

# Prologue

The Bible, in the First Book of Kings, and a few chapters into the second book, contains one of its most extensive biographies, that of Elijah. Nothing is known of his family or birth, except that he came from Tishbe, a village somewhere east of the Jordan river, whose ruins have not been found. The territory was controlled by the kingdom of Israel, which maintained an uneasy peace with its sister kingdom of Judah, united only by the common enemies surrounding them. Israel was officially Jewish, but during its four centuries of independence spent most of its years in government-sanctioned idol worship, particularly that of Ba'al, the male sex god, the god of choice in the land of Canaan, the fertile area east of the Mediterranean sea. There were several thousand Israelites who worshiped the true God, who lived honestly and decently; but they were scattered, hardly aware of each others' existence. When Elijah came on the scene, the monarch was named Ahab, a man of weak and yielding character, who married a hell-on-wheels named Jezebel, who introduced Ba'al worship on a grand scale, and persecuted the priests and prophets of God by threat and, on occasion, massacre. The seventeenth chapter of Kings begins with Elijah suddenly appearing before King Ahab and announcing himself as a messenger of God, declaring that "there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word."

What if Elijah lived today, the events of his life replayed by modern kings and princes? How far would this remarkable story stretch our imaginations? On occasion I have set Biblical stories in modern dress, and found them difficult because of the many references to Christ in our contemporary culture. But when I placed Elijah in the godless world of business, made him a Costa Rican day-laborer and King Ahab a crass oil baron, well... dear reader, judge for yourself!

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# Elias

## 1

### Tea and Company

"More, Sir?"

"Yes, please, Henry."

Golden liquid swirled into the bowl of a silver-rimmed teacup perched on the sports section of the *New York Times*. The *Times* often served as a place mat for croissants and toast with marmalade, for the short, balding but energetic young executive who nibbled at them was less interested in the anxieties and athletics of ordinary people than in the real action of the world.

"Journal, Sir?"

"Yes, please, Donald."

"My pleasure, Sir."

Once this final pleasantry had been exchanged, the reader snatched up the financial section of his *Wall Street Journal* to check the progress of a new pipeline in Alaska, and do some calculation on his laptop. Another sip of steaming Earl Grey, and delightful figures were dancing in his head.

"Donald, would you open the drapes?"

"My pleasure, Sir."

The hilltop palace, a unique design of the Frank Lloyd Wright school, was built of marble flagstones which blended quietly into dense chaparral highlighted with red, peeling manzanita and the occasional prickly pear. The structure was securely anchored into solid rock four hundred feet above Playa de las Palmas, a cove encircled with tall Mexican fan palms. Commanding the view of the Pacific was a bay window of three enormous panes encased in ivory, each covered with a thick curtain of velvet in deep purple. Though Ahab and his staff had performed this curtain ritual every morning for the past ten years, neither oil baron nor

servant was unmoved by the panorama, for three reasons. First, one could delight in the interplay of gulls and pelicans amid rolling breakers. Then, in certain seasons, gray whales could be spotted farther out. But the true joy lay beyond – a sea of tiny white obelisks visible almost to the horizon, each marking an oil-drilling platform, each connected to the mainland by a pipeline and by a title deed in a safe in the labyrinthine depths of Jonathan Ahab’s mansion.

Ahab was shaken from this reverie of sand, surf and steel by bumping noises in the foyer, and muffled shouting. A video intercom appeared in a window on his laptop.

“Mr. Ahab, Sir – there’s a homeless fellow here who insists on seeing you!”

“Well, I’m busy – this is a big day... homeless you say? Doesn’t this place have a fence?”

(More bumping, and a round bearded face, sometimes the eyes, sometimes the lips and chin, moved in and out of focus on the screen, mouthing strange sentences as the vagrant fought for control of the viewscreen).

*“God sent me to tell you this...”*

(Oh Lord, first it’s Greenpeace and now it’s God)

*“...no, I will not wait... as surely as God lives, not a drop of oil will pass through your pipeline for...”*

(For a second, a glimpse of two piercing black eyes at a 45-degree angle; then more noises, new voices, somebody shouting “Security!”)

*“...three years. Three years, Ahab. That’s all you need to know.”*

At the post-breakfast security briefing, Chief Millhouse, tall, slender, with wavy black hair like a movie actor from the thirties, spoke: “He didn’t want money or a job, Sir. Once he gave the message, he walked out calm and dignified, like an ambassador in a corduroy jacket. Really; he didn’t shuffle around like a transient. He just said what he — “

But at that moment the focus of the conversation shifted to the teacups, which had started to rattle nervously in their saucers, then began to slide, dancing in chorus on the polished surface of the mahogany table.

Then a powerful tremor converted the whole parlor into a ship in a sea storm, rocking and rolling to the fearsome creaking of the boards. Ahab involuntarily jerked his arm, dousing his white breakfast jacket with his tea. Though he had never been a sailor, his thundering voice filled the room with terms any shipmate would readily understand, while silently his mates scurried about the room trying to look professional by straightening chairs and art objects as the earthquake just as professionally put them out of place. Three teacups slid off the table, shattering on the terrazzo floor, but Millhouse deftly snatched the fourth as it teetered on the edge; and, not knowing what else to do, nestled it gently in his palm.

In the distance sirens, quite a few sirens, wailed faintly; then from Highway One, two hundred feet below, came the blaring klaxon of an ambulance roaring southward towards the cove. On the laptop a new screen appeared, this one trimmed in red. Barrow, Alaska.

“Sir, I am afraid there will be a delay in the opening of our new pipeline. Activists have –

“You take care of the activists. I’ve got an earthquake down here.”

To confirm the point, there was a huge rolling aftershock, then another sharp temblor, and a ghostly silence. Alaska hung up.

“Millhouse, what does security say on the beach?”

“No answer, Sir. No answer from anyone along the coast.”

Playa de las Palmas itself had its own generators; power continued, mostly uninterrupted. In a severe quake, the alluvial silt of lowlands is stirred into a kind of jello, setting up violent shock waves; while the solid granite of mountains resists the shaking. Still, today’s experience was a first-timer. They were far from the San Andreas fault and had thought themselves immune from such troubles. Now, a second red screen topped the first.

“Anyone, anyone, can you hear me? Tower 23, Tower 23 is about to collapse. I repeat, Tower 23 ---“

Tower 87, Tower 46, Tower 118 followed suit with desperate pleas. Others came on to report damage, but were still pumping and delivering, some of them at one hundred percent. Momentarily relieved,

Ahab tapped a green button, sending out a call to all towers.

“Good work. Our corporation needs brave men like you.”

He then mashed a yellow button. Within thirty seconds later Richardson appeared, huffing and puffing up from the basement, with a paper he had ripped from a computer printer.

“I’m sorry, Sir.”

“For a badly presented piece of paper?”

“For what the paper says, Sir.”

07090733 - PDLP Princess Tower - all pipelines ruptured by lateral seafloor subduction, displacement approx. 75 feet northward and downward. A number of pipes are totally disengaged and are spilling their entire contents into the Pacific Ocean. Some platforms are unmanned due to heavy sea waves and continue to deliver uncontrolled. Request helicopter crews to deactivate and to perform rescue operations. Loss of life unknown.

With numb fingers Ahab began to work his cell phone, grateful to God that satellites never get bothered by earthquakes.

“*My luck, the satellite will get hit by a meteor... ah, a tone.* Jessy, are you all right over there?”

“All right, what? Paris is beautiful. Always beautiful.”

“I just didn’t want you to worry. We just had a huge earthquake, must have been 9.0”

“Ooh – so *California...* shake, rattle and roll, huh? I *must* take you to this new discotheque, *L’Escargot Très Vite.* They will make your *9.ohhh* feel like a kitten jumping on your bed.”

## **2**

### **Grover**

The scrollboard read “Pismo / Five Cities.” Elias Álvarez took his tattered Greyhound pass out of his wallet, thumped it twice in his palm, and stepped out from the bus shelter. Six hours later, he stepped off in Grover Beach. This was the most pedestrian of a string of five laid-back,

beach-bum towns southwest of San Luis Obispo. It was originally named Grover City, but as it gentrified during the Eighties the name began to sound too muppetlike for folks who wanted to buy a bungalow for two million dollars, so Grover Beach it became. The only difference between Elias and the beach bums was the fact that most of them went home to the bungalows, while he was alone with a wallet containing no money and twenty-five business cards.

Market Street was quiet today, as it had been for the last eight months since the earthquake and oil shortage decimated the tourist trade. Elias noted rather nice-looking houses with boards in the windows. He could hear the roar of the Pacific, there was so little automobile traffic. Thumbing through the little stack of cards in his wallet, his eye lit on "Voth Publications – Henry Voth, Esq." A lawyer who really wanted to be a poet, Henry retired young to a red beach cottage six miles south of town.

The prophet, for that is what he was, decided to stop at the park first, for ordinary reasons. As he approached the outbuilding, a flock of crows startled him. Equally startling was that one dropped a brown paper sack at Elias' feet, which proved to contain an unopened bottle of Coke and three dollar bills. Even more surprising was the fact that this was the eleventh time in the last week that crows had given him something useful, including the Greyhound pass.

A visit to the Moccasin Diner took care of the three dollars. Elias sat at the counter directly in front of the establishment's pride and joy, a genuine historic moccasin displayed in a glass case, alongside spectacularly ugly paintings featuring Cochise, Sitting Bull and other notables among the tribes of the Great Plains. Like thousands before him, Elias passed authoritative judgment on this artifact.

"Yeah, I think it's real," he ventured. "A real moccasin. Leather."

"As real as your bagel and coffee. Two dollars and fifty-five cents, please."

Here. Keep the change, Sally. I'm feeling rich today."

Elias now felt truly bolstered for an afternoon hike. He hadn't seen Henry or tasted his wife's clam chowder in over six years; and he

sang songs to God while fairly dancing along a gravel road that wound into graygreen chaparral dotted with tiny yellow flowers.

### 3

## Jessy

*"Jessy, ma chère amie..."*

"I can't stay in Paris forever. My little Habby, all alone with his broken pipelines. Have they gotten them fixed yet?"

"No. And it's worse than you think, my dear. Do you realize in one morning we managed to coat several of the most sacred places on the California coast with crude oil? Every pelican seems to have a personal lawyer. Judge Stoneman and the Circuit Court have shut us down until we can prove that we will personally wipe the oil off the feet of any seagull which lands on something we missed while cleaning up. Lawyers in Alaska have kept our new pipeline there in a complete freeze until we can prove we are earthquake-proof. Not only are there stipulations coming out the bazooza, they are trying to turn the whole coast into a national park. Then the only way we can get in to Casa de la Playa is by presenting our Golden Eagle Passport to a ranger in a kiosk."

"Sergeant Millhouse told me about a crazy man who predicted this whole mess."

Elias. Elias Álvarez. An itinerant from Soledad, previously from Costa Rica. Looks like any migrant worker, except he's not. He's into social action. And the wildest thing is, he predicts things, especially trouble, and especially trouble that involves AhabOil. It's like he's there in the board room and the bedroom."

"I hope nobody else is in the bedroom, Habby Nabby."

Of course not. But Elijah seems to know everything we do. He leaks our plans to the press, and there are demonstrators at our gates before we have even announced anything!"

"You've got Andreyev and Baloshkin, and all of their friends. Why don't you just pay them to pay Elias a visit?"

## 4

# Sarah

Roses in full bloom entwined the Voth's blue mailbox, which read "HENR VOTH RU AL RTE 7". Twenty-three years earlier the property theoretically became 11950 Encinas Lane, but neither occupant nor postman saw any reason to change. Everything wonderful about coastal California was there – the Midwestern picket fence, vines, cacti, eucalyptus and palm trees scrambled into a scene impossible to rationalize, but easy to enjoy. As Elias sprang the latch on a creaky little wire gate, he noticed a dark blur to his left, approaching him rapidly.

"Bart, NO!!"

Elias found himself cornered by a huge, snarling Labrador. *When did they get a dog?*

"A friend, Bart. It's OK – this is Elias."

The voice and face were Sarah's. Thank goodness that someone else hadn't bought this obscure two-and-a-half acres, and the dog didn't belong to some friend of Ahab's! Man and dog quickly reconciled, though occasionally a quick start from Elias would bring a snarl and then an apology and then some tickling and ear-rubbing. Soon there was a pitcher of sparkling ice water and a tall glass. Sarah was forty-six, and still possessed a good deal of the form, and all the charm that had won Henry's heart twenty years earlier. As he settled into the luxury of a foam-and-plastic kitchen chair, Elias thoughts began to drift. *"How is it? On Sarah a common house dress looks like a queen's robe."* Her Midwestern twang brought him back to earth.

"I'm sorry, Elias. Henry told me in his last moments how much he would like to see you again, and when you came, to make you welcome."

"He's dead?" Elias was stricken with unbelief.

"For five years I've raised Lyndall alone. You're the first visitor I've seen that wasn't a lawyer or someone trying to get part of his estate. And they have succeeded. And we're hungry."



Elias remembered an odd something that had come into his mind at the diner. *I have commanded a widow in this town to supply you with food.* His own stomach underscored the Lord's word with a deep growl. It seemed quite appropriate to go with the flow of conversation.

"I am, too. Do you by any chance have any of that clam chowder, and maybe a hot, fresh hush puppy?"

"Both. But I was serious about being hungry. We're totally out of food. I don't mean we're down to canned beans, I mean we've got nothing, just enough to make one more nice supper. Our Social Security hasn't come for three months, so we have planned to eat clam chowder, and enjoy it, watch a few more sunsets and die."

"How about a cup of that chowder first? I think that I would die, coming all this way, if I did not get to taste it again!

Sarah wasn't sure if Elias had heard right. She had just told him she was starving to death, and now he asks for supper! But before anything she was a good hostess. With scarcely a pause she replied to the unusual request:

"Sure. And I have just enough batter for a dozen of my world-famous hushpuppies. Come in, feel at home."

A screen door creaked; they entered directly to the kitchen, recently repainted in a sunny yellow, with red-and-white chintz curtains. Seated at the kitchen table, with a sketch pad and charcoals, was her son. Lyndall Voth had been a Cub Scout at their last meeting, but had elongated into a handsome teenaged representation of himself. Handsome, with thick, flaming waves of red hair crowning a knobby-nosed, freckly face -- though like his mother, alarmingly thin.

Pot and pans in a low cabinet banged a cheerful accompaniment to Sarah's solo: "By the way, my hushpuppies aren't from scratch. I use Jiffy muffin mix."

Jiffy mix and oil were waiting faithfully on a wood-topped counter, and within seconds were plopped onto a cast-iron skillet. While they were frying up, the best service came out -- plates that read "Expo 72, Montréal"; "Old Faithful -Yellowstone", and "Niagara Falls". Tarnished

silver spoons which never expected to stir a thing except memories were placed alongside crystal glassware from the Voths' wedding. Elias offered grace.

*"Our Father in heaven, let it be known that your name is holy. Let your kingdom come, and your will be accomplished on this earth, just as it is in heaven. Give us, today, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil – for it is Your kingdom, Your power and Your glory that are forever. Amen."*

"Are you sure you want just one hush puppy?"

"And a cup of that delicious clam chowder, so I may dip my hush puppy in it and savor it."

"More water?"

"Please, and then I've got to get back to town. Sarah – Lyndall – you're not going to starve out here. Would you humor me? Take that Box of Jiffy out of the garbage – there are still a few crumbs in there – *and* the bottle of Mazola. Just leave them on the counter, and check them each morning."

## **5**

### **Edgar**

"Hey, Charlie – thanks for the banana! Can you imagine? Bananas and chocolate syrup. How do you know my favorite stuff?"

Elias had gotten to know the crows from the dumpster: graceful Annie, bashful Allan, lively Lily and Edgar, as well as Charlie, whose specialty was bringing him surprises. He had been in Grover Beach for almost three years now, and had yet to dumpster-dive. He certainly would have been picked up for vagrancy by now; but the local police never saw him raiding the trash can. He slept in an isolated sea cove, and when he visited a certain bench at the state beach, he never failed to find a candy bar, a hamburger, a coin, or something. The cawing of crows had become his music. For all he knew, he was the richest man in Grover. But the city was dying. Six months ago, Sally the waitress was let go, and the owner tried to keep the Moccasin going; but now it was closed, boarded

up. So were the school, the J.C. Penney, and the remaining grocery store. You could walk to Pismo for such luxuries, or do without. There was still a gas station on the freeway, but it wasn't a real gas station, only a cardlock outfit used by oil executives, the only people with money to travel any meaningful distance.

## **6**

### **Top Dogs**

"What we need, gentlemen, is an historic change in the way we do business, in order to keep AhabOil at the top of the pack."

"Yes, Sir!" His vice-presidents, each sporting a blue suit, red tie and white carnation, rumbled agreement.

"I, that is, *we* are charting a new course by embracing Bailout."

"Yes, Sir!" Another rumble, half the strength of the first, was followed by faint murmurs and furtive whispers.

"A successful business is founded on loyalty, *unquestioned* loyalty. As your founder, I wish to encourage you to express your loyalty and celebrate the new era of Bailout by attending our annual buffet dinner, which will be held, as usual, at my wife Jessy's home, 45 Rimmon Circle, in San Francisco. There will be lots of entertainment for everyone."

\* \* \*

Ahab's yearly buffet was much more than your conventional office party. He invited legislators, lobbyists, even competitors to these lavish affairs. How easy it is to twist someone's arm when he is roaring drunk! All employees who had any sense attended faithfully, even the ethically minded, even the teetotaler. Vice-Presidents who did not wish to compromise their morals either huddled in little knots in the foyer or hung around the lounge sipping orange juice, which was served by stunning waitresses along with an invitation to more exciting activities -- the high-priced "extreme sports" available by merely sharing a room number.

Occasionally one of the innocents would give in to curiosity; but most would politely turn aside such offers, risking epithets like *reverend* or *cherry* in favor of the respect of wives, children, and God. But tonight's bash took unrighteousness to a whole new level. There was only one theme – the unbridled devil-may-care love affair with Bailout, the notion that if a man's actions lead him into trouble, he deserves to be rescued. Since the only agency powerful enough to rescue huge oil companies would be the government, Jonathan Ahab carried on the courtship of government with all his might and charm. This was no longer the old soda-and-movie kind of romance; he had declared his intention to shack up permanently, and any considerations besides profit be damned. The bouquet he offered his fellow titans of industry and government was received and requited. California's Oil Queen presented the Ahabs with fifty roses, one for each state of the Union. A legislator from the southern peninsula staggered his way to the dais to express his undying love for this new domestic partnership. Executives from CalGas, formerly a bitter enemy, lofted a banner high with a big red heart: "CalGas loves Ahab". They proclaimed loudly, "The era of gas wars has come to an end!" "Oil! Peace! Prosperity! *Long live the profits of Bailout!*"

Not everyone was party to this collusion. A number of company officers, some bright-faced kids, others veterans in their seventies, had had quite enough. Thus it was that around seven-thirty Larry O'Brien, the CEO, quietly mentioned to a senior executive, "If this is boring, you don't have to stay. Meet me at the Conservatory at nine. Pass the word." And the word passed swiftly. Over the next half hour, one by one, about a hundred executives silently wandered out through the foyer and vanished into the night. The ninety-ninth, Bill Schulman, almost didn't make it out. A gorgeous blonde had cornered him, fuzzily moaning, "Don't leave so soon! You've got to experience Bailout. You'll love it." Then with a silky whisper and a come-hither motion towards her well-furnished *veranda*, she added, "I guarantee." The hundredth, following right behind, was the CEO, O'Brien, who whispered to the tempted and mortified VP, "Bill. Remember the last time you bought something with nothing more than a

personal guarantee?" Schulman remembered, shook himself and left with his rescuer.

They enjoyed a trip across town in O'Brien's red Ferrari, picking up a couple of subs and coffee, since neither had felt like eating at "Jezebel's Palace". They stopped at Golden Gate Park near the conservatory and strolled across the magnificent lawn under the lamp of a full moon. The Chief then stopped abruptly, and cleared his throat. To Schulman's amazement, he began softly to sing *Amazing Grace*, and as he did shadows in the yard began to move towards the two men, shadows wearing suits and conservative ties. In the blue light one could detect smiles on most faces as well as the vaguely musical rumble of a hundred men trying to sing along. They gathered closely around their CEO, who was handing out slips of paper. They were symbolically pink; but they were not dismissals. Each one bore a list of competing oil companies who were eager to employ these good men, solely on O'Brien's recommendation.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Thank you."

Some took the slips silently, shedding tears of gratitude.

The next morning, when the massive oil-derrick grandfather clock at Ahab Oil headquarters struck seven, there were a hundred empty offices, clean and neat, coffee makers clean and with fresh filters, ready to go – just no one to sit in the office chairs and ask the interns to get the coffee going. Stone drunk at the party, Ahab was unaware of this minor mutiny, unaware that Chief O'Brien had disappeared for a full hour. But today he was glad to see how efficiently his loyal CEO was scurrying about, filling the vacant offices with those junior executives who had just the qualities needed for promotion to senior: ruthlessness, skill at golf, and the ability to put away large amounts of liquor without embarrassing the corporation. Life would go on at AhabOil.

## 7

### Jessy (Partout)

Life was not so easy at home. Jonathan was not used to feeling betrayed, and tried sharing his feelings with his wife.

“So much for loyalty. That loyalty bash cost me a hundred good vice-presidents, the hardest-working men and women I had.

Jessy had not the least pity. “Disloyalty is not your problem. Elias Álvarez is your problem. He infects whoever he touches with his virgin virtue. He is an eloquent communicator. People who listen start believing that there actually is a God in heaven. You have to get rid of him. Completely.”

“Look, darling. Andreyev traced him to Pismo. Piulanov learned he had booked a room at the Sterling Hotel in Anchorage, but he never showed up. Somebody thought they saw him in King City, but it was probably just Elvis. I’ve got Baloshkin on it now.”

His sweetheart was unmoved. “I don’t want rumors, I want his head on a platter. I am losing patience. If you don’t take care of this situation, *I will.*”

## 8

### The Tough Side of Miracles

“Elias! There you are!”

The prophet put down the box of Triscuits he was enjoying, with cheese yet, to stare into the face of Sarah Voth. Her beautiful features were distorted by harsh emotions – terror, anger, fear.

“Sarah! What’s happened?”

“What good did those everlasting hushpuppies do? He died, Lyndall got sick and *died*. Can all of the oil in the world bring my son back, man of God? Everyone calls you Man of God. Why did you come back into my life – to remind me of my sin? Answer me. *Did you come to kill my son?*”

It seemed like the torrent of questions would never stop. Elias had no answer, no excuse. As he stood, head down, hands soldierly at his side, listening to Sarah's rage and sharing her tears, a gray Lincoln Continental quietly slid into a space in the eucalyptus shade of Grover Beach's downtown park, overlooking the beach. Pierre Baloshkin opened the trunk, transferring a crowbar to the back seat, then emerged to survey the territory. He sat down on a bench to light a cigarette. A crow, then two more crows, buzzed his bald head. He dropped his cigarette on the asphalt as he shooed the birds away; but one of them snatched it and flew towards the beach. Baloshkin, cursing in Russian, English and French, reached for the pack of Winstons in his coat pocket, and found it was no longer there. Thus sobered, he put his hands in his pockets and sat on the bench, facing the sea, until sunset. As the sun dipped below the horizon in a flaming display of God's glory, Baloshkin murmured, "Álvarez is American nonsense legend. He does never exist." He got back into the Lincoln, found another pack, lit up and headed for the freeway, never noticing a man and a woman arguing on the beach. Edgar, who always enjoyed surprising Elias, fluttered down to the water's edge and dropped a pack of Winstons at the prophet's feet. Elias laughed. "What is this, bird? This is the only gift you ever gave me I can't use."

## 9

### Lyndall

Twenty-three years past, Henry Voth had escaped from the City, having succeeded in business to the point that he could live wherever he wished and travel to wherever he needed to be. Grover was perfect. It occupied some of the most gorgeous beach country in the world, but was too far from the sprawl of Los Angeles or San Francisco to attract the dream-castle crowd. He found it a friendly place of tourists and farmers that would likely stay that way for a long time. He also found a knockout beauty of a waitress at the Moccasin Diner, and swept her off her feet – love at first sight, and trouble. Sarah Killingsworth was in the last stages of a crumbly marriage, and infidelities involving Henry finished it off.

She soon bore a child, whom they christened Lyndall, after the maternal grandfather's surname, on the premise that if he were to grow to be a lawyer, he ought to have at least a couple of surnames to bandy about. As a child, he never answered to "Lyn" or "Lindy", though both parents and fellow students tried these repeatedly. He was determined to be Lyndall or nobody. He grew strong and tall, though his mother constantly worried about his health and safety. Sarah had long felt she lived under a curse for her adultery, that tragedy would dog her steps forever, that sooner or later she would lose her only child or see him ruined.

Henry had taken the family to church every Sunday; but after his passing, Sarah's attendance became erratic. She never felt comfortable in the ladies' group, even though they were willing enough to let her be herself. Now, here she was, walking six miles with a prophet of God – who knows what God had told him about her? She would have avoided him, except that she had no other hope. When this man was present miracles hung in the air.

Elias and the widow reached the terminus of Sarah's Path by three in the afternoon. There were four cars in the yard – three occupied by her neighbors, the fourth belonging to Jeff Lowder, the county sheriff. Ellie Parks spoke first.

"I came over to visit, honey, and there was Lyndall on the kitchen floor. He wasn't breathing, and you weren't there, so I called 9-1-1. Who's this man with you?"

Sarah had left for only a few hours, but why hadn't she seen this coming? Rage against herself, her own lack of understanding swelled up within; but she choked on her fury, settled down, and quietly answered, "Elias... a friend... of the family."

"Ma'am, I am afraid I will have to ask you some questions. Were you here when this young man –"

"My son, Lyndall –"

"– stopped breathing?"

"Yes."



The officer frowned. "Why didn't you look for help among your neighbors?"

Sarah answered, hoping the reason would not sound lame. "I went down to the park to find Elias."

"Six miles, on foot?"

"No phone. Please, officer. Elias is a kind of... holistic healer. He's very well known among his people."

"You could have run to a neighbor, tried to get some help."

"According to the law, to abandon a minor who is desperately ill is a crime."

Elias spoke up. "Officer, no matter what the law says, the boy is dead. His mother, Sarah, has just returned. Would you help me put him on his bed, and allow us a few minutes alone with him; and then we can talk about responsibility?" Sheriff Lowder, a decent fellow, blushed with embarrassment that in his professionalism he had overlooked one of man's basic needs, to mourn the dead. He helped as requested, and then led all the onlookers into the kitchen to wait.

Tears filled Elias' eyes as he contemplated the lifeless blue eyes of this gentle boy who, with his mother, had been doing well, enjoying robust health thanks to the box of Jiffy mix and the bottle of Mazola Corn Oil which just wouldn't run out. There was a pile of dishes in the sink to attest to that. But six weeks ago he had caught a severe flu, and began to go downhill steadily. Sarah was beginning to lose rationality, moaning 'Why, Elias?', over and over. The prophet finally leaned over to her and whispered, "Sarah – one more time – let's ask God." She bit her tongue, and cried bitterly, but kept silent. He stretched his frame over Lyndall's and cried out strongly:

"O Lord, please let life return to this boy."

Nothing.

"One more time, Sarah." And he repeated the action, and the prayer, with the same result. Somewhere he remembered the notion that insanity is doing the same thing many times, expecting a different result. But love is greater than reason. He choked out, "Once more?"

“Yes.”

“O Lord... please... let life return... to... this boy!!” The words were spoken not in the confidence of a Healing Prophet but out of something close to despair mixed with rage at the devil who was turning the first work of faith, the everlasting muffin mix, into a nightmare. But oddly, in this furor Elias felt a tiny spark of faith – *somebody has to have faith here, so I will, no matter what* – and this faith enabled him to push his body up from the boy’s, which was exactly as lifeless as it had been. He stood tall, as if he was waiting for something to happen, though he had finished his task and had not the faintest inkling of what to do next. Inside his head, the accuser brought forth his case:

*“When the town gossips hear of this, you’ll be finished in Grover.”*

*“Shut up, devil. Even if this boy dies, you are NOT going to spoil this moment. I did as the Lord instructed me.”*

*“Come now, Elias. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Why were you trying to rob the boy’s death of its dignity, by trying to reverse it? Death has been a natural part of life since the Garden – “*

*“Adam listened to your prattle, but I will not. Get lost.”*

Elias took a deep, relaxed breath and stood calmly. A faint breeze ruffled the curtains.

Lyndall’s body gave a spasmodic jerk, his limp arm straightened stiffly. Rigor? Elias was no doctor. But Sarah gave an excited squeak. An eyelid clearly fluttered. *Both* eyelids were blinking, and the lips parted slightly. Was there a change in the light, or was his yellowed skin now glowing a healthy pink? Fifteen long seconds passed. Then without warning, both eyes opened wide, and Lyndall’s elbows were working to raise him off his deathbed.

“Hi, Mom! What a good rest. I think I can eat now.”

# 10

## Search Committee

AhabOil was taking a beating. After the earthquake, plans to repair the pipelines were tabled time and again. The wild Green fringe was constantly nipping at the heels of the big dogs of big energy. Lawsuits and demonstrations continued unabated through early summer. Ahab, out for an early morning errand one fine August morning, was halted on the main access road by the carcass of a juvenile gray whale that had allegedly been caught in one of AhabOil's protective nets. Someone had hijacked the thing and dumped it where it would leave an impression. Ahab hated whales.

Now, on a fine November morning, the oil lord of California awoke to find that two thousand radicals had parked old, beat-up cars sideways in all the roads leading from Highway One to headquarters, and simply walked away. These blocked the way in and out for weeks until an army of tow trucks could be assembled to make the fifty-mile trip up Highway One. Each chartered helicopter flight deepened Ahab's resolve to find out who was behind this. He raged for hours over news from Alaska. Their legislature had vowed by forty-five votes to two that there would not be a repeat of the fouling of their coastline as in the *Exxon Valdez* incident. The bill which took effect immediately, imposed such radical restrictions as to make offshore drilling unprofitable forever. Texaco and Chevron were spending millions on billboards and TV spots; "X ON AHAB" being the most popular. But far more efficient at bringing the company to a state of crisis were the incompetent executives who had replaced the Hundred the day after the party. They had proved too self-indulgent to be much good at being ruthless; so the company pipelines bled not black oil, but red ink.

Ahab paced rapidly on the deck outside the Tea Room.

"What are we going to do, Larry?"

The only employee Ahab ever addressed by his first name drummed his fingers on the mahogany, took a sip of tea, and hypothesized. Though Larry O'Brien was a close friend of the prophet, he

knew little of his comings and goings; therefore he could honestly reply, "We know that this Álvarez, this Elias the prophet, seems to have something to do with everything. Can't we find him? He's just a vagrant – he could be arrested for anything. I mean, we never even brought him in for trespassing the first time!"

Ahab snorted. "I've been sending our fellows after him for several months, and the best leads always come up dry."

O'Brien set his teacup on the narrow railing. "I don't want to accuse, but we can't overlook the possibility that our men have been missing him *on purpose*."

The Chief Officer emphasized his point with a hand gesture that passed within an inch of the cup. Ahab nervously considered saving the little Delft masterpiece from certain death on canyon rocks a hundred feet below, but folded his hands instead to listen more intently. "Chevron would pay a lot to keep someone around who keeps damaging our reputation. Listen, Jonathan. I've got some good leads – some in Oakland, around Lake Merritt, some in San Mateo, under the bridge."

"You mean, Larry, we should go ourselves and find out?"

"Even if we miss him, we'll find out where the loyalty is in our company."

"Good thinking. I'll go... San Mateo. I need to go there anyway and put some pressure on a few bankers. I'll take a change of clothes." Ahab was skilled at disguising himself. He could, with appropriate clothing, melt into a crowd of homeless, to learn what actual people were thinking. He could stand in front of a dumpster talking politics, listening with genuine interest to a unemployed father of four vent seething hatred for the power-hungry energy elite. He might commiserate by sharing his own stories of senators and judges taking bribes or sweeter favors from the oil lobby, even from the Oil King himself! The transients and dispossessed never failed to laugh off his tales of corruption – "Too flagrant, too obvious. Nobody could be *that* corrupt!" Jonathan Ahab always finished regaling his audience with a wink and, "It's the absolute truth." Which, of course, it was.

# 11

## UnCity

The UnCity. Oakland, California takes pride in its situation on the “sunny side of the Bay”, as well as its historic buildings which have been inventively maintained by their tenants, primarily students and others desiring inexpensive lodging. Oakland’s faux-modern flavor presents a stark contrast to the nineteenth-century haven of gold prospectors and Chinese immigrants across the bay. The City, as San Francisco is known (never, *ever* do natives call it “Frisco”) boasts century-old cable cars which carry real passengers to real workplaces; The UnCity has a double-decker freeway stack. The Queen of the Bay has Coit Tower and the shining needle Pyramid; Oakland has Kaiser Permanente. The City boasts Golden Gate Park, a florid paradise studded with museums; Oakland has Lake Merritt, a decent number of fog-free mornings, and a large resident population not recorded on any census. On one such brilliant morning O’Brien quietly parked his Ferrari in a nice residential zone near the Kaiser Center, walked a few blocks, bought a sandwich made of... something and stepped into a world which was at once delightful as Playa de las Palmas, owing to exquisite gardenry, and grimly obnoxious, owing to the many palms extended towards anyone who looked like they might have some spare change.

“Hey! O’Brien!”

What? Larry was terrified but knew he must face the voice. One of Ahab’s spies? Who on earth would know him here? All he saw was a crowd of probably unemployed migrant workers; but one, a short bald Latino with a wide moustache, stepped out ahead of the others and was now *running* towards him. It was the moustache. This guy actually looked sort of like Elias, except for a comical giant caterpillar waltzing across his upper lip. The guy zeroed in and gave Larry the best bear hug a five-foot-six man could give to a six-foot five man. It *was* Elias.

“Are you crazy, Álvarez? If anybody guesses who I am, I might not get out of here alive.”

“Sorry to confuse you with the makeover. I needed to lose the beard to get a job, but I cut my lip really bad, so the moustache. God sent me here to find you. I need you to find Ahab and tell him I’ll meet him in front of the Chevron station, at 4:30.”

O’Brien balked. “What did I do to deserve this? Suppose God tells you to go somewhere else and you don’t show up? You’ll be in Marin County or France or who knows where, and I’ll be left with a lame story. That can be dangerous. Ahab’s wife has convinced him that half the company is spying for Chevron, and he is sharpening his hatchet.”

“Go. Please. God is waiting, and I will be waiting.”

## 12

### **Russian Fools Where Angels Fear to Tread**

The San Mateo Bridge, though not so famous as its peers at the north end of the Bay, provides its own experience, for it goes *way* up, offering an unobstructed view; and being narrower, the possibilities for head on collisions offer a raw, breathless excitement. But for O’Brien the rawest excitement came from considering the question – “What do I do with this Ferrari?” He had parked it at Kaiser that morning; but now he had to find a rendezvous at an unknown point in a muddy no-man’s land, where his resourceful boss was doing business with some other captain of industry in a venue in which neither would be noticed. After dodging potholes below the ramps to the Bridge, failing to find his master but arousing the curiosity of scores of vagrants even more dangerous-looking than the Oakland crowd, Larry spotted an engine shop with a butterscotch Mercedes 450SL in one of its four parking spaces. It had a familiar look, and proved to be Ahab’s car. A seedy-looking mechanic, who proved to be Ahab, soon emerged from the shed with a can of Dr. Pepper, along with an even seedier-looking Pierre Baloshkin, and a third mechanic, greasy and wearing a uniform three sizes too small, none other than Andreyev.

O'Brien tried to stifle, but lost it, practically splitting a gut laughing. Ahab quickly came to the defense of his Russians.

"You think I would go into that place without a bodyguard?"

O'Brien quickly explained the mission. Ahab listened keenly, then without a word motioned to his ill-dressed companions; the three vanished into the Mercedes, which melted into early rush-hour bridge traffic bound for Oakland. Larry took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. He was free this afternoon to visit old friends from the company at their new jobs with Chevron, CalGas, and Texaco. They were all working low-level cubicle jobs under assumed names. For Ahab to learn of their whereabouts would mean litigation, even persecution, for the King of Oil could sit heavy on the personal lives of anyone who crossed him. But today, the King was on a bridge headed for a rendezvous with a prophet, and O'Brien could breathe free. Perhaps a visit to the windmill farm and maybe see old friends at Greenpeace would be a good way to celebrate – and to get the word out to others who would be interested in seeing the king of oil come face-to-face with Elias, the disturber of kings.

## **13**

### **Don't Call Me Ishmael**

Jonathan Ahab III dipped his hand into a bag of Doritos and began to feed the ducks of Lake Merritt. Soon Andreyev and Baloshkin were joining in the fun. Then a couple of large, aggressive geese decided the party was theirs. One charged, hissing, at Baloshkin; the terrified son of the Steppes dropped the bag. Gulls immediately appeared, dive-bombing, and avian chaos ruled. The flustered oil baron was swinging his hands in the air wildly, trying to scatter the birds, when he discerned among the squawks a laughing human voice:

"All we need is a piñata, Señor Ahab!"

"Who the devil are you?" Ahab was having problems. He had dreamed of being remembered with a statue overlooking Lake Merritt; but here he was being crowned by gulls while still alive, and he did not appreciate it.

The cheerful voice called out. "Call me anything, but don't call me Ishmael."

A bag of Doritos was ripped open and a handful of golden chips was tossed downwind, so that the center of bird traffic shifted away from the little conclave of men. Ahab seethed. With the veins in his neck bulging, he launched a diatribe at the one who seemed to be mocking him. "Aren't you the one that is bringing all this trouble? Troubling my business – troubling our nation's economy?"

Elias maintained his pleasant demeanor through this tirade, countering each insult peaceably, like a tennis player simply holding up his racket to return a vicious serve. "I haven't troubled anyone who didn't already have trouble, my friend." Ahab winced at this familiarity, but listened intently, taking pause only when a goose waddled up to delivered the prophet an unopened bag of pretzels. Elias broke the wrapper, took out a huge, perfect pretzel and soliloquized.

"Snyder's of Hanover. I must have God's favor today. I pray, Jonathan, that you will have his favor as well.

Elias bit out a corner and waved the remaining three-quarters of a pretzel in Ahab's face. "Once upon a time, Jonathan, your company was called Davidson Oil. It grew and prospered. It gained such a reputation that it was welcomed around the world for its business ethics and involvement in improving standards of living, and its concern for future generations. Your great-grandfather invested in windmills and solar energy against the day that oil would be depleted. But you have turned all that around; you are only interested in yourself, and your precious profits of Bailout!"

"So what are you going to do about it? You are only one homeless immigrant."

"I am calling for a meeting of the minds. Your people and my people. You and all four hundred and fifty of your executives, at the park on the summit of Mount Diablo, a week from Friday, at 9 A.M. Everyone bring their personal stock portfolios and a sack lunch; and be sure to supply two white plastic eight-foot tables, and a P.A. system."



Ahab's mind suspiciously conjured up a vision of an army of homeless desperadoes and greenies creeping up the slopes, to make an ugly scene, or even take him hostage in that unprotected area. "Who are you bringing with you?"

"Herman Melville."

"Be real."

"The One who created you will be there."

## 14

### **Lattés of the Night**

Ahab considered simply not showing up. But when he arrived back at the Playa, Richardson greeted him with news that the showdown had been twittered all over the Bay Area, that thousands might show up, and that the press was drooling at the chance to get footage of this showdown between a titan of industry and one uncommon man.

"Sir – I can't help thinking. We have the sheriff of Contra Costa County in the palm of our hand. If Álvarez comes up Diablo with his greenies and his green carders and starts causing trouble, even a little trouble, we can trump up some charge and even send him back to El Salvador for good."

"No. I want to show the people that we are the company America can trust – that Bailout is the destiny of our nation. If we accept Elias' terms for this confrontation, it will completely disarm him, for he will no longer have the high moral ground."

"What sort of contest does this Álvarez have in mind?"

"I don't have the faintest idea."

Jessy was thrilled with the idea, whatever it was. She had such confidence in her husband to defeat Elias in single combat that she decided she didn't even need to watch. "I have a standing appointment with my hairdresser on Fridays, in Denver. I'm afraid you'll just have to tell me all the details." So this was Ahab's game, to win; and he was just as glad that Jessy would not be sitting in the stands getting half the credit

and all the pictures in the tabloids. She was beautiful, the steely kind of beautiful that men consider a prize, a symbol for womanhood at its most glamorous, rather than an actual woman. But unlike trophies, which just sit benignly on a shelf, she exercised a will of iron, with which she ruled her husband's passions. When they took their vows two decades ago, he was merely an ambitious young executive, in some ways very good-hearted and thoughtful, with a rich daddy. He had a deep yearning for her to lavish her with his unearned fortune, and she rewarded him for the privilege. But young Jonathan Ahab III found her capable of raising the bar for luxury, and soon found himself a "new kind of businessman", as he liked to put it. Old priorities were trumped by new vision. So it came to pass that on a rainy evening fourteen years into their marriage, he was walking up the wide carpeted steps alone to his room (for she now slept in her own palace). Thinking he might regain some favor, he told a servant to replace the giant framed oil which depicted Sol Davidson overlooking a clear blue ocean with one depicting Jessie, seated invitingly, in high heels, on the edge of a drilling platform the way other young women might sit on the hood of a Chevrolet.

Twenty-six years had passed since that modification. Thursday -- the eve of the shootout, or whatever it was to be -- came and went, and found Ahab clutching the rail of those same soft white stairs, barely noticing the portrait of his voluptuous wife, as he made his way to bed. He had taken a few too many mai tai's at supper, and the stairs now appeared as Everest. He wondered what sort of man this Elias was, who had probably walked up Mount Diablo and was camping on its slopes, waiting. He turned the untarnished brass handle to his bedroom and spotted Gregory, who not only served his nighttime drinks but made sure rooms were unoccupied before the boss entered them.

"Latté, Sir?"

"Triple. High-octane. Diesel."

Satin bed-coverings and soft ceiling lights swirled about in a sweet, confusing symphony of mocha and alcohol as Ahab watched the late news, slipped from consciousness to numbness, and hence to sleep,

interrupted only by a horrendous nightmare around two A.M., that the government had mandated solar within five years. Fear was dispelled by another power latté; and by and by the coastal fog began to gray, revealing the kind of morning that oilmen in Texas and Alaska could only dream about. Around five-thirty Ahab stumbled to the breakfast room, went through the curtain ritual, saw whales traveling south, cursed, took some Earl Grey, and, smiling an enigmatic smile, ordered a helicopter for a day trip to Contra Costa County and a car for the final few miles up the hill.

## **15**

### **Diablo**

The northwestern corner of the North American continent features a long spine of mountains whose vertebrae are volcanic. Most of them are dead or dormant, but a few, such as Redoubt in Alaska, St. Helens in Washington and Lassen in California, keep us on our toes. The Cascades of Washington and Oregon are so named because so many of their rivers freefall over the edges of lava flows. The high country of the Sierras is the result of simple folding, but there are a few mini-volcanoes south of Mount Lassen: the Twin Buttes, north of Sacramento, near Live Oak; and Mount Diablo, standing solitary east of San Francisco Bay. Its summit is visible from all points from many miles, so that it was used as a surveyor's marker from the earliest days. Like many volcanic formations, the Devil is in its name; though it has been quiet for so long that much more of the devilry is performed by those who find secret places in its scrub-oak forests than by the mountain itself. So today we find the saints, San Rafael, San Pablo, San Francisco, and San Mateo under the watchful eye of a very benign *Diablo*.

To Ahab, the mountain was a symbol of the powerful forces which created seams in the earth where oil could be had. His favorite weekend trip was to stop at Carmel-by-the-Sea for breakfast and to strike up a little business with the local tycoons, then on to Mount Diablo, where he could stay the night at a local Hyatt, and up the summit road before dawn, to view his empire in all of its glory. This Friday, however, his goal was to

get up the peak as quickly as possible, for today was this strange sort of company picnic that Elias – mad prophet, enemy, or whoever he was – had demanded. He had brought his sack lunch – Perrier, Brie and a croissant laden with prosciutto – as well as a white table cloth and necessary silver, stowed in the trunk of his Mercedes. He planned to enjoy a casual lunch after dealing with Elias. Around eight forty-five he and his bodyguards arrived, finding a few of his eager-beaver vice-presidents already there, shivering in the morning dew. “I could do without about half of these sycophants. Sometimes I think I don’t need any of them, except maybe O’Brien.” By nine-thirty the whole Board had arrived. Tables and sound system were up – a marvel of efficiency. Jonathan Ahab III reconsidered his thoughts. “You need a few drones around the hive.” At nine sharp a video truck from Channel 6 rolled in, and three others followed. A respectable force of police cruisers seemed to materialize from somewhere, which was reassuring. Ahab puzzled, “So where is the star attraction?”

He felt the grass rustle behind him. Wheeling around, he found himself staring directly into the gentle eyes of Elias Álvarez. Where did he come from and how did he get past Andreyev? The Costa Rican nodded hello and immediately turned to address those gathered on the lawn.

“Do you know, *hermanos*, that in this crowd of big vice-presidents, wealthy, powerful company men, there are some of you with the heart of little children who want to know God and have the joy of life? You still have that yearning buried beneath all of the layers of corporate loyalty, but you are afraid that your peers will make fun of you, so you keep quiet. Inside many of you is the teenager who heard about old man Davidson and listened with heart thumping to his stories of his decision to do the right thing – to inspire the other businessmen instead of sneaking around and cutting their throats. When he did the right thing, God helped his business, sometimes dramatically, and made him a leader in the world. You heard Ahab himself tell you those stories at staff meetings, and you wept real tears.

“Among you are dozens of noble leaders who have a deep sense of responsibility; but for some unknown reason you have chosen to feed at the trough of Bailout, wining and dining the call girls that Jezebel has provided for your pleasure, throwing around government money and forgetting the pledge you made when you joined this organization – to restore decency and honor to business. How long, my friends, will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him. If your precious Bailout is your god, then follow him.”

A silence hard and black as basalt followed.

“Well, there’s just God and me and a lot of cameras, but there are four hundred and fifty of you. Vice-presidents, department heads, interns, secretaries, water boys. I think it’s time we gave you the chance for some good press. Don’t you think it’s about time for a bull market?”

Puzzled looks and nods.

“The three years are up, today! It’s time for the oil to flow and the cash cows to moo!”

Driscoll raised his hand like a schoolboy. “What are you talking about?”

“You mean Captain Ahab didn’t tell his crew!! This is astonishing! Well, if you don’t know, I am a prophet, and I am about to prophesy!” Elias turned to the cameraman. “Can you give me a little more volume? “

The cameraman only shrugged, but an intern found a knob, which he immediately turned to “ten”, producing a howl of feedback, then backed it off to a squeaky but clearly audible level.

“Prosperity is going to return – it’s just a matter of whether it’s by Bailout or by God’s hand. So we will make it a contest. I presume you all have your Blackberries? Hold them high so I can see them.”

They were proud of their Blackberries. Within seconds, four hundred and fifty of the little super-cell phones appeared above the heads. Cameramen dived into a frenzy of focusing as they panned across this mini-sea of technology. Elias spoke again, now in a low voice, lips almost touching his microphone.

“My challenge is simple. Anyone can observe that Bailout is not working. Most of you have already watched half the money your department got from Bailout disappear without a trace. Truly you have built your house on quicksand! But here is your chance to make it all up - to prove publicly that with the encouragement of AhabOil, prices and productivity will go up. Those portfolios you brought might well double their value by the end of the day. Please place your portfolio on the table, as a symbol of your dedication to Bailout.”

There was some balking at this, but Ahab glowered and said, “Do it.” The briefcases and notebooks were dutifully stacked into a pile several feet high atop the table, which sagged under the weight.

“Now, gentlemen, you may be wondering... why the Blackberries? To drive the price up, of course! Those cell phones give you access to more congressmen, lobbyists, CEOs and bigwigs than I can name in one sitting. So call out to Bailout, your salvation! On top of this mountain reception is perfect. Get calling! Drive those prices up! Only one thing – listen carefully – “

Every molecule in the air stopped in its course.

“No insider trading.”

The Bailout crowd knew they had been had. That was the only sure-fire way to make money. But since this shindig was on national TV and a hundred Internet sites, they did not dare risk jail, even for the Corporation. They knew the whole affair was a farce; they could see the news anchors stifling laughter behind their memo pads. But being good Yes Men, they accepted the honor of raising their company’s reputation by calling on the powers-that-be to show their support of Ahab Oil, especially to put pressure on the Ninth Circuit Court Judge, Stoneman. Three years to this date, Washington Irving Stoneman had served an injunction against turning the main valve at the Playa which would let the oil flow again. Robinson, the Human Resources Director, spoke for the group. He was clearly not happy, but he spoke forcefully.

“O.K. Let’s get ‘er done.”

They sat at picnic benches and sprawled on the grass, furiously pounding the keys on their laptops, dialing and redialing their Blackberries. "Bailout! We need more Bailout to activate the market and get America on its feet!" Their pleas were long and eloquent, and fell on the ears of many who regarded influencing a judge as no more difficult than walking a poodle across the street. AhabOil stock had started the day at \$45.20 a share. Optimism soared as the first returns showed a two-dollar increase; but it plummeted to thirty-eight by noon and \$26.60 by two. Then a shock wave – a report that Judge Stoneman had disappeared! Was he hostage somewhere? Rumors flew rampant across the grassy knoll that was the county park.

"Timeout!" Elias' voice bawled through the fuzzy P.A. A furious wave of feedback stilled the telephone chatter. "What's the matter? Is there a *bear* in the woods? Is your precious Bailout afraid to come out of the restroom? Oh, excuse me. I mustn't interfere. Keep those calls coming! You never know when your special angel will answer!"

These clean-cut young execs, ripe for a challenge, increased the pace. Some threw caution to the wind, mortgaging their homes and tossing all of their liquid assets into stock. Others were even bolder, attempting to bribe congressmen with company favors. Some were overtaken with fear, as well as embarrassment. Kashmeier, a sensitive young VP, pulled out a gun and tried to shoot himself; but he was wrestled to the ground by his comrades and taken into custody. If Ahab had known all that was going on amid the babble, he would have fired the entire Board of Directors and pressed charges against the majority of them. The onlookers, newsmen and police began to relax; the whole thing was becoming good comedy. But not everyone was laughing.

"Two-minute warning!" The sun was now orange and visibly round near the horizon through thin bay fog. A brief pause, then more calling and key-pounding. But public confidence had caved in. AhabOil now stood at three dollars and twenty-two cents, and related stocks had dived through the floor. "Tiiiiiiiiime!" A few more calls and clicks and whispers of "Shut that thing off!", and silence.

Elias took the mic, face hard as a chunk of lava. He leaned against his table, which had a bad leg and collapsed. From his knapsack he produced a roll of duct tape and artfully repaired it; and he also brought forth four cans of Pepsi, four glass bottles of classic Coke, and four plastic bottles of Diet Dr. Pepper. "I am afraid I have no stock, in the sense of a bull, to offer as people once did in ancient times. I have only these, the sum of my liquid assets, as well as a truly nice roast beef sandwich, which I sacrifice to the cause. But it does not matter what I put on this table. It is what I own in this world. I can offer everything I have, because I live in God's kingdom, which is always a bull market." He opened each container so the silent crowd could hear the pop and rush of air, proving that these were the genuine products. He then carefully stacked the cans in a sort of pyramid, placed the Dr. Peppers at the corner, and the roast beef at the summit of the tiny altar. No one dared say, "What is this, some kind of joke?" Instead, an uneasy sense of dread swept over the audience. Newsmen stopped their quipping and Palm Pilots their punching.

*"There was a time when people who trusted in God offered their best to Him. In the days when agriculture was everything, their best was a prize animal, a blue-ribbon best-of-show. They burned the creature as a sacrifice, showing that success comes not by their own power or cleverness or luck, but through the spirit of God. Times have changed; today we present our lives, our very selves as a living sacrifice. For years, you have been making your sacrifice to Bailout or other creatures of pleasure, worshipping them with all your heart, worshipping at the expense of family and friends, yet you have failed. Has any one of you had peace, or even happiness, for a full twenty-four hour day?"*

Elias waited a moment, then spoke as a judge speaks when he is picking up his gavel.

*"Everything that is not of God's spirit is just stuff; it can be burned up and the world will not miss it, whether it is twelve cans of soda pop or a stock portfolio."*



A breeze took up and swept off fog in the west, so the coastal hills were sharply visible. The sun dipped below the lowest cloud and flooded the park with golden brilliance. Now its rim touched the edge of the world and was beginning to sink behind it. For the first time, Elijah raised his voice. The ancient 100-amp P.A. writhed with distortion and feedback, but the prophet did not hold back:

*“O Lord, God of all ages, from those who first trusted You until today: Let it be known today that You are God of the entire world, and that I am Your servant and have done all of these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord; answer me, so the people will know that You, O Lord, are God, and that You are turning their hearts back again.”*

At that moment, from the deep clear blue of a perfect evening sky, a ferocious bolt of lightning fell. Those who were not thrown to the ground ducked and scattered --- but that was all, just a single strike from nowhere. An awestruck audience returned to the grassy knoll to see – to see – nothing! Elias’ table was completely gone – vaporized. There were no cans or bottles to be seen, not a trace or a tab; there was only a sweet, savory aroma of roast beef, which lingered in the air, then vanished on a breeze, just as the last red flicker of Sun melted below the ridge of the Coast Range.

Elias bellowed into the cooling breeze of evening,

*“Is there anyone here who is richer for having cried to Bailout?”*

His voice thundered.

*“Anyone! Tell Mr. Ahab how successful your prayers have been.”*

The prophet walked into the crowd, holding the wireless microphone forward as if it were a royal scepter, jamming it into the faces of AhabOil executives. McGinty spoke first. “I lost two million today.” Amerson. “89% loss. I’m ruined.” Josephson lost 4.2 million, Andrews 800,000, Kenally 94% loss, Ingalls total loss. Smith was in the hospital, having tried to commit suicide by jumping off a cliff, but only succeeded in breaking a leg. On and on it went. Glassford, the senior vice-president, took his portfolio from the pile, examined its contents briefly, then tossed them on the grass. Next, he removed his tie, took his Leatherman tool

from his pocket, found the little knife and cut the tie into shreds. He folded up his tool, turned and without looking up, walked out to the parking lot. The junior executives, one by one, did the same. The profits of Bailout were completely wiped out in a single day.

## **16**

### **Gusher**

A few minutes later, Judge Stoneman, who had slipped away to a lonely private beach on Maui, without the least concern for court orders, pipelines or anything, heard an alarm on his laptop, opened an email, frowned, studied it for fifteen minutes, smiled, then phoned his liaison to rescind the order which had stifled the flow of oil from Ahab's pipeline. An employee who had stayed at the Playa to hold the fort relayed the information to a technician, who walked to a big red valve and gave it several turns. The release of pressure produced an ominous vibration, but within a minute all was flowing smoothly.

And during the last hour, a small army of greenies had been busy parking their cars, five abreast, on the winding road which takes all traffic to the top of Mount Diablo. Each pocketed his or her keys. Some walked up towards the summit to view the scene, some to pray to the earth-mother; others headed downhill to catch a bus home. When Ahab, speeding downhill, reached this impassable thicket of cars, he screeched to a halt, jumped out, cursed violently and kicked a dent into the side of a gray 1962 Peugeot. Still hopping on one foot, nursing the pain of what he had done to his own foot, Ahab heard a voice behind him.

"There are advantages to not owning one of those things."

Elias Álvarez strolled through the maze of parked cars, right past Ahab, not even turning to look at him until he was a safe distance past. Then he shouted,

"Jonathan! Jonathan! Give glory to God! The oil is flowing!"

"Nonsense! It is one thing to get a lightning bolt from a blue sky, and quite another thing to change a court order when the judge is out of town!"

“Call the home office.”

Busy. How can the line be busy? He had three personal lines.

“Try again.”

Ahab repeated the action six more times, finally getting Millhouse’s voice, “Welcome to AhabOil, king of the energy world.” This was followed with a menu of options, hours to call, and a beep. Ahab recorded a few choice words, but was quickly joined by Elias, who had darted back towards the tycoon’s Mercedes, yelling, “Woo-hoooo! The oil... is... *flowing!* Get your umbrellas out – we have a gusher!”

The prophet took off between the parked cars and vanished into the deepening dusk; the king, not wishing to be towed away, quietly moved his car uphill to a parking place at the summit.

## 17

### **Hushpuppies**

Sarah Voth’s slender hands, protected by bright red oven mitts, lifted an iron skillet carrying a dozen piping-hot hushpuppies to celebrate Elias’ victory. Clam chowder, of course, went with them, and Elias and O’Brien were the guests of honor. After supper, O’Brien opened the family Bible and read from First Kings the story of Elijah’s prayer of faith, which defeated the prophets of Ba’al at Mt. Carmel.

Lyndall was not satisfied with the analogy. “The people chased and killed all of the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal; but Ahab’s men lost nothing but stock portfolios.”

O’Brien countered. “Laddie, you are still young. You don’t know the value of a stock portfolio. You have never carried around a suitcase containing a hundred million dollars.”

“It’s nothing but money. We barely have the money to buy Jiffy mix and bicycle tires, and we’re happy enough.”

“The vice-presidents of AhabOil defined themselves by their money and by their power. Even when they gave money away, it was to

obey a voice inside them that told them the benevolence would lead to a good reputation, and ultimately more power. On Mount Diablo, they found they had no real power, only the ability to bully and deceive. Their wealth was an illusion – the false profits of Bailout. So when their stocks plunged to zero, they had no identity at all. It didn't matter whether they went back to their desks the next day or not. They lived as dead men walking around in suits for most of their adult life. They will go back to their homes on North Beach or Menlo Park, where each will dutifully greet his wife, who looks up for a moment from her computer at her husband, who has already begun to climb the staircase towards his computer, to find new ways to lure money into their accounts. They are dead, but Life is waiting for them, calling out to them, if they ever open their eyes and ears. It is up to them to decide whether or not they want to live.

“Your theology is great, but our chowder’s getting cold, men.”

“Thanks, Sarah. Let’s eat. But first, we raise your glasses in praise to the Lord. To the Lamb of God! *Skoal.*”

## 18

### **Al-va-raysss**

“Ahab, you have disgraced me! Why did you allow this rigged contest? You have debased our reputation in front of the world!”

“Jessy, honey – is lightning rigged? The Lord God –

“Do you *still* have a soft place for this Lord-Who-Humiliates? You’re supposed to be a king, and you’re playing footsie with a dangerous enemy, just because he represents some god you were afraid of because a group of sour old priests told you fairy tales about a *giant flood* and *the earth swallowing up thirty thousand people*. Listen. I’ve heard enough about this Elias Ál-va-rayyyss!” Jessy took pride in her Spanish pronunciation, having learned from professionals through countless episodes of *I Love Lucy*. She continued:

“Elias, he is a sweetheart. He wouldn’t hurt a single flea, though doubtless he owns many. You want to get rid of him?”

“Of course.”

“Say it with some conviction, dearest.”

Ahab mumbled, with conviction. “Of course.”

“Intimidation. You were on the right track, with your thugs out to break the kneecaps. But Álvarez will remain an irritant, even if he has to preach from a wheelchair. We have to up the ante on intimidation; and we have an advantage now. *We know where he lives.*”

## 19

### AI-VAIR-ezz

The mailman looked quizzically at Sarah Voth.

“Sarah, ma’am. I’ve got an Express Mail for Elias AI-VAIR-ez, at this address. Did I say it right?” What he meant was, “Why is a Mexican getting a letter at your address, single lady?”; but he was far too gentle a man to say it that way.

“AL-va-rehss. And it’s OK. He’s a friend who stops by here sometimes.”

“Just a friend?”

“You’d like him, George. Friend of the family.”

“Just a friend, then.”

“Yup.”

“All right. Good day... oh! Sign here, ma'am.”

George, ambling down Sarah’s Path, met two men, one of whom he suspected was Elias; but he stopped short of anything more than a “g’day”. Today was a special day for George. Usually he only got a glimpse of Sarah through the screen door, but today she had come out to sign for the express mail. He stood far enough away from the screen door to ensure that would happen, and it did, without a sign that he had caused it to happen. But now George had to muster up a little faith that the little

bald-headed Mexican-or-whatever he saw would not trouble the Lady of the House, and of his dreams. And, having a route to complete, he quickened his pace towards the grid of Grover proper.

Sarah, hearing the prophet's beautiful and distinctive whistling before she actually saw him, shouted, "United States Express Mail for Elias Alvarez!"

The gate creaked open and the two hikers appeared, one tall and lean, wearing a red flannel shirt, jeans and a shy grin. The other face was familiar, and gave an answer.

"Really? What? Is Ahab forcing up your electric rates again?"

"Naw. It's Express, for you. From San Francisco."

"Express can wait. I want you to meet Rick Glassford. He used to work at the oil company, but for some reason he wants to hang out with a prophet. AND he loves Jesus!" Glassford shook Sarah's hand, offering a shy, boyish glance.

Now to the letter. For an itinerant prophet, a letter is like a giant candy bar. He ripped the envelope open, tearing a corner of the letter in the process. He read greedily; but as he did, his face turned white; and he looked very old.

*By tomorrow morning, one of us will be dead, and it won't be me. But to be sporting, I'll give you a head start.*

*Very Sincerely, Jessy Lynnée Ahab*

The trembling prophet grabbed his backpack and turned to Glassford.

"Don't let Sarah be seen with you – it could be dangerous for both of you - Jezebel is out for revenge!"

Elias bolted out, swinging the screen door wide, and disappeared down the path.

"Your water – your canteen!"

Elias did not even turn around to consider the words Sarah was shouting. Glassford gave chase, but soon realized Elias wasn't on the path. He had veered off into the manzanita, to pursue some route not

made for car, hiker or even deer.

## **20**

### **Shortest Chapter in the Book**

Next morning, Jessy opened the curtains herself for the morning Tea Ritual, then sidled over to her husband and chirped, “You can forget about Elias. All gone.” Then she took Ahab’s cup from his hand, took a sip and announced, “You need something more exotic than this to start your day.” And with that, she dismissed the staff.

## **21**

### **Californias**

There is a legendary “California” which overlaps the real one. The television cliché shows us a blue-domed sky, wide boulevards shaded by tall palms, big Spanish-style mansions, and, somewhere in the mix, bikinis. The newspapers prefer to picture lunatic left-wingers robbing banks, shouting slogans against the government, or at times, running the government. To the media, there are only two cities in California: Los Angeles and San Francisco. Indeed, there are three other areas boasting over a million souls each; but San José, birthplace of our technical revolution, is far too bland to be of interest, as is the capital city, Sacramento. San Diego has research facilities, Sea World, and even more transients than Oakland. But there are even more Californias. The huge banana-shaped valley along the center of the state is populated by several generations of immigrant farmers. To many real people, Fresno is California – larger than Pittsburgh, yet having only one skyscraper, one art museum, and no traffic jams. To the east, there is a rural California unknown to the press – hundreds of towns in the valleys and foothills, at least four of which are named “Big Bear.” And there are tracts along the Pacific Coast and far inland that seem to have been left behind in time. The north part of the state boasts regions larger than New England states

with no more law than a county sheriff, and more bushes and caves to hide in than you can imagine. Not far from Casa de la Playa is the famous Big Sur coast, which features dizzying views of the sea from cliffs made of crumbly stuff. State Highway One twines tortuously through the crumbly cliffs, limiting tourism to nature photographers and really athletic bicyclists. The actual population consists of road maintenance crews, artists, and the sons of original settlers. These are very happy to keep the area as they found it. So while the outside of the Big Sur is seen in the travel section of every newspaper, the interior is wild and woody, a tulgey and temperate place where a little bald man with a backpack might not be noticed for a long time.

## **22**

### **Woodgate**

A handsome redwood arch greeted visitors coming in from the graveled parking lot. It bore the legend "Jack's Woodgate Inn Est. 1923 Welcome. No Trespassing Please." The sign was carved by the late Jack himself, the founding date by his son Jack, and the final note by his grandson, all three of them named Jack Woodgate. The latest Jack had a few rough experiences with some who had come in around rather than through the Woodgate. Prominently placed bales of barbed wire and electric fencing alerted the carefree visitor that there was a way to be welcome, and a way to be unwelcome. Pierre Baloshkin, weighing the options, elected to walk through the arch into a dark foyer, lit primarily by a Coke machine. He lit a cigarette. A voiced immediately split the dimlit quiet:

"No smoking in here, and if you try it outside, I will call the police. There is a severe fire danger notice out for the entire county. But don't be angry with me. A few hot words could set this whole joint on fire!"

Piotr Ulyanovich Baloshkin, a recent immigrant from Uzbekistan, understood the individual words, but only the first two made any sense. He extinguished his unsmoked Winston and put it back in the pack so it



might warn the others. He also muttered a few words in the Black Speech towards his newly adopted country's policies concerning the pleasant habit he had acquired when on a February morning one of his schoolmates had stolen a pack of Winstons and shared it, whereupon he threw up in the city fountain. The constable learned of this and forced him to clean it up -- and the bird droppings to boot. Pierre sometimes called the U.S.A. the "Un-Smoking..." and another word. Then he would laugh. He loved the United States, because Ahab paid him a ton of money to stand around and look tough, or drive somewhere, take care of a problem or two and drive home in an air-conditioned car on roads that had lots of pavement and few potholes. Today's problem involved a pistol, which he carried in a compartment at the bottom of a camera case.

"Hi, my name's Jack Woodgate. And yours?"

"Paul... Garchnik."

"Garchnik?"

"Yes, as in city in Uzbekistan."

"What brings you here, Paul?"

"Photographer for Uzbekographic Society."

"I love photography. I've got several signed Muenches here in the lodge."

"Signed munches? How do you --"

"Do you have some of your own work? I'd love to see one of your pictures."

"I am so sorry. Am on field. Assignment. Traveling, how you say, light."

"That's OK. Let's get you signed in. Say, first, could you take a picture of my wife and me in front of the gate? Then your people in Uzabekis, um, yeah, could see what it's like at Woodgate. I've got a digital card."

The only thing Pierre Ulyanovitch knew about the digital camera, his cover for the gun, was how to aim it. He knew how to aim things; but his fingers had to fight among the buttons until one he pressed produced a brilliant flash. He flashed a brilliant grin.

“Flashing attachment... works like good baby!”

Jack called for Marla Woodgate, and proprietor and photographer proceeded to the entrance arch. To Pierre’s alarm and surprise, when he put his thumb on a little bar to hold the camera steady, the zoom went into play. He took quite a while to master this new element in photographic art. “New... camera.” “Breath make, uh... lens foggy.” Finally he snapped and the camera flashed. Jack removed the digital card and put it in his printer. Baloshkin eagerly looked into the paper exit for the first photograph he had ever taken. It was a nicely framed image of the Woodgates, the Woodgate, the wood gate, and – a short, bald stranger in the background smiling and pointing to the “No Trespassing, Please” warning. Both men shrugged.

“Oh, yes, do you sell the feelm here?”

“Film? That’s a digital camera.”

Another voice spoke up. “Uses no film at all.”

“Oh, ho-ho. How you say it? Of course, no film. A joke!”

The other voice said, “I’d like to check in.” Elias was not too sure about wanting to check in. He had noted that the camera case was “Property of AhabOil”, that the cameraman did not know how to operate a camera, and he was getting a flashback of seeing the shiny dome of the same Russian’s head the morning of the prophecy and the earthquake. He thought he might have seen him more than once around Grover. He thought about the protective wiring around this pleasant lodge, and how difficult it might be to get out if need be. But he also felt assurance that God wanted him here, and that all would go well. He filled out the registration, took a key card for Room 14 and walked out to locate his cabin. It was comfortable and roomy, and had a good stout lock. Elias fantasized about gunshots through the window. These fantasies resulted in his moving the chair until it was out of a direct line of anything. “You coward,” he grumbled at himself. “Hey, if I’m going to get killed, it’s not going to be in my sleep.” He turned the lights out to help him listen more clearly. When there is no 60-cycle hum, the whole world sounds different. It sounds real. And in the perfect quiet of a moonlit night, Elias prayed.

At 1:14 he woke with a start. "Why didn't I check *out* instead of checking in and just melt into the woods? Did I really need supper?" And he heard a quiet voice answer, "Yes, you will need that supper." And he heard footsteps on the path, the classic twig break, and just three words from the same voice: "Front door. *Now.*" Indeed, he heard steps going around the cabin towards the sliding glass doors in the bedroom. With one complex motion he slung his pack on his back, worked the door latch and burst out onto the trail, then into the woods, desperately seeking any path that would not result in a turned ankle. His assassin, who had instantly taken pursuit, was crashing through the forest not far behind.

*"At least I know I wasn't just being paranoid. But how big is this place? Is the electric fence around the whole thing?"*

He stepped in a hole; his foot recoiled with pain. Blood, but nothing broken! Elias took off full speed through light brush. He saw a sign, "Stay On Path."

*"You really think so, Jack?"*

Suddenly an odd fluffy sound and a hole appeared in the sign.

*"A silencer! At least he'll have to be fairly close. He's heavy, I'm light. It's up the hill for me, I can put a few more yards between us... what's that bright thing? A boulder – and the fence!"*

It was now Baloshkin's turn to stumble. The Uzbek lost his gun in the weeds, and with it about fifteen seconds; but he quickly regained his breath. Though a big man, he knew how to use his long stride to conserve energy, and once on his feet was at full speed.

A memory of an article flashed through Elias' head, about a man who escaped the Soviet Union by pole vaulting a tree limb over an eight-foot fence.

*"Nothing here... but fallen, dead branches. One of those would snap and I would fall right into the fence. Lord, this is it. Help!"*

A gleam of something silver. Aluminum. Three eight-foot fence posts waiting to replace old bent-up ones! A plan sprang into existence.

*"Where's the bad place, the hole? To the right, in these bushes – there it*

*is! I don't need the rock. Good. I've lost that guy, for a second I guess. Idea. I'll just lay the pole on the rock, as if I went that way. All who fall on this rock will be crushed."*

Then Elias crawled through the hole in the fence, terrified of which wire might be electric, but all was quiet. He found a stone and threw it slightly beyond the rock just as the Uzbek came into view. The pursuer looked left, saw the eight-foot posts, surveyed the portion of fence that was visible from that point, and quickly computed.

"Yess. Farther in forest, less noise. Perhaps no one will even find the body."

During his three semesters at Lenin Podgorniy School, Pierre had been a champion in track and field, but a series of fights deprived him of the chance to compete in the national meet.

"I will show them all. They leap over a bar into pillows for a gold medal; but I will gain a prize that can purchase a wagon load of gold medals. Look – even a notch in the rock. For Father Lenin!"

Atop the flat boulder Baloshkin took a short trial run, then went for the gold, fiercely driving his pole into the depression in the rock; and with a mighty groan borne from deep within his soul he launched into space. The pole did not bend or break. Somewhere in midflight the smiling Pierre Ulyanovich, who at age six learned that Lenin's middle name was his own middle name, and never forgot to thank his parents for that treasured gift, remembered something from his technical training. He remembered that gravity accelerates a falling body sixteen feet per second per second, and that if forward motion and upward lift is insufficient, a body might fall, in less than a second, into baled barbed wire, and in cases such as this one, baled barbed wire carrying electric current.

## **23**

### **Los Baños**

The Voths and their house guest, Glassford, were delighted to see Elias, but the meeting was hasty, less than an hour. He left with a bag of

hush puppies, a Tupperware of chowder and a six-pack of Dr. Pepper, jammed into his knapsack, along with several more Greyhound passes they had found in the park. Glassford drove him over the Kettleman Hills to Los Baños. Elias refused to say where he was going, only that it would be 'somewhere no one has ever seen me before.'

He searched quite awhile around Los Baños for a shade tree. The region, which is flat and almost totally colorless, is given over to irrigated farms and bird sanctuaries. That day, agricultural dust obscured hills to the east and west, leaving only a vague blur for a horizon. Noon brought 103° even in that shade, and no breeze. Elias fingered a corn dodger, nibbled the end, whispering "Thank You, Sarah" hoarsely. He thought about opening a warm Dr. Pepper, and popped the top. It erupted, fizzing brown foam into his precious back of snacks.

"God!"

Dead, sticky silence.

"Lord!!"

A light breeze turned a page of his open Bible.

"Lord, I have had enough. No one is with me in this. I'm sorry. I forgot about Jezebel. She will not give up. Ahab is capable of mercy, but not her. Never... her. I will run, and I know how to hide, but it is useless! As soon as I show my face, if I board a bus, someone will notice, and they will kill me or find my friends and torture them. It is USE --- LESS! "

Elijah had come to this tree, in a corner of a wildlife refuge, to make a church of it, to worship God, to drown his fears in songs of praise and dance, and find refreshment for his spirit. Instead, as he looked around he saw only half-dead gray grass near him and a haze in the distance, no mountain to climb or castle to conquer. Back home, if he had been caught, there might have been a few sympathetic voices in the crowd; here, no one would see the act. He would simply disappear from the record.

"I have had enough, Lord. Let me die. I am no better than my ancestors." He leaned against the tree, then lay at its base, folding his hands. But before he could think of a word to pray, Elias drifted into a

sleep.

“Elias!”

A hand touched his shoulder. The bald prophet woke suddenly, aware of a large form directly above him. He thought of springing to his feet and making a run for it. How stupid that would be in an open field with probably a half-dozen of Jessy’s goons surrounding him. So he just curled up and began to cry.

“Get up and eat.”

“So they’re doing last meals these days? Fine, I’ll eat.” He opened his eyes fully, got up, still thinking of making a futile dash, spun around three-sixty and saw only one person.

“I am sorry to frighten you, but it *is* time to rise and be strengthened. Oh, I have not introduced myself.” A hand extended towards Elias. “Angel González.”

Elias shook his head, wondering to himself, “How long have I been asleep? Two hours? Longer?”

Angel replied to these mumblings. “Three hours. I have been here watching over you for that time. Come. Refresh yourself.”

The heat of the day had lost its ferocity. A strange object appeared in Elias’ field of vision. It appeared to be a Coleman propane grill, which it was; and upon it something savory was cooking -- beans in a little pot, and two tortillas warming along the side. Further inspection revealed a pitcher of ice water. He rubbed the sweat off the sides of the pitcher and rubbed the cold into his face and neck; then he chugged straight from the pitcher.

“Thanks. I had lost hope. Thanks.”

No one replied. There was no one to be seen. Elias walked around the tree trunk, thinking Angel González might have a sense of humor. But there was simply no one there. The fugitive prophet now felt full; and a little more confident, took a proper siesta.

“Elias!”

It was deep dusk now. Angel appeared, as unexpectedly as before.

“Get up and eat some more. Eat, eat. And here is a bag, filled with everything you will need. And maps, mosquito repellent. *Do not* take the Interstate, or any other highway. Don’t even think of going into Yuba City. Go around, way around. I hope your legs are in shape. Your destination is Mount Lassen.”

## **24**

### **Lassen**

It was a skinnier prophet who stumbled off a field worker’s bus in a quiet corner of the Sacramento Valley. This was the only part of his journey not taken on foot, and this only to take him to olive orchards, where he worked for a week to restore his wallet and his soul. The work, hot, dusty, dull and repetitive, was a delightful reprieve for one who had been trudging and tripping northward for weeks across the roots of mountains whose creekbeds ran relentlessly east and west. This was a lightly populated country, where every other town’s name ended in “ville.” Jonesville, Greenville, Taylorville, Susanville, Jamesville. Practically every state has a rural place called “Fredonia”, but out here it is spelled “Freedonyer.” On day thirty-four he forded Last Chance Creek, sitting on a boulder in mid-stream, thinking about it.

*“Why am I going to climb this volcano, anyway? Is it going to blow its top and end this whole mess?”*

From a ridgetop he caught a glimpse of Mount Lassen, which had recently surged into action, not catastrophically but merely bellowing immense clouds from its summit and surrounding vents. Descending along the trail he got quite a scare when a sharp tremor knocked him off his feet and into a manzanita bush, the only thing preventing him from continuing down a 100-foot scree slope.

*“All I need is some orcs, and this could be Mt. Doom.”*

But the orcs were more likely wearing blue AhabOil jackets and riding a tour bus, looking for a traveler of his description -- if indeed

anyone outside of Southern California was looking for him. He saw no orcs, not a one, as he continued negotiating hill and valley on the actual slopes of Lassen. Elias crossed Highway 89, felt the firmness of smooth asphalt under his feet, heard a motor in the distance, and melted back into the forest. This was nice forest, maintained by the National Park Service. The state highway wound almost to the summit; it was remarkably level country, crisscrossed with old trails and deerpaths. In times past, the ordinary traveler could get alone in a park. Trails connected everything, so travelers dispersed along their many branches; but as crowds grew, authorities found it too hard to police free wilderness; and so they took to herding everyone along one wide, bark-dusted path with fences and little posts into which you could plug a set of earphones and hear someone with a singsong Park Ranger Voice explain the mysteries of tectonic plates, evolution and erosion. When Elias crossed such a path, he knew he was really close. And there it was – a circular marker for the summit, the kind with outlines of mountains and lakes inscribed in brass along the edges, so you knew what you were looking at besides the most obvious landmark, Mount Shasta, to the north. In the center was a silhouette of the peak on which he stood: Mount Lassen, 10,457 feet above sea level. Elias loved maps. He spent the next ten minutes sighting towns, hills and highways in the valleys below. Then his ears prickled to hear commotion in a foreign language. It was only some German tourists; but nonetheless he slipped away quickly from the summit viewpoint, astounded by his own carelessness.

“I’d better find a cave somewhere.”

Volcanoes tend to be equipped with lava tubes and caves of various sorts, and within an hour Elias had located an elegant one suitable for spending the evening. The previous night there had been a tremendous cawing in the trees above him; he looked up and promptly stubbed his toe against an unopened soup can. Now he found himself popping the top of some Progresso Chicken Noodle, his favorite stuff. Thanking the Lord both for the provision and the fact that it had a pop-top, he feasted royally, but saved half the can for breakfast.



## 25

### **Earthquake, Fire and Quietness**

Elias went to the cave entrance and viewed a stunning sunrise over the Sierra.

“No tourist has seen this the way I am seeing it. Thank you, Lord, that I am alive and on this earth today. Thank you.”

He truly enjoyed the half-can of breakfast. But as he scooped out the last noodle fragments, he looked around the cave he alone had entered. He sensed that he was not alone. He doused his flashlight and let his eyes become accustomed to the half-light filtering in from the cave entrance. Elias felt a warm loveliness sidle up to his right ear. Words began to form inside his head, but not originating there. Every hair on his head stood at attention.

“What are you doing here, Elias?”

*This voice is God! Who else would know me, and who else would ask such an absurd question? Well, I will tell Him precisely why I am in a cave a hundred miles from Nothingville.*

“I am trying to serve God as a servant and prophet. My former friends at AhabOil have sold themselves to the devil. They will not listen to the counsel of an honest man. They pollute the land without a second thought. They break their contracts with impunity, shielding themselves with an armada of lawyers. Anyone who dares blow the whistle is fired and their reputation slurred. And I am their enemy number one, running for my life from a small army of hit men.”

“Elias. Go out and stand at the summit. God is waiting for you there. Stand in his presence, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Elias donned his corduroy jacket and climbed two hundred feet to the viewpoint. It was 5:45 A.M. The sun had climbed only a few degrees above the horizon. It was a downright lovely morning. A breeze began to mount; but instead of subsiding, it continued to gust, became a gale, then a hurricane. He squinted and covered his face as the air filled with dust,

sticks and pine cones. Elias knelt, then flattened himself on the ground so that he would not be blown down the six-hundred-foot field of scabble just beyond a flimsy guard rail. Towering clouds of steam vented from somewhere nearby. Boulders the size of Smart Cars were being tossed high into the air, tearing limbs from trees, even felling them. He clambered down the slope, trembling, glad only to see that his personal cave had not erupted, that the few possessions he owned were not destroyed; but before long the wind relaxed, and the clouds drifted up and away.

“Nothing but wind. I thought I was going to be part of the next Mount Saint –“

The earth jerked violently, and threw Elias into a pile of rocks as he shielded his head with his forearms. The rocks danced crazily about him for almost a full minute as unearthly groans and cracking sounds filled the air. He peeked out through the entrance and wished he had not. A plume of ash rose scarcely two hundred yards to the northeast, outlined by the sun. Grass fires were being lit by volcanic bombs everywhere. Soon almost the entire summit was ablaze, except for the well-moved park where Elias stood, and the fields of scree where no plant grew.

“I have experienced being on the top of an erupting volcano, and lived. But this is simply not God. It’s just a volcano. WHERE ARE YOU, LORD?” Again he retreated to the innards of his cave.

What he had felt last night, a unique closeness, a certainty that, yes, God was very near, returned. In the charcoal darkness, Elijah heard a new voice. Just a gentle whisper. But he found his own hands pulling the lapels of his coat over his face. For some reason he was ashamed of himself; he had to hide his face. But he forced himself to step outside and stand at the mouth of his cave. Here he heard, in a brilliant dawn, first a bird chirping, then the voice speaking, with greater amplitude:

“What on earth are you doing here, Elijah?”

“I told you – I want to serve God. Everyone else has deserted Him. The world has become a pit of corruption; dishonesty and double-dealing have become a normal way of life. Anyone who dares stand up

for anything good is cut down without mercy. But at least I AM HERE!”

Elias was astonished that he had screamed the last three words, at God no less. He was equally astonished at the reply. God did not destroy him, punish him, or even rebuke him. Instead, the Lord of the universe was outlining a plan. He had some more jobs for Elijah, now that the prophet was finally listening to His voice.

“Go back down this mountain, by the way you came, and take a bus to Las Vegas. There, you will meet various power brokers. One of them is named Heschel. Tell him that if he acts *now*, he can get controlling interest in Chevron, not immediately, but in due time. He will understand what you say. You’ll also find Yae Cho Nimshi at the Sahara in the executive suite. Tell him that if he acts *now*, GalGas will be his, totally his, in due time. He will also believe you. Then take a bus to Lake Havasu. You will meet a young man named Schaffer. All three of these men will help you. Chevron and CalGas are going to get new management – no more bailout, clean operation. The two men you have anointed will soon rule the world of oil.”

“What? Heschel and Yae Cho are cutthroats!”

“Elias Álvarez, do you think that you are the only person I talk to? I can lean pretty heavy on oil kings when it’s time. Mayors, senators, governors, take your pick. I talk, they listen. Well, usually.”

“But what about Ahab and that Jezebel of his – the one with the contract on ME? Have you forgotten that I am still the only one out there, the homeboy of Grover City against a huge oil conglomerate protected by its own army?”

“Oh, man... Liji, you’ve got so many sad songs, you could make a fortune in country music. But I’ve got a future for you, a hope and a future. Remember that Schaffer kid I told you about?”

“Yah.”

“Once you have finished creating these two new oil barons, I am going to give you a retirement package you will really like. But first, you get to train Schaffer to be a prophet. Don’t worry, he’s good. Arizona

farm boy. Desert farmer. He's tough. Also ambitious, but in a good way. He's not the sort to go hiding in caves. He'll get 'er done... and one more thing."

"Yes, Lord?"

"You're not the only one, Señor Don Quixote Álvarez de la Mancha! I've got seven thousand working for me, *seven thousand* who will never pay lip service to Bailout, who even as teenagers never once asked their fathers for an advance on their allowance!"

## 26

### **Vox Humana**

The prophet, greatly revived in spirit, began to pick his way down the mountain. He wished he could just walk along the state highway, but he deemed that too risky. Cuts, bruises, even broken bones or snakebite would be preferable than falling into the hands of Jezebel. The day was bright, clear and hot; around mid-afternoon Elias, hunting for shade, found the entrance to a lava tube. Not bad! This one had a stream nearby. As he splashed his face he could practically hear music in the dancing waters of the rivulet. In fact, as he entered the cave he heard the music again. Soft voices and stringed instruments engaging in elaborate, mystical harmonies alternating with simple folk tunes. Angels? Suddenly the violin burst into vigorous hoedown music, hands clapped and feet stomped. These were not angels; and if men, they certainly could not hold any danger, not if the nature of their music was any indication. Elias saw a dim light beyond an earthen barrier; he climbed the obstacle, heard a noise on the other side, and at the top met the source of the noise – face to face.

"Who in the world – O'Brien!"

"Son of Álvarez! What are you doing in this place?"

"That's crazy. God asked me that same question just this morning! He keeps giving me jobs to do, so I do them. What are *you* doing here?"

"The same sort of thing. I came up to check on the Northeast California Chapter. Took awhile to find them. Jezebel's spies had infiltrated Chevron. The Chapter got out of Yuba City just in time, and is literally holed up here. There's a grocery about five miles up the road. We send different people out to shop, to not arouse suspicion. Life in the cave isn't so bad - there are a lot of musicians in this bunch. You remember some of these guys - hey, fellows! Guess who's here!"

"Norcross! Bagley!"

"Elias, you rascal!"

"Wow! Elliot - and Margie -- with your whole family! This must be quite an adventure."

"We are free, Elias. Free of Bailout, free of that whole world."

"Have you heard how the Los Padres Chapter is doing?"

"Tell me."

"They're out in your neck of the woods, by Point Conception. There are now three schools of prophets down there, and they're starting to stir things up."

"That's great. I hope to see everybody sooner or later. First, I have to go to Las Vegas."

"Yuk."

Elias assumed his best gangster pose. "Hey! Don't knock Vegas. You could do a lot wois."

"But why would you go there? Wayne Newton concert?"

"No. The Lord doesn't give you trials beyond your ability to endure. Seems there's some guy named Heschel there. God wants me to anoint him as the next CEO of Chevron."

"Anoint?"

"Give him some timely advice."

"You're kidding. Heschel 's the Mob personified. He makes John Gotti look like a Sunday School teacher."

"Guys and gals, we need to pray for Elias here. God has given him a sort of impossible task; and none of us, including him, seem to know what it is about. But all of our lives may depend on the outcome."

They prayed for a long time; then Elias turned around and prayed for blessing on each family. And then they sang more of Elliot's music. Elliot Campbell had been a composer before he was a businessman. He had written several hymns while in the cave, and was anxious for the men to share them with the prophet. For hours they sang and shared stories of God's grace and provision on the long road away from the dens of Bailout, pollution and hell. Elias learned that Jack Faversham had died, having slipped while helping one of the women across a swollen stream. This was shocking news; Jack had been a missionary in Costa Rica, and had introduced the eight-year-old Elias to his Savior, Jesus. He wept while praising God that his mentor was safe in heaven. Eventually energies waned in the timeless cave world, flashlights were doused, and warm covers helped the troop of forty-seven prophets and their families pass the night in peace and silence.

## **27**

### **Schaffer**

Elias caught one of those nice tour buses with the tall windows, commanding fabulous views of the desert between Vegas and Lake Havasu. This was beginning to feel like the most absurd part of his crazy career. He had learned one thing: don't try to just walk up to an oil executive who is vacationing on the Strip. The prophet had met a solid wall of hostile subordinates of various stripes, mostly pinstripes, with black shirt and white tie. After a week of roaming around smoky casinos trying to get an "in", Elias made a simple decision: if he was to train Schaffer, and Schaffer was so good, then Schaffer could very well go and anoint the new oil kings who would go out and bring AhabOil to its knees. It was time to find a bus headed towards Arizona.

The Trailways glided to a halt right by the London Bridge, in Lake Havasu City. Elias took a brief tour of the world's most famous bridge, a span dating from medieval times. It had been purchased during a former owner's financial crunch time, and transported from England stone by

stone, to be reconstructed in a desert as a tourist attraction, a bridge connecting, really, nothing to anything.

*I am about as useful to God as a bridge in the desert*, Elias mused. He found a café nearby, the kind locals hang out in, and learned from a waitress that the Schaffer Ranch was out along Breckenberger Road, just a mile east and a half-mile north of the stop-and-go light. The directions were true. Elias found himself hiking along a washboard road, first shaded by sand pines, but evolving into real Sonoran desert. Seven miles of this brought him to a wrought-iron gate, which guarded no fence at all; so Elias simply walked around.

*"Here I am, Lord, And you want me to tell the owner of this placed, who has no idea he is a prophet, that he is a prophet?"*

*"Exactly."*

A slow-rising cloud of dust proclaimed that some responsible person was doing something. The dust cloud was created by a multiple plow that turned over twelve rows at a time. In a cupola above the plows rode a young man. Elias instantly took a liking to him, for he was also bald, glistening in the 98-degree sun.

"Where's the boss?"

"Speakin'. Lookin' fo' wuk?"

"Ever hear of Elias Álvarez?"

"Guy who won th' showdown with AhabOil? Who hasn't?"

"I've never seen him, except in a mirror."

"You're him?"

"Wanna see my green card?"

A flash of recognition swept across Schaffer's face. The face was right – he had seen it many times in the papers - but what really caught his notice was the threadbare corduroy jacket that was the very symbol of Elias Álvarez. Schaffer dismounted his plow and shook hands warmly.

"Don' need it. You're th' guy. Just don' *b'lieve* it yet. And you're lookin' for wuk out *here*?"

"Actually, I want to offer *you* a job."

"Got one arridy."

“Got a better one for you.”

Elias took off his jacket, and gently placed it on Elisha Schaffer’s shoulders. The men embraced, and wept.

Schaffer ventured hesitantly, “Mom and Pop will miss me.”

Elias immediately replied, “Do I look mean? Did I say you couldn’t say good-bye? I’m a prophet, not a monster.”

Schaffer smiled. “Come on in – meet the folks. You sure do it just like a prophet. Got here riggght... at suppertime. That’s how you can tell a real prophet, huh?”

“That’s enough, Schaffer. I can see you’re the man for the job.”

## 28

### **Ben Haddad**

9:00 P.M., and the Executive Dining Room in the CalGas Powerdome was brightly lit, awash with excitement. Tables were spread with fresh linen, and each was adorned with a liter of champagne. A gigantic tiered cake stood before the head table, where stood a tall, dark figure topped with sprays of frizzy hair – Ben Haddad, senior CEO, heir to billions and the genius behind CalGas’ meteoric rise in the oil universe. His right hand rose to shoulder level, and the room quickly hushed.

“Tomorrow, my friends, Bailout will remain only as the fond memory of losers in the world of industry. A brave new word will be on the tongues of every newsperson in America... Buyout!”

The room erupted in a roar of approval. The cake split at its summit, where burst forth a supple young woman adorned with little more than high heels and a red-and-gold sash bearing the legend, “Buy Me Out!” She dashed over to Haddad, gave him a huge kiss, and dashed from the room, leaving the smiling executive spattered with whipped cream frosting.

The CEO, with his index finger, swiped a dab of frosting from his cheek, and ceremoniously inserted it in his mouth. His face lit up with an infectious little-boy smile. “I myself was surprised, last week, at how



quickly Ahab conceded the Arizona pipeline to us. We had fought for years over that, and suddenly, with just the mildest coaxing, he said, 'You can have it.' Tonight, I hold in my hands the deed!"

Once again, pandemonium. The Buy-Me-Out girl emerged from a side door, sprinting about, kissing random executives, slapping one who thought he could have an extended celebration.

"Gentlemen, would you like to hear some trash talk?"

Haddad pulled out his cell phone, holding it to a microphone. He punched a series of numbers which he had memorized – Ahab's private line.

"Ahab speaking."

"This is marketing at CalGas. May I interest you, Sir, in a golden parachute?"

"Haddad, you clown, what are you getting at?"

"When you swung for that pipeline deal, you missed. I've got everything lined up. Tomorrow I am buying you out, big boy."

Click.

But two minutes later, a cell phone burst into life with the theme from "Oklahoma!"

"Haddad. Go."

"I made that Arizona concession in good faith. You are *not* buying me out."

"Hah! May God throw me into a pit of rattlesnakes if by tomorrow evening you still control enough oil to fry a taco."

Ahab countered with an old Jewish proverb. "One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off."

Click.

Ben Haddad frowned, looking towards Ulrich, his chief assistant. "So it's war. It will be a quick one." And he gave orders for all staff to be at work by six. He still assumed that Ahab's staff of seven thousand consisted of lackeys and sycophants who worshiped Bailout, totally unlike the third generation of managers that O'Brien had been hiring – honest, fearless, and business-savvy. These would also be at their desks by six,

and not to pour coffee.

As a wild orange sunrise silhouetted the Powerdome against the hills of Los Angeles, a judge in New York reversed a lower court's decision, thus voiding an illegal contract and returning the Arizona pipeline to AhabOil in perpetuity. As news leaked of the proposed buyout, there was public outrage. Since the showdown at Mt. Diablo, AhabOil had created a sparkling new image, cleaning up pollution and setting stiff new standards for the industry. Their logo was now green, featuring a breaching white whale. CalGas, on the other hand, was ruled by a classic robber-baron dynasty, for whom a fume-belching smokestack was still the symbol of success. Wednesday afternoon, an injunction against the merger was dropped on Haddad's desk. Private investigators were deployed en masse. There was no lack of fodder for the green cannons. Until this week, bribery had been a way of life at CalGas; now it was an invitation to a jail cell. Nine o'clock Friday morning, an associate informed his CEO that an envelope containing compromising pictures was missing from his files, and was most likely in the hands of Ahab's team of lawyers. Ben Haddad blanched at the news. He removed his signature De La Rocca necktie and his suit coat, and made his way out to the street.

A sleek Cadillac limo slid by him, then braked. Haddad, spooked, turned sharply back towards the entrance to the Powerdome; but a familiar voice halted him.

"Want a lift, brother?"

"Ahab!"

"Good to see you! I was worried you might have come down to the street the hard way. Oil is tough business."

"You could have ruined me totally, Ahab. You should be buying me out."

"I'm easy."

"I tell you what, Jonathan. You can have the rights to all of Kern County. Deal?"

"Between brothers, a handshake is sacred." They shook hands, then embraced. Laughter, and a few actual tears, flowed between the

former enemies.

## **29**

### **Junior**

Ahab the Merciful was enjoying a stay in a new mansion in San Juan Capistrano, part of the booty gained in his victory over Ben Haddad. It was a gorgeous place, except that it had no yard to speak of. Next door was a golf course owned by Junior Naboth, a retired pro. Ahab was a fine golfer, generally in the low 80's. On a breezy April morning he looked out over the course and dreamed.

"I would like to own this course. I own oil derricks and industrial rigs up to here, but it's time I owned something beautiful, something to retire to."

He found Junior Naboth running the cart which picks up balls on the driving range.

"Junior -- I want to buy this course from you, make you a rich man. Name your price."

"Not for sale. My great-granddad homesteaded this land, and it's going to be family forever. Sorry. No sale."

"Forty-seven million."

"No sale." Junior Naboth jumped up to the cab of the ball-gathering machine, turned the motor on, and gave a friendly wave and grin to Ahab.

Jonathan Ahab, not used to getting turned down with such finality, especially not on a deal that was actually generous to the other party, stalked away. Showering gravel towards Naboth as he spun away in his Mercedes, he took a wild tour of local roads, at speeds exceeding 120 miles an hour. Miraculously arriving home alive and unticketed, he stomped up the velvet stairs right past his wife to lay on his bed and sulk, refusing not only dinner, but his usual high-octane toddy as well.

## 30

### Glassford

A study in black and white. Perched on the nose of the Rick Glassford's cadaverous face were thick black horn-rimmed glasses. Nothing else, certainly not his bristly gray crew-cut hair, seemed alive on his head except two keen blue eyes, which were focused on Jonathan Ahab. Glassy had brushed aside the servants (his unwritten right, as JEO), going straight to the parlor where his boss was appearing to read *Forbes*, but was actually stewing over the unbuyable country club.

"Why are you reading *Forbes*? For all practical purposes, you write that magazine."

"Glassford! Good to see a friendly face."

"Better than that of a deadly enemy."

"You're sure in a good mood, Glassy."

"You told me last February to guard our contract with the Whitehorse Company, to not let go of it for anything. What if I told you I had learned that Chevron wanted the contract, but I decided it was more fun to go skiing at Aspen than fight with what's-his-name at Chevron, so I didn't bother with it?"

"You'd never do that."

"But suppose I did."

"I don't want to tell you."

"I don't want to tell you what's going to happen because you failed to buy out Ben Haddad. He is not your brother. He is a snake, a hooded cobra, and you have been drinking his poison."

## 31

### Ephraim

Ephraim Naboth put down his copy of *Scientific American* to

answer the familiar ringtone, the *Star Wars* theme. “Ephraim here.”

“I’m a dealer in choice properties, Mr. Naboth. I am prepared to make an offer for your land, which I believe would greatly interest you.”

“What sort of offer?”

“Fifty-seven million, cash.”

“For my villa? You’re crazy. It couldn’t top ten million, even if the buyer were a complete fool.”

“No, I’m talking about the country club.”

“Oh, the club. That’s my dad’s. I’ll get it some day, but he’ll never sell as long as he’s alive.”

“Oh, my foolishness. You’re not Junior; you are his heir then. Say, do you golf anything like your papa? You gonna run the place?”

“Heck, no. If someone was going to give me 57 million, I’d take it in a flash. I’m into astronomy, physics, string theory, black holes, that kind of thing. I have this dream of building a new kind of interactive observatory. You know – big telescope, out in the desert.”

“Yeah. Sorry we couldn’t make a deal like that. Well, nice talking to ya.”

“Pleasure.”

## 32

### **Diamonds in the Rough**

“Husband, where are you?” Jessy’s voice filled the corridor with cheer.

“Right here. Where else?” Ahab stared at a glass of spring water, into which Jessy tossed four ice cubes, spilling it over the edge, and a slug of Smirnov, spilling out yet more.

“And I have bought you a new hat for your first round at your new country club.”

“The one I can’t buy?”

“If you ever took some initiative, you might go somewhere, you handsome young thing. In a week the country club will be yours. No

Naboth. *You will be The Bawth.*"

## 33

### **Sudden-Death Playoff**

Thursday afternoon, Junior Naboth returned to the caddy shack to close up, and finish off his Dr. Pepper. He was careful about it because of the caffeine, but always sipped one a day. Today was hot, and he reached into the fridge for a cold one.

"Funny, I don't remember opening this one. Well, down the hatch."

Naboth had experienced bouts with angina for years; he seemed to be coping well with it. But halfway back to the clubhouse, as he was crossing a little creek, a blinding shock hit Junior's chest. He cut himself badly on the fence as he wobbled several more yards before collapsing on soft grass, dead as a stone. His two beloved Scotties, Angus and MacNelly, nervously sniffed their master, then began to lick the blood that oozed from a large gash in his forearm.

Though the sudden massive coronary which took him home was a shock to everyone, there was really no need for an autopsy. At the funeral, his longtime neighbor and golfing buddy Jon Ahab shared how fitting it was that Junior, whose first job was as a caddy on that very course, should find his way to heaven from the very place where, as a twelve-year-old boy, he had first wrapped his fingers around a golf club.

After cookies and punch, in the shaded courtyard which overlooked Oceano Memorial Gardens and the blue Pacific beyond, there was a quick meeting and title exchange.

"Thank you, Ephraim. I'd like to see your show when you get that observatory built. Let's make a toast. To the stars!"

## 34

### So We Meet Again

A skylark swept the blue dawn sky between massive eucalyptus groves surrounding the first tee area. A thumb pressed a bright yellow tee between second and third finger into the turf, then delicately set a brand-new Titleist on top. A three-wood addressed the ball, drew back and struck smartly, sending it straight and true down the fairway. Ahab, master of his new course, came out alone to try it out, as anxious as a boy with his first tricycle. He turned to fetch his clubs.

"I'd say the five-iron, Sir!"

A hundred yards down the fairway was a pudgy little man with a bag of clubs. Ahab's clubs! His own were no longer where he left them.

"I didn't ask for a caddy. Who are you?"

"Sorry. Sun must be in your face."

Ahab squinted. It was Elias Álvarez. An equal mix of astonishment and rage filled the king's visage. "So you have found me, my enemy!"

Álvarez cut to the chase. "I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of God. Have you not murdered a man to take possession of his property?"

Ahab hedged, "My wife... she said... it was taken care of..."

"Taken care of, then, if you prefer that terminology. Then find another way to say this: Just as dogs licked Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood. Yes, yours!

"And further: That's a lovely new logo your company now has – a deep sea green with that magnificent white whale. Enjoy it while you can, for it will soon be taken off of everything you own, for AhabOil will cease to exist. It will be devoured with the same greed by which it plundered. Not one scrap of office stationery will bear that name, for it will be an object to be despised forever, a symbol of an obsessed fool who carries the innocent to destruction."

"No... my Lord!"

“Your fate will be pleasant compared to that of your beloved wife Jessy.”

Ahab wept like a child. He flung his club far into the woods, roaring with anguish. Then, in the manner of some far-distant ancestor, he grabbed the lapels of his shirt, tore it down the front, and began to thrash the air with his fists. Finally, exhausted, he wobbled back to the posh clubhouse, where he remained for a week, unable to eat, only drinking enough to stay alive. Finally, on a gray Tuesday morning, he asked for a plate of pancakes. He ate, and began to apologize to anyone he met whom he had offended with his behavior. Ahab became a cheerful presence around the offices. He began to stand up more frequently to Jessy, who responded by receiving him icily and spending even more time at her own palace. It didn't seem to matter to the oil king, who noted that each day he awoke, not having been eaten by dogs, and that his good behavior seemed to be making such an occurrence less and less likely.

At Grover Beach State Park, Elias was watching waves come in and out, and enjoying the sound of the surf. The sound seem to fade away as a quiet voice visited his senses.

*“Have you noticed how Jonathan has humbled himself?”*

Elias answered. “It’s marvelous. I didn’t think it would ever happen.”

*“I will not force him to see this disaster. He will die as the oil king, surrounded by his loyal people. Soon afterwards, true calamity will strike, and the legacy of his greed will be seen, to be remembered by the world forever.”*

## **35**

### **Michaels**

Three years passed with not even a price war between AhabOil and CalGas. Then in a board meeting a minor irritant came up.

“Do you men realize that every year we pay CalGas \$400,000 for the use of a stretch of pipeline across the Colorado?”

“There was litigation about that, Sir, but three years ago you asked us to set it aside.”



“Well, fire it up again. That pipeline was ours, we built it years ago, and they hijacked it in 1947. It’s time we took back our own property.”

“It’s a complex case.”

“Well find me some complex lawyers!”

A team of attorneys was brought in from Los Angeles. Every one of them caught a gleam in the eye, seeing endless litigation, lightly controlled fees and retainers filling their briefcases. Consensus was, “Go for it!” With one exception. Sitting in the corner of the conference room as the final decision was to be made, was a nondescript middle-aged attorney named Allen Michaels. Yale graduate, wire-rimmed glasses, bow tie, nondescript.

Ahab spotted him. “You haven’t said boo yet, Michaels. What’s the verdict?”

“By all means, go for it. God is on your side.”

“That’s phony stuff, Allen. Be real. I need the absolute truth.”

“Go ahead and get your pipeline. To the Lord it’s a soda straw. Easy pickings.”

“Do I need to get a Bible out and make you swear on it? You are not telling me the truth.”

“Okay, you asked for it. I see a hillside with sheep running about, because they have no shepherd. Their master is gone, and will not return.”

He cleared his throat and continued.

“I saw God sitting on His throne, asking the angels about him, ‘who would like to go out and lure Ahab into a battle over a piece of pipeline?’ And one of them accepted this task, and put a lying spirit into the mouths of these lawyers, which really wasn’t all that hard, given the stakes involved.”

Sadek, the chief attorney, strode swiftly up to Michaels, and to the shock of everyone in the room, slapped him in the face. “Which way did this spirit of the Lord go when he went from me to speak to you?”

Michaels responded, “Oh, it’s a parity question then. No way to know who’s lying when the thing hasn’t happened yet. Fair question.”

Sadek: "I'm looking for an answer. No rabbit trail!"

Michaels: "You will find out on the day that you go to hide in an inner room."

Ahab then intervened. "That's enough. I am going out to the Arizona land in question to deal with the issue. Security, please escort Dr. Michaels from the premises. He is not welcome on AhabOil property until I return safely."

Michaels threw a last comment over his shoulder as two jumbo bodyguards took his elbows. "If you return safely, then God has not spoken through me."

"Get moving," mumbled a sandy-haired guard.

Michaels began to move, but shouted in the doorway, "Mark my words, all of you!"

## **36**

### **Not So Blythe**

East of Eden (Los Angeles) there are miles and miles of tract houses, formed into cities of about thirty thousand each, distinguished from one another only by their names. Once you pass Beaumont and Palm Springs, there is little but harsh, gray desert, not cactusy like the rich Sonoran desert of Arizona, but featureless, mostly starved ocotillo and mesquite. The bare roots of mountains and wide alluvial fans from each canyon are laid out plainly. Gray, pale pink and blue, and occasionally a milk-chocolate brown are the only colors this country knows. Deep in this territory sits a range of mountains called the Panamints; but its dirt is sold today not for gold, but for kitty litter, for it is some of the thirstiest earth on the planet. To the east, pressed against the Arizona-California border, the Colorado River has spread out a generous flood plain, watered by canals from which are squeezed the last few drops from this heavily-dammed waterway which began life in the high, snowy Rockies. Where Interstate 10 crosses the river is a smallish burg named Blythe, which because of its location rates three exits plus an airport capable of handling jetliners. On a blistering Saturday evening in July, Jonathan Ahab found

himself in his Learjet, descending to Blythe Airport. As he stepped out, a blast of 110-degree air filled his nostrils. He swore he would never visit this place again in the summer. Some genuinely friendly city councilmen and women were there to greet him, and he spent the night lying on top of his bed.

At daybreak his entourage traveled downtown, expecting a quiet tour of the layout and, later, a meeting with CalGas officials. As they approached the crossing where the old bridge connected to the main boulevard, they began to see crowds milling around everywhere. There were banners representing Green Forever and other environmental ultra-activist groups. Suddenly, a finger pointed at the lead limo.

“That’s him! Ahab himself!”

Ahab muttered, “Get us out of here, now!”

The convoy managed to break free of the crowd without striking anyone, though a few scattered, shaking their fists. Ahab donned wraparound shades. Five blocks away, they screeched to a dusty halt, to deploy a tactic from earlier days of wading through demonstrations. The oil king switched places with his attorney Sadek, taking the shotgun seat of an ordinary Subaru sedan, as if he were a nameless security officer.

The rally was well-organized; and the switch accomplished not too soon. While Ahab and his cohorts were busy planning whether or not to just fly out of town, the lead vehicles were slowly plowing through the city blocks, Jonathan heard a popping noise. He glanced to the right and saw a man with a gun – he knew the guy – Malvo Suganich, a ringleader of Green Forever and none too well-balanced. He was shooting at the tires of the cars. A policeman ordered him to stop. Suganich wheeled around to face the patrolman, then cut and ran. Ahab saw the patrolman fire, but did not hear the shot, for it pierced the window in front of his face, then pierced his skull. He could still gurgle out, “I’m hit – get me out of here...” but did not hear what he said. The crowd, stunned into silence, watched as an ambulance arrived quickly. They eased the Oil King onto a gurney as blood flowed heavily to the ground and Ahab began to convulse. Suganich dropped to the ground, weeping, as police

surrounded him. A lanky, red-headed officer, said quietly, "Everyone go home, please. It's over for today. Please go home." Everyone silently slipped away, but for several dogs, who busied themselves lapping up warm blood which was pooled on a pad of sunbaked concrete in Blythe, California.

## **37**

### **Hot Water**

Sarah Voth, immersed to her elbows in a sinkful of hot dishwater, singing along with the Paris Opera at the top of her lungs, heard a bell that was not part of the score. Letting a cast-iron skillet slide back into the suds, wringing her hands reasonably dry, she went to the screen door – Elias!

"Lyndall – it's Elias!"

Mother and son buried the prophet in hugs and a barrage of questions. At last sight, he had vanished into the night with some sort of Mafia on his tail, leaving his astonished associate, Glassford, as much in the lurch as anyone. Several months ago, a crow had dropped a torn music sheet of "Elijah Rock" on her doorstep; but exactly what it meant was a mystery.

Elias was road-weary, and his corduroy jacket was torn at the left sleeve.

"Lyndall, get some coffee. Make yourself comfortable, Elias, and give me that jacket. I will mend while you tell me about Elijah Rock and whatever else you have been up to."

"Mt. Lassen... it was steaming, fuming..."

"When were you on that thing?"

"The day before it erupted. I guess they never found those German tourists. I had no idea the place was closed. I climbed it by deer trails. But I heard God's voice."

"He has quite a voice!"

"No, it wasn't the roar or the fire or the tremor, though I saw the caldera rearranged before my eyes. He began to speak to me in the quiet way we talk with each other on the porch on a summer night. You know, those times we feel most like we are part of something eternal."

"Let's go out to the porch."

"United States Mail!" The crunch of footsteps brought George the Mailman to the gate, where Sarah greeted him. George looked a bit downcast as he handed her a square envelope, which she glanced at, then held tightly against her waist.

"Wish you the best, M'am." And he tipped his baseball cap, about-faced and began to amble back down the path.

"Funny thing for the mailman to say!" Elias offered.

"Let's go out to the porch, and sit on the swing."

During the extended time of Lyndall's illness, they had often sat talking and waiting. They were most genteel, and if a foot would accidentally brush a leg, there would always be an embarrassed "excuse me." But the prophet and the widow were very fond of each other. Lyndall sometimes told his mom that we wished Elias would quit being a prophet, and that she would quit being a widow.

"Like the last time – this letter is for you. Except it's not from Jezebel, or any other queen. It's from me."

Indeed, it was returned mail, which had been sent to the last address at which she thought Elias might be. The envelope was of fine, nubby paper, the address written in formal script, and it was square. Elias tore the seal gently, and pulled the contents out slowly.

*You are cordially invited  
To celebrate the uniting in marriage  
of  
Sarah Elizabeth Voth  
and  
Richard J. Glassford, esq.  
This twenty-ninth of July  
Two Thousand twenty-four*

Elias could barely read the other details through his tears.

“When did you know?”

“The day the mountain blew. I felt that it had something to do with you; and I realized that you were God’s person more than you could ever be mine. And it took the blinders off my eyes about Rick.”

“For all of my being a prophet, I never had such keen insight. I honestly didn’t know what to expect when I arrived here, and that worried me.”

“What kind of worry?”

“I was not in any position to make proposals, or take them. God is going to take me away from here.”

“Where?”

“The Lord got me a new assistant, Elisha Schaffer. He’s been in training for three years, and is ready to take my place.”

“But where are you going?”

“You will have to see it to believe it. Now I have just two questions. One: would you make me some fritters and clam chowder, and two: when is Rick Glassford coming by?”

## Waterspout

The reception for the Glassford's was simple but elegant, held at the Moccasin Diner, which had just re-opened, and now featured a garish neon moccasin to lure hungry freeway travelers at night.

Elias took a deep draft of iced Dr. Pepper.

"Do you know how many warm Peppers I have consumed the last three years? Say, where's the honeymoon?"

"Solvang, on the way to Santa Barbara."

"I am very embarrassed, but may I ask my friends one last favor?"

"What last favor? We are going to see you again, aren't we?"

"Yes, you will see me again, but it will be awhile. In the meantime, I need a lift to Los Olivos. It seems my Greyhound pass expired yesterday."

So they piled into the Glassfords' battered white Toyota, wound through Guadalupe and caught the freeway. On the quiet ride up the grade out of Santa María, Elias Álvarez seemed to drift off to sleep in the back seat, but he was really thinking, *"What have I accomplished by being a prophet? I have lived through a terrible earthquake and three years of famine; I have seen a predatory oil company change its ways, its leader repent and then backslide and consequently die. I have seen the dead brought back to life and the hungry fed miraculously, myself included. I have run for my life and escaped assassins by the guidance of God. I have traveled on Greyhound buses and walked half the state of California. I have anointed two oil kings who have not come to their thrones, and have been training my replacement for three years. I am tired."*

Los Olivos was little more than a few houses near the highway, but there was a small crowd gathered at the pharmacy/bus station. Elias exclaimed, "These are prophets I trained, the ones that used to work for Ahab – and there he is – Schaffer! Elisha Schaffer!" Before the Toyota had fully stopped, Álvarez had bounded out the rear door and was running to embrace his protégé.

As Elias returned to the car to introduce the Glassfords, one of them whispered to Schaffer, "Did you know that God is going to take Elias from us today?"

Schaffer's face twisted in anguish. "Please don't talk about it. Yes, I do."

"Rick, Sarah, please meet Elisha Schaffer. He is twice the prophet I am. Now, Elisha, would you wait here with the men. The Glassfords and I are going into Lompoc." Lompoc was a little military town near Vandenberg Air Force Base, a launch place for satellites.

Quickly Elisha countered, "No Sir. I am going with you."

"Well... there is a fourth seat in the Toyota. Hop in."

A small convoy of sedans rattled down Main Street, Lompoc, California, to absolutely no fanfare. At the corner of Main and Fourth, Elias dismounted, opened the other rear door and motioned for Elisha to get out. The answer was a firm "No." An additional entourage of prophets joined the group, which stopped again at Jalama Road, the dismal, twisting path to Point Conception. To the amazement of everyone, there were a dozen cars parked along this trail, each carrying prophets eager to meet their leader before he left them forever. They all got out to stretch their legs. One of the prophets took Elisha aside, and asked the same question which was raised in Los Olivos and in Lompoc. Elisha answered, not without a little irritation, "Please don't talk about it. It hurts too much."

Elias raised his voice against a rising breeze which was threatening to turn into a gale.

"Everyone, wait here! I am going down to the Point."

This meant Point Conception, a sharp tip of land where Southern California ends and Northern California begins. The prevailing winds, which are often ferocious at this place, make for an abrupt change of climate, as well as for mean, unpredictable weather. Schaffer, who would have none of Elias' talk about going alone, put on his overcoat.



"As God lives, and as you live, I am going with you. I am not going to miss this."

"Neither are we." Several prophets joined in the chorus.

Elias acquiesced. "All right. Follow me."

Now the entire convoy was making its way along a precarious path to the sea. Heavy rains had made the soil unstable; now thunder, rare anywhere in California, was heard in the heavens, and thick, low black clouds swirled along the horizon.

"The tracks!"

Far below, a gleam of silver indicated Southern Pacific tracks which had been planted long ago in an insane fit of engineering skill and daring which connected, for good, the two Californias. The balding tires of Rick's Toyota were no match for a set of sharp switchbacks, which sent them into a skid, stopping just short of a raging Jalama Creek and the remains of a washed-out bridge in a tangled heap downstream.

"What next?"

Elias stopped and prayed, then shouted to the caravan.

"The rest of you, go up to that ridge. We are going to the Point, but you must wait here. To the top! You can see from there!"

Then, to himself, "Never a dull moment in God's world."

The mounting storm bellowed like a dragon between the rocks of Jalama Canyon.

Suddenly, he motioned to Sarah, Rick and Elisha. "You three, back in the car. Quickly!"

Elias then did something entirely unexpected – he removed his corduroy jacket, which the wind immediately extended like a flag, almost ripping it from his hand. Immediately soaked to the skin, he rolled the jacket into a kind of scroll, raised it high and slapped it upon the border of the rushing creek. The ground shuddered; a crumble of rock was heard upstream, and the waters ceased to flow. The point of crossing was solid granite, and level. Glassford gently turned the ignition, the Toyota lurched into gear and smoothly slid across the creek bed. The prophet hopped in. A pair of badly painted wooden signs marked the transition

from Jalama Road to Cojo Bay Road. The Glassfords wondered if this eastbound seaside route might take them into Santa Barbara when this mission was done; but a look down the coast was unnerving. Still, there came a straight, smooth stretch along a line of double track.

At a crossing Elias said "Stop here. It's a half-mile to the very point. From that rock up there you can see perfectly. Rick, Sarah. It has been a pleasure to ride this planet with you. It has been profit – with honor! I am so glad that Lyndall has joined the company of the prophets! Now, go in peace and in the joy of the Lord." He embraced them, kissed them both on the cheek and sent them up the hill.

He turned to Elisha and asked him, "This is it. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Elisha seized the moment. "Yes, Sir! Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit."

The prophet of Grover Beach mused on this. "I trained you right, boy. But that's a big order. Well, for starters, you're twice as bald as I am." The young, chrome-domed prophet blushed, then said, "I'm serious."

Elias responded immediately. "I never had any doubt. If you see me when I go, you've got what you asked for. If not, no superpowers." And with that, Elias stepped out onto the path to the overlook. The sky was turning a ghastly green overhead. Crazy clouds swirled about above and below the cliffs, as the surf doubled in volume.

Sarah gasped. A low point in the blackest cloud was dipping ominously towards the sea, then touched, sucking up water, forming a gray-blue funnel which twisted every direction but was headed towards them as if guided by a hand. The surf continued to roar, but intermingled came a song of divine beauty. The prophets on the hill were singing, singing Elliot's gorgeous hymns of praise to God with full, open, happy hearts. Elias paused on the top of a little hill, turned, saluted his friends, and sang first to them and then to the sea.

Lightning began to fill the sky. One moment the tiny form of Elias was seen at the point; the next, sheets of rain obscured him. He appeared

again briefly, and what looked like a huge crow swooped down, rested on his shoulder, and flew off. The funnel grew alarmingly closer, not more than two hundred yards offshore. Then a clattering, and something not at all natural appeared between them.

Elisha cried out, "Oh, my Lord! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" Fiery chariots filled their field of vision; riders wielding flaming swords flashed by, not threatening, but protecting the man who stood alone against kings in the name of Almighty God. Schaffer did not flinch – he kept the miniscule figure of Elias Álvarez in his sight the entire time. He saw smaller tornado clouds whirling overhead, and – oh, wonder – Elias perched within the main funnel. He saw the prophet remove his corduroy jacket and fling it into the air. It was snatched by the wind, flung free from the whirlwind high in the air towards the beach, then softly fluttered to the ground at Schaffer's feet.

Elisha threw off his own nearly-new overcoat and tossed it over the seacliff. He then put the corduroy on, was surprised to see that it fit perfectly, for Elisha was both taller and stouter than his teacher. He felt three stiff pieces of paper in the inside pocket. One proved to be Elias' outdated Greyhound pass. The other two were brand-new passes, both good for two years from date of issue.

The three reached the Toyota simultaneously, entering its sanctuary solemnly, silently. Rick put the key in the ignition, but stopped, afraid to let the engine noise ruin the beautiful sound of silver rain on the rooftop. They wept for joy, weeping along with the tears of heaven that covered Point Conception. An hour passed, as they began to sing hymns of praise. The gray deepened, signaling that somewhere the sun was setting, and all agreed it was time to go up to the highway. The way was smooth. Only a few boulders had rolled onto Jalama Road; but the creek had made its way through its rock-slide dam and was now running two feet deep across the roadway.

Sarah broke the silence. "Shall we turn around and try the beach route?" Schaffer thought a moment. "If you want to waste your honeymoon pulling this car off of a sand bar. Now this works... You

don't believe me, do ya? It works, but you gotta hold your tongue just right." With that, Elisha Schaffer, Newly-Minted Prophet, stepped out into the rain, dramatically pulled off the jacket, calmly rolled it up into a scroll, tucking in the lapels just so, in commemoration of his master. He prayed, lifted the corduroy scroll high above his head, and with every ounce of his strength slapped the roiling brown waters of Jalama Creek.