

THE GYRE MISSION:

JOURNEY TO THE
*SSHOLE OF THE WORLD

MR. EDGAR SWAMP

DEDICATED TO LILY SWAMP

1999-2011



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The author would like to thank Tom Kelliher for reading an early draft of the novel and offering valuable insights as to its shortcomings and ridiculous plot holes, also for pointing out that such an eyesore as a ginormous island of trash surely wouldn't go unnoticed in today's modern world, as I'd indicated in that early, crappy draft, why, I don't know. Maybe I thought it would be more mysterious, or somehow point an accusatory finger at how negligent we, the human race, are, being overly concerned about bigger, better and faster technology but indifferent to its nasty byproduct.

This novel is based upon the 'great Pacific garbage patch', an area of densely collected debris in the north Pacific roughly a thousand miles off the California coast that has been described as being 'twice the size of Texas'. I read an article about it in the San Diego Union Tribune in late 2009 and thought it would be a cool idea for an offbeat survival story. The majority of what I wrote pertained to info I found from then up until 2011. I've since learned there are three garbage patches in the Pacific: the eastern garbage patch, which is between San Francisco and Hawaii, the western garbage patch, located off of Japan and, finally, the one in which I wrote about and thought was called the north Pacific garbage patch, located north of the Hawaiian archipelagos in what is known as the northern subtropical convergence zone. I also recently learned that they are in constant motion with the ocean's currents, making the job of pinpointing their exact location quite difficult. The book was finished when I found out this information, so I am sharing this with you now because I don't want to appear to be a total idiot (see rider below). Millions of tons of waste (mostly plastic particles) have accrued because of the slow moving currents of the ocean's subtropical gyre and, as of this writing, are only getting bigger and bigger. What I describe herein is merely a speculation on what could happen if one of these patches was allowed to continue to keep growing without any intervention.

I would like to offer here a disclaimer: the science in this novel is wonky at best and is in no way meant to be misconstrued as 'serious' or 'probable'. I've manipulated everything to suit my needs, the bulk of my information coming from (most likely) outdated Wikipedia pages (see explanation above in which I profess to not being a brain-dead, drooling nincompoop). No professionals were consulted concerning anything (told myself I was going to do that but due to my raging ADD and deplorable laziness found it was simply easier to make everything up) so there is no one to blame but me regarding any glaring errors and I can only hope that anyone who reads this won't find them absolutely unforgivable. So...enjoy!

Special thanks to Michael and Sandra Waldman for lending me hundreds of wonderful books and not getting angry at the terrible condition I return them in. Thanks guys!

PROLOGUE

The large sailboat pitched up and down over the choppy Pacific waters, fine sprays of mist catching the sun and creating stunning mini-rainbows. The captain and sole passenger squinted into the dying sun, relishing the dazzling hues of purple and crimson-orange. His face was seamed with wrinkles but his whitish blond hair insinuated a certain timelessness, and it was only when you saw his hands could you tell by their gnarled appearance that arthritis was slowly creeping in. It was nothing but a minor matter to him though, as he had been born to sail and that's what he would do until his legs could no longer hold him or his hands failed to work at all. For the time being he was content, traveling the world's oceans at his leisure, catching fish for sustenance and selling the surplus in order to make necessary repairs or to purchase supplies.

In the recent past he'd been known to take on light cargo for a modest freight charge, but during the last few months he'd been apt to decline, as it was more of a hassle than a real moneymaking venture, requiring he occasionally make port in places that took him out of the way of his intended destinations. It wasn't that backtracking particularly inconvenienced him; his true concern regarded the passage of time, which went by at a rate that was nothing short of astounding. Mornings melted into evenings, days into weeks. At his age he felt that squandering such a precious commodity was imprudent.

Over the years he'd also been approached countless times to transport illegal drugs (given that he looked like the last person who would embark upon such illicit endeavors and would hence thwart any investigation) yet every time he refused since that was a young man's game and criminal pursuits were of no interest to him, no matter how much they paid. As it was he no longer cared about money, not really. He'd worked hard his whole life and had a sizeable amount in a savings account, mostly sitting there and gathering interest. Every now and then he needed a few bucks for this or that, but he mostly took what he required from the sea and turned it into spending money. What's more, the thought of whiling away his remaining days incarcerated was not a pleasant one. No, he lived on the open water and he wanted to die on the open water.

Currently he was traveling east, heading for California, having left the Philippines roughly two weeks ago. He'd never sailed this far north, generally preferring the southern route because it passed through familiar territory, but this was of no consequence to him. There would be new things to see, possibly a fresh challenge to arise to, and that thought alone was invigorating, something novel for his old soul. On his journey west he'd encountered waves large enough to capsize a boat twice this size, and overturn she did, leaving him to the sea and his wits. Luck had been with him in the form of a fishing vessel a few miles off the coast of the Solomon Islands, and he'd spent a considerable amount of time there mending before carrying on with the rest of his voyage.

Many of his peers thought he was reckless, somewhat a fool. While they employed the latest in GPS navigating and Doppler equipment he chose to sail without the aid of any of these new-fangled devices, preferring instead to get by on his common sense and guile alone. It was in their opinion that when you were traveling the vast expanse of the Pacific by yourself (or any other large body of water for that matter) you had to be fastidious about your preparations so you'd know what to expect. His thoughts, however, were quite to the contrary. He enjoyed the unexpected, for it was in this environment he thrived.

Yes, he'd be lying if he said he hadn't thought the sea was going to claim he and his sailboat on the first leg of this trek, yet she'd stayed afloat while he clung to the bottom side, and for three days he drifted as dehydration almost overcame him, his strength weakening with each passing hour. It was in the late afternoon of the third day the fishermen stumbled upon him, croaking and

delirious in the heat of a scorching August sun. After he'd been taken aboard and given the chance to dry out the men went about righting his sloop, making jokes about the old girl that he chose to ignore. She was an aged vessel but she was still seaworthy, a wooden relic of another time, and the two of them got along just fine without any of those modern gizmo's contemporary sailors so relied upon. To chart his course he used an archaic tool called a sextant, employing a method called celestial navigating. Calling this technique antiquated was certainly being kind; radar and radio navigating had long replaced it before satellite technology was pioneered. But it was a hobby of his, something he'd always wanted to do since he was a young man. And what the hell, he was retired. He had the time. Also, he was of the opinion that the use of the radar or satellite-based tracking devices took away much of the thrill, for the constant threat of death was what kept him alive. It was for this reason that he seldom monitored the radio for weather forecasts as well. Worse sailor's than he had done without in centuries past and survived, why couldn't he?

This leg of the trip the weather had been mostly uneventful, bearing calm, sunny skies up until this afternoon when a sharp wind blew in from the south and the waves began pounding against the hull with an intensity he hadn't seen in over a months time. But it would be preposterous to even suggest he was frightened, no, a good sailor only felt panic when confronted by the very worst. For him this was simply the prelude, and what it was building up to he could only patiently wait and find out.

As the last of the sun slipped below the horizon he filled a pipe with stale tobacco and held his Zippo to it until he puffed up plumes of white smoke. It was time to put on the running lights, lower the main sail and make sure all the ropes were tightly fastened. Get her all battened down for the night. As a man who spent more time on the water than on land he had no fear of sleeping, even in a tumultuous sea, because he had faith in his abilities and his keen sixth sense to know when to awaken. Most solo sailors slept in intervals of twenty or thirty minutes but he was bolder than that; he'd never sleep through weather that could potentially cause trouble, but he could certainly doze and enjoy a brief respite from the day.

Whistling a song that had been popular over thirty years ago, he did his rounds, making sure his old sloop was snug for the night. After dropping his sea anchor (an apparatus that resembled a parachute; it wouldn't hold him in place but would produce enough drag to ensure he didn't drift too far off course) he went below and stretched out on his bunk, settling in for a little rest.



The clouds were obscuring the stars, a thick drizzle coming down in sheets blown erratically by hearty gusts of wind, so when he peeked out he had no idea what time it was. A quick look at his pocket watch informed him it was just past two. He'd felt the boat strike something, jarring him from his slumber, and he got up quickly to take a look. His immediate thought was that it was a bit of flotsam, just random debris drifting along, but it felt far too big, much too solid. It could be a whale perhaps, one that had gotten confused in the storm. If so he could only hope that they'd mutually sustained very little damage.

Stepping topside and into the inky blackness he could taste the raw sea salt on the air, thick, almost pungent. The wind tousled his hair, the rain peppering him like tiny shards of ice. Locating an industrial-sized flashlight, he shone it into the darkness but there was nothing to see but

the foamy waves that lapped against the side of the boat, nothing to hear but the squall of the wind and the spatter of raindrops. He then shone the light across the deck until he located his raincoat, taking the old yellow slicker and shaking it out before draping it over his shoulders. Cocking his head to one side, he listened patiently to the symphony of the elements, and gradually it sounded to him as if the storm was dying down. For this he was glad. There would come a day when he'd have to admit he was getting too old to travel alone, that he would either have to take on a partner or give up on sailing altogether. Of course he knew the latter wasn't an option, but it was what he often used to threaten himself with, something to make him appreciate his travels more. Yes, one day in the near future he would have to take more precautions, would have to safeguard himself against the old age that was steadily sneaking up on him. But, thankfully, it wasn't today.

Continuing his vigil, he shined the light back and forth across the water but could see nothing but shadows outlined by creeping fog. Whatever it was, he supposed, was no longer a threat to he or his ship.

"Well, I'm up goddamnit. Might as well do the rounds, make sure everything is tip-top," he said, his breath steaming in the chilly night air. Being alone as often as he was, talking to himself was a habit he'd picked up unconsciously, a trait he took little notice of. "Least it's not raining anymore."

He walked aft and checked the old, battered compass that had come with the ship when he'd bought it (an ancient, out-dated gadget that looked like it would be more at home in a nautical museum rather than being put to any actual use), and noted with only the slightest unease that the storm had turned him about, had him pointed due north instead of east. It wasn't anything to be overly worried about; he certainly couldn't have been blown too far off course, not with the sea anchor deployed. Moreover, there was no need to do anything about it tonight. He could deal with it in the morning.

He returned to mid-ship, setting the light down and taking a seat in one of the deck chairs, feeling the weary muscles in his legs sing out in relief. He slapped his pocket for his pipe but discovered it wasn't there so, too tired to get up and find it, he decided he didn't need a smoke that badly anyway. Leaning back he felt his eyes growing heavy, a drowsy warmth creeping over him stealthy as a fox, and he could hear the sounds of angels singing, or maybe it was the sirens of the sea. Often before he drifted off his mind created voices, either singsong or speaking, and this was how he knew he was falling asleep. He'd let these gentle voices usher him into dreamland, where the images would explode behind his closed lids, memories of seas traversed, old thoughts of all the places, reminisces of all the faces...

At once the boat pitched sharply and his eyes flew open as he heard a rending crunch in the hull near the bow.

"Dear God!" he cried, bolting to his feet, hoping the sound he'd heard wasn't as severe as it at first seemed. He picked up the flashlight and walked slowly along the starboard side, searching the hull at the waterline but seeing nothing. What did he hit? Squinting furiously into the gloom he couldn't make out anything, and as he turned around and around it was clear to him that whatever it'd been it was going to remain a mystery to him for the remainder of this eerie, fog-choked night. His floodlights could barely pierce the skin of the dark; indeed the impenetrable murk seemed almost to swallow the light, as if he were on the rim of a black hole.

Next he went below deck, and once his feet left the ladder he felt the frigid kiss of the sea just over the top of his boots. It took only a moment before he became deadly certain the ship

was sinking. How did he know? Well, some things are simply a given when they are second nature to a man who has sailed the oceans nearly the entirety of his life. He didn't need to see the hole in the bow to know the water was pouring in, all that was necessary was to feel the back and forth motion of the boat and straight away he knew she was listing to the port side.

He moved quickly to the hatch that led to the bilge, forgoing the ladder and jumping the meager three feet, and here it was no surprise the water was almost to his waist. Whatever he'd hit had ripped a large hole in the hull and the water was streaming in fast, so fast he feared escape was going to be impossible. His bilge pump plainly couldn't keep up.

A cold reserve shot through him, an almost impractical calm. This was no time for alarm. If this were to be his last night on earth than he would take it like a man. No need to worry or fret. If he were about to meet his maker he would do it with a distinguished flourish.

He climbed back up the ladder, returning to the upper deck. For the hell of it he decided to send out a distress call, in case there was anybody within range who could come to his rescue, even though he knew in his heart it was fanciful thinking at best. These waters were seldom navigated, and the chance of there being another ship nearby was slim to none. But he knew he should at least try for Christ's sake; he couldn't go down without a fight. He considered for a moment the life preserver he kept handy and then dismissed it. It would only prolong the inevitable. To drown would be better than to float with no protection, as it was a good way to attract unwanted attention. In his youth he'd thought it a heroic death to be ripped apart by sharks, but now it didn't appeal to him so much. He flicked a switch on the radio and picked up the transmitter.

"This is the Sea Wolf," he said evenly into his handset, glancing at the coordinates on his navigational chart and guessing his approximate position. "I'm located at latitude 140 west, longitude 38 north. Mayday, mayday, mayday! My hull has been breached and my ship is sinking. I don't think she'll stay afloat longer than an hour, possibly two at best. Mayday, mayday, mayday!"

He repeated his message for several minutes but there was no reply from the squawk box, only the hiss of static. He glanced down and saw that the lower deck was completely engulfed in water now. His estimation was exceedingly optimistic to be sure. He probably had no more than fifteen, twenty minutes tops before it reached where he stood. Taking a deep breath he gazed skyward, fixing his eyes on a bright constellation of stars that shone miraculously through the dense cloud cover.

I hope that's where I'm going, he thought, when at once the boat tilted sharply downward, flinging him headlong into the wheel, and then he knew no more.



He gradually became aware of a pounding in his head, and his mouth felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton. He tried to breath through his nose but found it impossible. Probing it tentatively with his fingertips, he felt his nostrils crusted with dried blood. For a moment he had no idea where he was or the nature of his circumstances, all he knew was that his joints seemed to be clogged with pieces of broken glass. Nearby he heard the screeching, shrieking sounds of... birds? Was that what it was? He opened his eyes but when the dazzling sunlight hit his dilated pupils he closed them again quickly, pain shooting through his head like a bolt of lightning. At once everything came back to him and in a moment of unadulterated glory he realized he wasn't dead,

the sea hadn't become his grave. He took stock of himself, opening and closing his hands, wiggling his toes. He turned his head and slowly, very slowly, opened his eyes, allowing them to adjust to the light. He was lying prone on the upper deck, his back against the column of the helm, but what was it that had stopped the boat from sinking?

Taking his time, knowing that at a moment like this there was certainly no hurry, he found his way to his knees, eventually his feet. The light was so dazzling that for several minutes he was unable to see anything other than a vague outline, and his eyes streamed tears as he squinted savagely into the glaring luminosity, his curiosity overcoming his discomfort. And still he could hear those shrieking, squawking sounds, growing louder around him. If they were birds they were like none he'd ever heard.

Little by little his eyes began to filter out the brightness and images took shape before him. As they did his heart at once sank, for it was with a dreaded conviction that this was a fantasy, an illusion, and he had indeed perished at sea.

Scrubbing his face nervously, his index finger brushed against one of his tender nostrils, and when he dislodged a clump of dried blood the smell hit him in thick, rolling, overpowering waves. His stomach clenched painfully and his bile curdled, almost doubling him over as he gasped for air. This was not a dream, definitely not a mirage. What he was seeing before him was all too real.

"Wha...what the fuck is this?" he wheezed, taking in the desolate landscape before him, his senses finding it almost too overwhelming to believe.

Abruptly the squawking sounds doubled in volume and he realized he was no longer alone. He could hear something scraping the wooden deck directly behind him, could almost taste the fetid stench that floated around it like a dank, putrid cloud.

With measured precision he turned his head, hearing the tendons in his neck creak like rusty door hinges. What he saw made his mouth open wide in a delirious, nameless fear, and as the urine soaked through his denim pants he thought fleetingly that perhaps drowning would have been the easy way out after all...

PART ONE

THE PASSENGERS

ONE

Ad on Greg's list:

Very naughty man needs discipline and punishment. Can't tolerate self much anymore. Esteem: At an all-time low. Please call (****) ****-5426 if you can help.

'It is better to inflict pain than to receive it.'

Madam Coventry

Crack! The whip flashes through the air, striking the target with a precision that is only a hair less than deadly. The man winces, biting down on the red ball-gag wedged tightly in his mouth. He utters a groan that betrays his pain and in an instant knows he will get it much worse the next time.

"Quiet slave!" the dominatrix snarls, and the whip descends with an increased fervor, a flurry of blows that almost makes the man piss himself. If he could piss through a hard-on that is, which at this point he probably can, he is in so much agony. His pale, hairy, acne covered back is a mass of red welts, but he doesn't know this, can't know this. Not without a mirror. What he does know is that it hurts like hell.

The dominatrix pauses momentarily and reaches for a bottle of Jack Daniels sitting on a shelf behind her. She takes a large slug then puts it back, wiping her mouth daintily. She normally wears a leather mask with zippers over the eyes and mouth but today she has forgone it because she simply doesn't care. Her dirty, black hair hangs limply upon her shoulders, a dull look clouding her emerald green eyes.

Crack! The man flinches but this time does his best not to utter a peep. He is getting close to shrieking the safeword-which is 'peaches'-but is unsure if this will enrage the dominatrix even more. He is also uncertain whether or not he'd be understood with the gag in his mouth. And, furthermore, he wonders if this is supposed to hurt so much. He can feel thin wisps of blood feathering down his back and is hoping this experience isn't going to leave him scarred. It is his first time, after all, and he isn't all too keen on the specifics.

The dominatrix, Madam Coventry, is barely paying attention. If she was she would notice that she is whipping the man much too hard and that, yes, the marks are going to leave scars. She is generally painstakingly adroit at her trade but today she is being far less than professional. The rules of her vocation state

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that she must always wear the mask, be careful with the whip, and never, *ever* drink while she is working. She couldn't care less about any of this, however, because she is so pissed off right now she actually wants to kill this guy.

Not that he did anything to her, no, he is some stranger whose ad she saw on Greg's List, but right now she hates the world and it's crummy inhabitants so much it's making her sick and she just wants to get some aggression out. For the most part she is oblivious to what she is doing; her mind is a million miles away and it's all because of that prick Tyler, that skuzzy low-life she let into her home and her life and all he did was drain her, suck her dry. His smile was so full of promises when they met but over the course of seven months he proved what a self-centered, arrogant piece of shit he really was.



For starters, Tyler never got a job. He told her when they met that he was a 'business consultant' (whatever the hell that was; he hadn't bothered to give her any details and she'd never asked) and he was presently going through a slow period. He blamed the lousy economy.

("I could find a job flippin' patties at Mick and D's in the meanwhile but it would make me feel like a jerk," he'd said to her once with a casual grin and she'd laughed it off.)

She paid his way for the entire seven months, and as each month went by she became increasingly resentful, so much so that the thought of his unemployed, sleazy hands touching her made her ill. Not that it stopped her from having sex with him (for sex was essential to her well-being) but she found herself filled with disgust after she'd achieved her orgasm, and post-coital she simply wanted to be left alone, which was just fine for him because he could roll over and fall asleep.

And for seconds he was so full of self-adoration she was certain if the mirror had a hole he could stick his dick into (or he had a clone) he would much rather fuck himself than her. Not to mention he spent so much time chatting with other women on Facebook that she was beginning to feel like the odd man out at an orgy. The person in the corner with their clothes on while everyone else was naked and squirming, fucking and sucking.

It all came to a head this morning, when she'd finally asked him when he was going to resume 'consulting some businesses' and he laughed, actually laughed and told her he didn't really feel like it.

"Don't really feel like it babe," he said as he languished at the kitchen table, intermittently reading an old issue of Maxim Magazine with an aging Megan Fox on the cover and grooming himself.

"I'm the one who's been making all the money," she said through clenched teeth, "and I'm getting damn sick of it. You think you could do something to put a little food on the table?"

"You know my ebay scam has been shut down because of complaints. What the hell am I supposed to do?"

Ah yes, his ebay scam. What started as a lark had blossomed into quite the little moneymaker for a while there, and it was sort of clever. What he did was buy useless crap off of ebay (cheap guitars, band posters, movie posters, cymbals, drum sticks, guitar pedals etc.) and then forged dead musician's signatures on them. Layne Staley, Greg Allman, Eric Clapton, Prince, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Eddie Van Halen, Brittany Spears, Axel Rose, Bob Dylan, Stephen Tyler. That sort of thing. He would find photos of their signatures on the net and then practice until he could

recreate them almost flawlessly. In the instances where he couldn't he'd print them and then trace over them. Although painful, she acknowledged that he actually did a pretty good job, even if she was hard pressed to admit he did anything well except be a sponging asshole.

His ebay 'persona' was that of an elderly woman whose husband was the actual collector of the autographed merchandise who was tragically dying of cancer. Colon cancer. She needed to sell off his collection so they could pay for his chemo treatments, as it were. And people bought it hook line and sinker. His ebay feedback was fantastic, which led to more sales. This was all fine and dandy, but the thing was he took the money and spent it on more merchandise or on clothes for himself, and not a dime on her. He was a handsome man who liked to look good, and he felt his chiseled face should be equipped with authentic Ray bans, his sculpted torso with tight, silk Calvin Klein shirts, his well-built legs with \$300 pairs of the latest designer jeans. It was hard to deny that the clothing vastly enhanced his sex appeal, but she wished he would spend some of it (any of it) on her.

What brought his whole scam to a screeching halt was when he sold a guitar pedal with Kurt Cobain's signature on it and it was determined by the buyer that the pedal was manufactured several years after Cobain's demise. The purchaser was livid and reported his shenanigans to ebay, who promptly investigated him and then suspended his page. Just like that, he was out of a 'job'.

"Have you ever thought about getting a real job?" she said to him this morning as he trimmed his nose hairs at the table with a small scissors and a hand held mirror.

"I hate jobs," he said dismissively, as if to imply the subject was closed, and at once she was furious.

"You think I like getting up every morning and going to work?" she said, slamming the pan she'd been holding into the sink, eggs flying every which way. "How do you think I feel?"

"Babe, you beat people up for a living," he replied, not even looking away from the mirror. "What you do isn't considered 'work'."

It was that casual remark that prompted her to kick his ass out into the street where he belonged. Going to the bedroom, she emptied out the drawers of his clothes and, bringing them into the dining room, began throwing them at him.

"Hey, hey!" he said, getting up from his chair. "Those are my new shirts. Easy!"

She cursed him out with every swear word she could think of (probably even making a few of them up) and when she ran out of clothes from the dresser she raided the closet. He ran around the apartment in his boxers, picking up the clothing as if the garments were fragile, near-extinct animals on the endangered species list.

"If that's the way you want to be about it than I might as well get the fuck out of here," he said, cradling his precious shirts and pants and expensive socks that required garters. "But you'll come calling once you see what it's like to be on your own."

At this seemingly casual (yet wholly contrived) statement her left eye twitched, and inside she felt a gnawing, hollow sensation. Truth be told, she hated being alone; even though she projected a tough, independent exterior, deep inside she was vulnerable to loneliness, and he knew it all too well, in fact had used this threat many times before. Whenever she'd gotten on his case about getting a job, or complained that he never did anything around the condo like taking out the trash or washing the dishes, he'd utter the magic words and it worked like a charm every time. She'd simply clam up, assuring herself she'd deal with it another day. And this silence began to fester within her over time, an annoyance that built steadily with each refusal, growing concurrently with his increased irresponsibility.

Yet the thing was, despite his faults (and he had a lot of them), he wasn't all bad. Sure, he was lazy and he didn't bring any money in but he was a good listener and exceedingly charming when he wanted to be. Yes, he was narcissistic to a degree that was sometimes ludicrous (see the aforementioned comment regarding a clone) but he was kind to her, tender when she needed it, rough when she didn't. Through the months, despite her irritation over supporting him, she felt she'd actually grown to love him, warts and all...until today, and not only was it the comment about not feeling like working but was also the repeated threat of leaving her alone; no one threatened her, goddamnit, no one. He'd done it in the past but no more. Today was the day she was going to throw it right back in his gorgeous face

"There's the door," she replied, skipping the age-old adage 'don't let it hit you on the ass on the way out', choosing instead to remain as civilized as possible.

He froze for a second, unable to believe his warning was being rebuffed, but incapable (or unwilling) to take it back.

"Fine, I'm out of here!" he bellowed, dramatically collecting all of his things from the apartment as if they were priceless treasures: His Ozzy Osbourne doll, his Judas Priest posters, his rag tag collection of trading cards that pictured girls from the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition, his model cars and a number of t-shirts he'd bought at exorbitant rates that were of no value whatsoever except for their kitsch aesthetic. All of this crap he loaded into a couple of cardboard boxes and piled by the door, looking at her forlornly.

What made this whole display so pathetic was that it was a total farce. She knew he had nowhere to go. He was trying too hard to make it look like he didn't care, but she was his meal ticket; he probably didn't have a dime to his name.

"Is this what you want?" he cried, desperately wanting her to see that she was hurting herself more than he. "Is this what you really, really want?"

"Get out," she said, calling his bluff, and his face fell so comically she almost had to suppress a laugh. And on the heels of her joy she felt an instant surge of relief: his power over her was diminishing. Maybe three weeks ago she would have bought this little tirade and asked him to stay, but not now. Not after she'd finally come to her senses and realized what a self-centered waste of sperm he really was.

"Fine," he said. "Have a nice life." And he stalked dejectedly out the door, the battered boxes tucked under his arms, his head down. She'd watched him walk away, waiting for him to turn around one last time and beseech her with his eyes, but he never did. When he reached the end of the corridor he took a right toward the bank of elevators and simply disappeared. One minute here, the next gone.

She'd slammed the door (hoping he'd hear it) and stood with her back to it for several minutes before she realized she was crying. The tears felt hot and feverish, raw in their immediacy, yet cleansing, pure. That jackass couldn't control her any longer, couldn't take from her anymore than he already had.

And that's why she's so mad presently: despite everything he'd put her through she actually misses the son of a bitch. She doesn't regret kicking him out, but she knows the transition from the life she knew over the last seven months to this newfound solitude is going to be difficult, tougher than anything she's endured in quite some time. The worst thing isn't what Tyler took from her home, it's what he took from her heart.

* * *

She swings the whip again, harder, the *'crack'* resonating off the walls like a gun shot and the man before her screams (tries to scream actually; the ball gag really does a good job of restraining it) and the sound of his pain infuriates her.

"I said quiet slave!" she cries, grabbing the whisky bottle and taking another hefty swig. She gasps as the liquid fire momentarily takes her breath away, then gulps some more for good measure. Setting the bottle down, she resumes her torture, attacking him with a fury that is animalistic yet machine-like in its precision. He is grunting and groaning (and if she didn't know better she'd swear he was trying to say something) and this makes her beat him even harder. She swings the whip until her arm grows tired and, only after she feels her stomach take a nauseous turn from the booze, does she stop. She belches loudly and tastes the acidic tang of her bile coming back up.

"Whoa." She takes a step back, setting the whip down, and then notices the marks on the guys back, sees the blood dripping off of him like errant raindrops. He is sagging in the straps, his knees buckled. He isn't moving. For a moment she isn't even sure if he is breathing.

She shakes her head.

"Fucking amateur," she mutters, wondering why, if he was in so much pain, he didn't say the safeword?



Madam Coventry's given name was Melissa Grant, and how she wound up in the pain for pleasure business was purely by chance, let's call it blind luck or fate. Although she had been drawn to small acts of self-mutilation (she was a 'cutter' in high school, in that she liked to make small cuts on her thighs because it gave her an endorphin rush) she wasn't entirely abnormal. Her first forays into sex didn't require that she be slapped or handled roughly, but she found the experiences weren't entirely satisfying until her late teens when she found a guy who liked to play 'rape' with her. He started out innocently enough by simply ripping her clothes off and holding her down, but gradually progressed to spankings and light facial slapping. Of course that eventually led to being bound to the bed, which in turn opened the door to sex toys, ultimately bringing her around to whips, nipple clamps and other nasty tools of the S&M trade. It began slowly but snowballed rather quickly.

It is entirely possible that her home life had something to do with these tendencies, as her parents divorced when she was only five and her mother then adopted what could be best described as a revolving door policy on boyfriends. Sometimes these guys would stick around for a couple months, sometimes a couple days. They're faces were blurred in Melissa's mind, most of them leaving little to no lasting impression whatsoever. After two and a half years of this her mother found a man she judged to be a keeper and they married quietly and quickly at a chapel in Vegas. No one but the blushing bride and the eager husband were in attendance.

Her real father had been granted visitation rights but after the first year he stopped coming around, had all but vanished into the North American landscape. When he *had* visited he always looked disheveled and smelled of something her mom called 'wino wine'. The divorce had been very bad for him, had left his pride injured and his dignity at an all time low. He brought her cheap gifts (probably purchased at the Quicki-Mart just down the block where he got his wine) and always took her someplace close by (his driver's license had been revoked because of multiple

DUI's), such as the city park, where he would sip from a bottle tucked in a brown paper bag and watch while she swung on the swings and hung from the monkey bars. His eyes always looked tired and bloodshot, his clothes rumpled and dirty. Even as young as she was she knew that her father was hurting inside but she had no idea what to do about it, how to help him. When he finally disappeared she felt ashamed of herself because her predominant emotion was one of relief.

Her mother changed drastically with the addition of the new man in their household. The once sweet and carefree woman was now a tireless nag, constantly harassing Melissa to pick up her toys, shushing her whenever she asked questions while mommy was watching television, and rarely did anything special for her besides the obligatory cake and present at her birthday.

Melissa blamed the step-father for this, mainly because he was such an unsympathetic asshole who didn't want to have anything to do with his new step-daughter, that is, until she got a little older, but her memories of those times were murky, hazy, muddled...in other words *repressed*.

So her family life had been reduced to nothing more than a necessary duty, an obligation that grew progressively more tiresome. As she got older her mother paid less and less attention to her, except to ridicule her increasingly bizarre clothing (Melissa had become a 'Goth Chick') and her choice in boyfriends. Like the boy she played 'rape' with, the majority of the guys she brought home had pierced noses and eyebrows and black hair and wore ripped black jeans and t-shirts emblazoned with metal band logos, names written in such exaggerated Goth lettering they were impossible to decipher.

Her mother and her stepfather hated these boys, of course, and that's just what she wanted. She loved to watch them squirm. Eventually they found out about her peculiar habits (cutting, tying string tightly around her finger to cut off the blood flow, self-asphyxiation) and were suitably appalled. They didn't know the extent of it until just after her eighteenth birthday when they discovered bondage and S&M porn on her computer during one of their regular snooping sessions. Shortly thereafter she moved out of the house, her commitment to them now relegated to Thanksgiving and Christmas, and those visits were strained at best, awkward and volatile at worst.

She escaped by going to a state college and there she studied business, having no clue as to what she wanted to be. She worked as a waitress at a bar and grill in the evening (she'd applied for and received financial aid but it wasn't enough to pay for everything) and it was there that she met a woman who would alter her life forever. Her name was Monica and she was in the process of starting up a phone sex business and needed women to work the phones. She promised Melissa more money than she was currently making so with little fanfare she decided to give it a try.

As the job progressed (and she showed a very adept skill at it) Monica asked her if she would be interested in writing the weekly S&M and Bondage blog that was posted on their website. Melissa didn't know if she was qualified but figured what the hell, she'd give it a whack. She excelled at it, naturally, and her pay increased and she became invaluable to the company. And it was only a matter of time before the things she wrote about became activities she enthusiastically engaged in for pay, as Monica desired to expand, wanted to open up a studio where people's sexual fantasy's could come true.

For that was the best part about the bondage and S&M game. Melissa didn't have to have sex with the clients so it was (for the most part) legal. Sure, the clientele were allowed to jerk-off when it was over, but she never touched their privates with her hands, only her whip and other assorted torture devices. That was how Monica was able to get a business license and offer other services like piercing, tattooing and massages-sans happy ending (as far as the Board of Business Ethics knew).

Against Monica's advice Melissa dropped out of college. She didn't think she needed it, and she knew she certainly didn't want to be tens of thousands of dollars in debt from the student loans. After all, she'd found her true calling. She loved dressing the part as a dominatrix, simply adored wielding the whip, and cherished the feeling of power she held over the submissive's as she pounded them into oblivion. And she never once felt that her clients were sick bastards (well, not most of them anyway) because she enjoyed the lash of the whip as well, taking great pleasure in hanging in the straps while another S&M professional gave her the business.

She even had a brief affair with Monica, the two liberally exploring their lesbian desires. It was intense but short lived, as the two of them discovered in themselves a jealous streak that simply had no place in a working environment. When they decided to call it quits they were better friends for it and were ready to channel those feelings into the business. Besides, Melissa preferred the company of men to that of women because she liked being manhandled, wanted to be treated rough. Sex with Monica had been so gentle, even with all the toys and strap-on dildos; it was vanilla to the chocolate she preferred.

And the years flew by, the business growing steadily, Melissa becoming ever more proficient at the fine art of taking people to the thresholds of their tolerance for pain, and she couldn't be happier. There was nothing else that she would rather be doing with her life, no other job that gave her so much satisfaction. The best thing was there was never any lack of clients; it might be a fetish that's mostly hush-hush out in the real world but the planet was literally crawling with people who wanted to be abused, thanks to their lousy parents, society, whatever.

Melissa kept an ongoing ad on the Internet so she could keep as busy as she wanted, as well as perusing it for ads when necessary. The studio provided her plenty of work but certain months of the year were slow. Over time she'd made enough money that she was able to convert one of the rooms in her condo into a dungeon. She pre-screened potential clients by requiring a driver's license and conducted thorough background checks on them before she gave out her address. That way no true sicko's ever got through the lobby doors.

So it was she thrived. By keeping to a strict business ethic (a code of conduct for the S&M Professional) she never lacked customers and made more money than she ever would have dreamed.

That is, until today she kept to the conduct code. But today, as she was to find, was going to usher in the next phase of her life.



The man hangs limply in the straps. He's not moving, hasn't moved in the last half hour. Melissa has been holding her breath, afraid to get near him, terrified of confirming what she thinks to be true.

I killed the stupid bastard, she thinks as she sips at the whiskey bottle. I fucking killed the guy.

She sees her life flashing before her eyes, knows her career as a dominatrix is over. She feels paralyzed, helpless.

Stepping closer, she carefully removes the ball-gag and his tongue lolls out hideously, a thin smear of blood crusted under his bottom lip. Jesus this guy is ugly. She can't even imagine being a prostitute, can't stomach the thought of actually having to touch him. His pale belly is ridiculously bloated, his shoulders just as hairy as his back. This guy, he wanted to be beaten in his

whitey tighties. Some guys want to wear the leather costume, some don't. This guy wanted it all to hang out.

She stares at him, trying to determine if he is breathing or not but she can't tell. He is just too damn fat. She leans in closer, listening for the telltale sign of air wheezing in and out but can't bring herself to actually place her ear against his sweaty, pasty chest.

She wonders what she is going to do if he is dead, wonders whom she is going to call. Maybe it isn't her fault and he had a heart attack. Hell, that certainly is possible. The guy looks like a cholesterol overload just waiting to happen.

But she can't be sure, no, this could very well be all her doing. She'd been pretty rough with him.

Once again her wrath turns toward Tyler, and she's convinced this is all his fault. If he hadn't made her so mad she wouldn't have been drinking and gotten careless. She also knows that if he wasn't such a mooching prick he would still be in her life and she could count on him to help her work this out. She certainly doesn't want to call Monica, no matter how good of friends they are, because Monica always believes the customer is right and will ban her from the studio, will put the word around town that Melissa is an unhinged maniac. Madam Coventry is reckless and bad for business.

She shudders, sets the bottle down and wraps her arms around herself. The only good thing she can think of right now is that this happened at her place and not at the studio. At least she has time to think, has time to plan what she is going to say.

But she knows that if he *is* dead than all the time that's passing makes her look guilty, makes this look somewhat premeditated. She has to think, damnit, has to figure out what the fuck she is going to do-

Suddenly the guy draws in a loud, gasping breath, followed by almost a full minute of coughing/retching. He barfs (mostly undigested food, maybe a little bit of blood) and raises his head weakly, looking around dazedly.

"I-i-is it...over?" he asks weakly and for a moment all Melissa can do is gawk, her mouth agape, eyes wide. She's been given a reprieve, her fantasies of cops and prison receding, savoring for a moment the exquisite pleasure that her life is back within her control.

"Quiet Slave!" she barks and the guy flinches, probably expecting to be hit. His shoulders hunch and he ducks his head dramatically.

"Okay," Madam Coventry says after a lengthy pause. "I think that will be enough for today." She stalks behind him and grabs her mask and whip from the shelf where she keeps the whiskey. Strapping the leather mask on, she strolls back in front of him and extends her arm, placing the end of the whip against his chest. She stares at him fiercely for a moment before she says:

"Before I untie you I need to know: will this be cash or charge?"

TWO

'If it is waste you seek, simply examine my life'.

Dante Kellerman

The smell is the first thing that hits him when he opens the door. Well, open is a rather nice word. Kicked in would be more appropriate.

"Holy shit!" he gasps. "Ma! Ma! You in here?" he calls, but the squawking of the birds drowns out his voice. "Ma!"

There is bird shit all over everything. It coats the cheap linoleum floor, is caked and dried in clumps on the thin, wood paneled walls. Hell, it's even on the ceiling, hanging down like dung stalactites. How that is even possible he doesn't want to know.

He'd been trying to call her for two days but she wasn't answering her phone so, as soon as he could, he came out to see if she was all right.

"Ma!" he yells. "Ma!"

He feels a flutter of panic rise within him, and for a moment curses the fact that he couldn't get here sooner, but knows it was impossible because he would have forfeited the money from the pharmaceutical study if he had, and that simply wasn't an option. If you don't finish the study in its entirety, you don't get paid.

Just this morning he'd completed a drug trial for an experimental heart medication that was given to him (and six other human guinea pigs) in large doses with a radioactive tracer. It was so they could examine more clearly how the drug exited the body through their shit, piss, blood and saliva. Every urination, every dump, was collected in plastic containers and handed off to a nurse ('Poop Station Girls' the guinea pigs jokingly referred to them as) who labeled it and then put it in a large refrigerator for later testing. Because of the radioactive material and the amount of time they had to stay until it cleared their systems (almost five weeks) the study paid \$7000. No one knew what the potential side effects might be in the future but fuck if he cared, hell he hardly even read the waiver he'd been required to sign. The future was a big question mark on the horizon to him and each day he survived was a bonus. But that sort of changed when he'd met Leeann. Before her all he had was his drug studies and his mother. Ah yes, his mother...



Dante grew up in Indio, California, the son of a meth-head and a crazy woman. His speed freak father deserted them by the time Dante was seven years old, just up and disappeared one night after 'Seinfeld', saying he was going out to get a six-pack and some Backwoods Smokes. His mother took it pretty hard. She reported his absence to the police as if he'd been kidnapped or abducted by aliens and soon enough her over-the-top hysterics had the cops on *his* side. The 'search' lasted all of three days. By that time they figured (judging by her irrational behavior) that he was smart to get the hell out while he could. The woman was freakin' nuts. As would be expected, during the seven years time he'd been around he'd managed to knock her up three times so, besides Dante, there were two other mouths to feed. After his father's hasty departure his mother (who had always been slightly unbalanced) went even further off the deep end and so it was up to Dante to help raise his younger brother and sister while dear old mom tried to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. The four of them struggled through some very hard times, but there weren't four of them for long.

Dante never told anybody this, (God, who would?) but he was almost certain his mother intentionally killed his little sister when she was an infant. Not 'intentionally' like she held a gun to her head, but in the sense that she knew she was dying and did nothing to save her. 'Depraved Indifference' he believed it was called. The poor girl was emaciated from malnourishment, her lungs waterlogged from a cold that progressed to pneumonia, crying relentlessly while unattended in her crib as their mother roamed the streets, looking for some guy to replace the man who'd left her. Young Dante was starving and sick as well and had no idea what he could do to help the poor child. His other sibling, his five-year-old brother, was of no assistance either, and the two of them watched as their ailing sister choked on her phlegm, her little face turning blue, hands clenched into tight fists. It was only after she'd stopped crying for good that Dante and Ricky began to cry. Oh, and they got it good when their mother got home, boy did they ever.

She blamed them in the police report she filed, claiming they'd choked her to death because they wanted her share of food, but the Indio Police Department was already well aware of her lunacy and so, after a speedy trial (she was defended by a court appointed lawyer who did little to aid her, in fact helped the prosecutors make their case), Adel Kellerman was locked up in a state prison and Dante and Ricky were taken into state custody. They were fortunate enough to be relocated in foster homes relatively close to one another (they were lucky to find foster homes *period*, as opposed to remaining wards of the state), but by the time they were teenagers Ricky detested Dante and they seldom spoke. The reason for this was that Dante persisted in defending their mother. Ricky had written her off as deranged and dangerous while Dante still pined for her, wishing they could be together as a family. After Ricky graduated from high school he joined the army and was stationed in North Carolina for basic training until getting shipped overseas. Dante never heard from him again. For all he knew his brother was dead, killed in one of America's many 'conflicts', possibly Iraq or Afghanistan.

Adel was released from prison when Dante was nineteen, having served twelve years of a fifteen-year sentence and, renouncing his affiliation with the foster family who took care of him for over a decade (they'd never cemented a loving relationship, in fact had only taken Dante in to receive money from the state), he moved her and her meager belongings into his place and commenced taking care of her. Well, tried to take care of her anyway, as much as he could or as much as she would let him. She was still a very difficult woman, was still crazy as a fucking bedbug.

But that was familial love for you: unconditional.

He worked hard, even went to school to be a paramedic but never finished his degree because he couldn't find the time in between his manual labor shit jobs and taking care of her to concentrate on his studies. He'd dropped out numerous times only to enroll again and again, to no avail.

For ten years they shared a small room in a boardinghouse in a crappy neighborhood, and employing the word 'small' is beyond a doubt generous. Tiny was more like it. To make better use of the space he'd put in bunk beds. Keeping the place clean was supposed to be his mother's job, so the room was continuously filthy. Other tenants complained about the smell and the overpopulation of cockroaches that their trash invited, but somehow Dante always managed to clean it up enough not to get evicted.

And they lived like this, this squalid existence, for over ten years until Dante stumbled upon the pharmaceutical company. He saw the ad in the Indio Sunday paper. It listed the drugs they were testing, the type of people they were looking for (by age, weight, and health) and what they paid. Dante was immediately intrigued. The pay was extravagant compared to what he was getting washing dishes and delivering pizzas. Apparently they paid thousands of dollars for only a few weeks of your time, a month tops. So he traveled to San Diego and screened for his first study, was accepted, and thus began his education as to how the whole operation worked.

The pharmaceutical company was called Pharmacoastalcal Incorporated, and what they did was test medications that were close to being introduced on the market. These chemicals had already been tested several times (possibly on convicts or animals), but this phase was intended to get the approval of the FDA and to work out any kinks in the product. It was insinuated that the drugs were 'safe' although there was a great deal of paperwork for the participants to fill out, waivers releasing Pharmacoastalcal of any liability should someone become seriously ill or incapacitated. This happened occasionally and these patients had to be pulled from the trials, receiving a small stipend for their involvement.

Some of the studies conducted were inpatient (these paid more) while others were outpatient. The outpatient studies tended to take longer (could sometimes extend over several months time, thus delaying payment until their conclusion) so Dante preferred doing inpatient studies. Besides, living as far away as he did, the inpatient drug trials were really his only choice, until he at last decided to relocate. Thereafter he could do either one. It wasn't easy to get his mother to leave Indio, but threatening to desert her quickly did the job, and after a year and a half of profitable drug trials he realized he was making enough money to get her her own place. It was painful for both of them to cut the umbilical cord, but eventually he persuaded her to move into a trailer he rented for her in a quiet little trailer park in Chula Vista while he took up residence in a rooming house in downtown San Diego to be closer to the pharmaceutical facility. Spanish speaking Mexicans and poor whites populated the park, these destitute folks living six or seven to a two-bedroom trailer and raising chickens in their yards, yet Adel was reasonably satisfied. But little did he know their livestock tending ways would soon influence her in a manner he never would have guessed.

Before Dante met Leeann he was in denial as to how utterly unhappy he was, not realizing that if he didn't change things he would probably go nuts and slit his own throat. After they met, all Dante wanted was to live a 'normal' life, one that held promise instead of misery. He felt he'd made great strides in that direction by getting his mother her own place. Step one had been completed.

Of all places he met Leeann at Pharmacoastalcal, the only setting in which he probably ever could meet a woman one would suppose, given that he spent so much time there. By the time he

made her acquaintance he'd become the poster child for drug trials; he had a system worked out so he could live on it indefinitely, and what the hell? The staff got to know him well and they liked him. After a while they began to give him preferential treatment, even called him when they knew there was a really high paying study coming up. And so he'd found his calling. Between studies (there was a drug wash out time one had to adhere to, you couldn't simply end one drug trial and jump right into another) he would deliver pizzas and tend to his mother.

He met Leeann in one of the many TV lounges one day after having given blood for the eighth time in six hours and was feeling woozy enough to summon up the guts to talk to her. He learned that she was in a study testing out a new heartburn medication and was only doing it because a friend of hers at UCSD had recommended it so they could make extra money to take a trip to South Padre Island for spring break. Leeann was in her last year of college, getting ready to graduate with a BA in marine biology, minoring in oceanography. She didn't much like the study protocol, having to get up at all hours of the night to have her vitals checked, and liked even less having to give so much blood, but the money promised was good and she felt she deserved a break after so diligently working her way through school in just over three years time.

He also learned she was from Corpus Christi in east Texas, and had grown up in a loving family of modest means. She was slender and freckled and pretty and the second Dante laid eyes on her he fell in love. What she saw in him was anybody's best guess. Maybe it was her love of biology, the science of the organic, sometimes odd and unusual. Who knows? Whatever the case, Dante's affections weren't entirely rebuffed.

Other study members and some of the staff, as it were, often referred to Dante, as 'the missing link', although never to his face. He was tall (six foot five) and wore a bushy beard that rose high up on his rotund cheeks. His long, curly black hair was an unruly mop and the centerpiece of his face was a pair of Buddy Holly glasses so thick they made his eyes look like giant hard-boiled eggs. He was personable and reasonably intelligent but he had the demeanor of a comic book fan boy (which he was), or a hardcore 'Trekkie' (which he also was). In other words, a geek.

Had he not been so completely out to lunch from blood loss he probably never would have approached her, and even then it took quite a bit of hemming and hawing for him to manage 'hello' and introduce himself. Leeann had been keeping mostly to herself throughout the duration of the study, not because she was conceited but because she didn't like the majority of the people she met. For the most part they were slackers and lowlifes who were simply avoiding the real world, hiding out in these studies so they didn't have to do any real work. She would have hated Dante for this, given the chance, but after several conversations she realized this was his profession, and he attacked it with a zeal that was almost admirable.

It took over a week to reach that point however, as Dante didn't often make very good first impressions, but his persistence finally won her over. By the last day of her study he'd been able to get her phone number so he could call her when he got out.

"You sure it's all right?" he'd asked.

"What's all right?"

"That I can call you."

"I wouldn't have given you my number otherwise," she'd said with a sly smile and Dante felt the heat rising in his cheeks. Thanks to the beard she had no idea he was blushing.

"I suppose if we should lose touch we'll always have the 'boner guys'," he added, laughing nervously, and to this she guffawed.

"Yes," she replied. "We'll always have the 'boner guys'."

Something that aided their bonding was their shared hilarity of the pitiable old men in the boner drug trial. What with the advances made by Viagra, Ciallis and so on the pharmaceutical companies were always looking for a better drug for erectile dysfunction, and the old guys in that particular study were constantly stiff and randy as all living hell, making a general nuisance of themselves. Women and men alike were the victims of their affections, study participants and staff included. Leeann and Dante made a game of avoiding them, as they'd pop out from seemingly nowhere with a particular gleam in their eyes and a bulge in their pants, desiring satisfaction. Dante had fended off two of them in the shared bathroom while attempting to shower, and Leeann had had an encounter with one particularly lecherous old man while she was waiting on line in the cafeteria. She'd been lucky there were other people around. Dante had been lucky he was bigger and stronger than them.

So it was that the old guys and their hard dicks were the ongoing joke they shared, and eventually Dante-the-missing-link sort of grew on her. Even though there were plenty of activities offered for the patients to do while they participated in the drug trials (TV, Internet, Blue Ray's, video games, books, magazines, pool tables, board games, sleep etc.) the hours sometimes stretched on and on. This left plenty of time to talk with one another.

It goes without saying that Dante never went into much detail about his own life (his mother to be exact), but managed to be a wonderful listener while Leeann talked about college and her aspirations as a marine biologist and her up coming trip to South Padre Island. He studied her rapturously as she talked, watched the dance of her tongue, noted the cadence of her speech, loved the way her freckles seemed to glimmer beneath the fluorescent lights. He adored her southern accent; it aroused him, both spiritually and sexually.

Holding the piece of paper her number was written on like it was a treasured artifact, he watched her from the window as she exited the building into the bright morning sunshine the day she checked out. Shortly after he finished his study she'd be back from her vacation. He hoped she would still want to see him when that time came.



But, presently, those thoughts are displaced by his rabid fear for his mother's safety. Where the hell is she, and what are all these peacocks doing in her trailer? The place is a veritable zoo for Christ's sake; peacocks large and small are taking up every inch of space, tearing the cheap furniture apart and shitting on everything. The last time he was here she'd had a couple of them out in the backyard. Now they've multiplied and are living inside.

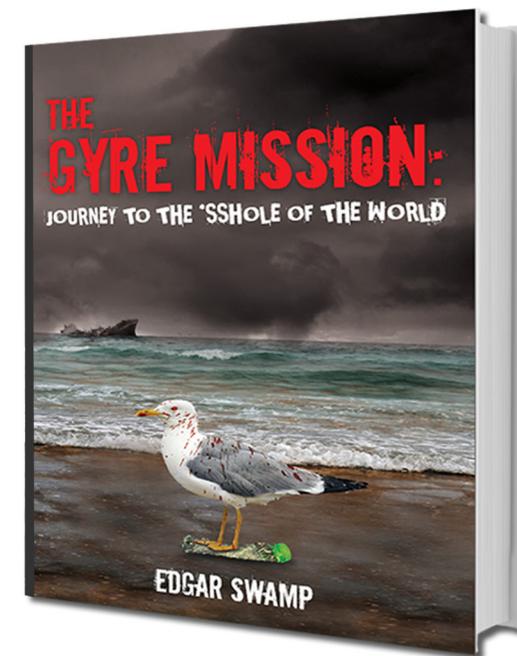
"Ma!" he hollers again before he trips on something and falls head first into a pile of bird crap. Wiping at his face, struggling to keep from vomiting, he gets back on his feet and staggers to the door. Shambling out into the hot, bright, morning, he just barely makes it down the steps before losing his breakfast on the dry, brown lawn. He retches helplessly for several minutes before he can control himself, and only after he's scrubbed the last of the puke from his mouth and beard does he notice he is making a spectacle of himself in front of her neighbors. Several Mexican women are standing in front of their trailers, watching the large man with the shaggy beard toss his cookies, and they are scowling and making the sign of the cross.

"Hey!" he calls to them, waving hands that drip the half-digested remnants of bacon and eggs. "Have you seen my mother?"

None of them reply, instead they take two steps back for every one he advances. Maybe it's because they don't speak English, or maybe it's because they are afraid of him-whatever the case, as he gets within a few feet they flee quickly into their trailers. He can hear them squealing amongst themselves through the thin walls, their language as unintelligible to him as his is to theirs.

"Well son of a bitch," he mutters, feeling momentarily like something the cat dragged in, but dismissing it swiftly in his anxiety to find his mother.

He returns to the door of the trailer, steeling himself to do a more thorough search. Holding his breath he darts back in and, when he reaches the bedroom at the end of the hall, he doesn't know if he should feel guilty, sad or liberated.



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