

IN THE PLACE OF DRAGONS.  
TWO CHAPTERS OF A NOVEL ALONG WITH A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Our heart is not turned back,  
Neither have our steps declined  
from thy way;  
Though thou hast sore broken us  
in the place of dragons,  
And covered us with the shadow  
of death.

Psalm 44: 18,19

## In the Place of Dragons

### Chapter One

The red light glowed menacingly, illuminating the instrument panel of Cliff Nader's '68 GTO. It was the temperature light; the other bulbs had long since burned out.

"Fucking white shit," Cliff said as he squinted to see the speedometer through the smoke from his joint. Forty-five miles an hour was all he could make as I-17 was being blanketed by rapidly falling wet snow. What a time for his engine to overheat. He had passed the Sedona exit about five miles back, so he was thirty miles from Flagstaff and a hundred from his destination, Phoenix. There wasn't much chance of getting a ride to a service station, if any were open. Few people would be traveling or working 8:30 at night on Christmas day, especially with the snowstorm.

If the problem was just that his radiator was low on water, he could fill it at one of the Arizona state recreation areas just off the highway not more than fifteen or twenty miles further south. But if it was a busted hose or a leak in the radiator itself, then he was fucked. Cliff decided to try to make it as far down the mountains as possible. If he could get low enough to where the snow turned to rain, it might keep the engine cool enough so that he could make it to Phoenix without stopping.

But when the steam started pouring from under his hood, making it impossible to see where he was going, Cliff had to stop. He grabbed his



flashlight and pulled up the collar of his leather jacket. He hadn't brought his winter parka because it wasn't snowing when he left Wide Ruins, the Navajo reservation post where he worked as a deputy for the U.S. Marshal's Office. Of course, he wouldn't need any warm clothes in Phoenix . . . if he ever made it there.

Cliff put on his thick deerskin gloves, got out, and opened the hood. The heat from the engine compartment flooded over him so that he would hardly have noticed the cold if it weren't for the wind knifing through his uniform trousers. He couldn't find any problem with the hoses or clamps, so he flipped the handle on the radiator cap, releasing the pressure, then popped it off. Dry as dirt. Cliff swore and looked around the highway. Across the road was a wall of rock rising high above him. On this side, beyond the guard rail, the terrain fell away to a pine tree-filled canyon. No place to get water and nothing to carry it in if there had been. He looked up; it was snowing even harder. He walked around to the back of his car, stopping first to give the rear quarter panel a good kick as he had done on many other occasions, accounting for the many dents in the GTO's body. In the trunk was an empty Coors bottle. If he could knock the neck off it, maybe he could use it to scoop up snow to put into the top of the radiator. It was hot enough to melt the snow, Cliff was sure, but it'd take forever to stuff what little snow it would hold into it, wait for it to melt, then repeat the process again and again until the radiator had enough water to get going. If only it were raining instead. Cliff walked over to the guard rail, considered how to hold the bottle, then banged it against the edge of the metal railing. The neck came off all right, but the rest of the bottle fractured

into pieces as well. "I hate winter," he said, pushing his hat down tighter on his head as he bent over to scoop snow with his hands.

It was no good. The top of the radiator was too small to hold any significant amount of snow. Cliff could fill the radiator up faster by pissing into it, and he considered doing just that. If he'd had time to put the case of Coors sitting back at his apartment in the trunk, he would have filled the radiator with what was, in his opinion, the best beer money could buy. His "Goat," as he still called the GT0, would be the first car arrested for DUI, Cliff would bet. What he needed was a bucket or something he could use to collect snow in and then melt it inside the car. Even that would take a long time, but it would be a hell of a lot faster than stuffing snow into the narrow neck of the radiator. Cliff walked along the highway in either direction, hunting for something he could use as a bucket. All he could find was a rusted hubcap. It wasn't very wide in diameter, but it was deep enough to hold maybe a pint of water. It would have to do.

Back inside his car with the hubcap full of snow placed next to the heater on the floorboard, Cliff smoked another joint. He knew he should've kicked himself instead of the Goat for not checking the radiator before setting out on a two-hundred mile drive down Arizona. Living in the desert the last seven years had taught him to keep a close watch on water, oil, and gas when driving through miles of empty, flat sand. And he was careful about those things with the jeep he drove when on patrol (Cliff almost laughed at calling his daily activities on the reservation "patrol"). He hardly ever drove his Goat anymore, and wouldn't have taken it on this trip except he wasn't allowed to take the jeep off the reservation for personal use. Using his own car, it just hadn't occurred to him to check

it over first. Besides, he'd been in a hurry to get going after his younger brother, Scott Nader, had called. Cliff was going to Phoenix because of that call. That was the official reason, the one he'd told the Marshal, anyway. What Cliff hadn't told him, nor Scotty, was that he needed to get away from the reservation for a while--maybe even for good. Six months ago, he had gotten involved with one of the old Indian chiefs and his home-brewed chemicals. They were more potent than any hallucinogens Cliff had ever bought. The last couple weeks, he had been seeing some pretty strange things, and for the first time in his experience with drugs, Cliff was frightened. The scariest thing was he hadn't taken any of Chief's "medicine," as the Indian called it, for five days, but he was still hallucinating.

Last night, on Christmas Eve, sitting in his one-room apartment in Wide Ruins getting stoned, Cliff had a vision. It materialized out of nothing right in front of him. At first he thought a large bat had gotten inside somehow, but the thing, whatever it was, was much larger than a bat. Its long tail curled down and toward him like a scorpion's. The creature's skin was a phosphorescent green that stretched so tightly over the bones of its enormous wings the greasy webbing was almost translucent in places. The head was grotesquely large with two yellowed tusks hanging from an elongated snout. The worst part of the thing's appearance was its eyes. They weren't cold, lifeless lizard eyes; no, they were watery, blue-irised human eyes. Even this wouldn't have affected him so strongly, although the whole thing was terrible to gaze upon. What scared him so much that he literally shit his pants as he sat in his easy chair last night, what was driving him away from the reservation to Phoenix on the excuse of

helping his father tonight, was when the beast had opened its mouth and with a hungry smile hissed . . . "Cliff."

He shivered violently at the thought of the hallucination and shook his head to clear the image from his mind. He felt claustrophobic inside the Goat; he had to get out. Most of the snow in the hubcap was melted, so he put his gloves back on, went outside to pour the water into the radiator, and refilled the hubcap with snow. Back inside, Cliff shivered now only from the cold. The image of the monster was gone. He just needed to get away for a while, let those "Injun" drugs wash out of his system.

Checking his watch, he wondered how long Scotty would wait for him. The kid called Cliff last night because their old man, Jerome Nader, had almost killed someone in a car accident while he was drunk. The Maricopa County police were ready to charge him with manslaughter and everything else they could come up with if the man died. Scotty sounded like he was pretty shaken up over the phone. He wanted Cliff and Norm, their older brother, to come to Phoenix where Jerome was being held on fifty thousand dollars bail so they could discuss what to do about the situation. At first Cliff had said he didn't give a flying fuck what happened to the old man and didn't want to say shit to Norm either, but after Scotty practically broke down and begged him--and then remembering last night's vision that had haunted him all day--he agreed to come. Now, as he waited, stranded on the side of a deserted highway on Christmas night, for the snow in a rusted hubcap to melt, Cliff couldn't imagine what it would be like for the Nader brothers to be back together again.

Cliff hadn't seen Scott since the kid's high school graduation six months ago. Before that, it had been nearly four years. They'd written to each other and called once in a while, but neither one had made the trip

between Tucson and the reservation. At the reception for Scott at Aunt Di's, he had been surprised to discover that his little brother wasn't so little anymore. Scotty had grown as tall as Cliff--and was almost as good looking. They hadn't had the chance to talk all that much; Cliff was only there for the evening and then had gone back to Wide Ruins in the morning. But when they first saw each other, immediately there was . . . something that passed between them. Scott looked like a rock star with his long hair. Cliff didn't have anything against it, but the kid could have been a real lady-killer if he got a haircut. He knew Scott was equally stunned by Cliff's appearance, having never seen him in his deputy's uniform. Cliff had gotten a hair cut before making the trip down. His dark straight hair was combed back; he was clean shaven; he'd even trimmed and cleaned his normally long fingernails. His posture was erect, his shoulders square (a vestige of serving in the military). Cliff could see Scott taking it all in and being impressed. At least in appearance, perhaps the middle Nader brother was the most accomplished. If the kid wanted to believe it went beyond the clothes, he wasn't about to set him straight. The trip to Tucson had been Cliff's only time off the reservation since he'd started working there. Now, he was actually looking forward to seeing Scotty, getting a chance to know him again. They'd always been closer than he and Norm.

The last time Cliff had seen his older brother was at the Phoenix airport in the fall of '72. Cliff was coming back from Nam by way of Washington, D.C. He borrowed enough money from Norm to buy the Goat, some clothes, and to get an apartment in Wide Ruins. Asking Norm for money was worse than being interrogated by the army intelligence officer back in Saigon. Cliff paid it all back as quickly as he could. Once they

were square, he didn't bother trying to keep in touch with his older brother at all, though Norm had called him a couple times. Cliff knew what for; the nosey son-of-a-bitch was checking up on him. Finally ol' sourpuss got the message, though, and let Cliff alone. It's all Cliff wanted from anybody, and for seven years of living and working in the desert among the Indians--who disliked him as much as he did them--he had accomplished his goal. But now his isolation was coming to an end, at least temporarily.

Cliff gazed out the window at the snow filling up the black sky. When the hell was it going to stop? If only he'd made it just a couple miles or so farther. He had to be close to where precipitation came down as rain; he'd gotten pretty far down the mountain after the light first came on. If it was raining, he'd leave the hubcap outside where it would fill up a lot faster than snow melts. At this rate, he'd be lucky to get to Phoenix by midnight.

Cliff decided to walk across the highway to see if there was any spring water flowing down the rock wall. As long as it wasn't cold enough to freeze running water, he might have a chance. He went a few hundred feet in either direction without any luck. His hands and feet were stinging from the cold, and his ears were numb. Numb was what Cliff had been the past seven years--hell, make that nine; the two years overseas were hardly one of his sensitive periods. On the reservation, his past had slowly grown more and more hazy, each year becoming as featureless as the desert landscape. The Navajo Indian reservation in northeastern Arizona was ninety-nine percent nothing. Just miles and miles of wasteland. Even the small town--if you could call the few government-built dormitories, a school, a general store, and the Marshal's office that was named Wide Ruins

a town--was bleak, barren, boring. There was never any excitement in his job. Picking up a drunk Indian now and then, filling out forms, driving around the settlement in the jeep as if the place needed watching over was the full extent of his work. Drugs and two prostitutes--one white and one red--offered the only entertainment. No booze could be sold on the reservation, so the Indians set up a still which the Marshal made Cliff or Dale Johnson, the other deputy, bust up every couple months. The Marshal was realistic, but he also took his job too seriously sometimes. Cliff and Dale knew better, but they dismantled the still anyway, leaving the glass tubes which were hard to come by. On several occasions, Cliff helped them set it back up when he was off-duty. Not because he got any thrill out of helping the Injuns; the truth was they made damned good firewater. Besides, it was all they had, other than the Coors Dale sneaked in once a month from his trips to Colorado to see some "tail" back there.

Cliff wished he had some Coors with him now to warm his innards. That was the one distinct advantage of booze over pot. Besides that, it didn't make your throat raw like Cliff's was from the two joints he'd smoked in the Goat. He stooped down to cup some freshly fallen snow in his hand, then put it in his mouth. Judas priest, it was cold! He stood back up, pulled his glove on, and looked up at the rock monolith towering above him. The quiet of the snowy night and the size of this gash cut out of a mountain for the highway gave the place a solemn mood, almost religious even. Cliff snorted at the image that popped into his head. He'd once stood in front of the Capitol in Washington, D.C. like this, feeling--just for a second--a little of the building's silent majesty. He had just been released from the army. They had started bringing the troops in Nam back in two stages, once the drug problem got out to the press: first, they sent the worst



cases to Manila to get the shit flushed out of their bodies. When a soldier was reasonably independent of whatever he'd been on, he was flown to D.C. to go through the secret reintegration program. It wasn't done for everyone, just those who'd become all-out junkies so they wouldn't freak out during the months of wading through rice paddies, not knowing which slant-eyes were friends and which were enemies. The army made them a deal: a medical discharge and some sort of government job if they'd stay clean for a while and, most importantly, keep a low profile. That meant stay away from journalists out to win a Pulitzer prize for writing "Viet Nam: the real story." Cliff had learned later that as soon as Nixon's reelection was sewn up, they axed the reintegration program just as quietly as they'd set it up. Cliff was one of the lucky few who made it in under the wire. Even at the time, as he walked around the mall, seeing all the famous sights, he knew it was all political. More of the vets probably would have told the army to keep their fucking medical discharges and their jobs too if it hadn't been for the fact that most of them wanted nothing more than the chance to get away from everything and everybody connected with the service and Viet Nam, and just try to put the whole mess behind them. From what Cliff had heard, most of the jobs offered were like the reservation position: out in the boondocks where it'd be kept quiet if they started up on the drugs again or just plain lost their sanity from mulling over what they'd done and had done to them. The army and the government had enough mud on their faces.

As he stared up at the great white dome of the capitol building, Cliff wished he could splatter it with mud--no, make that shit. The shit he and thousands of other guys filled their pants with while scouting in the jungle, or searching and then torching villages, climbing through V.C. tunnels, or



huddling behind anything they could find while an unseen sniper picked off their buddies. Then let'em get their news cameras down here and photograph Nixon with that shit-eating grin of his and his peace signs standing in front of a fouled capitol. Let him explain that, the cocksucker. Everyone was predicting he'd get reelected, but it wouldn't be on the vote of the guys who'd served over there and the families of those who were killed the last four years while Mr. President delayed pulling out the troops so he could use it as the grand finale of his reelection campaign. Cliff wondered how far he'd get if he walked into the capitol or jumped the fence at the white house. Not far enough, he knew.

He walked along the mall, mingling in with tourists, but having to fight back the urge to tell the camera-snappers to look behind those marble facades to get the real picture. Standing with a group of kids on a field trip or something before the Washington Monument, he wanted to say to the clean-scrubbed faces of the girls who were "oohing" and "ahing," "Looks kind of like a big, white dick, doesn't it?" The Washington Monument was one of the few structures he'd seen that didn't have a dome or massive stairs leading up to pillars almost as big as the monument itself, it seemed. They were like temples built to honor gods. And that's how the people who worked in them acted--as if they were gods. They expected everyone to kiss their asses, even the twerpy little military aides who had processed Cliff out of Uncle Sam's armed forces. Let'em try working in Saigon for a few months. He bet they wouldn't be so cocky then.

Cliff kept walking west until he came to the Potomac. He hadn't seen many rivers, having grown up in a state that was mostly desert. This was a slow-moving, silver-watered one. He's seen a few rivers in Nam, but they were all brown with swift currents. Crossing the Arlington Memorial bridge,

he could see the Pentagon. Now here was a building whose occupants knew who they were and precisely what their mission was. He couldn't see the pentagon shape, but the building was flat, many-cornered, and gray. Cliff held no grudge toward the army itself. The military was just the puppet of the government anyway. He'd served under three C.O.s in two years and all of them were just as messed up as the infantry men, just as eager to get out of that hell-hole, whether it meant winning or losing the so-called war. It wasn't patriotism, but everyone sung the praises of home when they knew there was a good chance they might never see it again. As Cliff strolled along, not really heading anywhere, he tried to picture what it would be like working on a reservation. After the jungles and swamps of southeast Asia, the desert sounded like heaven.

When he came to the cemetery, Cliff snapped out of his funk. In front of him, stretching out for acres, were the white headstones of thousands of men who had died in the service of their country.

"Every fucking thing in this city is white," he muttered and shivered as the wind gusted. It was October and winter was already in the air. His head felt the cold especially, his hair having not grown back yet. He zipped up his blue jacket; it was just a plain lightweight job he bought with the little money the army gave him to buy clothes and get home with. Part of the deal was to completely separate his identity from the military. He wasn't to wear an old uniform or coat. Cliff shrugged. It was fine with him.

He looked up at the overcast sky above Washington. It was so dreary he wasn't sure where the sun was, but he knew it was getting late. He turned and walked away from the landscape of head stones. As he crossed back over the bridge, he turned around a moment, feeling a little strange.

Listening to the Potomac slide by underneath him, he knew he should be thankful or something because he was walking away from the cemetery instead of lying inside it. He knew he should, but . . . . Cliff turned and strode across the bridge and turned south toward the airport. His legs were tired from all the walking he'd done, but he wasn't about to stop for a rest. He had just enough money to pay for the ticket to Arizona, and that was all. No motel, no dinner, just go. The sooner he got out of this city of white, the better.

Shaking his head with disgust, Cliff started to walk back across the highway. There wasn't any spring water flowing down this mountain. He'd just have to wait for the snow he gathered to melt inside his Goat. Cliff stopped and listened. He thought he heard . . . a car! It was coming from the south, but if they'd take him back to Sedona maybe he could get a wrecker--or a cop, if nobody else--to bring him and a water jug back.

The car came over the crest of the road fast. It was a big Ford, a Continental. It slowed, but when Cliff was in its left headlight beam where they could see him clearly, it veered away and accelerated rapidly up the incline and soon disappeared in the veil of snow.

"Hey, you fucks, come back! Come back!" Cliff shouted, running after them, but it was no use. They were gone. "Son of a bitch!" Probably a bunch of kids with some grass and they freaked when they saw his uniform. Cliff was so frustrated he felt like shooting something. His first thought was his Goat, but it represented what little hope he had of getting out of there on his own. Still, he was tempted to take target practice on it anyway. He hadn't shot his gun in a long while. Cliff drew the pistol and pointed it at the car. The snow was coming down so thickly that the Goat

was little more than a silhouette. Suddenly he raised the gun into the air and fired into the relentlessly falling snowflakes. An echo carried for a long time across the dark canyon, then there was a profound hush, as if he'd shot a hole in the snowy shell surrounding the earth, allowing the noise to escape momentarily, but then the white shroud closed up again, making the world as quiet as the grave.

Cliff shivered, and thought of the old Indian Chief. He started to get into his car, then stopped. All at once, without any warning, the snow became rain, and the muffled quiet was replaced by the splattering sound of water drops on the road, the Goat, and Cliff's hat. He had to smile. Cliff glanced down at the gun, then raised the barrel to his lips, and blew.

\* \* \*

The arm of the cherry picker was extended to its maximum length in order for Norm Nader to reach the transformer on the telephone pole. Standing in the cherry picker's box, Norm sighed in relief. His search was over.

"One little wire breaks loose from its busbar and telephone service to a whole community is cut off," he muttered to himself as he shook his head. Blinking rain out of his eyes, Norm resoldered a yellow wire back in place inside the transformer. He scanned the other terminals with his flashlight, found another one about to spring loose, and melted a glob of solder on top of it. He slipped the solder gun in the leather holster he had made for it, then put on a pair of headphones with a wire ending in a silver probe. Running the tester across the copper bars, he searched

until he heard voices. Scottsdale, Arizona, was back in touch with the world.

Norm paused for a satisfied spit of chew, and then gathered up his equipment, putting each instrument in its place on his utility belt. He shut the access panel to the transformer's insides and hit the down button on the cherry picker's controls. The box lowered toward the truck with a steady hum and Norm took a last look at the transformer perched on the telephone pole cross bar. Some day, he knew, everything would be computerized so that any malfunction in the system would be pinpointed instantly and there would be no need for a lineman to hunt for hours to find the cause. Actually, there would probably be no need for linemen; the equipment would be so sophisticated it would repair itself. They'd still need troubleshooters like Norm, though, for problems with the customers' equipment, but he knew he'd miss the line work if all they were predicting came to pass in his lifetime.

He scrambled back inside the truck and turned the heat to high. Norm didn't like to work at night, but he had been asked to be on call. They usually hit him up on holidays so the other linemen could be with their families. Before Brook left him, he took the holidays off along with the other family men; now it was different. Single guy, living alone, hell, what would he do on Christmas anyway? They were right; Christmas was just like any other day of the year to Norm. He was either working or home reading or watching the tube. He didn't buy a tree to decorate anymore. He still had the ball ornaments and strings of lights from his and Brook's one Christmas together--probably ought to have a garage sale to get rid of them some time. There weren't any gifts to open. He and his brothers had given up that ritual years ago. Scott still sent him a card and called to

wish him a Merry Christmas, but that was the full extent of Norm's yuletide activities. It was nice of Scott to remember him, but it wasn't enough to make the day special. Getting paid triple time was the best thing about it for Norm. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd gone to a Christmas mass. Probably when Iris Nader, his mother, was still alive, just ten years ago now. The holidays had meant something to him back then when the Nader family was really a family. Nineteen seventy was the best Christmas of all, even though it was the first one without his mother, because he and Brook had just moved into their new house. They had bought hardly any furniture--just a bed, a card table and chairs for a dinette, and a couch. That was all they could afford after making the down payment on the ranch style house with three bedrooms for Norm, his new wife, and the four children they'd planned on having. The rooms looked bare that Christmas, but it hadn't mattered to either of them. They decorated their tree, drank eggnog, and opened gifts while listening to Christmas carols on the radio.

That reminded Norm to turn on the CB. After he had driven awhile, trying to put the thoughts of Brook out of his head, the dispatcher's voice crackled out of the speaker. Norm picked up the mike.

"Nader," he acknowledged.

"Yo, Norm; how you doin' out there?"

He smiled at Smitty's cheerful greeting. He'd never met the company dispatcher in person, but in a way he felt he knew the man behind the friendly voice better than any of the other phone company employees.

"Real good, Smitty. There was a fat man wearing a red suit tangled up in some lines. Kept saying something about couldn't wait until he got his hands on Rudolph. Make any sense to you?"

Smitty laughed, then said, "Sounds like some wino celebrating New Year's a week early. Hey, I just remembered: your brother called here looking for you."

"My brother? Who, Scott?"

"I don't know; he didn't give his name, but he wants you to meet him at a place called the Chrome Club over on Southern Avenue down by the railroad tracks. Says it's an emergency--family emergency, he said."

Now what the hell was Scott doing in that neighborhood? Norm wondered. Or at a place called the Chrome Club.

"Did he say what the emergency is?" Norm asked.

"Nope, but he sounded real upset."

"Okay, thanks, Smitty."

"You got it, Norm. I hope it's nothing serious. You want me to see if I can get someone to go on call for you?"

"Na, let me find out what's up first. Could even be a prank, you know?"

Smitty said he did and to let him know what Norm's status was as soon as possible.

Norm stopped at an intersection. There was no one behind him so he just stayed there a minute to think. Something about the call made him suspicious. It could be Scott, but Norm thought it was more likely that Jerome had put some kid up to calling, saying he was Norm's brother. Jerome Nader knew if he called, his eldest son wouldn't even carry on a conversation with him because it could only be about one thing--money. He'd been propping up his father for years, sending him twenty bucks here, fifty there. Lately, though, it had been more than twenty dollars Jerome needed. Norm had bailed him out of jail three months back for public

intoxication. A month later Jerome's license was suspended for driving under the influence. The last time, only two weeks ago, his father had been arrested for vagrancy. When the police called Norm about it, they told him it would only take his signature on a document that said Jerome lived with him to set him free. At first, he wouldn't go down to the police station. Then he started feeling guilty and did go, but afterwards he told his father this was the last time. The bank was closed for good.

Now, Norm paused at the intersection, trying to decide whether to drive home or downtown to meet whomever was waiting for him. He was tired of carrying the family's problems on his shoulders; he wished his brothers would take over for awhile. Fat chance of that, though. Scott didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. He said in his Christmas card that he was barely getting by in college, even with financial aid and a part-time job. Norm had to give his youngest brother credit for trying to rise above the blue-collar cellar that all the other Naders were fated to slave away in. Scott was the only hope for a Nader who gave the orders instead of always taking them. That is, if he didn't blow this chance by doing something stupid like going into the priesthood or studying fairy tales or some crap like that in college. That was one of the great things about this country: they'd give you a chance to show the world what you had--but only one chance. Now Norm's other brother, Cliff, was a different story. He had to be making something up there on the Indian reservation where he worked, but he wasn't about to spend it on anything but drugs. Cliff had had his chance. He looked it right in the face and told it to get fucked. Instead, Cliff was the one who got fucked. Burned-out at twenty-eight. As hard up as the military was for manpower, even they wouldn't keep Cliff Nader. Norm had thought they might make a man out



of him, but he knew now he had expected miracles. The reservation was the best place for Cliff--kept him out of trouble.

Norm licked his lips, savoring the bitter taste of his chew. He let his eyes glaze a moment, looking out through the rain-washed windshield of his company truck. This was some kind of strange weather, he mused. They'd already had more rain in one night in Phoenix than all of Arizona got in a whole year. Norm could feel the cool drops on his face and running through his beard. He preferred the hot sweat he worked up when he was out on the county roads around the city fixing the lines and the sun was beating down from a cloudless, blue sky. On a day when it was in the nineties or higher, he'd lose ten pounds or more. A lot of the guys at the company complained about the heat and sweating so much they smelled like dog piss on a hot water heater. Not Norm. To him, it was the sign of an honest day's work.

"So what's it going to be?" he prodded himself. Turn west and he could settle in for the night, unless he got called out again, or turn east and get tangled up in who knows what mess with his father. Or, it might really be Scott, but what would he be doing in Phoenix wanting to meet Norm--unless it had to do with money too?

"Piss on it," he said, and turned left, toward home. He drove for a couple minutes until he came to Central Avenue, a through-street with no traffic light or stop sign. Norm waited for a line of cars all jammed together to pass. Funny to see so many on Christmas night, he thought, trying to keep his mind off whoever was waiting for him at the Chrome Club. Norm rolled down his window to spit, and heard loud music and laughter coming from one of the cars in the group. A kid was hanging out the window, yelling and waving a can of beer.

"Hurry on down; hell's only half full," Norm muttered.

Suddenly, as he waited for the mobile party to pass so he could be on his way, a bolt of lightning, terrible as it fractured the night sky, struck in the distance. Almost at the same moment, the powerlines off to the side of the road crackled. It startled Norm; he'd never seen that happen before. As he stared at the lines, an acrid smell reached the cab of his truck. He knew there must be a rational explanation for it. Probably happened all the time in parts of the country where it rained a bunch. The procession of cars had passed, so Norm started to pull out into the intersection, but then it happened again, this time more violently: a flash of light followed by an angry buzzing from the powerlines. Norm hesitated, then floored the accelerator, shooting his truck across the road--but not before the burnt odor stung his nostrils again.

Norm chewed on his beard, brooding. He drove the route to his house without really being conscious of what he was doing. The next intersection he came to was Nineteenth Street. Straight up two blocks and a left turn on North Mountain Park Circle would bring him home. But he didn't turn. A car pulled up behind, waited a moment, then urged him on with its horn. Finally, it swerved around and drove on. Norm's face was wet, but it wasn't from rain anymore.

All right, he'd go to the Chrome Club and see what was up, but that was all. Unless it was a matter of life and death, they'd have to go panhandling somewhere else. He'd tell them that for sure. If Scott needed money for school, then he'd better be prepared to let Norm have some say on the kind of education he got.

As he drove along the empty streets on the way downtown, Norm looked at the palm tree fronds, barely visible in the wet darkness. They looked

to him like the frayed ends of a telephone wire that had come loose from its terminal.

\* \* \*

"Drive defensively," they had hammered into everyone's skulls in Driver's Ed., so Scott Nader brought his VW Beetle to a complete stop at the yield sign and checked both ways before proceeding. Soon he spotted what he had been searching the southwest side of Phoenix for: the blue and silver glow of a telephone booth. He parked his Beetle across the street from the booth, waited a moment for the rain to slacken, then jumped out and ran across the street holding a windbreaker above his head as an umbrella. Inside the booth, Scott emptied all the change from his pocket onto the aluminum shelf. He picked up a dime but stopped short of inserting it into the slot. Neither of his brothers would like what he was about to ask them to do. He didn't like spending Christmas this way himself, but it had to be done. Their father was in the worst trouble of his life. Scott dropped the coin in the slot, listened for it to clink its way down into the mechanism, then started to dial. Suddenly there was a sharp rapping on the glass. Startled, he dropped the receiver and whirled around to see someone standing outside the booth. It was a girl. Scott opened the folding door.

"Uh, may I help you?" he asked.

"Let me in," she yelled.

"But I'm--"

He didn't have time to finish his protest; the girl squeezed through and shut the door, pushing him up against the cold glass wall of the booth.

"I was becoming soaked," she said, in a Mexican accent.

Scott's arms were pinned at his sides; he barely had room to breathe.

"I was about to make some calls here."

"It just for couple minutes," she replied as she wriggled out of a sopping wet cloth jacket. She was so close it was impossible for her breast not to press against his arm. He had nowhere to move. Scott tried to clear his throat; it came out as a squeak.

"I hate to complain, but you're getting me all wet."

"How you think I feel?" she asked, sniffing. "How can I attract man looking like this?"

Oh, Lord, Scott thought, suddenly realizing why this girl was walking the streets in this neighborhood, the closest thing Phoenix had to slums. It was hard to tell with the lighting in the booth so poor, but her skin looked dark enough to confirm she was Mexican. Her dark hair hung straight down and dripped water onto her low-cut nylon top. The blue shirt was so tight and wet that it might have been painted onto her skin.

Scott looked out the booth and tried to concentrate on a traffic light.

"You how old, kid?" she asked.

"I'm eighteen, why?"

"I thought you was older. First I thought you was a girl with that hair."

He rolled his eyes; he expected remarks like that from older folks like Aunt Di and Mr. Jorgenson, his boss at the bookstore, but not from a girl close to his own age. Scott wore his hair long--almost to his shoulders. When he wasn't being mistaken for a girl, he was often asked if he were an albino because his hair was so blond it was almost white.

"Why are you, uh, out in this mess on Christmas night?" he asked, trying not to let his irritation show. The Mexican girl was searching through her purse but stopped and eyed him suspiciously, as if he might be an undercover cop trying to trap her. "I mean, don't you ever . . . take a holiday?"

She smiled and pulled a pocket mirror out of her purse. "Christmas is one of best nights of whole year," she replied. "But this rain, it kill business."

"That's . . . too bad," Scott said, watching her clean off her smeared make-up with a tissue and check her work in the small mirror. She applied new coloring to her eyelids and cheeks with quick, almost hurried strokes of a tiny brush, then putting everything back in her purse she slipped her hand between his legs.

"You got any money, kid? I give you best Christmas present ever."

Scott felt like his whole body was blushing. "No thanks," he said and removed her hand. She put her other hand under his sweatshirt and rubbed his chest.

"I need to make money tonight real bad. I got bills to pay, just like you."

Scott couldn't believe this was happening to him of all people. He knew guys back at school who would sell their souls to be where he was now.

"I'm not interested."

"Come on, you good-looking kid; we have some fun, 'ey?"

"I--I just don't--"

She took away her hand and shrank back. "You homo?"

"No, I'm not that. I just don't want to have sex with you."

"You think you too good for me? I bet you never have a woman. Let me make you man, tonight. For first time, I give you deal--twenty-five bucks. We do it right here if you want."

"No!" Scott yelled at her, knocking her hands away.

"All right, fuck you," she snarled, and opened the door. "Pretty blond faggot."

Scott watched her walk down the street holding the soaked jacket above her head. "Wait!" he shouted, and ran after her.

The Mexican girl turned, her face friendly again. "Change mind?"

"No, but I'll--I'll give you five dollars if you tell me where there's a restaurant around here that's open all night. Just some place where I can grab a bite to eat while I wait for someone to meet me."

She looked like she was going to curse him again, but then put out her hand. Scott reached in his pocket and pulled a five from a wad of ones. She took it, put it in her purse, then told him a place called the Chrome Club was just four blocks over on Southern Avenue.

"I'd rather not go to a bar if that's what it--"

"Hey, what you expect to find on Christmas night?"

Scott looked down at his dampening sweatshirt, jeans, and tennis shoes.

"Can I get in like this?"

"Sure," she said, and reached out to flip his hair, which--as they stood in the rain--was beginning to look more like hers by the minute. She smiled at him, this time not a come-on smile, and then turned and walked away. He hesitated a moment, then asked if he could give her a lift somewhere.

"I don't accept ride from strangers," she replied over her shoulder and kept walking.

Scott stared after her until she disappeared around the corner of a dilapidated brick building. As he ran back to the booth, he felt sad at what she had said about her business: that on this most blessed of all days of the year, there would have been plenty of men looking to rent her body if it hadn't been for the rain.

It wasn't easy convincing Cliff to come to Phoenix. He responded as Scott knew he would--bitter and hostile. When Scott explained to him that whatever they could do to help Jerome would take awhile and that he couldn't do it alone, Cliff gave in. Scott had been close to tears, but he managed to keep himself under control. It was less of an emotional ordeal with Norm simply because there was no answer at his house. Scott left a message at the telephone company, making it as vague as he could without losing the sense of urgency. He was counting on Norm's curiosity to get the best of him; the oldest Nader boy had always had to know everything that was going on. For the first time, Scott was beginning to understand that Norm didn't do it because he was nosey.

The Chrome Club was easy to find. Its lighted facade glowed in the dark empty street as if it were radioactive. The music was so loud that Scott heard it before he pulled up in front of the club and parked. He wasn't a fan of disco; it was much too decadent, as far as he was concerned. He didn't relish the idea of waiting for his brothers inside a club, but it was too late to change his mind now. Besides, he hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast and he was starving to death.

When Scott went inside, it was as if he had stepped into his worst nightmare of hell. The noise level was deafening, and the bass drum beat

so hard it jarred him down to his blood cells. The heat and odor of sweaty excitement were stifling. A mass of bodies glistening with perspiration was writhing on the dance floor, spilling over into the bar area, and long, flat clouds of cigarette smoke drifted over them like spirits searching for a way out of purgatory. Red lights reflected off chrome walls, a chrome bar, which--Scott saw when he looked closer--was a mammoth automobile. He would have run back out, but above the sweat and smoke was a refuge: spelled out in chrome letters and hanging above a second floor balcony like a constellation was a deli sign. When a gorilla-sized checker came up to Scott and asked him for I.D., he decided to stay. It wasn't so bad--except for the disco songs the D.J. was playing--once he got over the initial assault on his senses. The checker wore leather pants and a purple fishnet t-shirt, against which his enormous muscles bulged as if they were oranges overstuffed into a produce bag. It wasn't the usual attire of silk shirt open to the waist, vest, and gold chains, so maybe the Mexican girl was right about him getting in dressed like he was. The checker did give him the once-over, but then handed back the I.D. and stepped aside.

Scott tried to hold his breath as he squeezed through the crowd, but the gyrating bodies knocking into him made that impossible. By the time he reached the stairs to the upper level, his empty stomach was rolling with nausea, the smell of body odor was that overpowering. It was so hot on the dance floor Scott was surprised people weren't passing out. At the deli counter, he ordered a submarine sandwich and coke. The waitress said to have a seat and she'd bring it out to him. He sat where he could look over the railing and see the entrance beyond the undulating bodies beneath him.



Scott was exhausted, more from the emotional strain than anything else, although he had spent almost the entire day behind the wheel, first driving up from Tucson after the police called him at his father's request, then going back and forth across Phoenix trying to find out what could be done for him. Virtually nothing, as it turned out. "It's Christmas," he'd been told by receptionists, policemen, and operators. Right. Some Christmas. Sitting in Phoenix's version of Studio 54, alone, hungry, and tired, his Christmas spirit had all but vanished. He didn't know precisely what he would do to help Jerome, nor what he could do, but he was convinced he had to try something. Getting Norm and Cliff together was at least a start.

Scott hated what was happening to his father. Jerome Nader had been a good man once. He used to be a responsible and hard worker; he had been a policeman at one time and then a truck driver. He'd been a loving husband and a good father too. Scott remembered the camping trips Jerome used to take the whole family on before Iris Nader died. That was the problem: his father had never recovered from her death. He recalled how hard Jerome had taken the diagnosis of thyroid cancer, which was almost always fatal. Now Jerome was the one who was sick, and he'd done a terrible thing last night. Because of him, a man might not live. Scott wanted to pray for that man and to pray for his dad, his brothers, and himself. Scott felt a strong need to talk to Father Charles right now. It seemed as if the whole universe was collapsing in on him like he was in a black hole. As far as he knew, this was the first time he'd missed Christmas mass; it made him uneasy, as if something horrible would happen as a result. Father Charles would help him to keep having faith, but it sure looked awfully bleak for his dad. Scott desperately wanted to pray, but sitting in the

Chrome Club with music-to-have-an-orgy-by blaring, and shivering from the chill he caught standing in the rain, he didn't think he could concentrate enough to say even a couple of Hail Marys.

I must look like a scum-bag, he thought, pulling a chrome napkin dispenser closer to look at his reflection. Just then the waitress brought his order. Scott pushed away the napkin holder so she could set the sub and coke down on the table.

"You want anything else?" she asked in a low, throaty voice.

"This is fine, thank you," he replied, eager for her to leave. She was eyeing him as if he were a huge tip.

He ate the sandwich ravenously, not thinking about anything else for the moment. When he was finished, he felt better and took several gulps of his drink. Scott remembered he should call Aunt Di to let her know what was happening, and to see if she'd given the message to Mr. Jorgenson that he probably wouldn't be able to work at the bookstore the next day. At 67, Aunt Di was still nimble and in fairly good health, but she tended to forget anything that didn't have to do with her antiques. He'd lived with his aunt for almost six years now. He knew it had been the right thing to do--wasn't today proof of that? His father lay in a jail, a fifty thousand dollar bond on his head, while the family of a poor old man wept and prayed. Scott shook his head. It was going to take a miracle for Jerome Nader not to spend the rest of his life in prison. Scott hadn't ruled a miracle out; in fact, he was counting on it. If there ever was a time when he needed God to step in and exercise His power over men and circumstances, it was now.

Suddenly the nausea he had earlier came back, only much worse. His eyes searched the upper level for a restroom sign, spotted it (in chrome,

of course). He ran with his hand clamped over his mouth, barely making it to a stall in time; it all came up: the sandwich, the coke, the breakfast. He didn't try to hold it back.

Scott rinsed his mouth out at the sink and then looked himself in the mirror. His hair was dry, but its normal sheen was dulled and it hung limply. His face was drawn from having thrown up. He figured it was just nerves. He was tense with worrying about his father, Aunt Di, his job, college--suddenly Scott drew back, startled by what he saw, or thought he saw, in the mirror. Just for a moment, it seemed to him he resembled Jerome Nader. It was the eyes. As a boy, he had always thought his father's eyes were like the sea Scott had never seen. They could be tempestuous or placid, but they were always a deep liquid blue. Even when Jerome's eyes had been calm, they frightened Scott because of their intensity, as if they were actually tiny electric lights. Up until he was seven or so, Scott had nightmares that his father was really a robot controlled by an evil scientist who watched Scott all the while through Jerome's eyes.

Scott felt weak, so weak he had to steady himself against the sink. He didn't want to look like Jerome, not in the eyes, his face, or anything. If a son resembled his father physically, might he not also take after him in other ways? No. Scott hadn't lived with him in six years, hadn't seen him in two. He was nothing like Jerome, or Norm or Cliff either. They were his family, that's all. He loved them in spite of their lifestyles, in spite of their beliefs or lack of them. He would do whatever he could to help them. There was still hope for his father; there was. He'd have to keep telling himself that. He had to have faith.

Feeling stronger, Scott splashed cold water on his face and combed his hair. The music was muted enough by the restroom walls that he felt he could regain the sanctuary of prayer, just for a couple minutes. He said three Our Fathers, the first quickly by rote but the second slower, correctly inflected, and the third truly as a prayer. Back at his table, he sipped the rest of his coke for a couple minutes before becoming aware of a change in the club. The noise level had dropped way down. The conversation seemed subdued, even tentative. Scott glanced down over the railing and saw the reason. Like the Red Sea parting at Moses' command, the crowd on the dance floor divided to allow a deputy marshal to pass through. He looked around menacingly, one hand on his gun. The D.J. stopped the music. Scott couldn't help smiling.

"Cliff," he said softly, but it was like a shout in the strange silence that had fallen over the club.

The deputy looked up, saw Scott, and breaking into a smile himself, asked "What the fuck are we doin' in a gay bar?"

## SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS TWO THROUGH SIX

### Chapter Two: Scott's Point of View

All three Nader brothers are sitting in a circular booth in a Denny's. (Norm insisted that he wouldn't spend two minutes in a "damned fag joint.") Scott is in the middle, Norm and Cliff on either end--the same way they sat in restaurants when they were boys, Scott remembers. Cliff and Norm slip easily into their old roles: Cliff makes sarcastic remarks to get a rise out of Norm who obliges and then sulks. Scott uses Cliff to badger Norm into accepting his proposal to try to free Jerome and then get him some professional help (AA, at least). Norm complains, but finally gives in and agrees to let Scott and Cliff bunk at his place for however long they hang around Phoenix. Scott is going to the jail to check on Jerome's condition and Cliff says he wants to check out the heterosexual establishments, so the brothers split up.

At the jail infirmary, Scott has to wait for the ward nurse to come off her rounds. While he relaxes on a couch, he closes his eyes and recalls the last family camping trip before his mother went into the hospital where she died. Scott was only eight when he overheard his parents arguing about going to church while on vacation. His mother ran out of the camper and Scott followed her through the pine trees until he found her standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. In his child sensibilities, the canyon, glowing red with the setting sun, looks like a huge monster's mouth about

to swallow up his mother. He runs to her and she cries as she holds him, but he senses it is not because Jerome won't let them go to church. Scott's flashback is interrupted by the nurse. She is a tall, big-boned girl, who wears her hair up under her cap in a tight bun. Scott sensed her watching him when his eyes were closed; she says she thought he was asleep. Kathryn Milikin is a student nurse finishing up her internship in ASU's nursing program. She works flexible hours (the ones the regular staff don't want) at the infirmary. Kathryn tells Scott that Jerome is in fair condition after the auto accident: just minor cuts and bruises except for his left arm, which was deeply lacerated. The main nerve was partially severed so that the arm is paralyzed. The doctors do not yet know if it will be permanent or not. When Scott sees Jerome, who is asleep, he reacts strongly. His father's appearance has changed drastically since Scott last saw him. Jerome's hair is completely white and thinning, but long on the sides. His face is fat and heavily lined. It is also bruised so that both eyes are purple and black, as if he were wearing a mask. Kathryn leads Scott out. He is shivering, but claims he only caught a chill from the rain. He tells her a little bit about himself and his family. The chapter closes with her offering to help in any way she can.

### Chapter Three: Cliff's Point of View

The day after Christmas, Norm, Cliff, and Scott stand outside the bail bondsman's office. The bondsman would not post bail because he felt Jerome was too high a risk. The bail was set so high, he stood to lose too much if Jerome took off. Relieved, Norm says, "Well that settles that," but Cliff replies that they can get a hearing to request a lower

bail, and he volunteers to set it up. Norm wants to know why Cliff is being so helpful since, last he knew, Cliff hated Jerome. Cliff trades barbs with Norm to keep himself from thinking about the hallucinations, but Scott interrupts to suggest they go over to the infirmary to visit Jerome. Neither Cliff nor Norm want to, but Scott persuades them to do it just this once. They came in Cliff's car, so driving to the infirmary Cliff thinks about seeing Jerome again after all these years. He slams on the brakes for a red light and the glove box door falls open, revealing a bag of marijuana and a bottle of pills. Norm starts criticizing him; Cliff responds in kind until Scott tells them both to shut up. He says, "If Cliff wants to commit slow suicide, that's his choice. We'll bring flowers to his funeral." Cliff is more upset by that than anything Norm said; he turns around and yells at Scott. The three brothers are in a mean mood when they walk into Jerome's semi-private room. Scott does his best to cheer him up and encourages his brothers to play along. Cliff stands just out of Jerome's direct line of sight so he can study him. Neither Jerome nor Cliff have acknowledged each other. Then Scott tries to force the issue, Jerome says something, Cliff retorts, and soon all four Naders are yelling. A nurse comes in and tells them to leave. Cliff strides quickly out, gets in his "Goat," and drives off, leaving Scott and Norm stranded. He says aloud, "Just let me get you out of that jail, old man."

#### Chapter Four: Norm's Point of View

Just an hour after the fracas at the jail infirmary, Norm is working on the telephone lines north of Phoenix with Sandy Winey, the youngest

lineman at the company. They replace a line downed in the rainstorm the night before. Norm secures the new line from the cherry picker while Sandy drives the truck. Norm is fuming over what happened when they visited Jerome, especially Cliff abandoning him and Scott. He is regretting having agreed to take any part in this rescue mission. When the truck is stationary, Sandy yaks away, getting on Norm's nerves. The nineteen year-old kid talks about his girlfriend and their plans to get married, buy a house, and have kids. Norm tries not to think back to when he was also making those plans with his then wife-to-be, Brook. He can't help remembering, though, and that makes him all the madder. As he is about to check out the new line, Norm thinks he hears Sandy say something else, but Sandy says he didn't. Then Norm hears it again; it sounds like a voice, but it's too indistinct to make out. It couldn't be the telephone line because they haven't radioed headquarters to bring it back into the system yet. Then Norm hears thousands of voices over the line. He yells at Sandy for radioing in before Norm told him to. That seems to explain what he heard before.

Back at his house, a ranch style with empty rooms never lived in, Norm goes about his regular nightly routine of fixing dinner, reading, and watching TV, since neither Cliff or Scott are there. Restless, he goes out to get extra groceries. Before turning in, Norm fixes up the pull-out bed for them, wondering if they will come back after all.

#### Chapter Five: Scott's Point of View

Frustrated by the day's events but keeping the faith, Scott goes to the ASU library to do some reading for his research paper, which he has been given an extension on. Scott realized too late he'd taken on more



than he could handle, but didn't want to admit that to Professor O'dell because he is considering majoring in Folklore and wants to impress his professor, who is also the head of the department. The paper is due in ten days, so Scott must squeeze in some work on it whenever he can. While taking a break to eat dinner in the library cafeteria, Scott sees his father's nurse, Kathryn Milikin, sitting at a table with some friends. Scott is stunned by her change in appearance: she is wearing jeans and a sweater rather than a nurse's uniform, and she has let her hair down. It is a beautiful, honey-blond train that cascades down past her waist. Kathryn sees him, comes over and asks what floor he is on so she can talk to him about the outburst at the infirmary. Scott decides to study on a different floor, but, feeling guilty, he goes back to where he was before. When she comes over, they talk about Jerome at first, then their respective family histories (she is more vague about hers). Scott is unquestionably attracted to Kathryn and thinks she is attracted to him, but he tells himself he has no time to even think about a girl, what with trying to get his father out of jail, keeping his brothers from killing each other, working on his paper, checking up on his aunt, and somehow managing not to lose his job at the bookstore. Still, she is nice, sympathetic to his family's problems, and also a Christian--but a Baptist, which makes Scott feel a little put off by her because of what he has heard about Baptists' opinions of Catholics. They walk out of the library together and talk for a while longer by his Beetle. His ambivalence toward her extends to the visual as he thinks her hair--now blown wildly about by the wind--makes her look like a witch. When she leaves, saying "I like you, Scott Nader," and then he sees her drive away in a gleaming Pierce-Arrow, he cannot help but be enchanted by her.

Back at Norm's, Scott tries to be quiet as he undresses by the pull-out couch, but Cliff startles him so that he knocks over a lamp, bringing out Norm to complain that this is costing him enough without them wrecking his house too. After Norm goes back to bed, Scott and Cliff have a heart-to-heart. Scott tells him about Kathryn, and when Cliff makes a crude remark Scott says something cruel enough to hurt even Cliff. Afterward, Scott regrets it and tries to apologize but can't get any response from his brother.

#### Chapter Six: Cliff's Point of View

It is December 27th. The hearing to request Jerome's bail be lowered is set for 11:00 A.M. Cliff is getting ready in the bathroom of Norm's house. Feeling a bit groggy, he takes a hit of speed then gets into the shower. He thinks back to when he and Jerome went fishing at a man-made lake, just the two of them. Cliff was sixteen then—just old enough that he should have had a fishing license. When the game warden came up to where they were fishing by a small waterfall, Cliff was scared. He didn't know what the penalty was for not having a license, but the way the warden was acting it was serious. Cliff had never loved his dad more than that day when Jerome skillfully lied to keep Cliff out of trouble. He remembered Jerome's confident wink when the warden turned away. That wink only revolts Cliff now. Getting out of the shower, he feels light-headed. Cliff shakes it off and dries himself. He picks up a hair drier, turns it on, and as the filaments begin to glow orange, he sees an image of the coals of the old Indian chief's fire, and then he relives a hallucination he had in the chief's hut. Cliff drops the hair drier into the sink filled

with water. There is a loud ZAP, and the light goes out in the bathroom. Scott knocks on the door and comes in to find Cliff shaking. He tries to discover what happened, but after a minute Cliff is laughing it off.

Next we see the Nader boys outside the Maricopa County courthouse. It is a beautiful day, unlike the previous rainy and cold weather. Scott tells them if they have faith, God will be with them. In the courtroom, Cliff recognizes the judge's name as the same as a C.O.'s he'd heard stories about in Saigon. That C.O., reported M.I.A., was said to be the son of a judge in Arizona. Judge Granson is a mountain of a man, has a jutting jaw and a deep, thunder-like voice. The public defender (Cliff said he couldn't retain a real lawyer on such short notice, but the actual reason was he didn't have enough money) tells them Granson is hell on alcohol-related cases. Judge Granson listens to the public defender present the Nader's request. He won't lower the bail, but he says if the family is eager to help he will grant that Jerome be released twice a week for counseling in an alcoholism clinic recommended by the court--but only in the custody of the oldest son who lives in Phoenix. After the hearing, Scott is depressed and leaves. Norm is incredulous that it worked out worse for him. Cliff ponders what he knows (or what he heard, rather) about Granson's son. He tells Norm he is going into the judge's chambers and talk to him. Norm wants to know what's up, but Cliff only says to leave everything to him.

## Chapter Seven

"Is that damn light going to stay red forever?" Norm asked himself, revving the truck's motor impatiently as he waited behind two other cars at an intersection in downtown Phoenix. It was one of those stupid delayed signals, the kind that ran through all its phases even if there were no cars coming from the other direction. He undid the tight collar and then the rest of the buttons on his dress shirt. Even with the air conditioner on, the truck cab was too hot. Any breaks in Arizona's desert heat, such as they'd had earlier in the week, were short-lived. He'd be sweating rivers working on the lines today. He was supposed to go in to work after the hearing, but he was too mad about how things had turned out. He'd have to drive around to cool off a bit first.

Finally, the light changed, but the car in front of Norm didn't move quickly enough so he lay on the horn. The driver turned around and held up a middle finger, making Norm wish he had his deer rifle with him; he'd have shot that fucker's finger off at the first joint. Driving along Central Avenue with its row of leaning palm trees lined up in the median, Norm regretted going to meet Scott and Cliff Tuesday night at the Chrome Club. He should have just taken off for California or Mexico. He could've called in from wherever he was the next day, taken his two months of accumulated sick leave, and let the Nader clan fend for themselves for a change.

He couldn't help wondering what Scott and Cliff really thought of him. Did they see him just as someone to take advantage of? Cliff acted that

way, even came close to admitting it openly. Always the smart-ass, he did his damndest to get under Norm's skin. It was all a big joke to him, just something to help pass the time, something to keep him from having to face up to real responsibility. He had been looking for the easy way out since he was a kid. Cliff was always the little tag-along with Jerome, pretending he was interested in how to clean a fish, or shoot a rifle, or put new spark plugs in the old Buick, just to get out of doing things. Norm had thought the army might make a man out of him, but Cliff was given a medical discharge for having screwed himself up on drugs while over in Southeast Asia. The easy way out again.

Norm was passing out of the city. The palm and fruit trees grew sparser, the houses and businesses soon disappeared completely. However, he noticed very little as he mulled things over, not even consciously driving the truck, as if he were on auto-pilot.

Now, Scott was harder to figure. He was a devout Christian--not as bad as one of those fire-and-brimstone Bible-thumpers always asking for a handout on TV--but still overdoing it in giving God or the devil credit for what happened in his life. Norm didn't depend on either to make his way in the world. Not that he was an out-and-out atheist. He liked what Jonah Goldman, a crusty, old Jewish lineman now retired used to say: If God does exist, and he's choosey about who passes through the pearly gates, it's not the medals he looks for . . . it's the scars. Norm had plenty of scars. He doubted if Scott would agree with Jonah, but his tune would change once he quit hiding from things in his little shell. Him and Cliff both were good at that: Cliff had drugs, Scott books. Norm had told him to get into computers; that's where the big bucks are--and the jobs. Hell, if he were eighteen again . . . . Scott talked about becoming a professor.

Professional student was what he meant. Norm tried to tell him he wouldn't be able to raise a family without a good-paying job.

A vulture sitting in the middle of the road was startled by the approach of the truck and flapped up out of the way just in time; Norm suddenly realized he was driving in the desert.

Cacti surrounded the blacktop road leading to nowhere. To Norm, they were old friends. Cactus trees grew everywhere he went around Maricopa County working on the lines. He could even distinguish some of them from others, as if they had personalities. There was an ugly stout cactus on North Sunset Road that he called Bertha. On the west side of town was a slender one with a double trunk that looked like legs; Farrah was its name. Still another, right at the edge of the Superstition Mountains, he called Stupid-Fuck because it'd grown smack dab under a rock overhang, squashing itself into a chef's hat shape. Gazing at the un-named cactus trees before him, Norm felt no desire to give them names; ' just be more of 'em to keep track of.

Steering his truck off the road and back on again in a u-turn, he wondered how long he would have driven if it hadn't been for that stupid vulture. Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea: what if he'd just cruised along in a daze for years, somehow not running out of gas or anything, then one day waking up to find himself in a new place, a new time? He would start over again, work his way up from ground level. He would build a new life, one all for himself.

Norm caught a glimpse of a roadrunner off to his right, zipping alongside the highway back toward the desert. Nothing was going to catch that wise little bird, except maybe another roadrunner. It was dumb, but Norm remembered Scott always loved the cartoon show about the coyote and

roadrunner when he was little. Of course, his little brother cheered for the bird while Norm secretly wished the coyote would succeed with one of his madcap inventions to catch his dream-dinner. It struck Norm now that Scott had become like his favorite cartoon character, quick-footed and nimble, so he could avoid life's traps. Until today, that is. His first lesson from the school of hard knocks came with the judge overriding Scott's tidy little plan to make everything all right again. "Never was all right," Norm muttered. And he was the only one who knew that. He had a feeling that before this mess was cleaned up Scott would also begin to realize it too. Norm would have gloated a little after the hearing, made sure the kid started learning his lesson, except that the judge went and put him in charge of Jerome. What a turn of events! Once again, it fell on good ol' Norm's shoulders. And what if he refused? There wasn't any law that said he had to help Jerome. Right. Then Scott would blame him for whatever happened. He could hear him saying something like, "If Norm hadn't turned his back on us Dad would be a changed man today. It's all Norm's fault." The hell it was! Scott wasn't going to pin that on him, no sir. Norm would do all he could, even though the old man had given up years ago, just like Mom.

He felt shitty for thinking that. He had never said it to anyone, but he believed it was true. He remembered her in the hospital, growing thinner and weaker almost every day, it had seemed. She hadn't wanted to get strong again. He was sure of that. She had stopped trying, as if life had become too much for her and she was leaving them on their own while she went to rest. The memory of his mother's last good day--if being hooked up to electric machines and fluids running into her through tubes could be called good--pushed the morning's frustrating events from

his thoughts. She had asked to see Norm alone. He was twenty then, but he had felt like an adult for years.

"Norman, you need to do something for me," she had said through chapped lips. He couldn't help wincing at his mother's use of his full name. She hadn't called him that for years; no one had, since grade school--not unless they wanted their teeth knocked down their throat. Standing in front of his dying mother, he could hear the sharp snap of the front tooth of the last boy who called him that, and he felt like crying to her, telling her he was sorry and he'd go to confession.

Her head was covered by a brightly colored scarf to hide how much of her hair she had lost. All that beautiful, long hair she had been so proud of, gone. It had happened so quickly. That summer they had been at the Grand Canyon; everything had been great. And now, six months later, she was a skeleton lying in a hospital room she shared with three other skeletons. Only plastic curtains alongside each bed gave them the impression of privacy.

"What is it, Mom?" he asked.

She fixed him with her eyes; their light seemed so much dimmer now. "Take care of them for me, Norm. Your brothers and your father need someone to look after them."

Norm frowned. "You can still do it. People have been known to lick this before."

She closed her eyes a moment. Norm began to worry, but she reopened them.

"No, I can't. This is something only God can defeat."

"Well . . . ask him to do it, pray to be healed," he shot back in frustration.



"Don't you think I have been?"

"Then forget God. Do it yourself. Concentrate on getting stronger--"

"I'm so tired."

He looked down at the white tiled floor and at the white walls, ceiling, and furniture. It was a hideous color for a hospital--the color of bone.

"Listen to me. You're the head of the family now."

Norm's eyes grew wide. What about Dad? He felt like a clerk who'd just been given his boss's job by the owner of the store.

"Scotty's young; Cliff will follow your father anywhere. Remember what I told you about Jerome? You'll have to be strong for all of them." She shut her eyes again and sighed. "It's your job now."

And damnit, he had been strong. But he wasn't a miracle worker. That was Scott's department. He couldn't take them by their hands and walk them through their lives. Norm had done all that could reasonably be expected of him, but that evidently was not enough. Okay, so he'd do more; he'd make Jerome go through the motions of turning over a new leaf, for whatever good it would do him or any of them. But one of these days . . . .

Back at the outskirts of the city, Norm pulled into a Trading Post where there was a telephone booth in the parking lot. He got out of his truck and dug in his pants pocket for a dime. Inserting it into the slot, he picked up the receiver, dialed information, and asked for the number of the clinic Judge Granson had mentioned. He explained to the receptionist that he needed to talk to one of their doctors about his father who was in considerable trouble. She said Doctor Chambliss could see him a week from Monday.

"Not good enough; Miss, this is urgent. A man is on the verge of self-destruction."

"We don't work with anyone who isn't," she replied, unimpressed.

"Hold one moment . . . are you here in Phoenix, sir?"

"Yeah, at the Trading Post on West Camelback Road."

"If you could come over right now, Doctor Wherli has just had a cancellation. You could talk to him."

"I appreciate it. You're over there by the university, right?"

Checking his watch, Norm figured he could see the psychiatrist at the clinic and still make it to the phone company by one-thirty. This shit was making him miss a hell of a lot of work.

He started to hang up the receiver, but he heard a faint voice say something. "Hello?" he said into the mouthpiece. Silence. It wasn't the phone. Norm shrugged, put the receiver in its hook, and turned to leave the booth. He stopped. There it was again. A soft sound, as if he were on the other side of a wall from someone who was speaking in a low rapid voice. It was almost like a low-power electric hum.

Looking outside, he saw the booth was situated at the northwest corner of the parking lot. He checked for power lines, but evidently they were underground along with the telephone cable. It couldn't have been coming from there.

Norm listened.

It wasn't just a power hum; it sounded like a human voice--no--voices. It reminded him of a choir humming the introduction to a solemn hymn.

"You silly son-of-a-bitch, Nader, what the hell's the matter with you?" Norm chided himself. It didn't work; they were still there.

If it was coming from the buried lines somehow, he supposed it would be possible for the steel frame of the phone booth to transmit a current, but there was no way it could reproduce the signals as audible sound. If it was just a little louder, he was sure he could separate the murmuring into words, but the more he concentrated on the voices, the less distinct they became.

Norm stepped outside the booth, and immediately whatever it was stopped. He leaned back inside, but it was gone. He surveyed the parking lot, the Trading Post, even the expanse of desert from which he'd just come, suspicious of a practical joker. There was no apparent source for whatever it was he had heard. Norm strode over to his truck, got in, and turned the engine over. Pulling out his wire, he stroked his beard nervously. Maybe he was the one who needed the shrink.

"They're gonna drive you into the nuthouse, Norm," he said, shaking his head as he pulled out of the parking lot.

The receptionist led him down a hallway to the doctor's office. Norm had a notion of what he should tell the doctor about Jerome, but it wouldn't be easy. He'd kept quiet all these years--hell, he wasn't even sure it meant anything. Maybe he wouldn't even bring it up. A man who had stayed in school for years studying how to straighten out people's noodles ought to know what questions to ask him. Norm expected Doctor Wherli to be a chubby, bald man who wore spectacles and smoked a smelly pipe. The kind of doctor that would get right down to business. One of the things he was going to make sure was settled up front was the old geezer's fees. He wasn't about to give them a blank check, no matter how good they were.

"In here," the receptionist chirped, beaming at him from behind little quarter-sized glasses.

Norm pressed his lips together as if to smile, then stepped into the office. For a second, he thought he was back outside. The office's walls were made entirely of glass, nothing but crisscrossing redwood beams in the ceiling to prevent the hot sun from pouring in. It was cool in the room, though. He cringed when he thought of how much it cost them in electricity to run the air conditioners, an expense that he was sure was tucked neatly into the clinic's fees. He noticed that the doctor's office, if that was what it was, had no furniture to speak of, no desk or couch. There were just two wicker chairs in the middle of a brick tile floor, and a bunch of plants of all kinds spread around the room. It was as if they had just set up the glass walls and ceiling around a tropical garden.

A man dressed casually in white pants and a beige shirt was stooped over a planter, using a mister to water the delicate leaves and blossoms of a bright pink flower. Norm assumed this was Doctor Wherli, but he looked nothing like he had expected.

"Be right with you," the man said, glancing quickly at Norm over his shoulder. In a minute, the doctor straightened up; he was very tall. At least two inches taller than Norm, but about half his weight. He looked like a pencil, one that Norm could easily snap in two. The doctor strode up to him, sticking out a thin arm that ended in a long-fingered hand.

"I'm David Wherli."

"Norm Nader." He shook hands loosely, afraid he might crush the doctor's delicate bones.

"Let's sit down, Norm. Is it okay if I call you Norm?"

Glancing around to make sure he knew where the door was, Norm nodded and sat in one of the wicker chairs. The doctor was in his early fifties, Norm guessed. His hair was thinning on top, but there were two tufts of gray hair at the sides that flared out like dove's wings. His nose was long and thin, just like the rest of him. Norm felt elephantine in comparison.

"You can call me David if you'd like," the doctor said.

"That's okay, Doc. I'm not your patient."

The doctor shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I expect we'll be getting to know each other, as--your father, I believe it is--as his treatment progresses. We might as well be friendly."

Norm scratched his beard. "You sure have a lot of plants here."

"Yes, we like to make the atmosphere as bright and cheerful as possible."

Doctor Wherli glanced around the room proudly, then crossed his stick-like legs and asked what the problem was with Jerome. Norm explained about the accident three days ago, Jerome's previous record, his alcoholism, the hearing. The doctor wanted to know how long Jerome had had a drinking problem; Norm told him his father had always drank some, but had begun getting drunk more frequently after Iris Nader died. The past couple years had been the worst. As far as Norm knew, Jerome hadn't lived anywhere for six months, and he had been fired from the last of a long line of meager jobs. At least that was what the foreman at the glass factory told Norm. Jerome claimed he had quit because of a philosophical disagreement. Norm didn't tell the doctor what Jerome had gone on to say: that he believed the formen was a lazy, stupid-shit spic, and the foreman believed Jerome was a loud-mouthed fat-ass. He had actually laughed at his father's joke.

"What was the cause of your mother's death?" Doctor Wherli asked.

Norm frowned. The son of a bitch sure didn't mind getting personal.

"Cancer. Had it in her throat."

The doctor nodded sympathetically, folded his arms, and asked if there was anything else he could tell him about his father's past behavior. Sweat ran down into Norm's beard. The room wasn't as cool as he thought. He considered not saying anything about what his mother had told him, but as he gazed through the glass at the ASU campus, he thought, what the hell-- maybe this guy knows what he's doing. Norm cleared his throat.

"Dad, uh, saw a psychiatrist a few times before, back when Mom was still alive."

Doctor Wherli wanted to know more, but that was all Iris Nader had told Norm the day she was first diagnosed as having thyroid cancer. He didn't know the doctor's name or how many times Jerome had gone to see him. Since it was a good bet Jerome had seen someone in Flagstaff, Doctor Wherli assured Norm he would be able to track down who had treated him and for what.

"It doesn't necessarily have any relation to your father's alcoholism and inability to hold a job now," he explained, "but chances are there is some problem which was left unresolved by the earlier treatment, and it has continued to undermine his ability to cope. Most people don't realize that it's worse to start therapy and quit than to not ever have talked to a psychiatrist at all. It's like taking a cast off a broken bone too soon; the limb never heals fully and is continually being reinjured. My son can tell you about unhealed limbs; it ended his football career."

Norm nodded. He wanted to leave. He was burning up in the hothouse office. And he didn't enjoy having to unearth his family's past like digging up a broken utility pole's rotted stump.

"You know, Norm," Doctor Wherli said, "if your father has a diagnosable condition, you might consider using that as a defense in court. If he is ill, he doesn't belong in prison."

Norm suddenly stood up. "Yeah, I'll keep that in mind. Thanks for your time, Doc. I've got to get to work."

The doctor seemed surprised by Norm's eagerness to leave, but stood up himself and led him to the door.

"Set up an appointment with our receptionist, and we'll do what we can to help your father."

Norm shut the door behind him and sighed. He was relieved to be out of there. At the end, he'd had a strong impression that he was at a tree nursery to learn what he hadn't done properly in taking care of a plant, rather than a psychiatrist's office that specialized in alcoholism. He walked down the hall to the lobby and the receptionist's desk. She was typing and didn't look up right away.

"I need to make an appointment with Doctor Wherli for my father," he said.

She smiled up at him, then pulled out a leather appointment book and flicked through it with long, candy-red fingernails.

"How about next Friday at ten?" she asked in a musical voice.

Norm nodded, and jingled the keys in his pants pocket as she wrote in the book. He took the reminder card she handed him, and--looking around to see if there was anyone else in the lobby--asked how much these visits would cost him.

"Fifty dollars per hour is our standard fee."

Norm was incredulous. "You mean every time I bring my old man here it's going to cost me fifty bucks?"

"You'll find it comparable to most clinics in our field, and for the high standard of service we provide--"

Norm stomped out of the lobby, climbed into his truck, stuck a wad of chew in his mouth from the can he kept in the glove box, and tore out of the parking lot.

Where the hell did they get off charging fifty bucks an hour? Maybe it was because they got a lot of the college kids coming in there, messed up on dope and booze . . . like Cliff, but with money. Two visits to Dr. Wherli per week--for how many weeks? Judge Granson had said the trial would be March first. Three months. So, twelve hundred dollars for the head doctor, lawyer fees, court costs, plus wages he lost taking time out from work. Norm cocked his arm to hit something.

And what about that business of pleading insanity? Wasn't that what the doc meant? Who would be expected to foot the bill for the years of treatment? No, it had to be prison for Jerome. It was the only place, besides the grave, where he would have to leave Norm alone.

Squealing his tires on the hot pavement as he turned onto Sun Devil Drive, a shortcut through the ASU campus to get to downtown Phoenix where the phone company was, Norm saw the cheerful faces of students as they scurried about like squirrels, walking along the street carrying books, throwing frisbees across well-manicured lawns, and embracing--even kissing--openly. They weren't serious about getting an education; it was just four years of play-time.

Norm hit the brakes as a group of kids dressed in white shorts and shirts and carrying tennis rackets walked out in front of his truck. They scrambled off the street, laughing to one another. It was funny.



"Smart-ass kids!" he yelled out the window. That's exactly what he meant. Somebody, their parents or the government, was forking out four or five thousand dollars a year so they could play snob games and joke about nearly causing an accident. It wasn't fair. He had always believed that if a man worked hard, kept his nose out of trouble and minded his own business, he would prosper--provided he didn't make any stupid mistakes. Norm had done all that, he had even tried to do it for his family, always putting their wants and needs before his, and look what it had cost him. He wasn't just thinking about money.

Norm once had his chance to have a family. True, it hadn't even lasted a year, but that wasn't his fault. At first, Brook hadn't complained about sending money to Jerome up in Flagstaff. They were both working--Norm just starting at the phone company and she at K-Mart. They could afford it in those early happy months of marriage. But when it became a weekly thing, and it started cutting into their plans to buy furniture for their new house and take a vacation, she started to complain. Hell, Norm couldn't blame her. What'd she done to deserve Jerome? Norm probably would have said to hell with it and told Jerome to either get a job or make unemployment compensation and social security do, if only Scott hadn't been living with him then. But Scotty was living with him. What could Norm do? Turn his back on his little brother and let him starve?

"I'm your first responsibility now," Brook had told Norm, sitting across the table from him. It was the first words she'd spoken since he'd told her about sending a hundred bucks to Jerome to pay his garage bill. The old Buick was just about on its last legs.

"We're in no danger of starving, babe," Norm replied, slurping his soup.

"No, but when are we going to start furnishing our home and saving up for our family? We might as well give up on the idea of having kids as long as your father keeps milking us of all but what we need to keep the wolf from the door."

He looked up from his empty bowl and wiped his beard slowly with the paper napkin. She really was upset about the hundred bucks. Her cheeks were flushed and her brown eyes were as wide as Camelback Mountain. It didn't make much sense--her being so mad over it. They'd sent several hundred dollars over the past six months . . . but never a whole hundred at one shot.

"You'd better eat, Brook, before it gets cold."

Her eyes grew even wider as she yelled "Norm!"

"Dammit, Brook, the man has to have a car to look for a job. He has to be able to get to work every day when he finds one."

"Is he really looking that hard for a job? It's been eight months."

Norm lowered his eyes. They hadn't argued like this before--not about sending Jerome money, not about anything. In fact, sitting at their card table he couldn't recall ever arguing over anything more serious than their wedding date. He didn't have any idea how to handle an angry wife. Norm drummed his fingers on the table a moment, then decided to change the subject.

"If you're not going to eat your soup, then I will. No sense letting it go to waste."

Brook looked as if she wanted to hit him. She stood up.

"Fine, do that--no, I've got a better idea. Why don't you send it to your father. Next week I'll just stop eating altogether and we can give him what we save on food."

"Now, listen here," he started to reply, but she didn't give him the chance. She left the kitchen, banging the "saloon" doors against the wall. Norm heard her slam and lock the bedroom door. He let out a frustrated sigh. He felt like pulling his beard out, kicking the card table through the patio glass door, throwing the dishes against the fireplace. No matter what he did, he was screwed. Help the old man and his marriage was in trouble. Turn his back on him--and Scott--and he'd be sick with guilt. What the hell could he do?

Suddenly Norm had a great idea. He'd call Ben Myers down at the Sinclair station where he'd worked before the phone company and see if he could get back on at nights. Last week when he was filling up, ol' Ben had mentioned something about his night man quitting. "Haven't had a night man worth a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of since you quit, Norm," Ben told him. Norm would use the extra money he made nights to help Jerome--just that money. His regular earnings and what Brook made at K-Mart would be just for them. Yeah, how could she complain about that? Norm was certain he'd found the solution to his problems.

For a while after that night, Norm's plan seemed to be working. He and Brook didn't fight anymore. Instead, they went shopping for furniture on Sundays, the only time he wasn't working either at the phone company or the gas station. Soon they had a couple end tables, easy chair, and console TV for the living room, a microwave oven and a real dinette set for the kitchen. He left her to make plans for their one year anniversary vacation. "You decide where, when, and how much," he told her, and she seemed pleased--although not as thrilled as Norm had hoped.

He should have been suspicious. There should have been some warning, some sign of what she was about to do.

. Brook left him two weeks before their first anniversary. She must have used the money for their vacation to move. She didn't leave a note or anything, just cleaned out her clothes and personal things and left. Norm had hoped it was something else--kidnapping even--but Brook's parents confirmed she had given up on him. "He was married to his family more than me," she had told them. They claimed she hadn't said where she went. Norm knew they were lying, but what could he do?

He didn't do anything. Not a damned thing. For a week he sat at home brooding. Every day he called into work sick. The Monday of the second week his boss called and said to get his ass in there if he wanted to keep his job. What Norm wanted was Brook to come back, to give him a second chance. He wouldn't send Jerome another dime. He'd buy her jewelry, furniture, her own car--whatever. Norm actually prayed for her to come back to him. It was the last time he had prayed for anything. Of course she didn't come back. She never even filed for a divorce, never communicated with him at all. Her parents finally admitted she went to California where she was living with a man who made movies. Norm had thought about going out there a couple times, hunting her up. Norm Nader goes to Hollywood. What a movie that would make, he'd thought. He never told anyone just what exactly the reason was for her leaving. Guys at work would ask, ol' Ben asked when Norm quit him for the second time, Aunt Di and Scott asked. But Norm wouldn't talk. He just went back to work.

Norm came up behind two cars whose drivers had stopped in the middle of the street to talk. There were cars parked along the sides so he couldn't go around. At first, he thought they'd had a wreck, but soon he saw they were just a couple of college kids shooting the shit, not giving a fuck about who else was trying to use the street. The car in

Norm's lane was a silver Corvette; the other one was a red Mercedes convertible. Norm honked his horn. They didn't budge.

"Get the hell out of the road!" he shouted at them.

The kid in the Vet flipped him off. Norm turned purple.

"Okay, you smart-ass," he growled as he shifted into first and eased his bumper into the rear of the sleek automobile. He was rewarded by the sound of the tail lights breaking. The kid in the Mercedes looked scared and took off, but the driver of the Corvette jumped out and slammed his door furiously. He was an Indian, and he looked to Norm like he was one who still held a grudge against all white people for the wrongs done to his ancestors.

Norm slid quickly across the seat and grabbed a hammer out of his tool tray on the floorboard. He got out through the passenger's side just as the Indian reached his driver's door, then walked around to the front of the Vet, which was purring angrily, the idle set too high.

"Looking for someone, college boy?" Norm said, not knowing what the hell he was doing. The Indian was huge--a defensive lineman if he ever saw one--but he didn't care. It was time someone else started paying. It was time Norm Nader started giving a little back.

"Hey, watch it, man; he's got a weapon," someone yelled from the sidewalk. The Indian nodded and, after inspecting the damage done to his car, approached Norm warily. "Go get'em, Hawk!" another voice cheered. The Indian and Norm both glanced at the small crowd that had formed.

Little shits stick together, Norm thought.

When the Indian turned his head back to face Norm, his black, dank hair swung slowly in an arc across his forehead until it lay against his temple. He pressed his palms together, rubbing them back and forth as if

that was what he meant to do to him. Norm flexed his fingers on the hammer. His chest was so tight he didn't dare try to take a breath. He was shaking, sweating, wanting to scream and strike out blindly at the Indian, at the silver car, at anything just to even up the score. But he didn't get the chance.

A campus cop walked up to them and asked, "What's going on here?"

Norm saw that he was young, a student playing policeman while at school. Student or not, he had a gun holstered at the side of his gray uniform. Norm knew the Indian saw all this too.

"This fuckin' weirdo ran into my car and then got out and started to pick a fight. He's hiding a knife or something behind his back, so watch it."

Norm suddenly realized that he had made a big mistake. The tightness in his chest sunk like a lead ball to his stomach; he thought he was going to be sick. He started to back away from them.

"He was the one blocking the street," Norm stammered. "I was just letting off some steam; I--"

"Hold it right there," the campus cop ordered, putting his hand on his pistol.

Norm thought fleetingly of running, but the kid would probably shoot him in the back. It was too late to escape; he was up to his ears in hot water. Dropping the hammer, he slowly raised his arms. The cop and the Indian walked cautiously toward him. He felt like some animal dying in the street--a coyote--waiting for a couple of circling buzzards to feast on his carcass. As Norm was shoved against his truck, he couldn't help wondering if he'd get Judge Granson. At least he hadn't been drinking.

## In the Place of Dragons:

### A Critical Afterword

In the Place of Dragons may be too overly-ambitious a first novel for me to be writing. It remains to be seen whether or not I can elevate my craft to meet the technical demands of the particular characters I want to create, the story I want to tell, and the themes I am trying to express. Regardless of the final outcome, writing my novel and this critical afterword has been an education in itself about the craft of fiction, the history of literature, and myself. Primarily what I want to argue here is that In the Place of Dragons is a romance or, at least, a novel that comes out of the romance tradition of literature. I will also analyze certain technical aspects of the narrative form of my novel, and discuss other literary works and authors which have helped and influenced me to write this particular book. In order for the reader to better follow the points I make on these matters, I will begin by giving a summary of the remainder of my novel (beginning where Chapter Seven left off), as well as a general analysis.

## I

Interwoven in the main plot of the Nader brothers trying to help their father salvage the remainder of his life are three separate stories concerning Norm, Cliff, and Scott that begin to develop almost immediately with Chapter One and resolve in the climax near the end of the book. By Chapter Seven, each of these stories has begun to come to the forefront of the narrative, while the main plot recedes into the background. In order for the reader to recognize the three distinct narratives, I will describe them separately,

although they unfold concurrently in the novel by means of alternating episodes of each character in a regular cycle.

After Cliff and Jerome's first meeting in years in the jail infirmary, Cliff's motivation for staying in Phoenix changed from leaving the reservation and hallucinations behind to getting revenge on his father. In Chapter Seven, Judge Granson refused to lower Jerome's bail, so Cliff tries to get in with him by lying about knowing his son who was killed in Viet Nam when Cliff was there. In between meetings with the judge, Cliff explores Phoenix's bars and continues to use drugs despite the haunting memories of his hallucinations. Though Cliff despises Judge Granson because he is a symbol of unbending, absolute authority, he finds he can't help respecting the man's lasting grief over the loss of his only son. All is going according to Cliff's plans until Scott walks in on him and a prostitute back at Norm's house. Excommunicated from the mission to save Jerome and ordered to leave Phoenix by Scott, Cliff is more determined to get his pound of flesh from his father. He forces Judge Granson at gunpoint to sign a release form for Jerome. It becomes clear by the time Cliff literally fights Norm to save Jerome's life that the hostility toward his father is a reaction to Jerome's rejection of Cliff's idolizing love ten years ago when Jerome left Cliff, who was then a college freshman, in jail to teach him not to get involved with "hippie protesters." After that experience, Cliff dropped out and joined the army. All Cliff wanted, although he doesn't realize it until after Jerome escapes from him when they leave the jail, is to hear his father say he is sorry the way things have turned out between them and that he still loves him. When, in the climatic scene in the Superstition Mountains, Jerome expresses only disgust and hatred, Cliff is enraged, and the violence that has been expected finally occurs.



By Chapter Seven, Norm Nader's story rests on this: he will either quit helping the family, as he claims he would like to do, or be humbled to the point of realizing he is the one who needs help. There is also the question of Norm's sanity with the repeated occurrences of his hearing voices. Jailed for the near-fight with the Indian, he has to spend the night because he can't reach Scott or Cliff by telephone to bail him out. The voices return and for the first time he connects their separate occurrences and tries to figure out what they are. Worried he may be losing his mind, Norm goes to see Dr. Wherli (after Sandy Winey has gotten him out of jail) on the pretense of talking more about Jerome. Norm is convinced that the voices are the result of his regret over losing Brook because of his family, so rather than pay a doctor thousands of dollars to help him accept this, he decides to go to Los Angeles to find her. The next morning in his motel room in L.A., he realizes he has no inclination of how to find her or what he would say or do if he did. Norm goes to the shore for his first look at the ocean and accepts that the past is past; Brook is no longer part of his life. On the way back to Phoenix, he has to drive into a ditch when he tries to pass a semi without enough room. Walking to the Hoover Dam power station for help, Norm is in awe of the huge expanse of white wall built by men to make nature serve them. He resolves to cut himself loose of Scott, Cliff, and Jerome when he gets back in order to save his sanity (the voices have not returned since he left the Nader family problems behind to concentrate on his own).

The next day after work, Norm is knocked unconscious by Jerome who has gone berserk after escaping from Cliff. Norm decides Cliff had the right idea--the world would be a better place without their father--however it will be Norm who will play what is, in his mind, the ultimate martyr: he will kill

Jerome for his brothers' sakes. As he chases after Jerome, the voices return and spur him on to commit an act even more horrible than patricide: pushing Jerome and Cliff into downed power lines so that both of them are electrocuted, Norm has to admit he has done something so grossly wrong that not only has he not fulfilled the responsibility of taking care of the family, but he also has failed by any standards--man's or God's--to live a good life; he knows he is in desperate need of forgiveness.

Scott Nader is also moving toward an awareness of sin in his life and his own need for absolution. Frustrated by the way the hearing turned out, he decides to return to Tucson when, once again, he runs into Kathryn Milikin. Since her parents live in Tucson and she has the weekend off, she asks to ride down with him. Scott grows more enchanted with her but feels too guilty to be happy while his family is so miserable. However, after he has visited Aunt Di with Kathryn, played tennis with her, gone on a picnic, toured her father's palace-like mansion (including his personal two-story library), attended a Saturday mass and a Sunday worship service at their respective churches, Scott enjoys Kathryn as a physical and intellectual equal, although he still feels a spiritual superiority. Coming upon a rockslide on the drive back to Phoenix, Scott braces himself for a painful death, while Kathryn cries out for God to save them. The lightweight VW is launched into the air when its front wheels strike a utility pole lying just in front of the large rocks. The car barely clears the worst of the rockslide, and they are unharmed, although the VW is damaged too badly to drive. Scott believes this to be an actual miracle. Since Kathryn has demonstrated her greater faith in a crisis, his last inhibition is gone and he is in love.

Later that evening, Kathryn shows him a place in the Superstition Mountains

outside Phoenix where, as a girl, she thought she could talk directly to God. In his inexperience, Scott makes a too forward and ill-timed advance and then takes Kathryn's refusal as a personal rejection; he resolves never to let himself be tempted by lust again, even if it means joining a monastery. The next day Scott becomes feverish as he worries about where Norm is, feels guilty and hypocritical for kicking Cliff out, and begins to realize from what he has learned about his mother and father from Aunt Di and Dr. Wherli, respectively (Scott took a phone message for Norm about Jerome's previous psychiatric treatment)--that his family was never the ideal of love and virtue he had convinced himself it was. Fatigued from the cold he caught in the rain on Tuesday and from pulling an all-nighter to finish his research paper, Scott is nearly delirious when he has a revelation that Jerome is like the dragon in classical mythology, alternating between periods of anarchial behavior and a passive hibernation. He realizes it is up to him to save or destroy his father because he is the only one who can see the forces of good and evil at war inside him. Scott flees to Kathryn's place in the Superstition Mountains after being physically overpowered by Jerome at Norm's. He prays to be taken from earth, whether by bolt of lightning or falling boulder. Kathryn comes to Scott and assures him that he is not responsible if his brothers and father choose the broad road to destruction instead of the narrow path to salvation. She tells him that it is not right for Christians to retreat from the world because they must provide its light. She also tells him that she loves him and she will always be with him to help make that light brighter. In the final chapter, at his father and brother's funeral, Scott prays for their souls but realizes, by means invisible at the time but now all too clear, his prayer that the Nader family be cleansed has been answered.

In the three stories that make up the novel, I intend to achieve a unity of characterization, plot, and theme. The Nader family is truly at a nadir; they have become a family in name only because Jerome, Norm, Cliff, and even Scott have retreated from each other into a self-centered existence, a self-imposed exile from society. A psychologist might describe this as an inhibition of the process of de-centering (i.e., breaking out of an egocentric perception of the world). An anthropologist might call it the failure to engage the ritual mechanism for passage from individual to community. A minister would simply call it sin, keeping the self master of one's life rather than making Christ lord. Scott and Norm both realize at the last that they cannot live a ptolemaic life anymore. Norm especially learns the lesson that a philosophy of total self-reliance as he has lived leads only to ultimate failure and despair. Cliff comes face to face with this truth, has the chance to shed his skin of bitterness, cynicism, and rebelliousness, but in not forgiving his father--regardless of whether Jerome asked to be or not--and in not considering that perhaps he was the one who should ask for forgiveness, Cliff commits spiritual suicide. The Nader family is cleansed of its evil, then, with the deaths of Cliff and Jerome and with Norm's new humility and confession. Scott and Kathryn in love indicates that the Nader family will, in fact, rise out of the ashes of its past and move forward to a future of depending on God and each other. Supernatural/mysterious happenings in my book are part of this theme that we need, literally, help from above. The miracle on the drive to Phoenix from Tucson, Kathryn seemingly being forced into Scott's life, Cliff's hallucinations, the voices Norm hears, the weather, the car accidents, all are presented in such a way that they could be rationally explained, but most of the characters do not believe they are natural phenomena, and all of them, at

one time or another, have a feeling of being mere chess pieces in a larger conflict between supernatural forces. Even Scott, who believes the greater of these forces is a beneficial God, wonders regretfully if there wasn't a better way rather than killing Jerome and Cliff, but he chooses to trust God instead of bitterly questioning him. This is the tone of the epigraph at the beginning of the novel. The psalmist is acknowledging that God has certainly allowed the people of Israel to suffer grievously--has caused it, even; nevertheless, they will continue to trust him, for what other hope is there? Norm, too, is humbled, and finally descends from the lofty height upon which he had ensconced himself. Cliff resents his role as pawn of the government, society, or a brutal and unjust world. Even he believes in something, then, but it is only the despair in himself projected onto the universe.

Given these characters, themes, and plot(s), I think it is appropriate the novel be set in a desert state like Arizona. I try to give symbolic meaning to the dichotomy of the winter, mountains, and sparse settlements in the north and the summer, flat lands, and large cities in the south, as well as such topographical features as the Grand Canyon, the Black Mesa, the Superstition Mountains and such places as Phoenix, Flagstaff, and the Hoover Dam. The time--the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve 1979--is meant to juxtapose these pairs: death and rebirth, past regrets and hope in the future, conservation and liberation. In other words, this week is a kind of no-man's-land in which the future of the Nader family will be determined by the forces battling for possession of their souls.

## II

Romance: . . . In common usage, it refers to works with extravagant characters, or remote exotic places, or highly exciting and heroic events, or passionate love, or mysterious or supernatural experiences. In another and more sophisticated sense, romance refers to works which are relatively free of the more restrictive aspects of realistic verisimilitude and which are expressive of profound or transcendent or idealistic truths. (387)

Given the above definition from A Handbook to Literature by C. Hugh Holman, many of the literary works in the history of the world would have to be classified as romances (especially if we include religious writing). One only has to look at specific examples from the long tradition of romance (still employing the definition quoted above) to realize that much of the literature we call great belongs to it. From the French verse and prose stories about knights which first employed the term romance (Quest of the Holy Grail, for example) to the Middle English imitations of them (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight), from the romantic epics and tragedies in the English Renaissance (Spenser's Faerie Queene, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth) to the prose and verse works of the English Romantic Period (Scott's Ivanhoe and his other books, Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner), from the pioneers of American literature (Irving's tales, Brown's Wieland) to the American Romantic Period (Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter, Melville's Moby Dick), romance had been an important form for the great artists to express their themes.

This list alone should give romance the respect it is due, yet in our modern tradition of realism, this literary form, or at least such aspects of it as melodrama and allegory--has fallen out of favor. In his discussion of

romance in Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye says "Romance is older than the novel, a fact which has developed the historical illusion that it is something to be outgrown, a juvenile and underdeveloped form" (306). Leslie Fiedler expresses this contemporary devaluation of romance (although he calls it a different name) in Love and Death in the American Novel when he says, "Symbolic gothicism threatens always to dissolve into its components, abstract morality and shoddy theater" (xxiii). However, Richard Chase, in The American Novel and Its Tradition, correctly reminds us that "melodrama is an ancient and honorable, if easily degraded, form, and the American novel cannot be understood without some attention to it" (38). In spite of their reservations, both Fiedler and Chase agree that the great American novels are romances.

Having presented this brief defense of romance, I will depend heavily on the scholarly works already quoted from to narrow the definition or, at least, describe in greater length the qualities of works which are in this tradition.

Since I am referring to In the Place of Dragons as a novel or as a romance, I had better review first how Frye, Chase, and Fiedler distinguish between these terms. Frye says, "The prose romance, then, is an independent form of fiction to be distinguished from the novel and extracted from the miscellaneous heap of prose works now covered by that term" (305), although he admits pure examples of it or his other archetypal forms (confession, novel, anatomy) are hard to find because they are mixed "like racial strains in human beings not separable like the sexes" (305). Chase prefers to speak in terms of movements or schools of writing which have affected the development of the American novel. He says, ". . . since the earliest days the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance" (viii). He sees the American novel, then,



as an "amalgamation of realism and romance" (xii). Expressing the modern opinion of the inferiority of romance, Fiedler, again preferring to use the term "gothic," says, "Our fiction is essentially and at its best nonrealistic, even anti-realistic," and it is "not merely in flight from the physical data of the actual world . . . it is bewilderingly and embarassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (xxiv). He also calls it "a literature of horror for boys" (xxiv). (To assure the reader that these scholars are discussing the same form, I note here that all three refer to Wuthering Heights as an important example of the kinds of works we are discussing.) Thus, regardless of their different ways of classifying romances (and their opinions of its value), these scholars do agree that it is paradoxically vital to the development of the novel, which has been annexed by the "rise of realism." Although these scholars tend to use novel and romance interchangeably in their discussions (as I am) along with different terms, it is, after all, the qualities of romance, gothic, or elements of romance in the novel that are important to my discussion.

As demonstrated above, the way to describe romance is by contrasting it to the novel. Thus, Frye says, "The romance, which deals with heroes, is intermediate between the novel, which deals with men, and the myth, which deals with gods" (306). Chase states much the same when he says, "Heroes, villains, victims, legendary types, confronting mysterious or otherwise dire forces--this is what we meet in romances" (22), and later, "Being less committed to the immediate rendition of reality than the novel, the romance will more freely veer toward mythic, allegorical, and symbolistic forms" (13). The crucial difference is, for Chase then, verisimilitude, as he indicates:



The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail . . . Character is more important than action and plot. Any violent or sensational events are prepared for. By contrast, the romance, following distantly the medieval example, feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering, as it were, less resistance from reality. (12-13)

Having established a more precise definition of romance, I would like to look at characterization, plot, setting, and theme as they apply to a romance and relate them specifically to my novel. Again, with all these elements, it is how fully they are realized that distinguishes them as belonging to romance and not the novel.

Frye says, "The essential difference between the novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization. . . The romance does not attempt to create 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes" (304). Chase basically agrees with this in referring to the two greatest American romances, Moby Dick and The Scarlet Letter:

The romance can flourish without providing much intricacy of relation. The characters, probably rather two-dimensional types, will not be complexly related to each other or to society or to the past . . . They will share emotions only after these have become abstract or symbolic. To be sure, characters may become profoundly involved in some way, as in Hawthorne or Melville, but it will be a deep and narrow, an obsessive involvement. (13)

Both Frye and Chase's descriptions of character in romance fit the Nader family perfectly. One criticism I have received in workshops is that the Nader brothers

and their father are not well-rounded enough, but I have always intended them to represent different philosophical perspectives.

Jerome Nader's attitude is best expressed by the saying, "Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven." He believes his problems are all externally caused (the economy, his bosses, Iris's death). His periods of mental problems (when he becomes especially belligerent, threatens violence, drinks heavily) alternate with periods of sullen passivity.

Norm Nader is the protestant work ethic incarnate, a blue-collar existentialist who preaches self-reliance to his family and himself. Until the end of the book, he firmly believes that you make your luck, and don't give into it.

Cliff Nader, as the son most like Jerome, is the rebel against authority. His cynicism has led him to a belief that the world is so unjust that if there is a god he is the devil, not Christ. In Viet Nam, Cliff turned to drugs to cope with the all-too-real possibility of getting killed. Since then, he has continued to use drugs and becomes promiscuous because he is still afraid to die. Cliff fears death because he still has the association of death and judgment in his subconscious. The hallucinations brought on by the Indian Chief's drugs are expressions of Cliff's fear of death and judgment, although he never realizes this.

Scott is the only living Nader who believes in relying on God and helping others, although he has yet to truly live this himself. He mistakes his will for God's and believes the way to grow spiritually is through intense introspection (rather than shifting one's energy and focus away from the self to the needs of others). Armed with the justification of knowing what is right and true, Scott believes that he too can change people and circumstances. In

doing so, he hopes to prove his election, which is close to a theology of salvation by good works. What Scott learns from Kathryn Milikin is that Christians are the agents, not the administrators, of God's will on earth. As a nurse, she knows that helping people is a combination of personal effort and good fortune. She makes Scott understand the protestant concept of salvation by grace, and how God blesses people and circumstances not because of their efforts, but regardless of them. Scott and Kathryn, in a broadly allegorical sense, stand for their respective churches. In making them do so, I have tried to dramatize the union of these factions of The Church in the form of Kathryn and Scott falling in love. There is also an archetypical quality about Scott and Kathryn which may be the "good bad boy and good good girl" types Fiedler discusses in his book. In a romance, characters will have, as Chase says, "a kind of abstracted simplicity about them. . . . It is narrow and predictable" (5) and so abstract and ideal "that it seems to be merely a function of plot" (13). The Naders have their individual obsessions which are related to how each son feels about his past (Scott--nostalgic, Cliff--bitter, Norm--sad) in a simplistic way, based largely on one event (the camping trip at the Grand Canyon for Scott, Jerome leaving Cliff in jail, Brook leaving Norm and his mother giving him the responsibility of looking out for the family). I think there is a similarity in this to Moby Dick (Ahab has lost his leg in previous encounters with the whale and is obsessed with getting revenge) and The Scarlet Letter (Hester and Dimmesdale's one act of passion determines the rest of their lives, causing each to be isolated, physically or spiritually, from society). The Nader brothers' individual pasts, to a large extent, determine how they respond to the circumstances of the present. The difference in these character types make Norm, Scott, and Cliff's isolation from each other believable, which is necessary for three separate stories to occur within one.

The main plot of In the Place of Dragons was described earlier as the brothers' attempt, at least apparently, to help their father. However, since each of them at one time considers killing Jerome to purge the family of its bad blood, I think it is safe to say that the following point Frye makes is in evidence in my book: "However conservative he [the romance writer] may be, something nihilistic and untamable is likely to keep breaking out of his pages" (305). I must admit that I am somewhat uncomfortable with writing a book about the resurrection of a family (and *The Family*) by having the father and one brother killed. When I read Leslie Fiedler on this--"Through these gothic images are projected certain obsessive concerns of our national life: the ambiguity of our relationship with Indian and negro, the ambiguity of our encounter with nature, the guilt of the revolutionist who feels himself a parricide--and, not least of all, the uneasiness of the writer who cannot help believing that the very act of composing a book is satanic revolt" (xxii)--I felt, like Prufrock, fixed "in a formulated phrase . . . pinned and wriggling on the wall." What happens to Jerome and Cliff is horrible; nevertheless, it is true--even in nature--that life comes out of death.

With regard to the supernatural/mysterious events, they belong more to the three individual stories than having any direct bearing on the outcome of the major plot. (No lightning bolts strike Jerome, no earthquakes swallow up Cliff. Scott isn't enchanted by Kathryn because of a love potion so that they will renew the family). The fantastic events the Nader brothers experience are depicted as each character interprets them based on how he sees the world. Thus, I believe another point Chase makes about the romance is illustrated in my novel: "Astounding events may occur, and these are likely to have a symbolic or ideological rather than a realistic plausibility" (13).

The setting of In the Place of Dragons is also a typically romance place and time in that the details of the milieu are less important than the mood and symbolism evoked. Chase states:

Romance is, as we see, a kind of 'border' fiction, whether the field of action is in the neutral territory between civilization and the wilderness as in the adventure tales of Cooper and Simms or whether, as in Hawthorne and later romances, the field of action is concerned not so much as a place as a state of mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle. Romance does not plant itself, like the novel, solidly in the midst of the actual. (19)

I think Fiedler makes much the same point but even more appropriately to my novel's setting: "The American writer inhabits a country . . . of an endlessly retreating vision of innocence--on the 'frontier,' which is to say the margin where the theory of original goodness and the fact of original sin come face to face" (xiii). So, Scott sees the awesome majesty of the Grand Canyon as a beast about to swallow his mother, and a small peak in the Superstition Mountains as a spiritual transmitter; Cliff sees the Indian reservation as more representative of what the United States really is than the impressive facades of the government buildings in Washington, D.C.; Norm is soothed by his first look at the Pacific Ocean, but then is inspired by the Hoover Dam as a symbol of man conquering nature. The Nader brothers see the world through impressionistic lenses, but this is not a surreal work; as a romance, it cannot be. As Chase says, "The truth of the heart as pictured in the romance may be more generic or archetypal than in the novel; it may be rendered less concretely; but it still must be made to belong to a time and place" (19).

The action of my novel is given concrete settings: Phoenix, Tucson, the highways in between, the desert, the mountains. These are not exotic places, as one thinks of romances being set in, but with the symbolism of the names, they have taken on a certain enchantment for me.

When I was first working on the germinal idea of the novel, considering where to set the story of three brothers and their father, I wanted a setting that would suggest "a place of dragons." It needed to be sparsely vegetated, rocky, arid, and barren, yet have a legendary, mythical quality. Arizona seemed the perfect place. The time also needed to have some special significance, an ambivalent mood. The week before one decade ends and another begins is a liminal time where, like Janus, we review the facts of the past and hope in the possibilities of the future.

To conclude my general discussion of In the Place of Dragons as a romance, I will say a little more on its theme in relation to what the scholars I have been referring to think about the meaning of romances. Chase says that "It is not necessarily true that in so far as a novel departs from realism it is obscuranist and disqualified to make moral comments on the world . . . The very abstractness and profundity of romance allow it to formulate moral truths of universal validity . . ." (xi). Although my theme is based upon Christian sensibilities, certain aspects of it such as the condemnation of self-centered existence have been a concern for other writers who do not share my beliefs, as confirmed by Chase when he says, "Solipsism, hypnotic self-regard, imprisonment within the self--these themes have absorbed American novelists" (107). I have not mentioned heretofore the jail motif (Cliff was left in jail by Jerome, Jerome is in jail and faces life imprisonment, Norm is put in jail overnight) meant to support the self-imprisonment theme. With that, I believe my novel

fits Fiedler's discussion of the themes of the gothic American novel: "The final horrors, as modern society has come to realize, are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds" (xxxiv).

Finally, in my treatment of my novel as a romance, I would like to discuss Chapter Seven, which precedes this critical afterword, as containing concrete examples of the elements of romance. The most obvious aspect of Chapter Seven that illustrates romance is Norm's characterization. As he drives away from the city into the desert to calm down after the hearing, and then later as he takes a shortcut through the ASU campus, we see just how extensive his isolation is. Norm is alienated from his society like Ahab in Moby Dick, Hester in The Scarlet Letter, and the monster in John Gardner's Grendel, who is called "earth rim-roamer" (3). As discussed earlier, romance characters' alienation usually stem from their relationship to the past; Chapter Seven shows why Norm's heart is in conflict with himself. He feels an exaggerated obligation to provide for and protect the Nader family because of his mother's dying bequest. He resents this responsibility because his wife left him with the excuse that Norm's loyalties were misplaced in helping Jerome and Scott to the point of hurting her. Norm is bitter and sad; he has overreacted in hoarding his earnings and keeping to himself, not willing to take another chance with life. As the working class hero (abstracted characterization in romance), he deeply resents (envies, actually) the lack of responsibility and the ease with which the college students make their way in the world. He resents this so much, in fact, that he takes his frustrations over his family's problems and the memory of his wife leaving him out on one of them--the Indian football player. After the near-fight, Norm goes to jail, a dramatization of his self-imprisonment and, like driving into the desert at the beginning of the chapter, of his

wanting to escape. He himself will realize this after an initial perverse delight in being locked away from his parasitical family. Thus, in Chapter Seven, Norm is a character typical of romances as described by Fiedler: "The enemy of society on the run toward 'freedom' is also the pariah in flight from his guilt, of that very flight; and new phantoms arise to haunt him at every step" (xxi).

Norm's new phantoms are, of course, the voices he hears outside the telephone booth. These voices are the supernatural/mysterious element characteristic of romance in Norm's story. Their nature or origin are never explained in the book, but I think it is fairly clear that Norm is in some way creating them as his increasing frustration and guilt brings him closer and closer to a breakdown. Norm is so proud he will not admit he needs help, not until the very end of the novel, that is. I tried to demonstrate his aversion to going for help in the scene with Dr. Wherli. Norm is very uncomfortable in the psychologist's office because the symbolism of this environment contrasts with his pride and resentfulness of helping his father. The many plants spread around the sunny office and Dr. Wherli's visible care and concern for them demonstrate not only community, but community that exists for the sole purpose of healing and helping others to grow, which is apparent by Norm's thinking of the office as a tree nursery and a greenhouse. When Dr. Wherli suggests that Jerome's mental problems could be used as a defense to keep him out of prison, Norm wants to leave immediately. In his subconscious and later consciously, he wants Jerome, Scott, Cliff, and himself locked away in their individual cells of self-reliance. "Every man for himself" is the rule Norm wants to live by. Even when he decides to sacrifice himself, it is a morally warped martyrdom: he will kill his father for Scott and Cliff's sake.



The lesser concern with verisimilitude found in romance writing can be seen in Chapter Seven. There are a few references to palm trees and cacti, traffic lights and students throwing frisbees, but the setting is mainly painted in large strokes: the desert, the campus street. In a realistic novel, we would have Phoenix's milieu rendered in a much finer texture.

The final point I want to make about Chapter Seven as an example of romance writing is with regard to theme. This is probably the most explicit treatment of the major moral dilemma of my novel, out of which comes the tragic tone at the end of the book. The question is, where does a man's responsibility for his family end? What can be done for someone like Jerome Nader? If Norm turns his back on his father, he will be haunted by guilt the rest of his life. If he continues to try to help Jerome, Norm may be pulled down with him. Which is right, then? Self-preservation or self-sacrifice? As Norm says, there is no answer. Either way, he loses. When man is forced to choose between two goods and is destroyed as a result, according to the Hegelian theory, we have tragedy. Faced with his failure and possible destruction as he totters on the edge of despair, Norm must turn to dependency of the highest kind: forgiveness from God. In this, Norm is like Lancelot in Quest of the Holy Grail. Lancelot is no longer the best of the best (that honor belongs to his son, Galahad), but neither is he the paragon of the self-glorifying chivalric ideal (Gawain is). He strives to do what is right, and he comes close to what he is searching for (the grail, a return to his former spiritual perfection). Still, he fails and is destroyed (not shown in Quest, but even in medieval times the legend was well known enough that the author counted on his audience knowing how the story ends). Lancelot is a tragic hero because he is torn between loyalty to Arthur and Camelot and his love for Guenivere, and despite

his repentance at the end of Quest, we know he will fall again, bringing Camelot and all its noble ideals down with him. This makes him the most sympathetic of the main characters of the romance because he does recommit himself to God, although he doesn't realize until much too late that the chivalric ideal is one of self-glorification and thus in direct opposition to the Christian faith he professes. Similarly, I suspect Norm will be the most sympathetic character of my book. Like Lancelot, he indicates he will change his ways, and his sincerity is without question. But will he fall back into his self-centered ways? There is the suggestion in the last chapter of the book that he will turn himself in (i.e., confess to murdering his father and brother); the humiliation of prison would make it hard for Norm to be proud of himself anymore. I think Norm will never be a Scott, just as Lancelot could not hope equaling Galahad, but he leaves the bars that imprisoned his soul behind in the Superstition Mountains.

Although a discussion of technique is required as part of the critical afterword, I would need to deal with the narrative form of my novel regardless because it is, at least in part, related to the choice of the romance mode for telling the story of the Nader family. In the next section, I will discuss this relationship of theme and form and how the narrative structure of my novel functions by making use of works by Eugene Vinaver and Wayne Booth, and by using Chapter One of In the Place of Dragons as an illustration.

### III

The story of my novel is told by means of a multiple point of view shifting chapter by chapter in a regular cycle. That is, following Chapter One, there is a chapter with Scott as the third person limited omniscient reflecting

consciousness, followed by a chapter with Cliff as reflector, then a chapter with Norm as the central consciousness, and then the cycle begins again with Scott. This is an unusual and highly artificial narrative structure, to be sure, but I believe it is justified in that my novel is a romance.

First let me say that I did not choose this structure; it developed organically during the writing of the first draft. I started out with the basic idea of a story about three brothers and a derelict father. Making the brothers radically different was more or less a requirement to generate enough conflict between them to make their story interesting; however, the major interest for me has always been how they are still so very much alike. While writing the first few chapters, no one brother rose to the forefront as the protagonist. Scott was the one closest to my sensibilities, but the least convincing. Norm was the most convincing and most sympathetic, but least interesting in terms of what he thought about. Cliff's thoughts were the most interesting, but he had the greatest distance from my values. In a way, it was as if all three characters were competing for dominance of the book like the respective philosophic points of view they represent have vied for acceptance in western society.

Having the point of view repeat in the same order gives the impression of a "unity in disunity," which Chase says characterizes the many parts of a romance that seem to be straining to break loose from the book that contains them. Beginning about half way through my novel, the chapters become progressively shorter, creating a sense of inevitability of the cycle and--along with the voices, hallucinations, etc.--establishing an ominous mood. I want the reader to feel something terrible is going to happen, just as the beginnings of Shakespeare's tragedies promise catastrophic conclusions. I would

also like to achieve the uplifting, life-affirming effect that Shakespeare creates in spite of (because of?) the destruction of one or more characters at the ends of his plays. The rotating point of view could produce both effects by making it seem to the Nader family as if they have embarked on a chaotic journey; to the reader, it is a highly ordered--albeit a terrifying order--journey, but one that will result in a new hope, a new beginning. (Scott and Kathryn function, in this regard, in the same manner as Fortinbras in Hamlet. We knew he was coming, but he arrives only in time to pick up the pieces.) Since I have studied renaissance and medieval literature concurrently with writing the novel, and the Wheel of Fortune theme was important to both periods, it is not surprising that something similar has come up in my book. As the characters developed and I sought to discover why each one had become the way they were and how that would affect what they did to help their father, I realized there were actually three separate stories here, each with its own protagonist, plot, and resolution. Jerome's trouble seemed just an excuse to tell the three stories; he was the catalyst for the three plots to be resolved at the same time and place. (Actually, there is more to the major plot of helping Jerome; as discussed earlier, it concerns the moral dilemma of one's responsibility to his family which can lead only to a tragic conclusion.)

What finally settled me on the shifting multiple point of view was reading other works with similar narrative structures. The Field of Vision by Wright Morris also has a multiple point of view that shifts in a regular cycle, chapter by chapter. Morris's book has five reflecting consciousnesses who each have a story to tell. The present story (they're watching a bull fight in Mexico) really is just an excuse to bring together the five points of view concerning certain key events from the characters' collective past, but there also is a

resolution of sorts shared by all of them in the present (or, more like the beginning of a new story).

The next work with a similar narrative structure to mine that I read was Quest of the Holy Grail. Here, it would be more accurate to call the point of view fully omniscient, as it tells the story of the search for the grail by alternating from the distinctly different characters' episodes. So, we follow Gawain in his inglorious search for glory, then switch to Lancelot struggling as much with his shame at having lost his way spiritually as being physically lost in the forest, and, finally, we read Galahad's story of attaining perfection (and his two companions, Bors and Perceval, who come close). The shifting is not in any regular pattern, as in my book, but we are always left hanging at the end of an episode so that we know the narrator must eventually return to this character. Quest of the Holy Grail's narrative form reflects medieval interest in elaborate ornamentation in painting, architecture, poetry, and verse, repeating patterns almost infinitely and all interwoven into a larger design. The term Eugene Vinaver used for this in his book The Rise of Romance is "interlace." Although it is less specific and technical with regard to point of view, it does accurately describe the three stories as part of one in my novel. Thus, I would like to begin using this term and will quote some of Vinaver's discussion of it to justify my doing so.

The major plot of the prose Lancelot, of which Quest of the Holy Grail is one part, is the rise and fall of Camelot. The major plot of Quest is an attempt to find the grail to receive absolution for the kingdom. In the telling of these stories, as Vinaver says, "Straightforward progression is abandoned in favour of intertwined patterns" (76) and "Since it is always possible and often necessary for several themes to be pursued simultaneously, they have to

alternate like threads in a woven fabric, one theme interrupting another and again another, and yet all constantly present in the author's and reader's mind" (77).

The appropriateness of this form for a romance is evident given one effect of interlace: "Any theme can reappear after an interval so as to stretch the whole fabric still further until the reader loses every sense of limitation in time or space" (76). If the romance writer is seeking to express universal truths, then he will need to do something such as this to prevent his characters, action, and theme from becoming too cemented to the specific setting.

The structure of my novel isn't nearly as extravagant as the prose romances, but it certainly employs the same kind of narrative with Scott's story interrupted by Cliff's story which is interrupted by Norm's. Vinaver says these interlace designs are cohesive, though acentric; they are self-contained or elliptical, like a maze with no apparent way out. That is nearly the same effect I want to achieve with the ever swifter rotating point of view; once the tragic machinery is set in motion, it cannot be stopped. The characters are forced to look back at how they became entrapped in this maze or cycle of events, but the answer lies inside themselves. The self-contained aspect, then, also fits into my major theme against solipsistic living. Not every romance since Quest of the Holy Grail has employed an interlace narrative (largely because the trend in narrative was to simplify, not elaborate), although they have used freer narrative structures than the novel (for example, Ishmael's omniscience, the narrator of The Scarlet Letter's ability to enter the heads of Hester, Dimmesdale, or Chillingworth). However, there are many other works which use more than one reflecting consciousness, whether they're romances or realistic novels: two by William Faulkner, which both Chase and

Fiedler consider part of the romance tradition, are among the more noteworthy. The Sound and the Fury uses four characters as narrators to tell the story of a southern family's dissolution, but there is no repetition or cycle. As I Lay Dying uses sixteen different reflecting consciousnesses, some of which are repeated more than others in a vague pattern, to tell a kind of quest story. Thus, I think there is enough precedent for attempting such a structure in my novel--and it may even be required.

It was discussed above that one characteristic of a romance, as opposed to the novel, is lack of verisimilitude. The romance writer does not strive for the realistic presentation of people, places, or events. Chase says that "the effect of a central intelligence is to produce a sense of verisimilitude and dramatic coherence" (24), which is precisely what is not wanted in a romance because "too much depends on mystery and bewilderment to risk a generally receptive intelligence in the midst of things" (23). If my novel were narrated from just one of the Nader brothers' perspective, the supernatural events would come off as cheap plot devices, the characters themselves as shallow and stupid. One perspective would be imposed on the events and the reader would blatantly accept or reject it. With the interlace narrative, the reader is never allowed to get comfortable with one way of seeing things. Every thing he has come to trust from Scott's optimism is undermined by Cliff's cynicism. Just when the reader is ready to accept Norm's pragmatism, he sees how selfish it is in light of Scott's idealism. It is my intention that eventually the reader will see in some respects all three characters are wrong and in some they are right, and that the only real solution is to hope in something besides man's philosophies and efforts. In order to discuss how a central theme and set of values emerges from this seeming chaos of shifting points of view, I will need the help of Wayne Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction.

In the introduction to the section on point of view in The Theory of the Novel, Philip Stevick says, "Of any novel, our understanding of its point of view determines to a large extent our perception of the novel's value system and its complex of attitudes" (86). There are literally hundreds of ramifications of Stevick's statement and Wayne Booth discusses the more apparent ones in his important critical work. What I want to discuss here is, in brief, Booth's concept of the "implied author," which stands behind the three narrators (third person limited omniscient reflecting consciousnesses Norm, Cliff, and Scott) of my book, accounting for all that we mean by such terms as theme, style, tone, technique, value system, etc. In other words, it is the reader's perception of the implied author, the person who seems to be telling the story, as opposed to the flesh-and-blood author, that will determine his response to the work of fiction.

The implied author gives the reader commentary, even in novels where no commentary is apparent, by means of what and how it is shown, where and through whom. As Booth puts it, the implied author is "the sum of his own choices" (75) in telling this story. The implied author is not only distinct from the actual author, he is also not the narrator of the story, although "there will be no distinction between him and the implied, undramatized narrator" (151). In other words, with the third person limited omniscient point of view, the character himself becomes the narrator, and just as with unreliable first person narrators, the reflecting consciousness's sensibilities may be in conflict with the implied author's. If that is the case, then we have this series of frameworks through which the meaning of a novel is communicated: real author to implied author to narrator/reflector to reader. In discussing the types of distance in fiction, Booth says:



Whether or not they are involved in the action as agents or as sufferers, narrators and third-person reflectors differ markedly according to the degree and kind of distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story . . . Each of the four can range, in relation to the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. (155)

The most important distances to keep track of, for my purposes, are emotional, intellectual, and moral between the reader and the narrator/reflector.

Emotional distance is more familiarly known as empathy. One of the best ways to achieve this is with the third-person narrator/reflector. Getting the story from his point of view will tend to make the reader feel for him because it is as if he is right there experiencing the character's sorrow and joy with him. If the sensibilities of the narrator/reflector are too distant from the implied author's (Chillingsworth in The Scarlet Letter, for example), the emotional distance from the reader will be greater. In any realistic novel which has no obvious heroes and villains, this is a very important concept for the author to control the reader's response to the characters (for example, Stephen Dedalus' emotional empathy is first established early in Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man and maintained more or less at the same level while the other kinds of distance take wide swings as we see him go from boy to college student, from candidate for the priesthood to agnostic intellectual; this technique of Joyce's will be discussed at greater length in section IV with regard to Scott's character).

Intellectual distance has to do with the quality and subject of the narrator/reflector's thoughts. Since he gives us the story from the inside out, we

observe him thinking about what he experiences. If he is a simple, uneducated person, we may have a large intellectual distance from him. In other words, we feel smarter, more perceptive of the meaning of the action (for example, Will Brady in Wright Morris' The Works of Love does not even realize he is blinding himself with a high-intensity sun lamp). Conversely, if the narrator/reflector is much smarter than us (the protagonist of Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet had numerous degrees and an incredible store of knowledge which he is most willing to display to other characters or himself, which means the reader too). In either case, this can be manipulated according to the author's overall purpose in relation with other kinds of distances (for example, in The Sound and Fury, we have a huge intellectual distance from Benjy, but we are close to him emotionally).

The final kind of distance I want to discuss is moral. It is possible to feel close to a narrator/reflector emotionally and intellectually, but still be in disagreement with the ethics of his actions and thoughts (for example, Grendel in John Gardner's version of the Beowulf story is lonely--thus sympathetic, a fairly lucid thinker with a touch of abstract philosophy--thus on the same intellectual level, more or less, with the average reader of literature, but he kills Hrothgar's men, as he himself admits, for no good reason. Therefore, we will always be kept at a large moral distance from him. The effect achieved in this case is a sense of justice in Beowulf killing him, though we still feel sorry that Grendel has gone astray, as any one of us might do under similar circumstances). It is a trick of the writer's craft to be aware of and maintain these distances, and when there are three narrator/reflectors interlaced into one work, the complications abound.

In discussing As I Lay Dying, Booth says:

Our roving visitation into the minds of sixteen characters, seeing nothing but what those minds contain, may seem in one sense not to depend on an omniscient author. But this method is omniscience with teeth in it: the implied author demands our absolute faith in his powers of divination. We must never for a moment doubt that he knows everything about each of those sixteen minds or that he has chosen correctly how much to show of each. In short, impersonal narration is really no escape from omniscience. (161)

Chase agrees with Booth about this Faulkner novel when he says, "But a multiple point of view, if it is multiple enough, of necessity simply becomes the point of view of the omniscient author" (207), and also on The Sound and Fury where he comes close to describing Booth's implied author:

And we see that Faulkner has done in the Benjy section what every accomplished novelist has to be able to do. He eats his cake and has it too. That is, he establishes a character; he uses this character as his point of view, but Benjy as point of view is merely the dramatic convention of the piece. The actual point of view is still the author's, and his mind envelops the whole. (226)

What all of this means in relation to In the Place of Dragons is, as with the medieval interlace design, that there is a cohesion to the story and its meaning, although it is, seemingly, acentric. As with As I Lay Dying, the reader must trust in the implied author of my novel and in the interlace narrative itself. The reader must believe that the continual shifting from Scott to Cliff to Norm will, by the specific effects of that shifting, bring him to an understanding and appreciation of the work that is more or less what the implied author intended. The reader will know that as he sympathizes closely with Norm

in his point of view chapter, he will then pull back from Norm in the next chapter from Cliff's point of view--and then some sort of compromise will be achieved in Scott's chapter's presentation of Norm's actions and Scott's opinions about them. The same thing should be happening for Scott and Cliff too. Chapter One provides an illustration of this effect.

In Cliff's section of Chapter One, which begins the novel, we are shown that Cliff is a cynical, bitter drug addict and then given some explanation of why (his Viet Nam experiences). We are also shown his fear of the hallucinations, the boredom that has crept into his bones from being so long on the reservation in the desert, and the genuine feeling he has for Scotty. All this is intended to make the reader have sympathy for Cliff, to feel that, to some extent, his bitterness is justified and underneath there is still a decent human being (although it may be far underneath). However, in Norm's section, which is told through a straightforward, uncomplicated narrator/reflector, the reader's view of Cliff takes a turn for the worse. According to Norm, a hard-working responsible man who has sacrificed much for his family, Cliff is burned-out at twenty eight, a reject from the military, and a troublemaker who is best left out there in the desert. My suspicion is that the reader will accept this assessment because as a narrator/reflector Norm has always been the most reliable, although next-to-the-most distant from the implied author morally. Finally, in Scott's section, Cliff is judged negatively (but through a narrator/reflector's sensibilities which will be a question mark for most readers early on, even though Scott is finally the closest to the implied author morally, emotionally, and intellectually) when Scott protests to himself in the Chrome Club's restroom that he is nothing like Cliff (or Norm or Jerome), but then Cliff's worth is dramatized in Scott's reaction to seeing

his brother's effect on the people in the bar. Scott's smile and softly spoken "Cliff" is not only a release of tension (help has arrived), but also a genuinely affectionate expression at seeing his brother.

If space permitted, I could go through this analysis of each brother (and Jerome) in the other two brothers' eyes to show that by the end of Chapter One the reader cannot have adopted any one of the three points of view as the right one, or most truthful one. Morally, they may be closest to Scott, who believes he must help his father; intellectually, they will probably be closest to Cliff; and emotionally, the reader will more than likely be closest to Norm. It will require patience from the reader to begin to recognize the intersection of these three sensibilities to discover those of the implied author's--maybe even until the end of the book where the reader might make his final decision based on the outcome of the plot. If the sense of the tragic inevitability from the interlace narrative and the supernatural events is working, then perhaps that is all that is necessary for the reader to have a relatively accurate understanding and appreciation of my book. Some readers will undoubtedly feel that my novel is tragic with a Christian epilogue stuck on the end, but Christianity is a belief system that incorporates the tragic perspective. It states that in the face of our failure to make the universe what we want it to be, we must trust in the mystery of what it is.

Before I conclude my treatment of the narrative form of my novel, I want to give reference to some of the other effects that are present in varying degrees in all forms of telling a story, but work especially well with the interlace structure.

Obviously, with three narrator/reflectors who share common experiences in the past and present, there will be much opportunity for dramatic irony. I

have not made as much use of this in my first draft as I hope to in the second. In Chapter One, I try to use dramatic irony to gain sympathy for Scott in that the reader knows before he does that Cliff and Norm are going to provide little actual help with Jerome. One ill-effect of this kind of dramatic irony is that it may make Scott seem too naive. To counter that, I tried to show that he was aware of the difficulty he would have in getting Cliff and Norm to agree to meet about the crisis, but that his faith in the rightness of what he was doing overcame his doubts in the feasibility of trying to get the family back together. I hope to use dramatic irony more effectively later in the novel when, for example, Norm is returning from Los Angeles with the idea of telling Scott and Cliff to leave. The reader knows that it won't be that simple now that Jerome is out of jail, Cliff has held a gun to Judge Granson's head, and Scott is becoming frantic after his behavior with Kathryn and his discovery about Jerome's past mental problems.

Another obvious effect of interlace is heightening suspense. Chapter Seven ends with Norm being arrested; Chapter Eight shows Scott and Kathryn in Tucson; Chapter Nine is about Cliff working on Judge Granson. Thus, the reader has to read two more chapters before he finds out what happens to Norm. Ideally, he will not only be anxious to find out what happens, but he will also long for a return to Norm's sensibilities in order to help him digest new information he has about the story. "What will Norm think of that?" (or Scott, or Cliff?) should be running through the reader's mind, even if he suspects Norm may not find out about the event until later. The effect is a constant reminder of Norm, who was in big trouble, the last the reader knew. This is, of course, related to (interlaced with?) the other aspect of this form already discussed earlier: the potential for multiple interpretations of important events. If

I have done my job well, by the middle of the book or so the reader should be able to fairly accurately predict how Norm, Cliff, and Scott will respond to things, and then realize, when any of them act differently, that they are changing in the face of their crises--or not changing in spite of their crises.

That effect is the whole purpose of Wright Morris's The Field of Vision; he is trying to create the entire "field of vision" with his five reflecting consciousnesses. We are given the sensibilities of a fallen hero and intellectual (Boyd), a down-to-earth, common-sensical working man (McKee), a disappointed hero-worshipper (Mrs. McKee), a curious, analytical psychiatrist (Lehmann), and a sour, impish old man (Scanlon) who view from their individual perspectives such events as a boy trying to walk across water, a first kiss, tearing the rear pocket off Ty Cobb's pants in a baseball game, and the bullfight.

Which of these is closest to the book's implied author? Since Morris quotes Milton's famous line from Paradise Lost ("The mind is its own place, and in itself/can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n") at the beginning of The Field of Vision, I think the implied author there is an amalgamation of all the perspectives, honoring all perspectives, and judging no one. He certainly has, at times, a fine absurd sense of the world; yet, at others, he seems to admire, along with Mrs. McKee, the heroism of Boyd. In my book, as I have spent much of this critical afterword explaining, all perspectives are not honored because some lead to self-destruction.

In the final section of my critical afterword I will briefly discuss the works which have influenced me as a writer and those to which I turned for models of particular solutions to problems I encountered in writing my book.

## IV

One of the most surprising things I have learned in writing this critical afterword is that those authors and works I have always referred to as influencing me as a writer turn out to belong to the romance tradition. By the time I took college preparatory English in high school, I was already an avid reader, starting with comic books, then science fiction, and finally graduating to novelizations of movies. When I read Grendel by John Gardner, I was hooked on literature. Grendel is the Beowulf story told from the monster's point of view. This short novel has most of the characteristic elements of a romance. Grendel is so alienated from his medieval society that he makes Norm look like a social butterfly. Grendel longs to become part of Hrothgar's mead hall festivities, but because he is a monster the only interaction possible for him is to eat Hrothgar's men. As in my novel, Gardner's book has a dragon, but this is a real one that appears on stage as the oldest, wisest creature on earth. "Seek out gold and sit on it" is the advice he gives to Grendel (the same advice Norm will remember receiving from Jerome and curse his father for not following it himself), even though as he sits on his heap of gold, jewels, etc. he knows Beowulf is coming to kill him and Grendel too. Beowulf is a Christ figure (the victorious Christ of the second coming, not the sacrificial lamb Christ) in the book. The effect at the end of Grendel where the monster, in great pain as his arm is torn off, perceives Beowulf as having white wings and words that leap out of his mouth as fire, is similar to what I attempt with the climax of my novel. Shaken by the fight with Cliff, Norm sees Jerome as having bat-like wings, his breath visible in the cool air seems like smoke, and the hiss of voices which now seem to be coming from Jerome make Norm see his father as a dragon, as Cliff and Scott have (though Norm never thinks the word "dragon").



The setting of Grendel, some place where the mists of medieval society and medieval art mix, enabled Gardner to maintain a mood of mystery and myth, while the modern reader's knowledge of the story gives it the same tragic inevitability that I am striving for. After I read Grendel, I knew I wanted to write.

The next major influence was Shakespeare, and his works continue to be, for me, the greatest literature in the English language. Shakespeare wrote what were actually called romances, such as The Tempest and Cymbeline in which banished characters possess magic or are aided by gods literally descending from heaven. In other words, those plays are clearly romances as I have been discussing romance, but so are some of Shakespeare's great comedies and tragedies. In Midsummer Night's Dream, the lovers are, temporarily, alienated from their society in defiance of parental desires and civic laws concerning their marriages. The supernatural makes its appearance in the form of Puck and the other fairies. In drama, it is more the norm to have interlacing of separate plot lines than it is in novels. We alternate between scenes with the lovers, then the rustics, next the fairies, and then repeat the process until all plot lines come together in Act Five with the wedding celebration. The tragedies are even better examples of romance, as I have defined it here. The ghost in Hamlet, the witches in Macbeth, the storm in Lear are supernatural forces which contribute to the alienation of the tragic heroes. Although characters besides Hamlet, Lear, and Macbeth die (some innocently), we understand that it is only because they are too near the objects of the destructive machinery and get caught up in the works. (To assure the reader I am discriminating in my labeling works romances, I will say that I do not consider Othello nor Coriolanus romances, although they do share some qualities of romance: alienation, melodrama.) Shakespeare doesn't use a Christian context for

his plots, but the lines between good and evil are clearly drawn. What could be more melodramatic than Macbeth and Macduff squaring off at the end of that play? I am sure the conception of In the Place of Dragons's climactic battle between Norm and Cliff (and Jerome) as well as the tragic tone, comes from, at least in part, my admiration of Shakespeare's art.

The final influence which I will discuss is that of Melville and Hawthorne. To me, Moby Dick is the ultimate quest story because it is about the search for absolute truth, or God, or the embodiment of a malevolent universe (or a whale, anyway). Like Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, Ahab is the great over-reacher; he attempts to go beyond the boundaries set for man and is destroyed as a result. In that destruction, there is some light shed on the universal truths, but the cloud of mystery immediately douses it. The answer man is given when he dares to ask "Why?", as in the book of Job in the Bible, is that we are not meant to know and who are we to interrogate God? In a way, all three brothers attempt to find the solution to their moral dilemma--which is close to being the same as asking why God permits evil to exist in the world--take the burden on their shoulders, and try to overstep the laws of the universe that prevent a solution.

Ahab seems to get his just desserts for his megalomanism, but Dimmesdale is truly sympathetic in The Scarlet Letter. I focus on him rather than Hester because I think he has been somewhat of an influence on me for Scott's character. Scott professes what the book tries to show: those who trust in themselves will fail and fall into despair; those who trust in God will fail, but still have hope based on grace. He has not reached the point, though, where he actually lives this belief. If he had, he would not see the failure to reunite the family and save Jerome as evidence of his lack of faith. He would not, even in his feverish state at the end of the novel, rush off to cast the demons out

or, failing that, to destroy his father.' And, he would not run off to the Superstition Mountains to ask God to put him out of his misery with a lightning bolt. Similarly, Dimmesdale attempts to bear his sin without confession, all the while (we must presume) preaching confession. Had he confessed his adultery with Hester, he would have received the absolution he so desperately needed. Instead, he is tortured spiritually and physically until, as he dies, he is finally able to bear his scarlet letter openly. The letter stands as much for sin in general as it does for adultery, and that is the "family quality" of the Naders that I have tried to show. Ironically, Dimmesdale is perhaps even more alienated than Hester. Hawthorne tries to show that the Christian thing to do is confess and forgive, rather than isolating oneself in penitential suffering. This is what Scott must and does finally learn.

While writing In the Place of Dragons, I have turned to other literary works with similar characters, plots, or narrative forms to use as models. I have already discussed how The Field of Vision and As I Lay Dying have helped me to understand how a narrative form such as the one I am attempting works. A greater problem, though, has been with the character of Scott. In workshop, the problem at first was that he seemed too good, like a model being held up for the reader to follow. My intention has always been that Scott is every inch a Nader and he too is guilty of the self-centered life, although he is the closest of the three to breaking out of his shell. In responding to the workshop criticism, I went too far in the other direction by making Scott too obviously distant from his own beliefs. Therefore, I have decided to stick more with my original concept of Scott. As a Christian, he will pray, read the Bible, discuss his beliefs with others, and so forth. Because the novel is not the story of Scott abandoning his faith, I will not undercut his beliefs,

but try to show that in his sincere desire to grow closer to God, he too has isolated himself from others. Undoubtedly, Scott's Christianity will put off many readers, but I must, like any other writer of literature, be true to my vision of the universe. Flannery O'Connor has much to say about the dilemma of a Christian who wants to write fiction in her book Mystery and Manners; here she sums up the situation as she sees it:

. . . I don't believe that we shall have great religious fiction until we have again that happy combination of believing artist and believing society. Until that time, the novelist will have to do the best he can in travail with the world he has. He may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. This is a modest achievement, but perhaps a necessary one. (168)

I think O'Connor is largely correct in her statement, but the problem with showing only the devil is that the act of representation itself lends some respect to what is represented. For example, Francois Truffaut said that it is impossible to make an anti-war film that dramatizes war because the big screen glorifies battles, combat, etc. Not only that, when a Christian writer dramatizes evil as he understands it, too often a non-Christian reader won't see it as evil at all, but just the opposite. Therefore, in my novel I have tried to show both sides--characters possessed by the devil (not in the sense popularized by movies about the occult) and characters filled with the spirit of God, but temporarily misled by the same devil.

One technique I have adopted to try to avoid non-Christian readers from putting down my book immediately I learned from reading Portrait of the Artist

as a Young Man by James Joyce. That book contains a lengthy section in the middle when the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, is zealous in his faith. Since the entire narrative is presented through his consciousness in the extremely interior mode we call stream of conscious writing, we receive such a detailed and sincere representation of a Catholic's sensibilities that, in spite of the fact that Stephen rejects his faith at the end, many Catholics have read the book with enjoyment and appreciation for that section alone. But how is Joyce able to earn the respect of non-Catholic readers so that they will read through the religious section? He accomplishes this by showing Stephen as a young boy who is more frail than his classmates and who is a victim of the unjust and harsh discipline of a parochial school. In other words, Joyce makes his protagonist sympathetic because of his intense suffering in the book's first section. Having earned that sympathy, then he depicts Stephen as a Catholic so devout he is asked to consider becoming a priest. The technique then is almost a deception of the reader, holding back what will make the character most unlikeable until the reader is hooked by the story or is sympathetic enough toward the character that he will stick with the book to see how it turns out, if for no other reason.

Similarly, I have decided to hold back the more explicitly Christian parts of my book until later. In Chapter Eight, Scott and Kathryn attend two church services and discuss the respective sermons. Scott will think more about his beliefs as his efforts to help his father and brothers become more futile. Near the conclusion of the novel, when Scott is near despair in the Superstition Mountains, Kathryn comforts and encourages him with some Christian beliefs that he has taken for granted. I don't think any non-Christian reader would stand for these sections if they were at the beginning of the book. My intention

is to first earn the reader's respect and sympathy for Scott because of his commitment to helping his father and how much he will suffer in the attempt. Accomplishing that, the reader can make his judgment about Scott and his beliefs later.

The last point I must discuss in this critical afterword is the similarity of my book to The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky. I read this Russian novel for the first time when I was about halfway through my first draft and was shocked at just how much my story and characters resembled his. Dostoevsky also tells the story of three sons who come together for the first time in years to help their derelict father. Like Scott, Alyosha is the youngest brother, a Christian, and the only one who truly wants to help his father. Ivan is a highly educated intellectual; he is like Cliff in his inability to believe in a God because of the injustice of the suffering of innocent people. Dimitri is like Cliff in his debauchery, but like Norm in his exaggerated sense of personal honor, and he also suffers a breakdown. The plots are similar, except that mine ends with the murder of the father, while Dostoevsky's becomes a murder mystery at that point. The only explanation I have for these and other similarities between the two books is that they both come out of the romance tradition (romance is a way of looking at the world, so that it is not confined merely to English language literature). Earlier I discussed how Leslie Fiedler treats romance but prefers to call it gothicism. In listing notable gothic writers by nation, he says, "Among the Russians, Dostoevsky alone" (125). To offer some brief evidence that Brothers Karamazov should be classified as a romance, I point to its elements of the supernatural, such as Ivan literally speaking with the devil, and the stinking of the corpse of the holy man who was Alyosha's mentor being interpreted as a sign from heaven. We see characters

who are alienated and obsessed: Dimitri with Grushenka and his honor, Ivan with trying to rationalize against his feelings of guilt over being at least unconsciously in collusion with Smerdyakov in Karamazov senior's murder, and Alyosha with helping virtually everyone, but especially his family and the group of boys for whom he becomes a mentor. The narrative form is loose, using an undramatized first person narrator who dissolves into a third person reflector in sections devoted to each brother. Verisimilitude is not one of Dostoevsky's concerns as he gives only enough details to suggest the outline of the milieu of a provincial small town. The universal truths the book deals with are given concrete form in Ivan's dream of the Grand Inquisitor. Although the good and evil never come face to face in combat, the lines are drawn with a kind of tragic stand-off, but as in my novel, there is the suggestion of re-birth. Like Norm, Dimitri finds at least a partial redemption, although he too will more than likely spend the rest of his life in prison. Ivan is reduced to a babbling idiot, is feverish, and will most likely die, as does Cliff. Hope is embodied in Alyosha, who realizes, like Scott, that he cannot hide from the world but must go "naked" into it. Finally, there is also a vague allegory intended by Dostoevsky, although I know too little of Russian history to follow it. There is a great deal of talk about Russia, its past, present, and potential, its strengths and weaknesses, and one can see the coming revolution in the frequent discussion of socialism by the more politically knowledgeable characters. The two books are so much alike, then, because they belong to the same large tradition of literature, they were intended to have universal and national themes, and because both authors are writing from Christian sensibilities. If I am ever fortunate enough to have my book published, there will probably be some comparisons to The Brothers Karamazov; my only hope is that they are favorable.

In writing this critical afterword I have learned a great deal about literature, about narrative technique, and about how I came to write this particular novel. The most amazing thing I have discovered is that even a young man who has only written a few short stories, none of them particularly good, and who has read a small portion of the world's great literature, can set out to write a book not knowing much about the direction it will go, and find later that the result has an organic unity based on the major theme the would-be author wanted to express, and that theme can be seen pervading nearly every aspect of the work, as if there really were a truly omniscient consciousness in control all the while. The process of writing certainly is one of discovery and contains a worth in and of itself. Even if I never publish In the Place of Dragons or anything else, I will have no regrets about the time and energy spent on it. Although some of the mystery of writing a novel was lost for me, I have gained back even more because in keeping with my belief on how the universe operates, writing a novel seems to require something other than just the careful control of the author--something invisible, spiritual, and mysterious.



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IN THE PLACE OF DRAGONS :  
TWO CHAPTERS OF A NOVEL ALONG WITH A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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B. S., Indiana University, 1981

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Abstract. Chapter One, the synopsis of Chapters Two through Six, and Chapter Seven of In the Place of Dragons show the major plot—three brothers trying, at least apparently, to help their father salvage the remainder of his life--begin to break up into its constituent parts—three separate stories of personal discovery of sin and subsequent repentance or destruction. The father, Jerome Nader, is an alcoholic; he is in jail for causing an automobile accident while driving under the influence, as a result of which a man may die. Scott Nader, Jerome's youngest son, summons his two brothers, Cliff and Norm, to Phoenix to help their father, and he prays this crisis will bring the Nader family back together after each member had gone his own way following the death of Iris Nader, Jerome's wife and the boys' mother. While Scott tries to find enough time and energy to attempt to get Jerome out of jail, keep Cliff and Norm from killing each other, work at the bookstore, keep an eye on his eccentric aunt, and finish a research paper for an incomplete from the fall semester, he keeps running into Kathryn Milikin, a nurse on his father's ward in the jail infirmary, and--against his wishes--becomes enchanted with her. Cliff Nader resembles Jerome in his abuse of alcohol and drugs. He came to Phoenix mainly as an excuse to get away from his troubles on the Indian reservation where he works, but after the reunion with his brothers and father he decides he wants to take revenge on Jerome for hurting him so deeply years ago. Norm Nader has carried the family's financial burdens for ten years. With the latest crisis, Norm wants to turn his back on all of them now more than ever, but his sense of duty and guilt won't allow him to do it. He is so torn between his responsibility to the family and his instinct of self-preservation that he nearly has an emotional breakdown. He begins to hear mysterious voices which seem to come from nowhere. The bitter

memory of losing his wife as a result of helping Jerome years ago resurfaces; Norm tries to take his frustration over the suffering his family has caused him in the past and present out on a college student, and he is arrested. By this point in the novel, each brother's attention has shifted back to himself and his own personal crisis, rather than the mission to rescue Jerome.

My critical afterword begins with a general summary and analysis of the rest of my novel. Next, I discuss romance, relying on Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism, Richard Chase's The American Novel And Its Tradition, and Leslie Fiedler's Love And Death In The American Novel to synthesize a comprehensive definition of it, and then attempt to support my claim that In the Place of Dragons is written in the romance tradition by examining the novel as a whole and Chapter Seven in particular for the qualities that characterize romance writing. I follow the discussion of my novel as romance with an analysis of the way its narrative form functions to tell three stories that are one, making use of these critical works: The Rhetoric of Fiction by Wayne Booth and The Rise of Romance by Eugene Vinaver, and these fictional works: The Field of Vision by Wright Morris and Quest of the Holy Grail. Finally, I discuss how John Gardner's Grendel, Shakespeare's great tragedies, Herman Melville's Moby-Dick, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter have influenced me to write a book such as In the Place of Dragons, and how I turned to such works as The Field of Vision and James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man to serve as models for solutions to problems in the writing of my novel.