

WOW!

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Letter from Space

You have entered Zolar's world. Please hear what Zolar has to say. Some things may not seem believable, but they are already happening. And they are happening to *you*, right now.

The person I believe Zolar first communicated with is having occasional doubts. I'm writing this book for him. He needs to remember all the way back to the beginning. All the way back to the hillside when he whispered in my ear.

To begin the book, here is the letter Zolar originally wrote to all of us; the words of which, once decoded, were shared with the world:

People of Earth:

I am of The Continuum. We are here to help you, as long as you cooperate. I will communicate with you through someone I have chosen as one of your own. We do not want to harm you, although if you do not heed us, the earth as you know it will become a place without light.

This means you must become very smart. Far smarter than you are now. It means you must become aware of what is truly valuable, and reach for it. The one I have chosen from your human race will try to help you make this necessary evolutionary leap.

If you do not succeed you will be erased. You will no longer exist. Not only will your body die, but your soul will be killed. This is very dangerous since it means your soul can never exist again in any form. So please follow instructions carefully.

The one who I have chosen to help is among you now. She will soon reveal herself to you.

Meek as she may seem, she has powers untold: Power to reverse the course of most of the life on your planet, which is now moving itself into a harmful place; power to stop bullets aimed in her direction; power to change the very core of who you are.

Please follow anything she chooses to say if you quickly know to be true. It will change more than your life. It will change the time far beyond that.

If you do not listen, if you fail to decode her words into your consciousness, we will not have to punish you directly. Because you will be committing suicide of the lowest form.

- ZOLAR

Part I

James Patrick Cowell XXXII

We begin with the father. Because the father was the man who first found, and later decoded, Zolar's letter. His name was James Patrick Cowell XXXII.

The day he was born his mother thought to herself, how many sons are born as the thirty-second descendent of *anyone*? Not Louis the XIV. Not Henry the VIII. So she made up a little white lie that James was the thirty-second in a long line of Jameses. Perhaps it would come in useful someday. (It did not.)

As a child he was impressed enough with his generational status to begin researching his ancestors. His mother refused to help him. But he was a clever boy and resourceful. Although there was no Internet in those days, at ten-years-old he eventually uncovered the truth: He was born a lie.

Instead of feeling depressed or deceived, he felt proud and excited. Because after hours at the library he realized he had deconstructed himself, by himself, into the truth. He decided right then and there, when he grew up he wanted to become a detective.

Indeed he did. James opened his first office downtown at the age of twenty-five. He began solving little mysteries at first, like finding lost cats or stolen cars. Later in his career, however, he began to discover odder things, bigger things. For instance, he came to the conclusion that the earth in its

present form, and the humans on it, might not survive much longer.

He also came to believe that his own wife might possess super powers, given to her by an alien being.

It was also possible he was being scammed.

A detective being scammed -- nothing could be more ignominious. If anyone found out, it would be a nightmarish ending to an admittedly unremarkable career.

But what if the letter *wasn't* a scam? What if he owed it to everyone on earth to reveal the letter before it was too late?

Gwyneth

James Cowell XXXII certainly did not underestimate his wife, Gwyneth. She was smarter than she led on. And she was also a pretty fast runner for a plump middle-aged lady, even with heels on. Not faster than a bullet by any means, but then again, she might not have to worry about bullets, according to the data James had recently uncovered.

According to *the letter*, at least the way he translated it, bullets aimed at her had a way of ricocheting back into the one who pulled the trigger, or would not fire from the gun at all.

Why did he spend so much time decoding that letter? Why did he have to shoulder these kinds of responsibilities?

“I need a vacation,” he muttered.

Gwen got up from her soft green TV chair and tried to open a stuck window. This was the same stuck window she had tried to open so many times before on hot summer nights. She was a creature of habit.

“Did you say something?” She also habitually ignored his babble.

“I need a *vacation!* I need to get away and clear my head.”

“A vacation?” she laughed. “Where would you go? And *with who?* Not with me, I have to work!”

“Whom,” he replied smugly.

“*What?*”

“With ‘*whom,*’ not with ‘*who.*’”

“What are you, an English professor now?”

"I'm just saying we should try to speak with good grammar." He loved feeling superior to Gwen, because he knew in so many ways he wasn't.

"And if we don't use good grammar, then what? You think the grammar police is outside ready to bust our door down and arrest us for illiteracy?"

"Are. . . ."

"What. . . ?"

"'Are' gonna bust our door down. . . ."

"In my world, the grammar police is a single person -- whom by the way I'd rather be married to than you."

"It's 'who.'"

On and on this kind of dialogue would flow, like ripples in a river with no hope of making it to the distant shore. These meaningless conversations, like their lives, seemed to be comprised of random phrases constantly ending in ellipses. . . .

Young James Cowell XXXIII

Young James Cowell XXXIII was the firstborn son and only child of James Cowell XXXII. Yes, the father had decided to continue his mother's lie.

Unlike his unremarkable-looking, short balding father, young James grew up to be a strapping boy. He was tall and slender, but muscular, with straight brown hair worn a little too long for a business suit, which is one of the many reasons he was working at the age of nineteen in a frozen yogurt shop during summer break.

He wore nerdy wire-rimmed glasses to compensate for his nearsightedness.

Behind his thick lenses he had striking blue eyes, like so many book characters do. But he had ears that were a little too small, if measured against the median ear size, and a Roman nose of a healthy length – let's call it robust but without it being so big as to be the butt of someone's joke. His neck possessed a slightly overlarge Adam's apple. Hidden underneath his frozen yogurt-stained blue T-shirt was a hairy but by no means apelike chest. His arms were gangly but very coordinated when it came to sports. In fact, he had rather inhuman strength as a batter due to his ridiculous wrist speed. He always pulled the ball. His legs were thin, no thick calves for this boy, James, yet he could run a marathon without losing the timing of his breath.

Young James XXXIII was always in control, it seemed, not in an arrogant way, or a needy way. The control just seemed to happen naturally, maybe because on a deep soul level he wasn't trying to control anything. Me included.

Below his thin calves were the sock-bare red sneakers he wore all the time, even to the funeral of his grandmother. Because he rarely wore socks his left big toe had a white cloud at the top of the nail that would come and go with medication. It was odd, indeed, that over-the-counter fungal cream would work effectively on James XXXIII's nail for periods of time, yet remained totally ineffective at *all* times for ninety-nine percent of the world's population. Was this a coincidence, a genetic anomaly, or was he blessed in some way? Looked after?

This, and many other things about the boy couldn't quite be explained.

For instance, how could he be so sure of himself, so strong in mind, body, and spirit, growing up with a lie for a name, in a house with parents addicted to TV, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, iPhone apps, new age music from the '90s, newly minted antique furniture from Ikea, Oreos, white bread, religion (Gwen), mangy dogs, stray cats, a sarcastic parakeet. There were also hideous paintings created by a psychopathic artist named Angela Grimm, whose prints made the walls look smaller and darker than they really were; a garden with only dead brown things in it, but steadfastly defined by his parents as a garden instead of an abandoned yard; three cars, two of which had been up on wooden slats for years waiting for a real mechanic; daily doses of Prozac, Xanax, Zoloft (for the naively unmedicated these are not the names of Nobel prize winning Russian novelists); and not least of all, neatly arranged white plastic one-gallon tubs of frozen yogurt lined up in on the back porch like sugar-colored bowling pins. (Young James would always bring home a gallon of leftovers at the end of his shift

and watch his parents get even rounder by inhaling all of it before, God forbid, it melted.)

On this very typical summer night, after James Sr. and Gwen were done scraping the bottom of a canister of Caramel Marshmallow Twist, James Sr. and Gwen decided to tell their son the news. They laid down their two white plastic spoons, which their son proudly noted were made from petrified sugar cane. "Son," his father cleared his throat, "we have something serious to tell you."

"Does it have anything to do with adult onset diabetes?" the son asked.

"Ha ha screw you *no!*" his father yelled. Not that he was angry; yelling without commas was his conversational tone.

His mother giggled. She thought her son should be a stand-up comedian, but her husband disagreed. Lately, he just seemed annoyed at everyone. Detective work was very stressful. And having no work was stressful. Therefore, because for some reason these two stresses did not cancel each other out, stress became his constant companion.

"Okay, can I take one more guess?" smiled the son.

"You know what, smart Alec? Forget it!" his father belted out, grabbing his iBook. "I'll go back to my. . ."

"Mystery novel?" His son was making what they called a repair attempt - an "I'm sorry," without actually having to admit to anything. He knew what was coming, but he wanted to give his father his moment in the sun.

"There are no 'mystery' novels to me, son, I'm a detective. I figure things out by the end of the first chapter."

"You have a gift," young James offered.

"He looks like he swallowed a whole bunch of gifts," Gwen teased.

"Sorry, Dad, what's the news you were going to surprise and shock me with? I'm not a detective, and I have a date in twenty minutes, so lay it on me in Cliff's notes. Speaking of which, can I borrow. . ."

"Let me guess, the car! The *car*, right? I told you I'm a detective, and *no*."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because you're a terrible kid. Unless you bring home a gallon of that Strawberry Toffee Swirl tomorrow."

"Anything to cause his untimely demise," Gwen interrupted.

Young James pulled his T-shirt over his head, ready to jump into the shower.

"Forget it," the father said, "there's no hot water left after your mother's marathon evening bath."

"I finally guessed what you wanted to tell me, Dad. It's an inheritance of some kind, hidden somewhere, right? I mean, you can't be living like this night after night with no work, nothing stashed away. . . Or maybe it's from your penny stock investing? What was that company you bought that was trying to re-name the Internet?"

"You sure know how to talk trash to your old man, don't you? Gwen, where the hell did you get this kid from, the city dump? He can't be a son of mine." He reached into his pocket and threw the car keys into his son's outstretched hands. James XXXIII began to make his way towards the shower.

"We're getting a divorce, James," his mother said quietly.

It was as if the word "divorce" was sacred, spoken in hushed tones, like the word "angel" – a word that led to something life altering.

"You're getting a divorce *again*?" James said. "That's the big news? I bet there's also going to be an LA Times headline tomorrow that says -- The sun is *yellow*, again."

"I hope this isn't going to segue into another one of your urinating jokes, James," his mom scolded. "You know, they're not funny."

"We mean it this time," said James XXXII.

"Got it, Dad." James Jr. put his T-shirt back on and grabbed his summer jacket off of the coat rack. The shower had lost its appeal. "Let me get this straight – you're going to divorce mom, and then you'll survive for how many days before we find you walking around shoeless, starving, and holding a gun to your head? You can't live without her. Don't lie to yourself."

"You're too young to understand," his father responded in an uncharacteristically soft voice. "It's complicated. You're only nineteen, you know nothing about these things."

"Well, you may be right about that, but now that I have the keys to the car I intend to learn as much as I can about 'these things.' Wish me luck. And if I don't come home tonight, you'll know my prayers have been answered."

Sunny

Sunny jumped into the car and kissed young James before they sped off.

“What did you tell them this time? You have a secret girlfriend waiting for you down the road?”

“I would never tell my father there’s a secret anything. He’s a detective. Saying the word 'secret' piques his otherwise non-existent curiosity. Professional pride, I guess. You have to just make everything seem normal and uninteresting. Then he goes back to reading his iBook and plotting ways of escaping my mom.”

Sunny had been James’ girlfriend for two years. She was going to UCLA majoring in film, while also studying acting and media relations, while James was at UCSD on a full scholarship, studying a variety of subjects that included marketing and religious studies. Somehow he dreamed of combining the two into a career. Marketing a newfound religion in need of advertising, perhaps?

There was no questioning James and Sunny’s loyalty and dedication to each other, even though they were attending different schools 129.71 miles away from each other. They had a pact. They had plans that superseded all doubts and distance.

The night sky was dusted in a pleasant, by now familiar mustard-colored haze. Although in the last few years a bit of black seemed to be sneaking through the West Hollywood sky from time to time. Sometimes L.A. natives would even stop and point upward – what *is* that? The night sky has turned black! The EPA was at it again.

Through the eyes of James Cowell XXXIII, Sunny looked beautiful, as always. Auburn ringlets framed her face. She wore a clean white T-shirt, tight jeans, and always had a smile at the ready. Her arm rested comfortably out the window of James' dad's beat-up gray Honda as it tore down Sunset Blvd. at a noisy thirty miles per hour.

Most nineteen year-olds would have been a little self-conscious about the car they picked their girlfriend up in. Either something newer, or something much older would have created an aura of cool. But James XXXIII had no sense of shame about driving around in this piece of pedestrian-looking junk, which in Sunny's mind made him uber-cool. Because he didn't care.

"Your dad's an okay guy, you know," Sunny offered. "Behind that ex-New York gruff exterior he has a big heart. I see through his tough talk."

James said nothing.

They pulled up to their small secret office down a miniscule side street, the exact location of which cannot be revealed. This was ground zero.

In Search of an Acronym

Beyond Comprehension – “B.C.”

Live a Life of Change – “L.L.C.”

Controversial Radical Altering Prayer “CRAP.” (Oops, no.)

Words of Wisdom “WOW!” (WOW is cool....)

Or maybe better still: A World of Wisdom?

Sunny and James would jot down cryptic acronyms and their meanings, then burn them. No one must ever find their notes. Sometimes they'd laugh. Sometimes they'd reflect. They would need to remember them without a cue card.

“WOW!” was an interesting one.

They had a lot of details to work out. They had a plan loosely sketched out.

They knew they would most likely fail. But as long as they had fun they didn't care. Not yet.

James XXXII wasn't really thinking about detective work that Saturday afternoon. He was cleaning out an old closet in his son's bedroom, which had been an attic long ago.

Now that fall had arrived, and James XXXIII was back in college, the plan was to make young James' old bedroom into James Sr.'s new home office. He would soon give up his office downtown. He would save on rent and work virtually. His son thought of the idea after announcing that he was not going to live home the following summer, or ever again.

James Sr. began to think about the money he would save on other expenses as well -- commute time, gas, and lunches at the diner with those idiots that he too often got snookered into playing afternoon cards with. He'd be saving just by limiting his gambling losses to the weekends.

Gwen didn't seem to care about the change. She told him as soon as they got divorced she was moving out of this dust hole and finding a place of her own.

Transforming his son's old room saddened the elder James in a way he wasn't quite expecting. During young James' teen years he wouldn't let anyone else in his tiny room, ever. Not friends, not girls, not his mother to clean -- he cleaned his room himself. In fact, it had been almost five years since anyone except his son had stepped foot in there.

But when he thanked young James for his idea and told him it made sense, and that his sacred bedroom was indeed going to be turned into an office, there was not even a fond memory recalled between them. His son seemed more than happy to move on and leave his past behind. The final

words on the phone were jarring: "Just do it, Dad. Don't keep procrastinating. You don't need my permission. Move the desk under the window. Clean out the closet. *Just do it!*"

James Sr., a *professional* detective, always brilliantly deciphering and decoding things in his spare time, like New York Times crossword puzzles, painfully concluded that his son was gone. He was never going to live home again. It was like his son was dead, in a way.

His mind kept the death march going: The past would mostly go unremembered. Time is barely real without memories. But what memories do we have after all these years? Out of approximately - he took out his trusty calculator - 599,184,000 seconds, how many memories did he have of him and his son? He counted the memories one by one. He counted 17 memories with an average duration of about 15 seconds each. That was 255 seconds of memories, or a total of 4.25 minutes. Out of nineteen years together!

Now Gwen might be leaving too. He would never let her know he still wanted her and would be lonely without her. That would be surrender. If she wanted to leave, fine. He was stronger than that. But he began to hear sad music in the background of his thoughts - a bad sign - it sounded like cellos playing in a minor key -- this was the end of having a son *and* a wife! He'd be fifty-five in a few days. A tear fell but was quickly wiped away.

And if *he* died, who would really care? Gwen, James Jr., his friends from the diner? The crossword puzzle nerds he was constantly competing with and arguing with at the crossword puzzle club?

“What kind of detective can’t figure out 6-down?” they would taunt him. “The word is ‘REALIZE!’ You call yourself a detective and you didn’t get ‘realize?’”

They all got a good laugh out of that one.

Then he had a frightening premonition that his son wouldn’t even come to his funeral. As a father, he had failed him.

So he did what any father who was convinced he had failed as a father would do. He began to drink heavily.

James Sr. had some Irish in him and could drink with the best of them. But now he was taking it to a new level. He was in mourning. In fact, he was witnessing his own funeral from somewhere high above. . . somewhere. . . everything was woozy and shimmery. But yes, now he could see himself laying there in his coffin, and that half-witted priest Gwen listens to on Sundays was giving the eulogy. He was watching it all as if he were part of the church ceiling. The eulogy was terrible. But it didn't matter, there was no one there to hear it. No one came. Not even Gwen. Was that the chorus to Eleanor Rigby playing in his head?

He awoke from this reverie with a new plan of action. He was going to bury each painful thought with a drink. One thought at a time. Drown them. *Kill them.*

He began to slowly dismantle his son’s room, moving the bottle of scotch along with him as he dragged the desk over to the window, and dusted that now empty corner of the room, spiders scattering. He heard violins in his head, with long slow vibratos. He tried to shake it. He tried humming *Twist and Shout* out loud, moving his pear-shaped torso and raising his hands in the air like the disco dancers he saw on TV. He tried swaying his arms and hips in

opposite directions, like the old '60s dance, The Twist. He remembered his first girlfriend, his first kiss after dancing at a party. It was in the backyard of a friend's house. He could see the friend's mother doing the party dishes, silhouetted in the kitchen window, then he's kiss his girl again. Maggie Stone. They were sixteen. But the second he was finished with these oft-visited reveries the violins came back. This was a very bad sign indeed. Then he opened the closet door.

The Chosen One

Murders were something James XXXII had only investigated a few times in his career. His work had never risen to the level of dark side that he would jealously watch on TV, or read about in books. If he only had the opportunity he felt sure he would be great at decoding the mystery of the murder. Not just competent, but *great*.

He wanted so badly to find a case that would be difficult to crack, and then, as he's walking the empty foggy city street searching for a sign one sleepless night, BANG, he puts all the pieces together in his head. But this was the stuff of fairytales.

That's why what he found in his son's closet, a closet that no one had been in except for his son for almost *five years*, was so odd, so intriguing. So frightening!

It was a note, or letter of some kind, in a glass jar, right there on the floor of the closet, typed in some kind of code.

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The oddest thing about it was the date on the jar, written in magic marker. The date was written in plain English, and it was dated only a few days ago! In fact, it was dated three days *after* his son had gone back to school.

James immediately called his son to ask him about the note but young James was in no mood for his father's curiosity. "Dad, I cleaned out of all my stuff before I left. I didn't see any glass jar. Whatever it is, just throw it out. Get yourself sober and keep cleaning! Your new office is going to be great."

James Sr. immediately downed another snifter of scotch to help him think things through. His son didn't care about the note, but he also admitted he didn't know where it came from. It looked like it was written in some kind of code. Who could have possibly put it there? And why?

Then it dawned on him. Maybe Gwen put it there as a challenge to him. Or to trick him. Was this some kind of joke?

But wait, she didn't know how to create code! Plus she had no time to create something like this. She was swamped at work every day. Came home dog-tired, cooked a simple meal for them, and sat in front of the TV until her eyelids beginning to flutter before the clock struck nine. Then she'd crawl off to bed, sometimes without flossing. That made him lose *all* respect for her, by the way. Further, she didn't give a damn about him, or his work, or the lack thereof anymore. Maybe she would have put divorce papers in a jar, but not some weird coded letter.

James considered himself more than an adequate code breaker (as well as an award-winning crossword puzzlist — which he strongly felt would come in handy someday). He didn't think it would be all that hard to break these somehow familiar-looking symbols into a coherent formula, unless it was purely meaningless scribble that someone -- but *why* would anyone have done that, or put this here? *And how did they get in?*

He thought himself into a frenzy. One good thing about all this, the violins weren't playing in his head anymore. He was too busy now. He was *working*. Maybe this would even turn out to be something important! You never know.

It took him only a few days to break the code. It was supposedly from a space alien, of all things. Ha! Very funny!

But after he read the entire letter several times, downing a shot of vodka before each new reading, he didn't know what to think. Half a bottle of vodka later, he came to the conclusion that Gwen was either the author, or had to be one they were talking about.

He tried to look for inner clues:

"If you do not succeed you will be erased. You will no longer exist. Not only will your body die, but your soul will be killed. This is very dangerous since it means your soul can never exist again in any form. So please follow instructions carefully."

("... please follow instructions carefully"... *WAS THIS A JOKE?*)

"She will soon reveal herself to you. . . ."

(*SHE?*)

"Meek as she may seem, she has powers untold. Power to reverse the course of most of the energy on your planet, which is now moving itself into a harmful place; power to stop bullets aimed in her direction; power to change the very core of who you are."

(SO WE HAVE A SUPER GIRL FLYING AROUND METROPOLIS NOW? THIS IS SUCH B.S. . . . UNLESS THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT GWE. . . NO WAY.)

“- - ZOLAR”

(ZOLAR???)

He was hooked into the game now. Could this be code within a code? Zolar backwards is “Raloz.” Hmm. No. He searched for anagrams. . . nothing was rearrangable. Although “lozar” was close to the word “loser!” *Interesting!* But that wouldn't make any sense.

He was stumped, but getting more and more excited. He would get to the bottom of this.

He called his son again and told him he decoded the letter he found in the jar. It was a warning of some kind. Apparently it was written by someone named Zolar. He was met with wild laughter, then sarcasm, then derision. Zolar! Dad, re-check your code breaking. *Zolar?*

This was a familiar emotional progression in the Cowell family: wild laughter, then sarcasm, then derision. But for some reason this time he took offense. He felt misunderstood. De-valued in some way. His son was lost to him. That was clearer than ever. His son was treating his detective father as if he were a gullible child; worse, a washed-up drunk.

He had to win his son back, not just by accurately decoding the message, but by solving the mystery behind it.

His first step was to question the only logical suspect he had. But this kind of inquiry had to be subtle.

"Gwen, have you been in James' old room lately?" He tried to yawn as if the question meant nothing at all.

"Does lately include when he was in eighth grade?"

"Really, I mean for any reason. Like maybe putting something in there. . . for me to find?"

"You wanted me to christen your office with another bottle of scotch? Sorry to disappoint you."

"I'm serious."

"James, you old fool, go away, I have a long day tomorrow. Remember *work*? You used to do it occasionally."

His assessment was that Gwen either put the letter there for him to find and was expertly lying about it, or Gwen was the one the alien the letter was referring to but she didn't know it yet. There couldn't be any other logical explanation if the letter was real. Although the letter might not be real. But then, why? Who? How?

He remembered a line from the letter: "*Meek as she may seem she has powers untold. Power to reverse the course of most of the energy on your planet. . . .*"

She couldn't even open the stuck living room window. How was she going to suddenly "help the planet," or "reverse energy," or "stop bullets?" *And whose bullets?*

He returned with the decoded letter in his hand and read it aloud to her. He couldn't imagine what she'd say or do next. But at least he would force a response.

When he finished reading and said the author was named, "Zolar," instead of laughing at him she seemed interested.

"Let me see that. . . . You *decoded* it?"

“Here’s the original. And yes, I decoded it. That’s what I do! Even though you see little or no value in my work anymore, it’s *who I am*,” he blathered, trying not to slur his words.

“Drunk! *Drunk* is who you are! What are you doing to yourself, you swamp rat? It’s five o’clock on a Thursday night and you’re sloshed. Look at yourself in the mirror! *Who are you?*”

“No, no, who are *you!*” he slammed his hand down on the table, but the timing was a little late. He told himself that was only because his mind was thinking faster than his brain to body commands. That meant he was *beyond* mentally sharp! In fact, he was feeling downright intuitive.

“Yes, who indeed are you?” he whispered in a low hiss, trying to intimidate her into a confession, to let her know her little game was up. He could figure out *any* mystery. Even her very bizarre prank.

“You shouldn’t have translated that stupid thing,” she said. “It’s either a dumb game someone is playing, or it sounds dangerous.”

“Well, you should know,” he shot back.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said sarcastically.

“What are you saying, you fat slob,” she yelled louder. She was starting to shake. Was she getting nervous?

“Anger isn’t necessary,” he volleyed, squinting at her calmly.

“*You* are not necessary, you know that?” she screamed. “You are a human waste of time. A one man ‘AA’ meeting, stumbling around the house with this idiotic letter clutched in your sweaty hands. It’s a PRANK, you old fool!”

"Your prank?"

"Oh yes, *my* prank. I spent days typing a new language I invented just to screw with your already screwed-up mind, and waste even more of your precious time, when you should be helping me make enough money for us to survive! How can you be stupid enough to try to drag me into this?"

"So you didn't. . . put the letter in the closet?"

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock."

"Then you must be. . ."

"Oh, my. . . *God!* Do you think I'm the 'she' in the letter?" she began cackling now. She couldn't stop laughing. She sounded like a witch.

He stared at her, assessing. Calculating.

Suddenly her tone changed. "You were stupid to reveal this to me."

"What?"

She nodded her head. "Didn't you realize if I was the 'she' in the letter I would suddenly know that I have powers *untold*. And I might have to get rid of you, *right here, right now*." She crossed her arms and smiled.

He assumed she was screwing with him. Yet being in this altered state of extreme insobriety also opened up all these other layers of perception.

"What would you like for dinner, you putz?"

"I don't care," he mumbled, feeling an odd fear in his stomach.

"How about *duck!*" she screamed.

"What?"

"*Duck!*" she yelled louder.

He crouched down quickly. *They had never eaten duck in their lives!*

She began to laugh. It was a laugh he had never heard from her before. It was perverted, sinister.

He quickly left the house and ate his dinner at a local bar (the meatloaf special). He had a lot of thinking to do. Meatloaf always helped him think, especially when it was washed down with a few beers.

Conception

The idea came to them while they were hiking in the hills on Catalina Island. They climbed all the way up to where they could see beautiful views of the harbor. The water looked crystal blue and God-like. Almost like a mirror for humans to discover themselves in.

They began running, running, running, laughing as they ran high above the water's edge. Sunny raced after young James. She caught up to him. They were breathless, falling, falling, falling together into a soft place on the ground, no one around, clothes falling, so filled with passion, stolen and inhaled from the lining of the clouds. So lightning bright, so expansive. All was one. Running, running, running together as one. Breathless. All was quiet afterwards. A space for pure thought existed between them. That's when it came to him.

It was brilliant. He whispered it to her quietly. Still breathing hard, he revealed the plan as it unfolded in his mind, piece by piece. He would need his secret kept, vacuum sealed, so the idea might expand across the world like the sky catching fire. He would need her more than ever now.

They laughed. They roared with laughter. They couldn't stop. Hour after hour the idea grew. More thoughts came. Details. Until it became monumental, life changing, life expanding. They had been searching for so long. All the time spent in Sunny's office exploring each other's minds and bodies, searching for something to light up and explode. Now it was here.

James and Sunny wrote the letter in Wingding font, knowing there was enough logic to the font for James' father to eventually "decode" it. James Jr. secretly placed it in a jar in his old closet three days before he went back to college. His father was sure to go in the closet to clean and organize it after James Jr. made him see how much money he could save by turning the room into a home office.

They waited for him to discover the letter.

He found it a few days earlier than young James predicted. But that was still well within the parameters of the plan.

Now that he'd decoded it there was no time to waste.

Dreams Apart

Gwen was the one who filed the divorce papers. She was not going to live with this gruff, careless, paranoid, hot-tempered drunk any more. She had been thinking about divorce since little James XXXIII was no more than knee-high to a garbage can.

No. Wait.

You see, the man had infected her in every way, even with the metaphors she chose. Knee-high to a garbage can? That was just not *her*. Even her own thoughts had become grotesque to her. Now with young James leaving home for the last time she was ready to move on too. She had no day-to-day parental responsibilities. She adored the boy and brought him up as well as she could, showered him with her full attention, gave him everything, sheltered him from his father's stupidity as best as she could. Although she had to admit he'd been a good father for the most part.

As she held the divorce papers in her hand for the first time she thought about him in an almost tender way. Her husband was a silly man, but in the end, harmless. Gruff but times at kind to a fault. Always quick to blame himself rather than those around him. Drinking himself sick every time he concluded, rightly or wrongly, that he was inadequate. After so many years – twenty-five years to be exact – with one man, she wondered, could another man actually be better? She had dreamed for years of meeting someone else, maybe a salsa dancer from Latin America. Or were all men just intolerable apes? It was the known versus the unknown. She had to choose adventure before it was too late to ever know.

She admitted to herself that her life could be a lot worse. She had read books and seen TV shows about the madness, the evil. And men, they were trouble, all of them. She secretly imagined some strong handsome man she had fallen for pushing her down on the bed and washing over her like a tsunami wave before turning away, fulfilled, coming back for one last long kiss, then closing the door behind him with a wink and a gentle bow. Would she let him come back again? She didn't quite know. She didn't quite trust herself.

Plenty of men could be worse than the old coot she had been with for so long, all of her best years. Finding someone worse would be the end of her.

This is why she vowed, while still clutching the divorce papers, she would not seek out another man, ever. She would be content to live alone. She would find herself a nice sunbathed one-bedroom apartment to put a few of her favorite plastic flowers in. She would sneak them out of the house along with the prettiest vases and teacups. She would draw a warm bath and dream endlessly, with no one rushing her to finish just so his drunken bladder could be drained. It would take decades to wash the coating of James XXXII off of her. She would sit in the bath for ten years, bubbled and perfumed, and sip vintage red wine while reading Vogue magazine until she was completely clean. Then she would put on a pretty nightgown, sit in front of the TV without having him rip the remote away from her, eat a tuna sandwich late at night without having to endure him telling her that it made her breath smell. The nightgown was made of silk. It would make her skin feel tingly and sensual.

What a glorious life awaited her.

Three Things, At

Most

James XXXII pretended to be happy when the divorce papers arrived. The first thing he would do when she was gone was throw out all the damn plastic flowers she had in every room, eternally frozen in a fake droop, crammed unartfully together in their amber glass vases.

The second thing he would do was take all those petite teacups they never used and fill them with beer, scotch, Kool-Aid, iced coffee – *valuable things*, not tea from China, not coffee from Kona. He would fill the tea cups with beer and put them in the fridge with the temperature turned to near freezing. He thought of all the times she had complained that the cold settings were wasting energy, so he was stuck with tepid cans of Coors and packaged meat wet with water vapor, rotting almost overnight. Never again! *Energy savings that, you stinkin' piece of. . . of. . . ex-wife!*

Then, the third thing he'd do was, let's see, maybe he would call an old girlfriend? That was a little crazy, he had to admit. The only other girlfriend he'd ever had was now dead from choking on a midnight peanut butter sandwich while listening to The Mamas and the Papas. He'd heard the news from a mutual friend. She was dead now too.

The fourth thing he'd do was, well, was there a fourth thing? Who was he kidding, even his own son didn't care about him anymore. This sobered him momentarily, which frightened him into taking another drink. So many friends lost in time. So many. And his buddy from college, his

roommate all four years, he'd never forget old. . . what's his name?

Part II

The Birth of WOW!

They decided to market the idea on YouTube. That was the best, most cost effective delivery system. The risk was that it would be seen as a joke or a hoax.

But then what wasn't a hoax? Acai berry diets? Stomach vibrating belts? Presidents? Rap lyrics? Peace treaties? Resveratrol? Religions? Reliable cars? Peacekeepers? Nuclear disarmament? Expensive wine? Landing on the moon? The innocence of babies? Enlightenment?

Everything is a hoax!

Everything we see with our eyes, and grasp with our senses. *Hoax!* Every thought, every goal we have, *all a hoax.*

One could only hope that beyond the skepticism, which was certainly to be expected, something good would come of it. Beyond the nasty online jokes, the critics, the cynics, maybe something would catch, something would strike a universal chord.

And if you want to strike a universal chord, why wouldn't you go out into the actual universe to source it?

It started with the now famous video of Sunny, dressed casually but in a feminine way – light makeup, a silk blouse with blue jeans -- a way that exuded sincerity and intimacy without any of the overt sexuality one might see these days. Her auburn hair was cut just below the ears. She wore a beautiful pair of very expensive earrings to give her some cred. Add to this the backdrop of the set, which created a visual image more akin to a CNN interview than a home

video, with some amorphous city lit up at night superimposed behind her.

She began speaking in an intentionally nervous voice, as if in the middle of a thought:

“At first I thought, honestly, James’ father had gone a little crazy. I thought it was a hoax of some kind. Except the letter and the decoding came from a professional detective working in Los Angeles with nothing to gain. In fact, he was too embarrassed to show the letter to anyone outside of his family. Since I am his son’s girlfriend, I was there, and read it with James when his father showed it to him.

“Mr. Cowell was scared to show this letter to the world. He was afraid it would ruin his career. Nor did his son, James, or I, have any thought of doing so. But the very next day after seeing the letter, my life changed. I began to hear a voice that called itself ‘Zolar.’

“Zolar claims to be the author of the letter. His voice sounds to me like a “he,” and I will call him such for now, although Zolar has no body and no form. Zolar lives in a dimension unknown to us, but soon our dimensions will merge. And we must be ready, or our souls will not survive.

"He literally calls our failure to merge with his dimension, which he calls The Continuum, a 'death after death.' Which does NOT have to happen to any of us. But we have to listen and ask ourselves if what he is saying is true, in order to save ourselves. Those were his words to me, which are similar to his warnings in the letter.

“I am apparently the one he is referring to in the letter. He spoke about me *metaphorically*, I assure you. Because I have no unnatural powers. I cannot reverse the course of energy. I don’t even know what any of that means! I can’t

stop bullets! I can't even stop the cynicism I will face by revealing this to you. I know that. In fact, I'm scared to do this. I'm afraid of what will happen after I post this video. But at this point, I'm more afraid of not posting it.

"All I can say is, this is no prank. I'm not mentally unstable. I've never heard voices before. I don't 'channel.' I've never even believed or respected any of those who say they do. But the voice I have begun to hear is real. Zolar is real, or at least in some reality he is real. And he says he can prove it to you.

"He is ready to answer questions to prove he is authentic. He says he is actually willing to answer *your* questions!

"He told me he isn't willing to answer questions about material things, since there is no point to it, and he has no desire to change the natural course of events. But he will answer questions about the spiritual world, our minds, our souls.

"So I am inviting you to go to WOW!.com, where you can submit your questions to Zolar for free. Believe me, I have no intention of making any money at all from this. Your questions will be answered free of any cost."

"I will be back in two weeks with a new video to give you Zolar's answers to the most important and difficult questions we receive.

"If you don't believe what I'm saying, I dare you to send in questions anyway. Ask yourself, what do you have to lose?

"According to Zolar, if we do not learn quickly the price will be unthinkably devastating for all of us. So submit

your questions. From what I have experienced so far, the answers will be unlike any you can ever imagine.”

The full text of the letter translated into English then freezes on the screen. At the end it says the full letter will also be posted on the website: WOW!.com

Questions from the Audience

There were 245 questions submitted in the first week, but 32 of them were pranks. (The numbers, and the off-color responses, were all well within the statistical parameters young James had expected.) Some of the questions were quite odd:

“Dear Sunny: I am Zolar’s hot son, ZuluMan. Would you like to meet me tonight at the crossroads of reality and Sunset Blvd?”

And: “I have a clue for you about who Zolar really is. Notice that Zolar rhymes with molar? Zolar is a dentist in the Bronx. He will be the first dentist to ever pull teeth from directly inside someone’s head. I hear he uses laughing gas. Enjoy.... PS: After he pulls your teeth be careful he’s not also pulling your leg. Ha, Ha.”

And another: “Hey Zoey, can I call him Zoey? What’s the winning number gonna be for the New York State lottery this month? It’s twenty three million bucks. You give me the right answer and I’ll not only believe in you, but I’ll split it with you right down the middle.”

They also had serious questions submitted. They had agreed before their first video that if the questions weren’t good enough they could make the questions up themselves. But they found some good ones:

“To Zolar: What’s the meaning of life? And why are you threatening our lives if we don’t do what you say?”

“To Zolar: What happens when we die?”

James began connecting their website to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and dozens of other social networks telling people to spread the word -- the next video would be posted soon. His goal was to reach one hundred thousand hits with video number two. But that was a severe miscalculation.

Sunny Shines

“Hey, babe,” Sunny called, “pass me the rouge.” She was chewing a piece of gum, trying to memorize her lines for the next taping.

James was setting up the video cameras. Yes, they would have two cameras this time. Sunny had mastered Final Cut Pro, so the edits would go smoothly and look great. She spit out her gum, toyed with her hair in the mirror until she got the slightly windblown look she wanted, and they were ready to roll.

“Hello, Earth!” Sunny smiled broadly. “I don’t mind making a little fun of myself since Zolar definitely has a good sense of humor, even at his own expense, or more likely mine.” Her smile turned slowly into a shy serious look. Ever so humble.

Her voice softened, “Anyway, as we promised last week, we are going to answer questions we received on our website at WOW!.com. But I want to preface this by saying I am relying entirely on Zolar for my responses. In fact, after I read each question to you I will actually need to shut my eyes before speaking the answers. Sorry about that looking kind of fake,” she smiled quickly and shrugged. Yes, a perfect look.

“The first question is, ‘Dear Sunny: How do you know this voice you’re hearing is not just another part of you? Your own voice speaking to you, not Zolar?’”

“I don’t need to shut my eyes for this one. I can answer this myself. First of all, the voice didn’t come to me until after the letter was found and translated. The translation came from a professional detective who wants nothing to do

with any of this. He is not seeking publicity. I don't think he even believes what the letter says to this day. But that's exactly what Zolar is fighting against – cynicism, apathy, the kind of unconscious sleep-walking through life we are all guilty of.

“After I read the translation of the letter the voice began talking to me, and *with* me, almost immediately, telling me that I was the one he was alluding to in the letter. I asked him, why me? I told him I was afraid to be a spokesperson for something this important because I was afraid I'd fail. I asked him why he didn't go to someone more famous. He laughed. He said I was the one because I was capable of spreading the word, even though I didn't believe that. Then he asked me to figure out how to tell everyone. I spoke to my boyfriend, James, about it. He told me he would help if I wanted him to but he didn't want us to become famous. He didn't want his face shown. We're in college. We have work to do to get our degree. We have a life we want to live privately. But I told him I thought this was too important to ignore. So he agreed that as long as we don't charge money for this, or do anything to make this look like a scam, he would help me. He set up the cameras here in the studio. He will edit things for the presentation. That's all I can tell you at this point. I've never heard voices before. And I am clear this voice is trying to reach all of us, not just me. That's all I know so far.

“Here are the next two questions: “What is the meaning of life? And why are you threatening our lives if we don't do what you say?””

Sunny closed her eyes, took a deep meditative breath, waited for ten full seconds, then spoke softly, with her voice slightly altered but still sounding like herself.

“Thank you for the directness of these questions. As paradoxical as it may sound, the search itself for the meaning of life helps create wholeness. Therefore, the knowing of, or believing in, any one meaning defeats the goal. But please know this, no one is threatening you for the sake of being mean. I am not mean. The universe we share is not mean. I am simply warning you about *the truth*. . . . Which brings me to the next question. For it will explain the rest.”

Sunny came back around to sounding like herself again, with just enough pause, speaking a little louder after coyly clearing her throat, “What happens when we die?”

Sunny’s eyes closed and she waited, while quickly rehearsing her lines.

“Death is not real. There is a continuum, not measured by your understanding of hours or years, but it exists. For those souls who are blessed with consciousness but insist on staying asleep, The Continuum is beyond their reach when their body falls away. This literally leaves them in a place I'd call 'nowhere.' Almost all of the energy in the universe is part of The Continuum. But there are patches of nowhere, a place of no energy, no primordial spark. It is a place for lost souls -- the disconnected. Those souls are left to truly die. The only way, in fact, to truly die, is to lose connection with The Continuum.

“My hope for each of you is that you will stay in step with The Continuum. It is extremely important you do this

and follow my instructions. To do anything less would be a disaster unlike anything you have ever imagined.

“That is why I am here, speaking through this person. I am trying, for no reason I can translate into your thought language, to prevent that disaster from happening *to you*.

“Because this very special gift, and massive responsibility that you call life will affect your soul for all time. Your choice at every crossroads is critical.”

Sunny suddenly opens her eyes and looks off camera to James, as if doing it spontaneously, “I’m very tired, James, can we please stop now?” Her eyes look hazy, as if she had been dreaming. She had practiced this look in the mirror for hours. It looked very realistic.

We hear James’ voice in the background: “Just do some kind of sign off, Sunny. That’s enough,” he says it compassionately, his voice sounding techy and shy.

Sunny returns her gaze to the camera and says, “Okay, I have to go. I want to help you. I want to answer more questions, but I need to stop for now. Please submit more questions for next week if you want, and visit the website at WOW!.com. All the answers from tonight will be there. The original letter is on there too, of course. The website is the only way to reach. . . uh, yes, I really have to go now, James.” She begins to cry shyly from exhaustion. The screen goes blank.

The video was edited and posted that evening.

Then they waited.

Mega-Viral

If the second video had attracted only a few hundred thousand hits you would never know. Because this book would never have been written.

Sunny and James held out some vague hope that something big could happen. They pondered the best and worst case scenarios, which they tried to map out statistically. They figured when the joke was over they would have to go back to reality, back to school, back to searching for their individual identities, choosing their careers, maybe have children someday.

But something unexpected happened. Their video went viral.

Views exponentialized every hour of each day. They hit a million views in a week. Video 1 was also getting hundreds of thousands of hits a day now. And their website was flooded twenty-four hours a day with the curious, the cynical, the clinically insane, the seekers, the devotees, some who claimed they had also been contacted by Zolar in their dreams, or while they were driving their car to the mall.

Their website was getting hits worldwide, and James was working day and night to make sure it wouldn't crash.

They sat in their office for days, watching the numbers multiply and the questions roll in – half a dozen per hour. What should they do next? They needed time to think. They hadn't really planned on anything this big happening. It was just a lark, a vehicle to practice what they were learning in college.

By the following Sunday they were expected to make video 3, but now they were re-thinking that. They needed to let video 1 and 2 play out a bit longer. They did a quick video with Sunny saying that she and James were trying to coordinate all the questions flooding in. But in ten days, at exactly 8 pm eastern time, she would do a simultaneous YouTube videotaping and live podcast that would be broadcast all over the web, all over the world.

More questions poured in: Who legally owned WOW!.com, asked one questioner? Was it Sunny and James? Or was it Zolar?

They knew the question was a joke, but they realized there was a deeper underlying legal issue. They never thought of owning the rights to anything. But maybe they needed a lawyer?

Meanwhile, views on YouTube jumped again, this time to over half a million per week.

Sunny prepared for the biggest night of her life.

Meanwhile, James was busy connecting to more and more social networks. He was also fielding emails from prospective book publishers. Many were obvious scams, but some seemed legitimate. It would take him months to weed through the fakes and the wannabes to see what they were offering, and to decide how to expand into other kinds of media.

However, James' natural ability to control things was starting to unravel. This was taking on a life of its own. He even heard a rumor that someone, a scientist in San Francisco, was starting a religion with Zolar as "the master."

Meanwhile, the amount of money they had made on this prank so far was exactly to the penny, \$0.00.

In fact, they hadn't even paid for the cost of buying the video cameras, lights, backdrops, computers, and office rent. All that was being bankrolled by Sunny's parents, who thought nothing of handing her a check for ten thousand dollars for film equipment and office rent, but who knew nothing about the YouTube posts. Yet.

In fact, no one in either of their families knew what was going on, and as far as James and Sunny's friends, well, they had no close friends. They had always been seen as weirdoes, outcasts, oddballs. They were two anonymous kids who happened to be running one of the better Internet scams anyone had seen in years.

Their life still seemed within the realm of normal, in a way. It still seemed like a fun way to spend summer of their sophomore year until the incident with the gun.

The Gun

Things were going well for our young spiritual charlatans. Soon they would have to explain all this to their parents, but so far not one of the four of them seemed to know a thing about what was going on. No one had contacted James Sr. about decoding the letter. No one knew anything about James, and even less about his father. It was all status quo in the family realm. It reminded James and Sunny daily just how small-time their little project still was.

Sunny had an old car gifted to her by her parents for the summer. It was a Volvo S60. They chose it for her because if she smashed it up, she'd be fine. It was a tank. It was a classic. It was one of the safest cars ever made according to *Forbes* magazine. However, *Forbes*, not exactly known for its automotive expertise, never discovered the fact that the year this particular Volvo S60 was made, there was some cost cutting. The engine was not made to go more than 70,000 miles. This car was sold to Sunny's parents with 69,500 miles on the odometer.

On Santa Monica Blvd., near Plummer Park, the odometer hit 70,001 and the engine blew. They pushed the car to the side of the road, swiping away the smoke with their hands.

"Zolar must be in a bad mood today," James quipped. They decided to cut through the park to get to their office by foot and call a tow truck.

It was getting dark. The basketball courts were strangely empty. None of the old men were playing chess. The air seemed oddly still and quiet. Until a man with wildly long hair and a matted curly beard leaped down

upon them with foul windy breath. He pounced and pushed James with one arm against a chain-link fence, then put his strong, age-withered hands around the front of James' neck.

Then he smiled at Sunny with a mouth only half-filled with teeth. "*Money please.*"

James was pinned to the fence with the wild man's fingers close to choking him to death. Sunny was stunned, but seeing James in danger she began to fumble through her pockets. The man patted down James' pants pockets and pulled out his wallet. "Aaagh," he said, finding almost nothing. "Sunny gave him a twenty dollar bill, folded and wrinkled from her pocket, and told him that was all she had.

"God told me you'd come!" he said.

James' neck was released from the man's grip. He was coughing slightly, trying to catch his breath.

The man's beard was curly reddish blonde. Small crumbs of old food were nesting in the depths of it.

"You are just a part of the dream, you know?" he smiled.

He looked at Sunny in an odd way now, his eyes darting up and down her body. "*Lovely,*" he smiled. Then he laughed. His laughter morphed into a rasping cough. James used his instincts in that precise moment to grab Sunny by the hand and run. How hard would it be to outrun an old bum?

But with James' third step he rolled his ankle on an old fuzzless tennis ball hiding in ambush, and fell on his knees, severely grass staining his new Gap jeans. Sunny stumbled over his legs and fell on top of him.

The crazy man reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun and lined his sight at an easy target. Before they knew it, he pulled the trigger, aiming it right at Sunny's face!

But nothing happened. The gun chamber clicked harmlessly.

"*Shit!*" the old man screamed. "God, can't you just leave me alone for just an hour? Just one day?"

James ignored the pain in his ankle and they began running through the park until they came to the other side of the park and ran into an open cafe. They sat at one of the tables, crashing down upon the chairs as if they'd fallen from the sky. They stayed there, out of breath, speechless, until the waitress came.

"What would you like?" she asked.

"I'm not sure anymore," Sunny cried.

James's Key

When he awoke the next morning James' neck was bruised. His ankle was sore. He was walking with a limp. His breathing felt tight. His ribs were black and blue. James had heard of things like this happening on the news, but nothing like this had ever happened to him or anyone he knew.

His father had told him stories about some of the cases he was involved in – a husband goes to work for his wife's father, embezzles all the money, and runs off to South America where he buys a villa by the sea and writes a letter with no return address to his two children twice a year. Then suddenly, he's murdered by a vagabond.

Or, the case of the woman whose rich husband had set up a running tab for her in every store on Rodeo Drive. She bought a million dollars' worth of clothes and modern art *in one day*, then sold it all for a hundred grand in cash and tried to secretly run off to Paris with her young boyfriend. She disappeared and the boyfriend was found with the rest of the cash in his suitcase. Her husband dropped all charges just before rushing off to a business meeting.

When he reflected on all these stories, James realized the world was a hideously absurd place filled with insanity and greed, with an occasional crack of light escaping from the darkness, like The Beatles, or Gorbachev, or Daniel Ellsberg. Then, back to darkness.

From this viewpoint Zolar was a complete waste of time.

But when the painkillers kicked in and he began to relax, he concluded the only exception, the *only* mind truly *worth* protecting in this world, was Sunny's. He adored her.

He trusted her, and only her. She was a random beam of light that always seemed to find its way to him, even when he was kidnapped and imprisoned by his own anger and cynicism -- keyless in the dark, no escape, except through her.

July Jameson

Because of what happened to James, Sunny was taking over -- scripting everything on her own. James dutifully manned the cameras, but his focus turned to Sunny's smile, her deeply rooted innocence, which he tried to capture through filters and certain camera angles. He was making moving portraits of this angel-faced girl he loved. He filmed her in such a way that the beauty he saw was able to radiate outwards to a million other eyes on the Internet. Sunny was becoming a star.

The response to these new videos and Podcasts was volcanic. Book and movie deals were swimming into their website like jellyfish at high tide. They knew they had to find a pro to take over the business end of things. Money was becoming important now, especially to James.

Enter July Jameson.

James chose July Jameson because he was one of the most famous entertainment agents in L.A. -- and because of his name. It was filled with irony. James had inherited his father's natural ability to jumble words and letters and turn them into something meaningful, like decoding a letter from Zolar. And what James recognized in this agent's name was, "You lie, James' son." Pretty funny as an inside joke.

July Jameson lived on power breakfasts, followed by power lunches -- entertaining clients and movie moguls at the best restaurants all over town. If a restaurant didn't know who July Jameson was, you shouldn't eat there.

July wore thousand dollar ties from China, tailored suits from Paris, imported Italian shoes, French men's

cologne. It seemed like every country in the world was making money off of him.

He was skeptical about taking on James and Sunny as clients. He was not one of the many dozens of agents and attorneys who had contacted them offering their services.

But after they got Jameson's attention he realized why their fame was spreading. Sunny was visually very appealing. Their message was uplifting, but weird. Their videos combined a new kind of religion with space aliens and a dash of shy and sexy. He liked it. He liked her. He just didn't know what to do with something like this. Yes, a self-help book might work. But how do you make a movie out of such a thing without exposing what he sensed was mostly Hollywood snake oil?

The most obvious idea would be getting them a book deal that would either have them expose the fraud and talk about how they got this thing to go viral, or, more likely, just stay in character and *be* the messenger of Zolar writing a book, so that they could save the scam admission for book two.

He opted for the latter because he could more easily imagine a documentary film if the first book, a book about Zolar, ghost-written, so-to-speak, by Sunny and James, took off. Then the book two admission would be all the more shocking. Scandalous. Funny!

July knew everyone. And like James' dad, he was a detective and a decoder of sorts. He sifted through their dozens of email offers one by one, mumbling aloud, "Never heard of him.... Heard of him, he's a schmuck. Ah this one, there's a crook right there, it figures he'd try to scam his way into your game before you had time to ask anyone about

him – go feed your brains to the pigeons, you little shit. Ah, Irving, wow, Irving emailed you. That’s interesting, impressive, I’ll call him... but he’s a bit too fiction for something like this. Let’s see, this, this is not a real HarperCollins email address, and never heard of the editor, so obviously...

“*This guy*, well, that’s fortunate now, Malcolm Manning is interested. He’s a hot young movie producer with one hit, one so-so project after that, which means it was a flop financially but the critics liked it. He needs something to get him back in the mix. I’ll call him, but he’ll have to beg. He’ll have to unzip his wallet to get you.... Once he’s in, if it works, the book deals will follow. We could *name* the publisher at that point. It’s kind of a back-assward approach, but I’ve seen it work.

“The question is, Sunny, can you act, I mean in a movie? Can you act beyond the role you’re acting now as Zolar’s intermediary, or channel? Whatever you call it. Because even in a documentary you have to act. You have to create an image of who Sunny is outside the lines, so to speak. But it’s still acting, with shaky cameras following you around and capturing that special moment when Zolar has something to say to you. Nah, that type of scene sounds hokey to me. Well, that’s why Malcolm is Malcolm. He’d never stoop that low.”

He was always thinking aloud in front of James and Sunny. James seemed to follow his thinking better than Sunny did. It wasn’t much different than listening to his dad’s rambling stories during those long hours before bed when he was a child. His father talked him to sleep, going on and on about his work, the neighbors, relationship

troubles with his mom, who he had always loved and pushed away all at the same time – almost every night of his life he heard his father's rambly stories, until he was fourteen. That's when young James decided no one could come into his room again, ever. It was to get away from his father's nighttime stories, wrestling with images that kept him up long after his father was asleep.

Sunny did not like or trust July Jameson at first. It took her a while to get past his toughness, his directness, and his immediate assumption that this was all just a scam, a show. Sunny was changing. She was becoming more serious about her role in all this. And she didn't want her agent, or her attorney, talking to her as if she were a two-bit charlatan.

Jameson eventually sensed this. So during their third meeting he said, "Sunny, I'm honored to be working with you. You're the real deal. I love what you have to say. It's powerful, very powerful information, for all of us, so we're going to say it in bright lights, to an audience so big, YouTube can only dream of such things."

Although Sunny often wondered who was scamming who, she succumbed to July's respectfulness and confident exuberance. Just in time too. Because soon after they signed an exclusive agreement to work with him, he presented them with not only a deal for a movie documentary with Malcolm Manning, but a major book deal as well, both of them offering huge advances.

Part III

And He's a Nice Man?

When James' mom and dad became aware of the videos, James' father was proud. He got the joke now, although his son still wouldn't admit anything. All he would say when his father made some cynical remark was, "Is that your conclusion?" Gwen was befuddled by the whole thing. What did Sunny mean? Really? A *continuum* to where?

His parents were still living together until the eternally delayed divorce papers were finalized. But there was a difference in the way they treated each other. The sarcasm was toned down. There was a bit of playfulness in their voices when they spoke. "We're divorcing, and going back to casually dating all at the same time," his father joked. Gwen would blush and tell him to stop. But change was in the air.

James XXXII also feebly tried to give his son some fatherly financial advice. "Watch out for the sharks. They don't just swim in water." The advice was given along with a quick slap on James Jr.'s back.

"Dad, you are wise beyond your years, you know that? And considering how old you are, that's not easy."

James XXXII also admitted that he liked Sunny. She might even be marriage material. He had never even spoken her name aloud before this, even though the two of them had met half a dozen times. Now, Sunny was "a good girl." He thought to himself, "she's a cash cow." But somehow he

restrained himself from saying it aloud. He had a whole part of his brain that thought in animals -- sharks, cows, wolves in sheep's clothing, lambs in waiting, someone else looks like a dog, or that guy's a rat, a snake. It helped clarify people and events without complicating things.

The father again tried to break his son down, "By the way, Junior, you sure fooled me for a while there. I admit it. How did you come up with all those crazy ideas in the letter? That was quite good."

"I didn't make up the letter, Dad. I don't know where the letter came from."

His father became stone silent. He crossed his arms, "So then how. . ."

"Sunny just started hearing voices after you showed us the letter. That's why I asked for a copy of it. It's all just the weirdest thing."

"Do tell," his father responded skeptically. He was always fond of old idiomatic expressions.

Days after he first decoded the letter Detective James dusted it for fingerprints but only found his own. James Jr. easily stayed a step ahead of his dad back then by carefully putting the jar and letter in his closet using gloves.

James XXXII got to his main point, "Son, I'm trying to be delicate about this, but don't you think I'm owed a few thousand bucks for finding and translating the letter? I mean, now that you're getting rich and famous," he cleared his throat. "After all, I *am* the founder of all this in a way, aren't I?"

"Being a 'founder' doesn't mean that you *found* something, dad," James laughed.

"*Why not?*" his dad yelled. "*Why the hell not?*"

His voice often sounded amplified. How did he do that?

A pair of thick furled eyebrows awaited a response. His eyes were vacuous, still holding out some vague hope, like an old beggar shaking a tin cup in front of a young prince's face.

"Okay, you can be the founder, Pops. I'll give you a wad of money, and I'll throw in a gift card to Eddie's bar for a dozen meatloaf dinners. But then we need to finish off that attic office together. You have to get that done, Dad, it's been almost a year since you. . ."

"Eh, the office can wait. I have bigger fish to fry."

James' mom was teary, "James, how is Sunny doing with all this? Is she seeing a psychiatrist?"

"What? No mom, she's actually very at peace with what's going on. She loves listening to her inner voice. There's a lot of wisdom there."

"And he's a nice man?"

"Who?"

"Zoo-man."

"Zolar? Yes, well, yes, mom he's very nice. . . we don't really know if Zolar is a he, or what he. . ." James paused.

Gwen covered her mouth, "Transgender?"

"No, no. *No* gender."

Then he realized, this was his mother he was talking to. He kissed her cheek, "Mom, he's a very nice man, and he comes from a very good neighborhood."

A Godsend

On the other side of town, Sunny was visiting her parents.

When she pulled up to the house in her new car and climbed the spiral walkway of her youth she spotted her father pacing in the open garage talking in a very animated voice on his cell phone. His arms were flailing. The words became clearer as she approached him. Her hug would have to wait, as usual.

"Earl, we just got home from Barcelona only to find a *huge* piece of junk in our backyard. What's going on...?"

"No. No, you *think* it's the outdoor Italian marble fireplace that I ordered. Let me tell you, if that marble is from Italy, then I'm from fucking Harlem! You know what I mean, Earl? *You know* what I'm saying, Earl? I wasn't born an hour ago. And you don't want to mess with a dude from Harlem, now do you?"

"Grrr owww rrr brr ooo ssss ah Igrrr marbrrrr?" That's what the voice on the other end of the phone sounded like to Sunny, now standing nearby.

"How do I know? *How do I know?* What is this, the Spanish Inquisition? I *know* because I've got Italian spies in the marble business, okay? And they're not from Harlem, they're from the Mafia. Now you get your guys over here and take this four ton piece of crap out of my backyard or it's going to end up as Exhibit A when I sue your ass for fraud. . . .

"Kkk cmm F-ddaaa, okaaa?"

"Yeah, Friday's fine. Just make sure it's before the weekend. We've got guests coming. And don't fuck up my

new lawn hauling this fake piece of doo-doo outta here, you little shit.”

He hung up and noticed his daughter waiting patiently. “Ahh, hallo, sweetheart!” he smiled. He stepped out of the garage just far enough to take his chewing gum out of his mouth and toss it over the hedge. “Sorry about the call. You know, you try to trust people, give them the key to the castle while you’re gone, but everyone’s running a scam, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Everybody wants to fuck with everybody, excuse my French.”

She nodded.

“Want to come in the backyard and roast some marshmallows in our fake Italian marble fireplace?”

“No, thanks.”

“Come in then, mom’s been waiting for you.” He gave her a soft kiss on the cheek.

For supper they had a beautiful meal, brought in from Sunny’s favorite restaurant. Her mom couldn’t cook. Unfortunately, neither could Sunny. Her father believed it was genetic.

They talked to Sunny about how beautiful Barcelona was. They told a funny story about nearly being strip-searched at the airport on the way home. “I think they thought your mother was hot.”

Finally their travelogue vignettes came to an end and the subject came around to Sunny. They were ecstatic that her film and acting classes at UCLA had paid off so soon. They told her she looked great on camera and that she should consider an acting career by accepting some new

kinds of roles, "Don't get typecast, honey," her mom advised. "It's the kiss of death. It'll end your career long before you can win your first Oscar. We've seen the Internet clips. You are *talented!* We believe in you."

Her dad chimed in, "What you've done is amazing, sweetie, but I hope you don't get into big trouble for this," her dad said. "Do you have a good attorney?"

She tried to allude to the fact that Zolar might be real, but she noticed them getting a little concerned about her mental stability, so she backed off. "Well, anyway, I'm glad to be home," she smiled. "I missed you guys."

"And James?" her mother asked.

"He's wonderful."

"How wonderful? I mean is he '*I love you*' wonderful?"

Sunny smiled shyly.

"Is he '*let's get married and have babies*' wonderful?"

"Well, maybe, mom. Actually, yes."

"*Thank God!*" Her mom turned her eyes up to heaven.

"Thank you, God, or Zolar!" Her parents laughed with gratitude and a sense of relief. Let it be said that despite Sunny's natural beauty her parents were always very concerned about her tomboy behavior. James was a godsend, no matter how odd of a boy he seemed to be.

Meaning What?

At some point both James and Sunny told their parents the reason they had come to visit. They were dropping out of school. They were way too busy to keep up with their studies.

They expected some level of disapproval. But with all the money being offered to them from the book and movie deal everyone treated the news with -- of course, of course, you're working now. You can always go back to school in a few years if you need to.

They also had one other bit of news to relay. James and Sunny informed their parents they were moving in together.

The reaction in the Cowell house was as expected.

"Oh my dear God, but when's the wedding?" Gwen asked.

James XXXII said, "Leave the boy alone, Gwen. He needs to sow his oats for a while, eh boy? I should only have been so smart."

Sunny's parents had another take on things entirely. "Be careful, love. You know once you live with them, men change," Sunny's mom offered profoundly.

"Just don't get pregnant," her dad warned. "You're not going to make another dime in Hollywood if you get pregnant."

Sunny said, "Mom, Dad, before I go, I feel like, at least for one brief, possibly strange moment, I need to try to reach you."

"In what way?" They looked at each other like, uh oh, she's crazy after all.

“There are things going on out there, beyond the world of finance, and the stores on Rodeo Drive. Beyond the Middle East. Beyond political scandals. There are bigger things going on.”

“Oh my, what’s going on?” her mom asked nervously.

“Okay,” her father said. “You want to do your Zolar thing for us one time, is that it? You have to see if you can own the living room, so to speak? We don’t mind. We’ve seen the videos. But come do it in the actual living room!”

“There’s more to it than just liking the videos,” she said patiently.

“Meaning what?” Even her father was getting nervous now.

She could tell he was about to come a bit unglued, because he started pulling at his wedding ring. This was a nervous habit Sunny used to notice even as a child.

In the end, she just didn’t have the heart to say aloud what she was thinking. Instead she said, “I just want you to enjoy your life.”

“Oh shit, what a mess,” he chortled. “You have no idea. But we’ll keep at it and maybe one day...” he reached out to hug her goodbye.

Their suburban life had been put back in place in an instant by Sunny’s silence, like seeing a building blowing up and then imploding back into itself, back to the way things were before.

Voice from Outer Space

James and Sunny left their parents with the following observations:

Gwen and James XXXII were happier than they'd been in many years. The eternally delayed divorce gave them the freedom to openly plan to leave each other, therefore, they didn't have to. The fantasy was almost as good as the reality. Especially because apartments rental prices were through the roof.

They were also ecstatic that their son was going to be rich. James XXXII felt like a proud Chinese farmer whose son was now breaking his back harvesting the crops, while he was sitting back watching ping-pong tournaments on his tiny black-and-white TV. Seriously, this could mean an early retirement. A *real* retirement! With trips to Mexico.

Sunny's parents were very proud of their daughter's career. After all, they were the mother and father of the world's most famous translator of a voice from outer space. And a superb young actress. Who would have thought?

Part IV

Fully Engaged

Their first book “Who Is Zolar, and Why Should You Be Listening to Him *Right Now?*” did quite well. But the movie documentary did even better. Malcolm Manning, the famous young documentary film producer, followed Sunny and James around with a two-man camera crew for two months. The public’s fascination was growing. He didn’t want to do a Scorsese thing. But he also didn’t want to do a lighthearted abstract kind of “A Hard Day’s Night with Zolar” thing either, although the studio begged him to consider it.

He also didn’t want to do an expose like “60 Minutes.” He didn’t want to simply focus on Zolar’s somber message. He was trying to find a balance, something with an edge.

In the end, Manning found his comfort zone. He captured James’ sincere intellect and wry sense of humor. He magnified Sunny’s unflappable innocence and natural beauty. One time he captured her relaxing in a sexy bikini by the pool.

By the time he was done editing, the lighting was so magnificent, the camera angles and quick cuts so clever, so unique, that the things James and Sunny said became secondary to Malcolm Manning’s filmmaking brilliance. He was pleased.

While the positive reviews were ample, doubts began to surface in the media. People were beginning to take the Zolar shtick too seriously, they said. The biggest review

came from the usually liberal *New York Times*, openly wondering how Sunny and James could pull off a scam this big.

“Zolar is no more real than E.T. or Avatar. Except Zolar cost nothing to make! So while we tip our hats to their ingenuity and financial savvy, the fact is, the facts don’t add up.”

July and James had decided to be proactive. They had been waiting for the accusations to surface. They were ready to respond.

By this time, Jameson sensed that James and Sunny were drinking their own Kool-Aid. They always seemed completely sincere about Zolar being real whenever they talked to him. And it wasn’t his job to probe. This wasn’t a trial. This wasn’t a confessional. This was *entertainment*. His job was to market entertainers, authors, actors, producers, rock stars. He tried not to think too hard about the product itself. After all, everyone he worked with was living in one fantasy world or another. A lot of his clients were far crazier than James and Sunny, truth be told.

Sunny accepted an invitation to do an interview with Rolling Stone Magazine. The questions were direct, and sometimes harsh:

Why didn’t Zolar just go through you to begin with, Sunny? Why the letter? And why not write the letter in English from the start?

“Those are good questions. And the answer, I hope, will be seen as disarmingly honest. Zolar chose to reveal himself the way he did because he knew it would be the best way to generate publicity and gather people’s focused attention on his very serious message. Why he chose this way rather than a more direct way is the empirical evidence you are witnessing at this very moment. I’m being interviewed in Rolling Stone. His way worked. Your way may not have.”

Why did Zolar choose an unknown person, Sunny? What’s so special about you? Why didn’t he choose a religious leader, or Oprah?

“This is not something Zolar will answer for me. So I have no response other than to say that these other people you mentioned already have an agenda for themselves. It’s possible they would have been seen as suddenly unstable, literally losing their minds. Especially if they stayed with it through all the criticism they would be sure to receive. I was, I suppose, an open channel, although I never thought of myself like that before. I had no agenda. I was just a college student. But the most important thing I can tell you is, this is not about me. It’s about listening to what Zolar has to say.”

You were majoring in film and acting. Good job! You made it!

I understand what you're getting at. But believe me, I was never *that* good! Ask my professors! Without a doubt though, the things I learned in my two years of college *has* helped me get through this. And I'm assuming Zolar saw my interests as a net positive when deciding to choose me.

Why does this “entity” or whatever it is, even bother caring about us? What’s its motive?

“I have no idea what motivates Zolar to do this. Maybe there is no motive except our best interests. I know that’s hard to imagine. But I keep assuming that.”

Why now? Why didn’t this guy show up a thousand years ago?

“Maybe he did. Maybe he’s tried telling us these things a thousand times before. Maybe the message keeps getting mangled over time. Or forgotten entirely. Hopefully, this time will be different.”

So you’re going to become rich from all this. How much will you give to charity? Or are you going to buy a house in Beverly Hills and retire now? Or, will you and James start a rock band next?

“For your information, I grew up in Beverly Hills. I lived that life. And I don’t want to live there anymore. Money is not a need of mine, and is not my motivation. And I don’t sing well, and can’t play guitar, or dance! On the other hand, I think I deserve to be paid for writing a book, and participating in a documentary. Remember, the information on the website is free to everyone, and will remain so. That being said, James and I do also intend to start a nonprofit foundation promoting Zolar’s ideas and thoughts. But the bottom line is, this isn’t about me, what I can or can’t do, or how much money we might make. Let’s not lose sight of the fact that Zolar is trying to warn us all that unless something

changes inside of us, unless we each get what he's saying, we are walking ourselves right off a cliff, and there won't be a way to climb back up. And we're not promoting a new religion, or building churches, or competing with other religions to tell you this. The message itself is FREE. And it's clear. And frankly, we don't have time to debate the motivations of others at this point."

What is your friend, James Cowell's role in all this?

(This was the answer that made the biggest splash, and why Sunny made the front page of *People* magazine's November issue):

"James is my best friend. He's just a great guy with pure intentions. He offered to help me when all this happened. He didn't run. He didn't call me crazy. And please keep this a secret, but as of last night we're engaged to be married. We love each other very much. We're going to spend the rest of our lives together. I guess some might call it a match made in heaven!"

Unflappable

July Jameson was thrilled, loved the bit about the engagement. "A match made in heaven!" *Perfect!* Sunny was a natural.

The second documentary by Malcolm Manning was about Sunny being dragged down and treated like crap by the evil press. They showed her smiling, unflappable, patiently answering the paparazzi's ugly personal attacks as she stepped out of her hotel holding hands with the ever shy, handsome, but nerdy looking James.

The film also included Sunny admonishing her devoted followers not to begrudge the press and their attacks on her, saying that they sometimes had very astute questions, and were only trying to protect the public in their own way. "There are too many scams and pretenders with bad intentions out there. We all have to be careful of those kinds of things."

After this second documentary was released the personal attacks virtually vanished for a while, even if the intellectual skepticism remained. Sunny was too kind to hate, too real to doubt. She was becoming one of the darlings of the entertainment world.

July, Bridget Fonda, and the Shrink

July Jameson pulled into his circular driveway after a long day of work. The man had not often been snookered, especially by a client. But he felt something queasy in the pit of his stomach. This either meant he needed a double dose of Alka Seltzer because of the slimy Mexican restaurant he'd been dragged to by his crazy teenage "boy band," or, well, maybe it was Sunny.

They had been working together for well over two years now, and she was starting to get under his skin. He was starting to watch her old YouTube posts, and actually read her book. When she was around he couldn't take his eyes off of her. Sometimes he even caught himself in the shower, or driving to work, thinking about some of the things she was saying, watching her beautiful mouth speaking those very disorienting words.

As he entered the house, his bejeweled wife was, as usual, wearing makeup as thick as icing on a birthday cake. Her lipstick made her lips look like two ropes of red licorice. The plastic surgery she'd had on her double chin now made her lips look too low. But not entirely grotesque. In fact, there was something sexy about it.

She was coming out of the kitchen with a tray of chips and salsa to share before dinner. He tried to be polite as he turned it down. "I just had Mexican for lunch."

She didn't seem disappointed. There wasn't quite enough for the two of them anyway.

"Beth, I just can't believe what I'm about to say, but this Sunny girl is really starting to get to me."

“How so?” Bethany’s first thought was – if he’s fantasizing about this girl like he fantasized about cute thin little Bridget Fonda when he represented her years ago I’m going to swat him, I swear to God. He’s too old for this kind of thing.

“Sometimes I almost. . . no, I can’t say it, you’ll think I’m crazy.”

“Does she look like her?”

“Who?”

“Bridget.”

“For God’s sake, Bethany, don’t be ridiculous. Stop with the Bridget thing. I had a crush on her from afar. Nothing happened. But the way she looked in those tight jeans throwing a baseball from the pitcher’s mound at Yankee Stadium in *It Could Happen To You* just broke me. I’m human.”

“Mmm, hmm.”

“I’m serious now, Beth, do you want to hear this or not?”

“Of course, dear.” She regained her hostess-like demeanor as she rearranged the chips and salsa, placing it closer to where she was seated.

“Sometimes I think there’s a one-in-a-million chance that this girl might be telling the truth. She’s very *very* convincing.”

Out of habit, he reached over and took a few chips, feeling a tweak in his mid-back as he lurched over to scoop up a tablespoon of salsa, which was almost out of his reach. He cupped his free hand under the concoction so as not to stain his white shirt imported from Spain (he ruined the last

one in a similar way) and pushed the whole thing in his mouth at once until his jaw began quivering involuntarily.

He rushed to swallow since he firmly believed in not speaking with his mouth full. He found it disgusting when his clients talked to him with their mouths full of food, or when they ignored the little drips of white aioli sauce zigzagging out of the corners of their mouths. All because they were in such a damn rush to make themselves heard. They couldn't wait another second to hype themselves *to their own attorney*. That's irony. That's just weird. In fact, that's *book material* some day! He always fantasized about writing a "tell-all" book about all these egotistical fops. Bridget Fonda would be politely excluded. She was flawless, that girl.

"I know it's crazy, Beth. And I by no means trust my judgment about these things. I mean, I remember one night Ozzie Osborne got me so stinking drunk that he actually convinced me it was morally agnostic for him to bite off the head of a live bat on stage."

"Do you know how many times you've told me that disgusting story?"

"Yes, and I know I promised never to tell it to you again right before dinner, but I'm just saying. . ."

"Try to keep your promises once in a while, sweetheart," she smiled.

". . . . She's just a very, very charismatic girl. Half of it is that she's not trying to be, you know? She has no swagger about her. No sense of entitlement. No haughtiness. No raging ego. No clinically definable madness I can see through." He stopped, suddenly deep in thought, his voice lowered. "She's so sincere about this Zolar character. She's

either the best scam artist I've *ever* met, and I've met quite a few, or something truly *strange* is going on. . . ." He laughed nervously.

He was met with dead silence.

"I'm kidding, of course, about the Zolar thing," he quickly added, trying to recover before things got too weird. Beth was never going to understand. She would call his therapist and book an appointment for him, and that's about as far as she might venture into such nonsense.

"Maybe she's schizophrenic," Bethany offered, guzzling down her glass of red wine. One more glass before dinner might be fine tonight.

"No, I called Dr. Borack. Remember him? The psychiatrist?"

"Michael Jackson's?"

"Well, I don't think that he officially. . ."

"He *was* his shrink, dear! If you believe the rumors. But okay, go on."

"Anyway I called him last Tuesday, and I said to him, have you seen the documentary on my client called, Sunny? He said yes, of course. I said, well, what do you think? Is she a certified nut job, or what?"

"And you know what he says to me?"

"What?" She leaned forward. Gossip = oxygen.

He leaned forward as well. "He said, 'The Zolar girl, she's an interesting kid. I actually submitted a question to her last week!'"

"*Oh my God*, the entire world's got a screw loose," Beth gasped.

"Well, yes, I suppose so. . . ."

Sunny Times

Fame is complicated and time consuming -- accounting, investments, speaking engagements, book signings. When they were “home” – they’d bought a house in Malibu -- they tried to create a normal routine. If there is such a thing as normal for twenty-one year-old media mega-stars.

James would work out downstairs in the home gym overlooking the green frothy Pacific ocean. She would try to cook, despite the genetic handicap she inherited from her mother. The kitchen had views of the rose garden. The ceiling had copper pots hanging from iron hooks directly above the blue granite kitchen island. She would cut and slice and dice all the food on the island counter, which came with its own sink. She would serve the meal to him proudly each night. But the lack of cooking genes were hard to overcome. Anything more adventurous than a peanut butter sandwich cut four ways with a very expensive butcher's knife was destined to get burnt and tortured. Her spicing abilities were comparable to those used by the cooks in a federal prison. They were usually sadists and had ill-intentions. She on the other hand was just simply terrible.

After her culinary mea culpa James would try to save the day. Because they were both still hungry. He would clang about improvisationally, and she would hear things sizzling and begin to smell alluring aromas while reading her book in the living room rocking chair, or while meditating on the thick white rug in the bedroom. She’d sneak a look in once in a while and watch him flipping things in the pan and stirring a thick concoction on the back

burner, and she would kiss him on the cheek when he thanked her with complete sincerity for the lovely "appetizer." Afterwards, he would clean whatever she may have burnt, never saying a word about the events that led to this added chore.

Cooking home was far better than going to a restaurant these days. Because they'd be mobbed. Even in Malibu.

A thin tip-toey woman came up to Sunny the other day during her main course and whispered her admiration for her and "her beautiful work." She reached into her large purse, "Can you autograph my Yogananda book? Just write, 'To Helen of Troy, from Zolar.'"

Then there was the young woman holding her kombucha, with added immune boosters, in one hand while placing a blank piece of paper in front of Sunny with the other hand. Sunny signed it with her usual flare, creating an incomprehensible signature. "Oh, what beautiful handwriting you have, or is it. . . *his*? Anyway, enjoy your. . . you eat *meat*? Oh, how. . . interesting. Have you ever heard of 'Praise, Don't Braise?' It's a beautiful organization run by my very good friend, 'Godhead Smith.' I think his real name is Stanley Krachner. Have you heard of him? He's writing a fabulous vegan book but he needs a publisher. . . speaking of which. . ."

Meanwhile, one thing – one very, very dark thing – stayed with them day and night: Whenever their minds were able to focus and come to rest, it all came back to "the lie." The fact that Zolar was a made-up thing, conceived while they were making love on a Catalina hillside overlooking the wild mirrory sea. It was a *joke*. It was never

supposed to work, no matter how much they wanted it to. It was a summer film project.

The joke had become a massive responsibility now. They were swamped with speaking tours, and academic lectures based on the powerful words spoken by someone that wasn't real.

The message that evolved was just an amalgam of Hindu and Buddhist thought, along with positive thinking, a biblical dose of do unto others, and a dash of good old hell 'n brimstone to add a sense of urgency.

James had a fairly vast knowledge of all the major religions from his studies at UCSD. He furthered his three college years of learning with online articles. He would erase his search history every night, just in case.

Sunny had never studied religion or spirituality. But she would listen to James talk for hours, asking questions, demanding he clarify, dig deeper.

Sometimes they would have philosophical discussions late into the night about these things. Was the Bhagavad-Gita a metaphor for the fight one must have with one's own mind and thoughts? The reluctant warrior must do battle with his base desires?

These were sweet and beautiful nights, before they were trying to form new ideas about life and death from a magical seed they'd planted.

Sunny had been playing the role of Zolar's channel for over two years now. She was capable of writing her own lectures without James' help. Talking to people without needing James' prompts. She knew how to play the role effectively, in fact, perfectly.

She even told James that sometimes she no longer knew where these thoughts of hers were coming from. She just seemed to allow herself to speak, without any forethought, and all this wisdom would come out, and she would listen to the things she was saying along with everyone else.

"James, do you have a minute to talk?" Sunny said. She was standing at the door of his office.

"In five minutes," he promised, waving her off with his hand as he tried to answer the last dozen emails of the day.

"I think you should stop now. It's about us."

He looked sideways from the computer and met her gaze. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

She smiled.

He stood up. "A movie deal? Full length?"

"The movie of a lifetime, James."

She waited for his brow to furl in confusion. She loved that look.

"What are you talking. . . ?"

"The movie is called 'Our Child.'

"You're. . . *pregnant?*" he whispered.

"Mmmm. . . ."

"*Pregnant? Really?*"

She smiled at him, but her eyes glistened with tears.

"Ohhhh *my God!*" He leaped up in the air and started pacing. She was standing there with her arms wide open.

"This is amazing, Sunny. I'm. . . *You know what?* We have to start canceling tour dates. You can't be doing this with a baby on the way. You'll need to rest."

"Slow down, James," she laughed. "I'll be okay. I'm young and healthy. It gives me joy to do the tours. And London will be fun. And Paris looks *amazing* in the pictures! Won't it be fun to go?"

"Yes, but. . . ."

"The baby will be okay."

"*Okay?*"

"James. We're okay. We're very okay. We're a family now."

A Book Inside a Book

Sunny wrote the outline for their second book, "WOW!" on her own. When she was finished with the conceptual bullet points she showed it to James. He put on his wire-rimmed glasses and read this:

~All the profits from this book will be going to the Zolar Center, a charitable institution we are creating. The book will be titled what we originally called our website, "WOW!" which stands for "A World of Wisdom."

~But there is another WOW. The word, "wow," reminds us to experience life for what it truly is. Amazing. Right here, here before us, all the time. It is the kind of wonder we might call "awe," or "ecstasy," where all souls and minds wish to exist for all time. We want to help you get to that place as often as possible, until in the end you become it.

~When you experience any form of pure love or wonder or ecstasy you feel totally "connected" in some inexplicable way. In fact, it feels better than anything else you have ever experienced. It's what we all strive for *every second*, whether we realize it or not.

~But our mind is not skilled enough to connect to WOW all the time. Our mind often plants spiritual land mines, like "searching for happiness," or reaching the of a goal, or marriage, or becoming a parent, or making a lot of money, all of which are destined to make things worse *if you're not*

connected in the first place. Because even though you may be reaching out for something potentially wonderful, you are destined to have it all blow up and shatter into pieces when insurmountable challenges arise, because you didn't set the base. The key is, before we can be truly successful at anything, or happy for longer than a few minutes at a time, we have to know how to become truly connected to something real.

How Can I Connect to WOW?

~As we mentioned in our first book, Zolar says there is a “continuum” of energy in the universe that is in an eternal state of ecstasy and wonder. Your soul, when it attempts to reach out to that purely ecstatic place, becomes closer to being connected *simply by the act of reaching out for it.*

~Those who insist on staying asleep by not even attempting it, or who stop reaching out to The Continuum because their personal goals become too important, become lost in a state of nothingness. Their souls exist in psychic and spiritual emptiness. If they stop reaching out in pure awe or wonder, after their life is over their soul “dies.” It finds itself adrift, and eventually disperses into non-existence. All the while The Continuum is lit up like an infinite string of stars, an unreachable dimension away.

~In fact, the *only way* to permanently “die” is if your soul loses connection with The Continuum.

~Currently, far too many humans on earth are not reaching out to connect with it. All they want to do is win the internal game they are playing. But that illusion is bound to fail them. And harm them.

How do you make sure your soul, and not your mind, is in control of your life?

~Notice which thoughts and actions help you reach out to WOW, and which ones prevent it. Try to follow any *succession of thoughts or actions* that lead to a pure state of awe. All other thoughts or actions need to be shifted away from the dark energy – the dark energy that exists everywhere, including right here on earth.

Life on earth is like a hologram of The Continuum. The connective shift happens when your thoughts merge with any one of the following:

Unconditional love

Unconditional giving

Unconditional compassion or empathy

Forgiveness without judgment

Gratitude for all things, including forgiving the things that lead to pain

Pure joy shared with another

You can add many similar thoughts or pure feelings. Any thought or motivation that leads to kindness and *wonder* is a connection.

These are the keys that connect you back to the natural state of the soul.

Some of you may be saying, “Yes, I know most of the things you are saying are true in a general sense. But it’s extremely difficult to train the mind to actually *do it*.”

That’s true! Of course! So this next thing I'm about to tell you is *VERY important*... It’s good news! Zolar says:

“Your soul does not have to succeed at connecting with The Continuum at any given time! Or ever! Success is not necessary. Because even the attempt to reach out is a step towards The Continuum. Contrarily, each time you ignore the opportunity to reach out, it’s a step away.

Awakening, or Death

~If your goal in this life is simply to be happy by having continuous good fortune and avoiding suffering, it’s a trap!

~If you attempt to be happy by putting a demand on others, or by allowing more greed or fear to grow in the world by your attempt, then that attempt cuts you off from The Continuum.

~If you attempt to be happy by gaining material things through “positive thinking,” then you are using that positive thinking for exactly the wrong purpose! Positive thinking only works to your benefit in the spiritual realm. In fact, any

goal to succeed purely on the material plane will most often will pull you in the wrong direction.

~If enough humans fall away from The Continuum, the earth itself will become a place without light. It will be an abandoned place without connection. Humans, animals, everything on earth, will suffer. Eventually a living earth will no longer exist in any form.

What you do with this knowledge is your choice.

Zolar says:

Reach out to beauty without the limitations of thought.
Travel intuitively towards the wonder.
Know that you are connected even when you attempt these things.

~Zolar cannot magically alter your soul's course. We can only hope this book, these words, will help point you in the right direction, and give you the inspiration to *try*.

~You have no choice but to choose one reality or the other: Connection, or disconnection. This is your true destiny: *to choose. Life, consciousness, forces you to choose.*

Part V

Keeping Buzzy

A few months later *WOW!* the book, was released worldwide.

The reviews were, by and large, positive, although interest in Sunny and Zolar was waning. They were now old news. They were put in a category that included a hundred other self-help books whose authors marketed their own variations of sanity or a sure ticket to the good life, or the after-life.

They were also getting more wacky responses from the general public, like "If Zolar is real why doesn't he go on TV like a real space alien would and freak everyone out? Like Gort in the original version of 'The Day the Earth Stood Still?'"

And: "Sunny and James -- how can you guys "reach out" when your arms are holding so much money?"

And: "Why do you want to start a new religion when every time a religion is born it ends up starting a war?"

They also tried to deflect the cynics who called Sunny and James "boring Buddhists," "socialists," "communists," "anti-capitalists," "anti-American," "gutless new-age wimps," "anti-Jew," "anti-Christian," "anti-infant," since how were infants supposed to reach out to The Continuum, and what if they died before they had a chance to "reach out"?

They were also labeled, "Simplistic Positivists," and "The Darkness Police."

Critics penned well-thought-out catch phrases, each of them hoping to make a name for *themselves* by making theirs the catchiest of catchphrases.

The news that really upset them, inevitable as it was, came from hearing that "Zolar Séances" were being held all over the world, which were leading to "Zolar Prayer Gatherings," which were leading to self-anointed leaders of these "Zolar Prayer Gatherings," who were then starting to dictate in no uncertain terms what gatherers should do and think, with terrible consequences if they dared disobey.

Sunny and James started every lecture on their world-wide book tour by reminding people that they didn't want to start a new religion. Zolar didn't want anyone starting a new religion or holding séances or gatherings. Zolar didn't want anyone praying to him. Zolar didn't want anyone calling themselves, Saints of Zolar. Or Devotees of Zolar. Or Monks of Zolar. Or, a Zolar Priest. Or "Jews for Zolar!" (That was an outlier. The guy was an ex-follower of Jews for Jesus.)

Zolar also didn't want songs written for opening or closing ceremonies, created for every chapter of the book, which was to be read out loud by the Zolar Priest! In fact, Zolar didn't want anyone to quit their current religion. There was no need for that.

Ultimately, bringing up any specific religion just got people riled up.

"Buddha was more than a messenger," whispered a Buddhist monk to a newspaper reporter, who was

interviewing him outside of Sunny's hotel as he sat cross-legged with his eyes closed. The reporter was sitting cross-legged too, in a black suit, holding a mic up to the monk's mouth.

Sunny and James were certainly creating a buzz now. Not that they wanted this kind of buzz.

But July Jameson was beside himself. "Any buzz is good buzz," he reminded them. "You kids are doing a great job!"

Two Endings

In Paris everything changed. *Paris!* A place they had dreamed of going someday, and now they were going as literary royalty. But the shift was coming. They couldn't know. But the game would soon be over.

They had just come from London. They took the Eurostar under the English Channel and arrived at their hotel near Tuileries Gardens in the late afternoon. They ate a picnic dinner, French style – they shared a baguette, some cheese, some fruit – near the lake. They watched little boys and girls playing with wooden sailboats, gliding away and turning back again, using the ripples as their motors. The sun was still high at nine in the evening. Time felt so different here. All time.

They thought about spending a few months in this place someday, maybe after this long grueling tour was over, and after the baby was born. Maybe they could play with the baby in a park nearby where they had seen a swing set and a merry-go-round. Maybe they would hire an au pair to come along so they could go out at night, as anonymous tourists.

White marble statues loomed over them as the sun finally set. Reminders of lives and legends long past.

They went to bed at midnight. Sunny was exhausted after another long day. But she was restless, unable to fall into a deep sleep, and at dawn she fell ill.

She thought it was morning sickness at first, but then certain signs, the bleeding, the cramping. All at once she thought she was going to die.

James was trying to call a doctor. But then it happened, too fast. And afterwards she found herself curled up on the bathroom floor, nearly unconscious. A life had ended inside of her.

There was nothing either of them could have done. It was no one's fault. That's what she kept chanting to herself.

Now she lay in bed, as weak and sick and as she had ever been in her life. At fault, it seems, was her body. It had failed her. She was a failure – that's what she kept thinking despite knowing it wasn't really true, those thoughts weren't real. Nonetheless, she was becoming depressed, crying, sinking fast.

James was equally devastated. He tried to hold her but she turned away from him. "Stop. Leave me be, James," she whispered.

They'd have to cancel the tour now for sure. They should have stayed home to begin with. They should have cancelled the tour before it even started. As soon as they'd found out. . . .

Then maybe. . . .

His thoughts turned vicious, "I should have protected them both. I could have prevented this. I should have insisted we stay home, insisted Sunny rest, just lounge around in the backyard with flowers blooming, cook meals for her, give her prenatal vitamins with a tall glass of cool spring water. Sing to her at night. This was all my fault." He felt as if a piece of him had died in the middle of the night.

He almost said aloud, "Things can't get any worse." The darkest moment of his life was washing over him, with Sunny as distant as a thunder cloud. Their life had been so blessed, so easy since the day they'd met. Until this.

And then, as if on cue, just as he thought the words, “Things can’t get any worse,” the phone rang.

It was James’ mother. Through her tears she told her son that his father, James XXXII, had died a few hours ago of a heart attack.

He was speechless.

“Hello?” his mother kept saying. “Hello, can you hear me, James?”

“Yes.”

“Will you come to the funeral?”

“Well, Mom, I can’t know right now. Something terrible has happened here as well.”

Internal Memorial

Gwen was free of him now. At least there was that. James XXXII would never paw after her again. Would never correct her grammar again, or tell her that her homemade chocolate chip cookies lined up on the cookie sheet looked like dots of code, with each chocolate chip representing either a letter or a concept. He would then proceed to eat a dozen cookies before taking his next breath. Early in their marriage she would laugh at things like that. Then at some point it wasn't funny anymore.

She came to see him as eccentric and self-centered and gaining too much weight. But now? What if he were still here to quickly drink the cold juice she had just served herself, sneakily gulping at it as she turned to get a napkin?

What if he were here to make her tea when she came home late from work, or to open the door for her when they went to a nice restaurant.

She remembered the one suit he owned, still hanging in the closet next to his oafy black dress shoes, and a rack of ties so old he joked they would eventually come back in style. She joked in return that she would hang him with the gray one someday.

She remembered when he had a head of hair, before he had gotten so overweight and aged so rapidly, when he would walk into the room and pick their little boy up in his strong arms and swing him, until little James screamed with fear and excitement.

And she remembered all the times he insisted on taking her shopping for new clothes — he knew her style. He could always find something pretty hiding in the sale rack, something that looked just right on her. Made her eyes glow, and her waist look naturally curved.

And the time she broke her arm in a clumsy fall, he cooked for both of them for a straight month, never once complaining. He bought cook books, and a new set of pots. Twelve-year-old James became his sous chef.

This was the same man who admitted he was attracted to the babysitter when James Jr. was two, who never watered a plant in his life, who called daisies “buttercups,” and couldn’t tell the difference between a rose and a petunia. Some detective.

So many thoughts flooded through her, like the time they went on a rare vacation; he chose Italy. He promised it would be “the vacation of a lifetime.” Little James stayed behind with his paternal grandmother, God rest her eccentric soul.

As one would expect from a detective, he carefully read and marked up with a red pen all the tour books he'd bought, and tried to learn Italian from a neighbor's grandfather who came from the old world. He spent months planning every waking hour of their journey, mapping out the Spanish Steps, step by step. Rome, then Florence, then Venice, all planned down to the hour.

It was in Venice where on their last day, as a spontaneous act, so unlike him, he paid a king's ransom in Euros to take her on a gondola ride. He put his arm around her proudly when they were gliding down the canal. He looked around regally from the cushioned seat embroidered

with fake gold, amazed at the colorful buildings that seemed to spin giddily around them, bobbing up and down in his vision as if he were a child on a merry-go-round.

Drunk with life in that moment he kissed her cheek for no reason. It was tender. It was real. It was one of the few times he seemed to want nothing in return. In that moment he seemed to have everything he ever wanted. That was his one moment of true connection. His one great reaching out to The Continuum, and it reached back.

A Funeral Where All Hell Breaks Loose

Gwen's car pulled into the church. She straightened her black dress as she got out. She was neat, formal, serious. Her husband always looked like a crumpled mess the few times she could drag him here. He would purposely not shave. He was who he appeared to be -- a mess outside and inside. She was devout. He made fun of her faith, and the presiding priest, who he claimed was an egotistical moron.

This same priest now came over to her and acknowledged her like a long lost friend, although he had just seen her on Sunday. And every Sunday before that for as long as he could remember.

He was a very odd man. Secretly, she had to admit she didn't like him, although she would never have said that to James, or anyone. James once called him a pompous putz seconds before entering the church. His sermons were hideously boring. But this church was the church Father Raymond used to preach in, before his untimely demise. Why they replaced such a wonderful man with such an incompetent yo-yo was beyond her.

In the end, she was too loyal to Father Raymond's memory to find another church. Even her heathen husband had admired Father Raymond from afar.

Now, ironically, one of the people her husband hated most was going to eulogize him.

Did this man even know her husband a little? He would have to rely on the form he asked her to fill out yesterday.

"Gwen, I'm so sorry." He put his hand formally on her shoulder seconds after she got out of her car. "I'm so so sorry,"

"Why?" she thought. But she dared not say it aloud.

She sat in the front row, of course. The casket was placed beneath an enormous reenactment of Jesus suffering on the cross. She decided to keep the casket closed. For his sake. If he saw who was eulogizing him he might just get up out of the casket and make a run at him. Plus, James Jr. wouldn't be here. She would hate to have his after-life self look around and see that. She knew he'd be waiting for a final goodbye kiss from his son. It wasn't going to happen.

Her son couldn't make the funeral for obvious reasons. Her heart sank and she became lost in inconsolable grief as she silently mourned the loss of her only grandchild. In some ways the loss felt worse than the loss of this stubborn old weirdo. He represented the past, even when he was still alive. Her grandchild was her future. Grandma Gweny. How she looked forward to holding that baby in the rocking chair with the needle point seat cushion. Yes, well, maybe someday, after some time, they will. . . .

The priest abruptly interrupted her reverie and began the service.

Friends that James XXXII used to play cards with were gathered in one group of seats, speaking a little too loudly, already drunk.

A few other friends that James knew from his crossword puzzle club sat pedantically sober on the other side, each with a wrinkled gray suit. Every one of them wore glasses. Damn crossword puzzles damage the eyes, she thought, shaking her head at the waste of time, the waste of

life, connecting those little words together, across and down. For what purpose?

Was anyone else here? She glanced around quickly. No relatives on either side of the family. They were all dead. Ramona, his old girlfriend, had also passed. His one true love before they met. He said she reminded him of a character named Ramona in a Henry Miller book.

He read books endlessly, but had only read that one Henry Miller book. The first sentence of the first chapter was oddly stupid. "Woof, woof, woof!" What kind of nut would start a book like that?

When Ramona died a few years back, it crushed him. He was never comfortable with death. It felt like the ultimate failure, of everything.

Even if James had read Henry Miller's entire life's works, or Henry James life's works for that matter, cover to cover, it seemed like nothing ever sank in. "Nothing much to it," he would declare as he ceremoniously slammed shut yet another book at the finish. She didn't believe it for a second. He was all bluster, but inside he was as sensitive as a dandelion sometimes. He would have been horrified to know that she knew that! He loved pretending he was tough.

". . . all gathered here today to mourn, yet also celebrate the life of, James the forty... ah, twenty. . ." he stumbled over the Roman numerals. Why would a priest be expected to know how to read Latin, after all? Gwen shook her head.

"James the thirty second, my gambling buddy," yelled one of his card playing friends.

It was totally inappropriate, of course. But the man had started the day with a Bloody Mary or two -- an appropriately named drink for attending church, he thought.

"Shhhhh," hissed one of James's deeply affronted crossword puzzle friends. "How *rude!*"

The priest said, "Yes, the thirty second," as he tugged at his glasses.

He continued, "James was a good man, an outstanding citizen, and a loving wife, I mean, *husband*. . . Gwen, uh, his wife."

This brought snickers from the congregation. The priest was beginning to sweat. His face moistened. His regular congregation was used to these harmless faux pas, but James' friends didn't belong to this church, and had never seen him in action before, and weren't about to let mistakes pass without mocking this troglodyte.

"Next thing you know he'll call him a Martian instead of an earthling," laughed one of his card playing buddies, nudging the card playing buddy next to him.

"*Shhhhhh!*" Spit flew from a gap-toothed crossworder a row across.

The priest had another go at competency. "James Coward, I mean Cowell, was a man of great compassion."

Another sputter of laughter arose from the back, this time louder. Hands were slapping on knees now. Things were getting out of control.

"Compassion for who?" said one of the crossworders, getting into the free-form nature of the ceremony. He thought everyone would understand that he meant James showed no compassion when he competed in the crossword

puzzle tournaments. “Not me. He was like Attila the Hun! No mercy.”

“Exactly!” said the old priest.

“*Exactly!*” the puzzler echoed back.

An embarrassed hush came over the sparse crowd. Even the card players were stunned into silence.

“*Here was a man . . .*” the priest’s words boomed – he had found his rhythm now – he could hear his suddenly sonorous voice echo back at him, reflecting off the high walls and stained glass windows. He wanted to raise his hand in the air to underscore the drama but didn’t yet know if it would fit what he was going to say. Anyway, no need for an organ player to create ambience, he thought, here is a moment where I can truly serve God and make my mark, maybe even steal away some of those overflow crowds at The First Church of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, with their clever little billboard sign outside, and all those pithy sayings they change every three months – “Come in for a faith lift,” it said one week. “Don’t let Jesus spend Sunday alone,” it said another week. Who makes up this drivel anyway? Father McLeary? He’d heard a few of McLeary’s sermons. They were as boring as the back of a playing card. Then he suddenly turns into Mark Twain with his billboard routine? Maybe *we* should get a billboard. . . . I could right junk like that in my sleep. “Come all ye face-full.” No. Well, given enough time I could easily. . . .

Here was a man. . . “married to a wonderful, pious, compassionate woman who doesn’t have an enemy in the world.”

“Or a friend in the world,” someone mumbled, remembering when his wife invited Gwen to a Mahjong game but was met with thunderous ambivalence.

Things were spiraling out of control. Here was where he would regain their attention in seconds. He had the power to do that sometimes. . . . “Yet this man, James Cowell, was *not* compassionate, not to his wife, or to Jesus the Lord, since he never once stepped into these hallowed halls except to doubt and mock, and now. . . to die!”

He turned his eyes squarely upon all of James’ doubting mocking friends who were suddenly staring at him like owls stunned by a full moon.

The congregation was silent at last, he thought. He had them in the palm of his hand! “He has us in the psalm of his hand...” something like that on the billboard would work. . . he too could be clever.

“*This man* also bore a son. His namesake. Who is now blaspheming his way to fame on the Internet, taking all the words of Jesus and turning them topsy-turvy.”

“Now wait a minute!” Gwen protested from the first pew.

The priest ignored her. He was almost to his main point. Mustn’t be stopped now.

“*Here is a son* who’s disrespect for his mother’s church, and God, and his family, is so heinous that he didn’t even bother to come to his own father’s funeral! *That’s* apparently what he thinks of his father, and the Holy Father!”

“Just a minute, you!” Gwen squealed, now in tears from the front row.

“What possible reason could he have had for missing the death of his father?” the priest’s words echoed

mountainously and hung there in the air, his pious finger now pointing right at her, fire and brimstone. *"What possible reason?"*

"You!" she screamed. *"You're the reason! Why should he be preached to by a silly awful man who only cares about himself?"*

Amidst dead silence she got up unsteadily. The hem of her wrinkled black dress caught on her pantyhose. She pushed the hem down daintily with one hand, then quickly exited the church in a slow walk. She was escorted out of the church amidst riotous applause. Tears filled her eyes. She waited outside by her car in the back of the church, pacing with anger and shame, until the hearse pulled up to take the casket to the funeral parlor.

She arrived at Matthews Funeral Home alone. All of James' friends went from the church straight to the bar across the street to recall the unforgettable grand slam that had just taken place. They reviewed the entire eulogy start to finish over draughts of beer and shots of tequila.

"The dude got nailed!" they screamed. *"Did you see James's old wife land that sucker punch? He walked right fucking into it. It was like the guy debating Dan Quail, remember what's his name? 'I knew Jack Kennedy, and Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy!'"*

"Yeah, she bailed us all out, that's for sure. How long were we going to have to sit there and listen to his bullshit?"

"We ain't gonna to be preached to by a silly awful man who only cares about himself," she screamed, and the priest's glasses start to fog up! He totally lost it."

"Then he tries to clean 'em and they fall off!"

“Falling from a great height. ”

“ . . . Oh God, it was beautiful!”

“I bet *he* could use a stiff drink right now.”

“Not in this bar. He’s *persona non gratis* around here.”

The destruction of a once famous idiomatic Latin phrase was followed by a long belch.

There were high fives all around.

Empty Room, Real Flowers

Gwen stepped into an overly air-conditioned vacuous silence. Imagine being deaf in a meat freezer.

The funeral director smelled as if he'd taken a shower in men's cologne. Brute? His breath smelled of alcohol and huevos rancheros. He greeted Gwen with sad-dog-eyes -- an expression he'd practiced a hundred times in the mirror, trying to emulate a photograph of a young Paul McCartney. But he ended up looking more like Christopher Lloyd in "Back to the Future" -- a little crazy, a little scary.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." Blah, blah, blah. His eyes echoed the words as best as he could. He wasn't sorry about anything, except having to work on a Sunday.

She said goodbye to James XXXII in a cold empty room. She was alone with him, as they had always been.

The room where the casket lay smelled strongly of air freshener. Dozens of plush chairs were lined in a row, awaiting no one.

There were more live flowers in this one room than she had ever seen in her life. This was costing her a crazy amount of money. But now, the show was over.

Sense-less

Have you ever seen clouds reversing their direction in the sky, hesitant and confused, with the wind whipping them around in senseless ways?

Clouds, floating so high, silently fighting the wind waves, unable to gain any traction.

But fighting for what purpose? Were they just meaningless puffy white gas bags set against a huge blue canvas, fighting against the natural course of time?

Have you ever felt like that?

Like you were going to drift apart from yourself and blow away in every direction all at once, before you even figured out who you really are, or deciphered where you were going?

Or, without even knowing why you wanted to travel across the sky in the first place?

Me too. I've felt that way too.

Zolar's Message to You

Sunny and James arrived home on a gray blustery day on the Malibu coast. Their big house felt long abandoned. Life felt missing from the rooms. The windows didn't seem to reflect anything. The views they remembered seemed to have gotten lost. The distant ocean seen from their backyard gazebo looked like a bowl of colorless dust. The roses had fallen and were being swallowed by the earth, bushes of thorns left standing. Their eyes had gone blind to the subtle beauty of these things.

Sunny was recovering, but James was not. For all his life he had been able to deflect his father's harmless craziness. Once he had escaped the iron-hard grip of a madman holding a gun in a park. He had heard the click of the chamber of that gun instead of hearing the sound of a bullet, knowing it would be Sunny's last sound heard on earth. He then felt Sunny's hand pulling him up from the ground with a strength he would never have guessed she had, so they could escape the madness of the moment together.

That meant all of his conclusions about life, and death, and afterlife, were drawn from the singular assumption that things would always turn out in his favor. He could rise above the madness.

But now after two deaths, just take a breath and follow the light, *right? Reach out to The Continuum!* What bullshit! How could anyone have believed what he and Sunny wrote and said? He couldn't even look himself in the mirror. His

thoughts were a monsoon, ripping out tree roots, blowing down road signs.

He had expected everyone else on earth to follow his advice, and survive suffering better than he could.

James also realized he was in many ways a reflection of his father – a detective with no true sense of observation. A man people would turn to for help, but inside himself he was helpless.

Sunny was sitting beside him. She was drinking a cup of tulsī tea as he lay there in silent agony on their bed.

“Sunny, we are completely snookering tens of millions of people begging for a lifeline. And what are we really giving them? A space alien televangelist with the face of a movie star? I can’t keep this up anymore. This isn’t doing anyone any good.”

Sunny leaned closer towards him but didn’t speak.

“I was *born* a hoax,” he whispered. “I’m not the 33rd descendant of James the 1st. In fact, I was born the hoax of a hoax. The lie of a *lie*! No wonder I ended up lying to everyone else.”

“I can’t imagine the sadness you feel right now.” She kissed his head like a mother might have done with a sick child and then touched his hand. “I feel like we had a life stolen from us – the baby was already beautiful. I knew it was a boy. I could feel his soul growing in me. But you – you lost the father, the son, and now the holy ghost, all at once.”

“Clever.”

“Am I just clever? Is that the way you see me? Why are you so cold to me now?” Her voice was still calm and tender. He was secretly amazed at her patience. “You are using all your brilliant air-tight logic against yourself, James.

But when you do that, either way, you lose. Either your logic is wrong, or worse, your logic is right. Personally, I think it's wrong."

"The irrefutable logic is -- I've failed you, and I'm *angry* about it! I should have said no to the tour, and kept you safe here. I should have stopped this lie about Zolar long ago and told the world the truth. I don't know why I let it go on this long. I really can't figure out what stopped me from confessing. I had so many chances."

"So you feel like a failure, a fake, a coward, weak, helpless. On and on. All those words that kill people's souls, they should be banned from the English language."

"Well, failure is also a feeling, and I can't shake it."

"Failure is going to happen most of the time we try *anything*. But the *attempt* is, well, that's what Zolar's message was, right? The attempt is what connects us."

"Are you lecturing me with Zolarisms now?"

"James!"

"Look, what's the point? I'm not going to be able to reverse time, or the things I've done, or the decisions I've made. I feel like I'm living at the oceanic bottom of me. I can't breathe there, and I can't escape. I have no capacity to attempt anything anymore."

"I've been there too -- rather recently, in fact. Don't you think? It's okay to grieve, James. We have to go all the way to the bottom, and feed off the algae and the minerals down there, where the nutrients are, before we know the next step to take. We can't just magically know the escape route. We can't just pre-map a way out, like you can when you're writing a book. You want to just drift away.

"That's the conclusion we come to at the bottom, feeling like we're breathing our last breaths. But then you know what? This is what happens: One day, you wake up to a morning just like yesterday morning. Except for reasons you can't understand, instead of feeling like you're drowning, you're back on land. You see beautiful things out the window again. The sky is more vibrant than you remembered it to be — maybe because you'd lost sight of it for so long. And suddenly, you're free."

"Sounds like we should create a board game. . . ."

"*Maybe!*" she expressed this word with a rare level of impatience and sarcasm. "But *listen to me*, James Cowell. *Here is the truth* -- you want the truth, right? I haven't been able to tell this to anyone. *Not even to you*, until now. Because, *because it's unbelievable* -- and I guess I just didn't have the courage before. But I have to tell it to you now."

She was anxious about what she was going to say. She took a deep breath as her eyes became wet with emotion. But suddenly her voice became clear and strong, "We think we *know* that we made this whole thing up, James! And maybe we did. Or. . . maybe Zolar has been setting this up since the very beginning! Since before we even knew it was the beginning. *Maybe the created is the creator*. Do you see?"

"Interesting, but ridiculous."

"The bullet didn't come out of the gun."

"*What?*"

"The gun! The madman's gun, James. Remember? He fired it at us from point-blank range but it didn't go off! The letter, in the letter it said:

'Meek as she may seem she has powers untold. Power to reverse the course of most of the energy on your planet, which is now moving itself into a harmful place; power to stop bullets aimed in her direction; power to change the very core of who you are.'

She looked at him with a strange expression, "Why did you write the part about bullets into the letter?"

"I meant bullets of cynicism and negativity. It was a *metaphor*."

"But James, think about it, what in the world made you choose a word like 'bullet' at that moment? It really didn't make any sense to reach that far for a metaphor and then not explain yourself. You're always quick to explain your metaphors. You're not a poet, you're a teacher. You *must* explain. It's who you are. But you didn't. *It was too far of a reach*, but you wrote it anyway. Why?"

"What are you getting at?" James laughed nervously.

"Maybe Zolar was speaking through you from the very beginning. Then through me. Maybe we're the ones who've been played."

"Wow."

"'Wow,' is right!"

"Very funny."

"You're not convinced."

He shook his head. "It can't be. I've never heard anyone inside my head talk to me. I've been in complete control of this whole scam ever since I invented the idea on Catalina Island, right in front of you, remember?"

"It was a mystical night. We fell into an altered dimension."

"Yes we did," he smiled.

“Yes. . . we did,” she repeated.

She became quiet: “This is the weirdest thing I’ve ever said to you, James, but I feel like I am hearing Zolar speaking to me right now, for your benefit, and he is saying, ‘Let me tell James something so irrefutable that it will change his entire perception of what’s going on right now.’”

“So you’re going to scam *me* now, for my own good?”

“Listen to what he just said, James! ‘Let me tell James something so *irrefutable* that it will change his entire perception of what’s going on, *right now*.’”

“Sunny, come on. . .”

“If I’m wrong, and it doesn’t change your perception, then you’re right, it’s a scam! *But what if it does?* Let me tell you, James. *Listen!* Here is Zolar’s message to you. . . .”

James, while still lying in bed, covered his face with his hands. Sunny sat above him. She closed her eyes, just like she used to do on the YouTube videos and the book tours.

“James, there is no need for you to know if I am real, or if I am your lie, or if I am Sunny’s lie. Consider me anonymous, or a dream. It really doesn't matter. The critically important questions are – If you were to attempt what I’ve asked all humans to attempt, would it help you right now? Is it wise to follow this guidance, even when you don't want to try? Or, even if you don't believe who or what I am?

"If attempting it does *not* help you become who you truly want to be, then discard it. I am a hoax. Another scam. However, if this guidance makes it easier for you to love, and to forgive, and to breathe more fully *right now*, despite the suffering, then why question how you received it? What's the point?

"I kept you and Sunny alive for a reason, James. His gun was pointed at *her*, but he would have killed both of you. He had more than one bullet in the chamber. . . ."

James took his hands away from his face and looked at Sunny sitting calmly next to him. She seemed surprised by what she had just said.

"Your task now, James, is to *remember* what you discovered during our time together, and to remember what you passed along to everyone who was willing to listen."

Sunny paused.

James sat up and whispered, "What exactly am I supposed to remember. . . *Zolar*?"

She smiled, but her eyes remained peacefully closed: "Remember to acknowledge the truth when you hear it, and from that truth, *reach out* to the one eternal moment, which is reaching back toward you."

The End