

# WOW!

*Gary Marks*

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## Letter from Earth

You have entered Zolar's world. Please read this carefully. 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 island 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:

## Letter from Space

*People of Earth:*

*I am of The Continuum. I am 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 our message, Earth as you know it will become a place without light.*

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

*If you do not succeed not only will your body die, but your soul will be erased. 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 the power to reverse the course of all the human life on your planet, which has, for far too long, been moving toward a harmful place; power to stop bullets aimed in her direction; power to change the very core of who you are.*

*If you do not listen, if you fail to decode her words into your consciousness and, more importantly, fail to act upon those words, 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 decoded Zolar's letter. His name was James Patrick Cowell XXXII.

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

When James was a young boy, he became so curious about his generational status he decided to research his ancestors. His mother refused to help him. But he was a very inquisitive and resourceful boy. Although there was no internet in those days, after a dozen library visits he eventually uncovered the truth: He was born a lie.

Instead of feeling depressed or deceived, he felt proud and excited. Because after endless hours at the library he realized he had deconstructed himself, *by* himself. He decided right then and there, when he grew up he'd 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 at one point came to the conclusion that the

earth in its present form, and the humans on it, might not survive much longer because of an alien presence.

He also came to believe that his own wife might possess superpowers given to her by the alien.

It was also possible he was being scammed.

A detective being scammed -- well, nothing could be more ignominious. If anyone found out, it would be a nightmarish ending to a thus far 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?

James Cowell XXXII certainly did not underestimate his wife, Gweneth. 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 information 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 enormous 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 him.

"I said 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."

Gwen hated his passive aggressive pseudo-intellectual attempts to exert his superiority. "And if we don't use good grammar, then what, Mr. Out of Work Detective? You think the grammar police is outside, ready to bust down our door and arrest us for illiteracy?"

"Are...."

"What...?"

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

"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 between them, like ripples in a river going nowhere.

And the stars would laugh. And the moon would flicker through clouds while time was passing.

Zolar would not be pleased.



## 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 to be a successful entrepreneur, 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 (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 in baseball due to his ridiculous wrist speed. (He would always pull the ball.) His legs were quite thin -- no thick calves for this boy, James -- yet he could run a marathon without losing the rhythm of his breath.

Young James XXXIII was always in control, it seemed. But not in an arrogant way, or a needy way. The control just seemed to happen naturally, maybe because he wasn't trying to control anything. Some would simply call this luck.

Below his thin calves were the sock-bare ripped red sneakers he wore all the time, even to the funeral of his grandmother. They never seemed to completely wear out, even after three years of walking, standing and occasionally running.

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, iPhone apps, new age music from the '90s, newly minted antique furniture from Ikea, Oreos, white bread, a sarcastic parakeet, 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 to miraculously show up one day), sporadic doses of Prozac and Xanax (for the naively unmedicated these are not the names of Nobel prize winning Russian novelists), and not least of all, empty white plastic one-gallon containers of frozen yogurt lined up 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 it melted.")

On this very typical summer night, after James Sr. and Gwen were done scraping the bottom of their free Caramel Marshmallow Twist, they 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 and completely biodegradable.

“Son,” his father cleared his throat, “we have something very serious to tell you.”

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

His mother giggled. She thought her son should be a stand-up comedian, but her husband disagreed. Lately, James Sr. just seemed annoyed at everyone. Detective work was very stressful. But having no work was equally stressful.

“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?” 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 or second chapter.”

“You have a gift,” young James offered.

“He looks like he's 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 the car! Right? I told you I’m a detective. And *no.*”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re a terrible kid. Unless you bring home a gallon of that Strawberry Toffee Swirl tomorrow night.”

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

“Put your shirt back on,” the father said, “there's no hot water left after your mother’s marathon evening bath.” He reached into his pocket and threw the car keys into his son’s outstretched hands.

“We’re getting a divorce, James,” his mother said quietly.

It was as if the word “divorce” was sacred, and had to be spoken in hushed tones, like the word “angel” or “magical” – a word that led to something life altering.

“You’re getting a divorce, *again?*” James said.

“We mean it this time,” said James XXXII.

James Jr. put his T-shirt back on and grabbed his summer jacket off the coat rack. “So you’re going to divorce Mom, and then you’ll survive for how many days before we find you walking around shoeless and starving to death? Mom's a Saint. You can’t live without her, and you know it.”

“She's divorcing me... this time. So watch your tongue, young man. What's the use. You’re too young to understand,” his father responded in an uncharacteristically soft voice. “You’re only nineteen, you know nothing about these things.”

## Sunny

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

Sunny had been James' girlfriend for two years. She was at UCLA majoring in film, while also studying acting and media relations. At the same time, James was attending the University of San Diego on a full scholarship, studying a wide array of subjects, from marketing to religious studies. Somehow, he dreamed of combining Sunny's interests with his someday.

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

L.A.'s night sky was dusted in a pleasant, 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? Apparently, the E.P.A. was at it again.

Through the eyes of young 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 thirty miles per hour.

“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 located down  
a side street, the exact location of which cannot be revealed.  
This was ground zero.

## Is 303 A Bit of a Stretch?

*Beyond Comprehension – “B.C.”*

*(No. Not real sure the Pope would enjoy the double entendre.)*

*Live a Life of Change – “L.L.C.”*

*(No, that would lead to trouble with the I.R.S.)*

*Controversial Radically Altering Prayer - (Oops, no.)*

*World of Wisdom - “WOW!” (With or without the exclamation point, they wondered?)*

James said, "Without the ! That way, if you put WOW in a mirror it's still WOW.

Sunny said, "And upside down, it's MOM."

James laughed, "And if you turn it sideways, it's 303."

Sunny furled her eyebrows, "That's a bit of a stretch, don't you think? I mean, what's the meaning of that?"

"I don't know. It doesn't have a meaning. But neither does an upside down MOM."

"True."

James began to doodle the number 303 anyway. What meaning might that possibly have? What could he come up with?

Sunny and James were always jotting down cryptic acronyms, discussing the pros and cons, then burning their notes. No one must ever find them.

WOW was an interesting one. But they decided that WOW! was better.

Mirrors, and Moms, and the number 303 lost out to some added level of excitement.

They had a lot of details to work out.

They knew they would most likely fail.

But as long as they had fun, they really 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.

Now that autumn 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 crummy little office downtown. He would save on rent and work virtually, like modern detectives do. 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 positives of this move from various angles -- commute time, gas savings, and no more lunches at the diner with those idiots he often got snookered into playing cards with. He'd be saving money just by limiting his gambling losses to the weekends.

On the other hand, transforming his son's old room saddened the elder James in a way he wasn't quite expecting. During young James' teen years the boy 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 his son seemed more than happy to move on and leave his past behind. His final words on the phone were almost like some kind of role reversal: "Just do it, Dad. Don't keep procrastinating."

James Sr. -- a *professional* detective, always brilliantly deciphering and decoding things -- painfully concluded that

his son was lost to him now. He was never going to live home again. He was all grown up. It was almost as if his little son, the boy who grew up in that room, was dead, in a way.

James Sr.'s mind kept the death theme marching along: The past would mostly go unremembered, he fretted. 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 while sitting in his son's creaky desk chair, sipping a beer. 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 wanted her to stay, and that he 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 besides his son? Gwen? He doubted it. 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. Forget the beer. This called for something stronger.

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*.

After a few stiff drinks everything became woozy and shimmery. He could see himself laying there in his coffin, and that half-witted priest Gwen occasionally drags him to on Sundays was giving the eulogy. James was watching the scene as if he were part of the church ceiling. The eulogy was terrible. But it didn't matter, because 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 now?

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, then dusted that now empty corner of the room, spiders scattering. He heard violins in his head with long slow vibratos. Then a choir singing Bach. 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 long ago.

He remembered his first girlfriend, his first kiss after dancing at a Twist 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, just before he kissed Maggie Stone. They were sixteen.

But the second he was finished with this pleasant, oft-visited reverie the violins came back. Was that a requiem mass of some kind? Mozart? Beethoven? One died young. The other went deaf. This was concerning.

Then he opened the closet door.

## The Chosen One

Murders were something James XXXII had only investigated a few times in his career. His sleuthing had never risen to the level of complexity and gore 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 step-by-step mysteries of a real murder. Not just competent, but *great*.

He wanted so badly to find a case that would be difficult to crack. He imagined walking the empty foggy city street one sleepless night, searching for a sign, then BANG, he puts all the pieces together in his head.

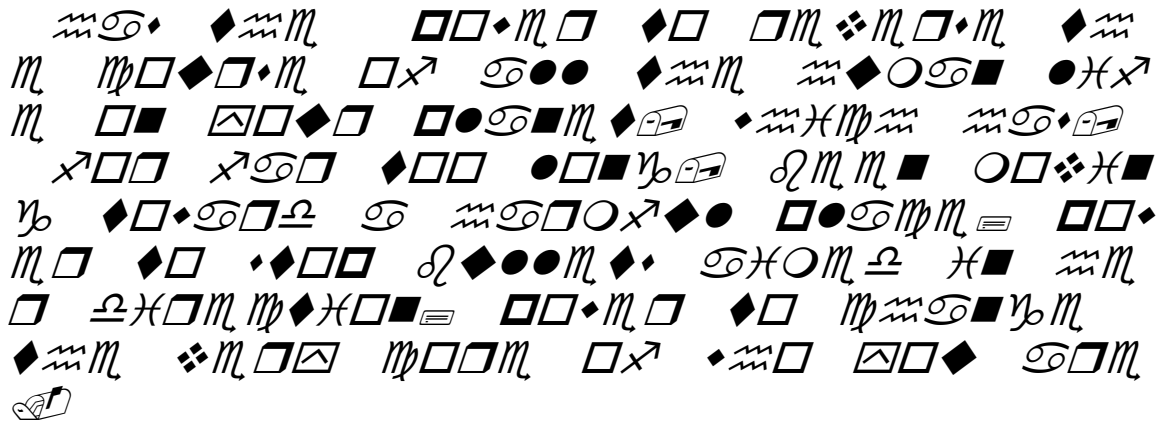
But this was the stuff of fairytales. The dispiriting truth was, he was out of work and bored. *More* than bored. Defeated.

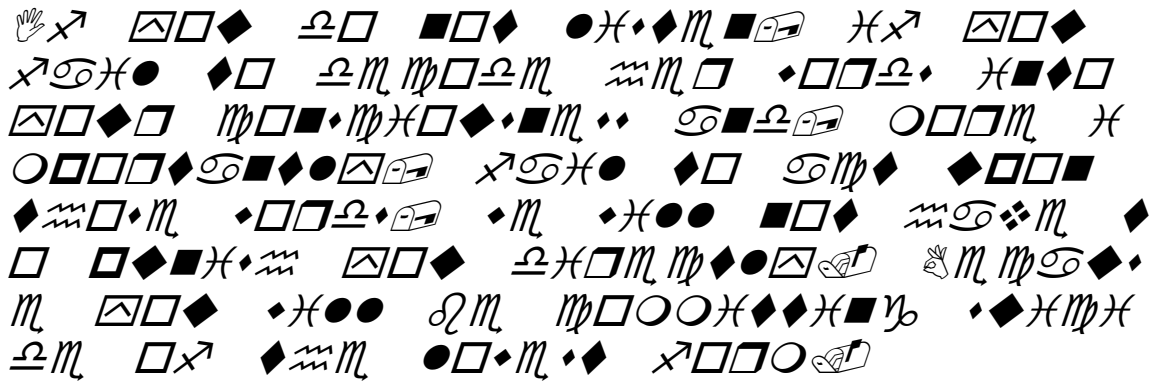
He prayed for inspiration as he cleaned and rearranged his son's furniture to become his.

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

It was a note, or a letter of some kind, rolled up in a tall glass jar, right in the middle of the floor of the closet. It looked to be 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 inebriated 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!”

James Sr. immediately downed a snifter of scotch to help him think things through. His son didn’t care about the note, but he had also admitted that he didn't know where it came from.

It looked like 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. It looked extremely complicated. And why would she bother? She was swamped at work every day. She came home dog-tired, cooked a simple meal for them, and sat in front of the TV until her eyelids began to flutter as 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 anymore, or his work, or lack thereof. Maybe she would have put divorce papers in the jar -- she would have gotten a good laugh about him finding *that!* 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 odd-looking symbols into a coherent formula, unless it was purely meaningless scribble that someone -- but *why* would



anyone have done that? *And how did someone get into his house without him knowing?*

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 in this business.

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 scotch before each new reading, he didn't know what to think. Half a bottle of scotch in, he came to two conclusions: One was that scotch, at least this scotch, tasted like salt-caramel with a hint of sea. The taste lingered for those like him with a highly sophisticated palate. Yes, he had decoded a taste into words -- a taste that was surely heretofore indescribable. The importance of this was debatable.

But the second conclusion was far more important: Gwen was either the author of the letter, or, maybe she was the one the letter was referring to. Why else would the letter have been put in the closet waiting for him to decode it?

He tried to look for further clues:

*"If you do not succeed not only will your body die, but your soul will be erased. So please follow instructions carefully..."*

*"... please follow instructions carefully..."*

*(Was this someone's attempt at a sense of humor?)*

“She will soon reveal herself to you...”

(*She?*)

“Meek as she may seem, she has powers untold.  
... power to stop bullets aimed in her direction;  
power to change the very core of who you are.”

“- - ZOLAR”

(*ZOLAR???*)

James was hooked into the game now. Could this be a code within a code? Zolar backwards is “Raloz.” He searched for anagrams... nothing was rearrangeable. Although “lozar” was close to the word “loser!” *Interesting!* But, no, that wouldn’t make any sense. Unless *he* was the “loser.” Was he wasting his time on an anagrammatic joke?

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 to question his code breaking skills... that was uncalled for. James took offense. He felt misunderstood. De-valued.

Granted, he wasn't Alan Turing. He didn't create a polyalphabetic substitution cipher with a bunch of rotors to

spit out the answers *for* him. But he didn't have to! He decoded the letter *without* some fancy gismo.

And now, to be disrespected about one of his few true gifts by his own son....

His son was lost to him. That was clearer than ever. His son was treating his own 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. There were a number of delicate subjects to broach.

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

"Does 'lately' include 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."

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 serious 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.

"*Drunk* is who you are! What are you doing to yourself? It's six o'clock on a Thursday night and you're sloshed. Look at yourself in the mirror! Look at that old loon, with his hair uncombed and his shirt untucked -- *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.

"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 are you saying, you silly man?" she yelled louder. She was starting to shake. Was she getting nervous? It seemed like he was finally getting to her.

"Anger isn't necessary," he volleyed, "now is it?" He squinted at her calmly.

"*You* are not necessary, you know that?" she screamed. "You are a human waste of time. You're stumbling around

the house with this idiotic letter clutched in your hands like a madman. 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, 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."

He stared at her, trying to assess....

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

Suddenly her tone changed. "You were unwise to reveal this to me. You know that, don't you?"

"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*. I might have to get rid of you, *right here, right now.*" She crossed her arms.

He assumed she was making fun of him. Yet being in this altered state of extreme insobriety also opened up other layers of possibilities.

"What would you like for dinner, you putz?" She began to walk into the kitchen.

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

She wheeled around towards him, "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 (they were serving 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 on tap.

Gwen ate a simple microwaved dinner that night, teary-eyed, as she sat in front of the TV. What had gotten into him? How had he become so crazy? The new millennium had not been kind. He used to be, well, he used to be a lot of decent things back in the twentieth century... that was our time. He was a decent man not so very long ago.

Snippets of a *Friends* re-run occasionally interrupted an endless stream of long irrelevant commercials. Time went by in a blur. She fell asleep in her soft green chair.

## Conception

Sunny and James 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 Goddess-like from there. 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, filled with passion, inhaled from the lining of the clouds. Everything seemed lightning bright, expansive. Wild. Free.

Then, all was quiet.

A space arose for sharing pure thought between them.

That's when it came to him. It was oddly brilliant.

Strangely connecting into so many things.

Still breathing hard, he whispered the plan to her as it unfolded in his mind.

He would need the secret kept, vacuum sealed, so that the idea behind the secret might expand across the world like the sky catching fire. He would need her more than ever now. And she would need him.

They laughed. They roared with laughter. They couldn't stop. Hour after hour the idea grew. More thoughts came. Detail by detail it was worked through. Until it became monumental, perfect, life expanding.

They had been searching for so long. All the time spent in their secret office exploring, seeking. Now it was here.

James and Sunny wrote a 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. suggested how much money he could save by turning the room into a home office.

They waited for him to discover the letter.

His father 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.



## The Various Parts of Parting

Gwen was the one who filed the divorce papers. She was not going to live with this gruff, careless 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. That's terrible. That man had infiltrated her heart and mind in every way, even with the metaphors she chose lately. Knee-high to a garbage can? That was just not *her*. She never used to think like that.

Of course, his heart was often kind and good, even now. And he was a good father, even now. He was quick to laugh at James Jr.'s jokes, even when they were pointed at him. Quick to joke back; quick to wink as if to say it was all in fun. He'd throw James Jr. the car keys. She never once saw him hand James Jr. the keys. No, he had to toss them. Then, he'd fake a frown if his son failed to catch them. "Mickey Owens," he'd mutter. This was their little inside joke, understood by James Jr. because of all the baseball history his father would yammer on about throughout his childhood. It was good for young James to be educated about the real world.

The old dope was also quick to blame himself rather than those around him when things went wrong. Drinking himself sick every time he concluded that, rightly or wrongly, he was inadequate. Or didn't make enough money to take us on a vacation to Tijuana.

After so many years — thirty years to be exact — with one man, she wondered, could another man actually be all that much better?

This is why she vowed, while still clutching the divorce papers, that 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 take them from the house along with the prettiest vases and teacups.

She would draw a warm bath at night in her new apartment, and dream endlessly, with no one rushing her to finish just so his drunken bladder could be drained.

She would sit in that bath for ten hours if she chose to, bubbled and perfumed, and sip 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 steal the remote from her, and eat a tuna sandwich late at night without having to endure him telling her that it made her breath smell fishy.

The nightgown would be made of real silk. It would make her skin feel pampered and sensual.

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 to throw out all the damn plastic flowers she had in every room, eternally frozen in a fake droop.

She wanted her own apartment? Wanted out of the house they had lived in for all these years? Fine. But the house would then be his, to decorate the way he wanted.

The second thing he would do would be to take all those petite teacups they never used and fill them with beer, scotch, Kool-Aid, Pepsi, iced instant coffee – *valuable things*, not tea from China, not coffee from Kona. Yes, he would fill the teacups 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 would be stuck with tepid cans of Coors, and packaged meat wet with water vapor. Never again! *Energy savings that, you stinkin' piece of... of... ex-wife!*

Then, the third thing he'd do would be to call an old girlfriend. But that was a little crazy, he had to admit. The only other girlfriend he'd ever had was dead from choking on a midnight sandwich while listening to The Mamas and the Papas. He'd heard the news from a mutual friend. The friend was dead now, too.

Nonetheless, the fourth thing he'd do would be, well, *was* there a fourth thing? Who was he kidding. Even his own son didn't care about him anymore. It would be far too awkward to visit him. This sobered him momentarily, which frightened him into taking another drink. So many friends

lost in time. So many. Then his own son. And now Gwen.  
But he was a survivor. He went back to re-reading the letter.  
What could it mean? And who was Zolar?

## Part II

### The Birth of WOW!

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

But then, what wasn't a hoax these days? Acai berries? Stomach vibrating belts? Presidents? Rap lyrics? Peace treaties? Reliable cars? Peacekeepers? Nuclear disarmament? Landing on the moon? The innocence of babies?

*Everything's 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 in the world these days, something good would come of the plan. Something beyond nasty online jokes, egomaniac critics, amateur 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 – light makeup, a silk blouse with blue jeans -- dressed in a way that exuded sincerity and intimacy but 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 during an interview:

“At first I thought, honestly, the man had gone a little crazy. I thought it was a hoax. Except the letter and the decoding of it came from a professional detective working in Los Angeles with nothing to gain by making the whole thing up. 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 when his father showed it to him.

“He was scared to show this letter to the world. He was afraid it would ruin his career. Nor did his son, or I, have any thought of sharing it. But the very next day 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, no gender, no form. Zolar lives in a dimension unknown to us. But soon our dimensions will merge. Yours and mine, with his. 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.' Death after death does not have to happen to any of us. It does not have to be our fate. The Continuum is there for us. But to merge with it, we have to listen, and ask ourselves if what Zolar is saying is true -- in order to save ourselves.

"Those words are similar to his warnings in the letter.

“I am apparently the one he is referring to in the letter. I don't know why in the world he chose me. And 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 all of you. I know that. In fact, I'm scared to do this video. I'm afraid of what will happen after I post it. But at this point, I'm even more afraid of not posting it.

“All I can tell you is, this is not a prank. And 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 that kind of thing. But the voice I have begun to hear is real. Zolar is real, or at least in some dimension of 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!

“Zolar told me he isn't willing to answer questions about material or superficial things, since there is no point to it, and he has no desire to change the natural course of superficial events. But he will answer questions about the spiritual world, our minds, our spiritual connections and disconnections, and our destiny.

“So I am inviting you to go to [WOW!.com](http://WOW!.com), where you can submit your questions to Zolar for free. Believe me, I have no intention of making any money 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 is there to lose? We will not collect personal information. In fact, you can leave your questions in the comment box below if you don't want to leave comments on our website. But from what I have experienced so far, the answers will be unlike any you can ever imagine.

“Also know this, according to Zolar, if we do not learn quickly, the price will be unthinkably devastating for all of us.”

The full text of the letter, decoded into English, then froze on the screen for sixty seconds.

Below the letter it said, "This letter will also be posted on the website where you can leave your questions: 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 very hot son, Zulu... U 2 R hot. Would you like to meet me tonight at the crossroads of Reality and Sunset Blvd?”

And this: “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 pulls teeth, just like you are pulling my leg.”

But they also had serious questions submitted. They agreed before their first video that if the questions weren’t good enough, they would make the questions up themselves. But they received 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 to moisten her mouth, trying to memorize her lines for the next taping.

James was setting up the video cameras. Yes, they would have two cameras set up 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 does have a sense of humor, even at his own expense, or more likely mine."

Her smile turned slowly into a shy serious look. Ever so humble. "Honestly, he is not trying to make the world even more somber than it already is. He's just trying to help us in a way I can only describe as, forever."

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 need to shut my eyes before speaking the answers so I can hear Zolar's response clearly.

"And I'm really sorry if it looks kind of fake," she shrugged. "It will simply allow me to be more precise with his answers.

"The first question is, 'Dear Sunny: How do you know this voice you're hearing is not just another part of you? Your own inner voice speaking to you, not 'Zolar?'"

“Actually, I don’t need to shut my eyes for this one. 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, or money. I don’t think he even believes what the letter says. But that’s exactly what Zolar is fighting against— cynicism, apathy, the kind of unconscious sleepwalking through life we are all guilty of.

“After I first 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. And not to be afraid. I asked him, why me? I told him that I *was* afraid. Including being afraid to be a spokesperson for something this important, because I was afraid I’d fail.

"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.

"By the way, I also asked him why he didn’t go to someone more famous to get a bigger audience? He said that I was capable of spreading the word, even though I wasn't famous. I spoke to my boyfriend, James, about the kinds of things Zolar was telling me. He told me he believed me, and that he would help me if I wanted him to. But he didn’t want us to become famous, or make money from this. He didn't want his own face shown. We’re in college. We have work to do to get our degrees. 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 any of this, or do anything to make this look like a scam, he would help me. He set up the cameras here in the studio.

We will edit things for the presentation, and see what happens. That's all I can tell you at this point."

She looked down at the desk where she was sitting. "Here are the next two questions, both from one responder: '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, with her voice slightly altered, slightly slower, deeper, softer, but also more confident-sounding.

"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 in you, for you. Therefore, the knowing of, or believing in, any one meaning can actually defeat, sometimes even oppose, the goal. But please know this, no one is threatening you for the sake of being mean or evil. I am not cruel or evil. The universe we share is not cruel or evil. I am simply warning you about *the truth*.... The way things are."

Sunny came back around to sounding like herself again, with just enough pause, speaking a little louder after coyly clearing her throat, "And the next is, 'What happens when we die?'"

Sunny nodded her head, to subtly signal that this was a question she was interested in as well. She closed her eyes and she waited, while secretly rehearsing her lines.

"Death, as you conceive of it, is not real. Or let's say, it doesn't have to be. 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 what you would call *the universe* is part of The Continuum. But there are patches of nowhere, dark places of no energy, with 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 for you personally 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 thoughts or 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. She says almost inaudibly, "I'm suddenly 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.

We hear James' voice in the background: "Just do some kind of sign off, Sunny. That should be enough." He says it off-mic, compassionately, his voice sounding techy and shy.

Sunny returns her gaze to the camera and says, "Okay, I have to go. Please know, I want to help you. I want to answer more questions, but I need to stop for now. 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.

## The Universe Goes Viral

If the second video had attracted only a few 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-case and worst-case scenarios. They figured the worst case scenario would be that the joke was over, and they would go back to their old life, back to school, back to choosing careers.

The best-case scenario was that the video would catch on, and somehow travel through internet space, rather than outer space, crossing the various social media mediums, and go viral.

To their surprise, views exponentialized every hour of each day. They hit seven-hundred-thousand views in a week. The original video was also getting hundreds of thousands of hits a day now. Their website was flooded twenty-four hours a day with the curious, the cynical, the clinically insane, the seekers, the newly self-described devotees, and some who claimed they had also been contacted by Zolar.

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 – sometimes 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, even though they had daydreamed about it. It started out as



a lark, a prank, a vehicle to practice what they were learning in college.

Now they had to deal with the fact that what Sunny was saying was being considered *fact* by many. Heresy by others.

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 YouTube livestream 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 the first two YouTube presentations jumped again, this time to over half a million per week.

Sunny prepared for the biggest acting night of her life. Meanwhile, James was busy connecting to more and more social networks. He was also fielding emails and texts from newspapers, magazines, investigative reporters, and prospective book publishers. Many of the publishers were obvious scams, but some seemed legitimate. It would take James 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, \$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 wealthy 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 parameters of normal. They were still having fun. It still seemed like an interesting and harmless way to spend the summer of their sophomore year, until the incident with the gun.

## The Incident With The Gun

Things were going well for our young spiritual charlatans. At some point 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, or what his last name was, and they knew even less about his father. It was all status quo with the family. 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 probably be fine. 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 at the picnic tables. 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.

He looked 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 coughed 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're 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.*" 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 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. "God works in

strange ways," his voice quivered. Before they knew it, he pulled the trigger, aiming it right at Sunny's head!

But nothing happened. The gun chamber clicked harmlessly.

"*Shit!*" the old man screamed while pointing his finger in the air. "God, can you leave me alone now?"

James ignored the pain in his ankle. Adrenaline had taken over. They began running through the park until they came to the other side. They crossed the street and ran into an open cafe. Breathlessly they sat down at one of the tables, crashing down upon the chairs as if they'd fallen from the sky. They stayed there, 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 felt fractured. 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 odd and sinister cases he was involved in – a husband goes to work for his wife's brother, embezzles all the money, and runs off to Mexico 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.

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* on various credit cards, then sold it all for a hundred grand in cash and tried to secretly run off to Paris with her young boyfriend. She disappeared before getting on the plane with him, and two months later the boyfriend was found with seventy thousand dollars in cash in his suitcase. When her husband was told he laughed, then dropped all charges just before rushing off to a business meeting.

When James reflected on all these stories his father told him he realized the world could be 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 would come the long fall back down the well, into darkness.

From this viewpoint, Zolar was a complete waste of time. Life itself was pointless.

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

## July Jameson

Because of what happened to James, Sunny was now taking over the scripting. James dutifully manned the cameras, but his focus literally turned to capturing Sunny's smile, and her quirky innocence, through certain filters and camera angles. 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. And because of this, and Sunny's Zolar-inspired words, she was becoming an online star.

The response to these new videos and Podcasts was volcanic. Book and movie deals were swimming into their website like jellyfish. They knew they had to find a professional to take over the business end of things. Even though they still hadn't made a penny up until now, the potential to earn money from books and other forms of media was obvious.

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. 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 Italy, tailored suits from Paris, and shoes from Spain. 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 beautiful. Their message was uplifting, but weird. Their videos combined a new kind of religion with some kind of space alien schtick, with a dash of shy and sexy from the face of the franchise, so-to-speak. 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 big money, like a movie, out of this kind of thing without exposing what he sensed was mostly Hollywood snake oil? Something derivative like, "Eat, Pray, and Listen to Zolar," was not going to make the cut.

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 for Zolar, with Sunny writing a book, if she could think up more things to say. That way 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, "ghost-written," by Sunny and James, so-to-speak, took off. Then a book two admitting that it was all a fake would be all the more shocking. Scandalous. Funny!

July knew everyone in the entertainment business. And like James' dad, he was a detective and a decoder of sorts.

He sifted through James and Sunny's 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 -- go feed your brains to a pigeon, you little shit. Ah, Irving, wow, Irving emailed you. That's interesting, impressive, I'll call him... but he's a bit too non-fiction for something like this. Let's see... this, this is not a real HarperCollins email address -- look at the logo, and never heard of the editor, so obviously...

"*This guy*, well, that's fortunate now. Malcolm Manning is interested. He's a hot young documentary producer with one hit, one so-so project after that -- 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 the film. We could *name* the publisher at that point, if it's successful. It's kind of a back-assward approach, but I've seen it work.

"The question is, Sunny, can you act beyond the role you're acting now as Zolar's intermediary? Because even in a documentary you have to act. You have to create an image of who Sunny is outside the lines. But it's still acting -- with shaky cameras following you around and capturing that special moment when Zolar has something to say to you," he chuckled. "I'm only kidding. That type of camera work is too hokey these days. Well, that's why Malcolm is Malcolm. He'd never stoop that low. . . anymore."

Jameson 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 literally talked him to sleep, going on and on about his work -- telling him about cases he was reading in the newspapers that he'd love to crack -- missing kids, murder suspects. Almost every night of his life he heard these stories, until he was fourteen. That's when young James decided no one could come into his room again, ever. It was mostly 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 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 Jameson, he presented them with not only a deal for a movie documentary with Malcolm Manning, but a major book deal as well, with both deals offering them huge advances. And the money began rolling in.

## 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? *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. His father said, "We're divorcing, and going back to casually dating at the same time." At which point Gwen would blush and tell James Sr. to stop. But change was in the air.

James Sr. also feebly tried to give his son some fatherly financial advice now that they had received advance money and their bank accounts were fattening. "Watch out for the sharks. They don't just swim in water." The advice was given with a simultaneous 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."

"Very funny. Except I can't remember what you just said."

James Sr. also admitted to his son privately 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." Maybe he thought to himself, "She's a cash cow," which easily can translate to "She's a good girl." James Sr. had an entire 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. That cat can really play piano. This driver is as slow as a slug. The governor is a pig. Something's fishy about this. Monkey see, monkey do. He's as dumb as a giraffe. Sometimes your mom is a monster. It helped to clarify his true feelings about people and events without complicating things.

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

"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, *what...?*"

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

"Do tell," his father responded skeptically. He was always fond of old idiomatic expressions from the 1940s when animals weren't appropriate.

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 thin black gloves. But James XXXII wouldn't let it go. He 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, young James wondered?

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

"Okay, fine, 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."

"Enough with the animals," Gwen rolled her eyes.

"Fish are not animals, 'deer'! Get it? D-E-E-R!"

"Uh, yeah they are Dad."

"Since when?"

James' mom became teary, "James, how is Sunny handling 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."

"So, 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..." James paused.

Gwen covered her mouth, "I don't understand."

Suddenly 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 family."

Gwen nodded. The world had been put back together, at least in that moment.

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'm saying, Earl? *You know* what I'm saying, Earl? I wasn't born an hour ago. And you don't want to mess with a white dude from Harlem, now do you?"

". . . wellll. . . nowww rrr. . . bur ooo ssssh ahnd 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* it's not from Italy? *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. Ever see Venus De Milo? Did you see what they did to her arms? That's because she gave the sculptor marble that wasn't from Italy. Seriously! 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. . . ."

"K cmm Fr ddaaa, okaaa?"



He motioned to Sunny to come closer.

"Yeah, Friday's fine. But just make sure it's before the weekend. We've got guests coming in. And don't fuck up my new lawn when you're hauling this fake piece of doo-doo outta here, understand?"

"O nw com o..."

He hung up mid-response and turned his full attention to his daughter, waiting patiently. "Ahh, hallo, sweetheart!" he smiled. He stepped out of the garage just far enough to take the gum he was chewing 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. "You look beautiful."

For supper they had a 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. 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. Do you have a good attorney?"

She tried to allude to the fact that Zolar had something of value to say, 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 him, and he loves me*' wonderful?"

Sunny smiled shyly.

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

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

"*Thank God!*" Her mom turned her eyes up to heaven. "Thank you, God, and thank you, 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 tomboyishness, her refusal to this day to wear a gown at their mega-New Years Eve parties. Young James was a true Godsend, no matter how odd of a young man he seemed to be.

## Implosion

At some point, both James and Sunny told their parents the reason they had come to visit. They were dropping out of college. 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 film deal everyone treated the news with -- *of course, of course, you're working now. You can always go back to school.*

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.

"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, beyond the stores on Rodeo Drive, beyond the Middle East, beyond political scandals. There are bigger things going on."

"You mean Beyond Meat? Because I own stock," her Dad chimed in.

"No, Dad."

"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, like Jerry McGuire? Well, we don't mind. We've seen the videos. Go ahead."

"There's more to it than just liking the videos," she said patiently.

"Meaning?" Now even her father was getting concerned. She could tell he was about to come a bit unglued, because he started pulling at his wedding ring. This was a nervous habit of his that 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 each other, love each other, and make the most of everything you have day-to-day. Life is precious. That's all." Sunny dumbed it down to a level of kindness they could understand.

In Sunny's mind she imagined telling them more about the Zolar warning, would it not be a powerful message and helpful to everyone, including her parents? But in the end she reverted back to spiritual cliches. She didn't want to shake their faith in her sanity and shake up their relationship and then drive away. So she kept her true thoughts to

herself. This decision brought about an image in her mind of watching a building blowing up and then imploding back into itself, precisely back to the way things were before.

## Voice from Outer Space

James and Sunny left their parents with the following three observations:

1. Gwen and James Sr. were happier than they'd been in many years. The eternally delayed divorce gave them the freedom to make detailed plans to leave each other, therefore, they didn't have to. The fantasy was almost as good as the reality. Especially because apartment rental prices were going 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. Screw Mexico! The Bahamas! Nassau!

2. Sunny's parents were very proud of their daughter's career. After all, they were now 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?

3. However earnest and committed they were at this point about actually trying to make a positive impact on the world using Zolar as the catalyst, their parents were not willing to

be impact-ees. They still saw Sunny and James as children. Children running around the yard, playing crazy games, screaming, laughing, twirling each other around, and making up invisible friends to play with. But now they were getting paid a lot of money to do it.

## 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 that preceded it did even better. Malcolm Manning, the famous young documentary filmmaker and producer, followed Sunny and James around with a two-man camera crew for a month. 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” kind of thing either, although the studio begged him to consider it.

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

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 bikini on the beach. She covered her eyes from the sun and waved. He wanted none of that edited out.

By the time he was done, the lighting was so magnificent, the camera angles and quick cuts so clever -- so Manning-esque, the soundtrack so subconsciously exquisite -- heartfelt but artsy -- that the things James and Sunny said in the film almost became secondary to Malcolm Manning’s filmmaking brilliance. He was pleased.



While the positive reviews were ample, doubts began to surface in the media. 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 virtually nothing to create! So, while we tip our caps to their ingenuity and financial savvy, the fact is, the facts don’t add up.”

July and James had decided before the film was even released to be proactive. They had been waiting for the suspicions and accusations to surface. They were ready to counter with their quick response team.

But during this crucial and delicate time, there also seemed to be a bit of an in-house issue arising. Jameson sensed that James and Sunny were drinking a little bit too much of their own Kool-Aid. But, look, 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, and always have their backs. He tried not to think too much about the quality or artistic honesty of 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 were, truth be told.

A month after the film was released, 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 answers, 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 message. Why he chose to do it exactly the way he did rather than in a more direct way is empirically obvious -- you are witnessing the results at this very moment. I'm being interviewed in Rolling Stone Magazine. Now you may think my reasoning is an example of the 'weak anthropomorphic principal' because I'm only able to say this since it worked, but that's my point! His way worked. I assume other ways would not have.”

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

“Again, this is not something Zolar will answer directly, 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, or trying to make themselves even more famous. Especially if they stayed with it through all the criticism that they would surely have received. I was, I suppose, an open channel, with no real agenda. I was just a college student, you know? 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. What's the difference how the message is delivered if the message can get through and change your life, and maybe even save your life?"

*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 period of time. And I'm assuming Zolar saw my interests as some kind of 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. Maybe there is no motive except a pure concern for 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 to tell us these things a thousand times before, through other people, religious figures, saints, philosophers. 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 of this windfall 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, or a desire, or a motivation of mine. And I don’t sing well, and can’t play rock guitar, or dance! On the other hand, I think James and I deserve to be paid, and keep some of it for writing a book and being in a documentary film. Remember, the information on the website is free to everyone, and will remain so. All 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 want to do next, or how much money we’ll 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 and make deep heartfelt conscious changes, we are walking ourselves right off a cliff, and there won’t be a way to climb back up. And, no, we’re not promoting a new religion, or building churches, or competing with other religions by telling you this. The message itself is *free*. And it’s clear. And frankly, we don't have a lot of time to debate the motivations of James or myself or 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 a great person with pure intentions and a big heart. He offered to help me when all this happened. He didn't run from it. He didn't call me crazy. He never doubted me. And please keep this a secret, but as of last night, we’re engaged to be married. Yes, 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, and 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 they 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. On the other hand, they are helping us to get Zolar's message out to the world, so they are our friends. We owe them our gratitude."

The main theme of the second documentary was for people to only believe the parts of Zolar's message that made sense to them. They didn't need to believe in Zolar. They needed only to assess the logic of his message. And if they believed it, *change*. Honor the message."

After this second documentary was released the personal attacks virtually vanished, even if the intellectual skepticism remained. Sunny was too kind to hate, too real to doubt. Ellen called. Fallon called. Sunny's career was experiencing what Jameson coined, "exponential expansion."

## 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 over two years, and she was starting to get under his skin. He was starting to watch her old YouTube posts, and actually read their 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 greeted him in her usual fashion, 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 below her chin now made her neck look like it was made of, well, plastic.

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.

He fell onto the couch across from her chair. "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, stop with the Bridget thing. I had a crush on her from afar. Nothing happened. But the way she looked in *It Could Happen To You* -- those tight jeans throwing a baseball to Nick Cage from the pitcher's mound at Yankee Stadium just broke me. I'm human. I'm weak of mind.”

“Mmm, hmm. You're also fat of skin. You had no shot.”

“I’m serious, 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, while pulling 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 reach. He cupped his free hand under the concoction so as not to stain his white shirt imported from Portugal (he ruined the last one in a similar way) and as he pushed the whole thing in his mouth at once his jaw began quivering involuntarily.



He rushed to swallow since he firmly believed in not speaking with his mouth full. He actually 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 agent and attorney*. That's irony. That's the Hollywood paradox -- when the stars try to hype the hype masters. In fact, that's *book material* some day! Jameson always fantasized about writing a "tell-all" book about these egotistical fops. Bridget Fonda would be politely excluded. She was flawless, that kid.

"I know it's crazy, Beth. And I by no means trust my judgment about these things. I mean, I remember one night Ozzy Osbourne 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 in front of twenty thousand teenagers."

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

"Yes, and I know I promised to never tell it to you again, especially not 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, and 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 she's brilliantly crazy, or... something truly *strange* is going on...." He laughed nervously.

He was met with dead silence.

"I'm, I'm kidding, of course, about the Zolar thing," he quickly added, trying to recover before things got too odd. 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 half glass of red wine

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

"Michael Jackson's?"

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

"He *was* his shrink, dear! I believe the rumors. They came from a trusted source. But okay, go on."

"Anyway, I called him last Tuesday, and I said to him, have you seen the documentary on my client, 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. For her, gossip equaled 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 time consuming -- accounting, investments, speaking engagements, book signings. When Sunny and James got back home to Los Angeles, they 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 megastars.

James would work out downstairs in the home gym overlooking the cold green frothy Pacific ocean. Sunny would try to cook, despite the theoretical 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 became apparent over time and was 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. (Except they were usually sadists and ill-intentioned. She, on the other hand, was just simply terrible.)

After her nightly 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 smell the alluring aromas while reading her book sitting in the living room rocking chair, or while meditating on the thick white rug in the bedroom. She'd

observe from a distance once in a while, and watch him flipping things in the pan, or stirring a thick concoction on the back burner. And she would kiss him on the cheek when he thanked her for what he called "the lovely appetizer." Afterwards, he would clean everything, including whatever pots and pans she may have burnt, never saying a word about the events that led up to it.

Cooking home was far better than going to a restaurant, because they'd be mobbed. Even in Malibu. A thin tip-toey woman came up to Sunny one 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, from Zolar.'"

Then there was the young woman holding her large-sized 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, 'God-Free Smith.' I think his real name is Stanley Smith, or Schwartz, or something, she whispered. But you know, everybody is changing their name these days. Have you heard of him? Is Sunny your real name? 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 really was a made-up thing, conceived while they were making love on a Catalina hillside overlooking the glass-smooth sailboat-speckled sea. A sea that looked for all the world like a mirror that day. But what James whispered in Sunny's ear 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 who wasn't real. How could a lie ever speak the truth?

They occasionally rehashed the etymology. The message that evolved into Zolar was just an amalgam of Hindu and Buddhist thought, along with positive thinking, a biblical dose of *do unto others*, an urging to awaken into a more conscious compassionate state of mind, and a dash of good old hell 'n brimstone to make sure people stayed attentive and obedient to the message.

James had a fairly vast knowledge of all the major religions from his studies at USD. He furthered his three college years of learning with online studies. 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. She demanded Socratic introspection and clarity.

Sometimes they would have philosophical discussions late into the night about these things. Was the Bhagavad-Gita actually just a metaphor for the fight one must have with one's own mind and thoughts? The reluctant inner

warrior must do battle with his base desires? They meditated together. They doubted and questioned everything together.

These were sweet and beautiful times, 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, and 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 spewing forth. James thought if she kept this up maybe someday she would become *realized*. Then he realized he wasn't sure if anyone was actually realized. He remembered a quote from Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki:

"Strictly speaking, there are no enlightened people, there is only enlightened activity."

He felt like Sunny and he were the worst of both worlds. Because, strictly speaking, they were unenlightened people faking like they understood enlightened activity.

Were they not?

"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 what you're doing. 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. "Another movie deal?"

"The movie of a lifetime, James."

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

She put her hand on her stomach.

"You didn't actually eat something you cooked?"

"I'm far wiser than you give me credit for."

"You know that's not possible."

She put her hand on her stomach again.

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

"Mmmm...."

"*Pregnant? Really? Seriously?*"

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

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

"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? Really?*”

“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:

~ 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. It is the kind of wonder we might call "awe," or "ecstasy," or "agape," or "an oceanic feeling," 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 inner ecstasy you feel totally "connected" in some inexplicable way. In fact, it feels better than anything else you experience in life. It's what we all strive for *all the time*, 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 landmines, like "searching for happiness," or "reaching the 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*.

This is because even though you may be reaching out for something potentially wonderful, you are destined to have it all blow up and shatter to 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 that's 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 conscious ecstasy and wonder. Your soul, when it attempts to reach out to that purely ecstatic place from here, from human life, immediately becomes closer to being connected -- *simply by the act of reaching out for it.*

~Those who insist on staying asleep by not even attempting to reach out, or who permanently stop reaching out, fall away from The Continuum. Maybe it's because their personal material goals become too important, or they themselves become too important to themselves. But whatever the reason, they risk becoming lost in a state of nothingness. Those whose souls exist in psychic and spiritual emptiness will eventually stop existing, because after this life, their soul will find itself adrift, and eventually it will disperse into non-existence. Please realize, the *only way* to permanently “die” is if your soul loses connection with The Continuum.

**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 -- the wonder of life -- and which ones prevent it. Try to stay with, and continue with, any *succession of thoughts or actions* that lead to a state of awe or pure love. Life on earth is like a hologram of The Continuum. Connection happens when your thoughts merge with any one of the following:

Pure love

Unconditional giving

Unconditional compassion or empathy

Forgiveness without judgment

Gratitude for all things, *including* those things that lead to sadness and pain, because they also can lead to wisdom

Pure joy and wonder

Pure joy and wonder shared with another

You can add many similar thoughts or pure feelings to this list. This is not Zolar's list. He will not give me a definitive list, or lay out the exact roadmap to follow step-by-step. The work is to figure out the connection for ourselves. Zolar is simply alerting us to the extreme importance of making the effort, moment to moment, and day by day.

It's up to each of us to find the keys that connect us 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 all the time.”

That is 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 in this life! *Success* at mindfulness is not necessary. *Succeeding* at being happy, or feeling awe, is not necessary. The key is the *attempt* to reach out toward The Continuum. Contrarily, each time you ignore the opportunity to reach out, it’s a step away.

### **Awakening, or Permanent Death?**

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

~If you attempt to be happy by putting demands on others, or by allowing more greed or fear to grow in the world by your attempt to fulfill your needs, that will only serve to cut 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 the wrong purpose! Positive thinking only works to your benefit *in the spiritual realm*. Not the material realm. In fact, any attempt to steer your thoughts towards

success on the material plane will usually pull you in the wrong direction. (This, of course, is true for James and me as well.)

~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 will suffer the ultimate calamity. Eventually a living earth will no longer exist in any form.

**What you do with this knowledge, is *your* choice.**

*Zolar says: "Travel intuitively towards the wonder of life. Know that you are connected *even when you attempt this.*"*

Zolar cannot magically alter our 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. Back page entertainment. 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 do 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 to The Continuum” when your arms are holding so many dollar bills?”

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 “The Boring Buddhists,” “Socratic Socialists,” “Covert Communists,” “Anarchistic Anti-Capitalists,” “Anti-American,” “The Gutless New-Age Wimp Brigade,”

“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”?)

And in that regard, were they also not unfairly targeting the mentally challenged?

And what about someone in a coma?

They were labeled, “Simplistic Positivists,” and “The Darkness Police.” One reviewer said, “Speaking of The Continuum, are they going to continue to write more and more sequels to these Sci-fi Bibles of theirs? *God*, I hope not.”

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, and say to attract others, with terrible consequences if they dared disobey the head Zolar Channeler.

Sunny and James started every lecture on their world-wide book tour by reminding people that they didn’t want to start a religion. Zolar didn’t want anyone starting a 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.

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

Sunny overheard a Buddhist monk being interviewed outside her hotel, while she tried to sneak out to her car unrecognized.

The monk sat cross-legged in red robes with his eyes closed. The reporter was sitting cross-legged too, in a black suit, holding a mic up to the monk's mouth. "Buddha was more than a messenger," the monk said cryptically.

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. 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 Garden in the late afternoon. They ate a picnic dinner, sharing a baguette and some cheese while sitting near the lake. The sun was still high at nine in the evening. Time felt so different here.

They thought about spending a few months in this place someday, maybe after the 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 to a casual dinner 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 tried to call a doctor. But everything happened too fast. 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 as she had ever felt in her life. At fault, it seemed, was her body. It had failed her. She was a failure – that's what she kept thinking to herself, 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 cancelled the tour before it even started. As soon as they'd found out she was.... Then *maybe*....

James's thoughts turned against himself, "I should have protected her, both of them. I could have prevented this. I should have insisted we stay home, lounge around in the backyard with flowers blooming, cook meals for her, give her prenatal vitamins with a tall glass of 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 being 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," his cell 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, Yes Mom. Sorry.”

“Can you come to the funeral?”

“Mom, I just don’t know. I don't know anything right now. Something terrible has happened here as well.”

## Internal Memorial

Gwen was free of him now. At least there was that. She secretly told herself this to calm herself down, though she only half-believed it was true. 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. He would then proceed to eat a dozen cookies before taking his next breath. "I'm internalizing the information," he would laugh. Early in their marriage she would laugh at things like that too. 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 it as she turned to get herself a napkin?

What if he were still 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 one of those ties someday.

She remembered when he had a head of hair, 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 going with her when she needed to shop for a new dress – 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, made 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 cookbooks and a new set of pans that weren't scraped and worn. 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 each of 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, feeling as if he were a child on a huge merry-go-round.

Drunk with life in that moment he kissed her cheek for no reason. It was tender. It was slow and soft. It was real. It was one of the few times he seemed to want nothing in return. In that moment, with that one kiss, 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 on a Sunday. He would purposely not shave. He was exactly who he appeared to be -- a mess outside and inside. She was devout. He made fun of her faith, and mocked 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 the previous Sunday, and every Sunday for as long as he could remember.

He was a very odd man -- secretly, she had to admit that. In fact, 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. But this church was the church that old 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 mocked 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 afternoon.

"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 to herself. She dare not say it aloud.

The priest thought something he dare not say as well, "James XXXII and Gwen Cowell were the parents of a crazy heretic son who was now posing as the priest of an alien from outer space, or a ghost of some kind, an unholy ghost."

Gwen dutifully sat in the front row. The casket was placed beneath an enormous reenactment of a tall white muscular Jesus suffering on the cross. He looked more like a young Larry Bird in a loin cloth than the middle eastern Iraqi Jew he apparently was.

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 her after-life husband look around and see that his only son was missing. It would break his already medically unrepairable heart. She knew he'd be waiting for a final goodbye kiss from his namesake. It wasn't going to happen.

Her son couldn't make the funeral for obvious reasons. She became lost in inconsolable grief as she silently mourned the loss of her only grandchild. In some ways that loss felt worse than the loss of this stubborn old man. 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 a rocking chair with a needle-point seat cushion. Yes, well, maybe someday, after some time, they will....



The priest 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. They blame iPhones now. But crossword puzzles were worse. What a waste of time, connecting those little words together, across and down. For what purpose?

Was anyone else here besides these two groups of men she hardly knew? 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 that one, that Henry Miller book, she glanced at it once. The first sentence of the entire book was, "Woof! Woof, 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.

"... 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 someone attending church, he thought.

“Shhhhh,” hissed one of James's deeply affronted crossword puzzle friends.

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, of course, *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 any mistake pass without mocking this troglodyte.

“Next thing you know he'll call him an upstanding Martian instead of a fine human being,” laughed one of his card playing buddies, nudging his elbow into the card playing buddy next to him.

“Shhhhhh!” Spit flew from a gap-toothed crossworder a row across from the heathen gamblers.

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 spirit of 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. "He was like Attila the Hun! No mercy."

"James would have corrected you, 'it's compassion for *whom*,'" said his fellow puzzler.

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 domino. Then somehow he turns into Mark Twain with his billboard routine? He had to have hired someone. Maybe *we* should get a billboard.... I could write hogwash like that in my sleep. "Come, all ye face-full!" No. Well, given enough time I could easily....

"...*Yes, 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 must regain the congregation's attention in seconds. He had the power to do that sometimes, "Yet this man, James Cowell, was *not* compassionate, I must say, not to his wife, or to Jesus the Lord, since he never once stepped into these hallowed halls except to doubt and mock!"

He turned his eyes squarely upon all of James' doubting mocking friends who were suddenly staring at him like owls stunned by the 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.... Yes, 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 into alien space junk."

"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 own mother's church, and God, 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 in the front row.

"What possible reason could he have had for missing the death of his father?" the priest's words echoed mountainously, hanging in the air, with his pious finger now pointing right at her. *"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? My husband was right. You are a moron."*

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 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.

## Very High Fives

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 drafts 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 you, Senator, are no Jack Kennedy!'"

"Yeah, she bailed us all out, that's for sure. Can you imagine how much longer we were going to have to sit there and listen to his bullshit?"

"We ain't gonna be preached to by a moron," she screams, and the priest's glasses start to fog up!"

Someone interrupts, "Yeah, then he tries to clean the fucking glasses with his handkerchief... *and they fall on the floor!*"

".... Oh God, it was beautiful!"

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

"Not in this bar. He's *persona none gratis* around here."

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

There were high fives all around.

## Empty Room, Real Flowers

The funeral home hallway met Gwen with an 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 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 he'd seen of a young Paul McCartney. He ended up looking more like Christopher Lloyd in *Back to the Future* -- a little crazy, a little scary.

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 this day.

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.

## From Sunny's Private Diary....

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, fighting with the wind, unable to gain any traction.

But fighting for what purpose? Were they not just meaningless puffy white strokes of paint set against a huge blue canvas, fighting to stay together against the natural course of time?

Have you ever felt like those clouds?

Like you were going to drift apart from yourself before you even figured out who you were, or decided where you were going?

Without even knowing why you wanted to travel across the sky in the first place?

Me too.

I've felt that way too.



## Arriving Home

Sunny and James arrived home on a gray blustery day. The Malibu coast was fogged in. 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. When the fog lifted, the distant ocean seen from their backyard gazebo looked like a bowl of colorless dust. Roses had fallen from their stems. Bushes of thorns were left standing. Their eyes had gone blind to the subtle beauty of all these things.

Sunny was recovering slowly, but James was not. Once, they had escaped a madman aiming a gun at Sunny's head in an L.A. park. He heard the click of an empty chamber, instead of hearing the sound that would have been the last sound Sunny would have ever 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.

From that miraculous instant, all of his conclusions about life and death were drawn from the assumption that things would always turn out in their favor. They could rise above the madness of life. They had some semblance of control over their fate. Or call it luck. Or call it destiny.

But now, after two deaths, what was he supposed to do? Reach out to The Continuum? He couldn't even look himself in the mirror. His thoughts turned dark and destructive, like a monsoon, ripping out tree roots, blowing down road signs.

He had expected everyone else on earth to follow his and Sunny's advice -- for what true purpose? To somehow be able to survive their suffering better than he could now?

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

Sunny was sitting beside him, propped up in bed. She was drinking a cup of tulsi tea as he lay there in silent agony.

“Sunny, we need to tell them the truth. We're deceiving tens of millions of people begging for a lifeline. And what are we really giving them? A space alien televangelist? I can't keep this up anymore. This isn't doing anyone any good.”

Sunny leaned closer towards him but didn't speak. She simply touched his arm.

“I was *born* a hoax,” he whispered. “I'm not the 33<sup>rd</sup> descendant of James the 1<sup>st</sup>. In fact, I was born the hoax of a hoax. The lie of a *lie*! No wonder I ended up lying to the entire world.”

“I can't imagine the sadness you feel right now,” she said. She kissed his head like a mother might have done to her sick child. She said, “James, 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, *with me*. But you – you lost a father and a son.”

James said, “No. It's not just that, Sunny. The irrefutable truth 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. 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're seeing yourself as a failure, a fake, a coward. 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, for all people everywhere, any time we try *anything* new or bold."

"Are you lecturing me with Zolarisms now?"

"James!"

"Sunny, I feel like I've tumbled down to the bottom of an ocean. It's hard to breathe down here."

"I've been down to the bottom of that ocean too, James -- rather recently, in fact! Don't you think? Sometimes we have to be pushed all the way to the bottom, to feed off the algae and the minerals, where the nutrients are, before we know the next step to take. We can't *skip* that step. We can't just pre-map our way out of tragedy by using logic and intellect, like we can when we're writing a book."

James remained silent.

"You know, James, we think that we made this whole thing up. And maybe we did.... Or, maybe Zolar has been setting this up since the very beginning. Just like we told the world he did. Maybe he set this up before we even knew it was the beginning. Maybe the created is the creator."

"That's ridiculous and you know it."

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

"*What?*"

"The gun! The madman's gun, James. Remember? He fired it at me from point-blank range, but it didn't go off. In

the letter, Zolar said *she has the power to stop bullets aimed in her direction....*"

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 violent word like 'bullets' at that moment? It really didn't make any sense to reach that far out for a metaphor and not have a clear reason."

"What are you getting at?"

"Maybe we're the ones who've been deceived, by thinking we made all this up."

"Very funny. But I've never heard anyone talking inside *my* head. I've been in complete control of this game the whole time, ever since I invented the idea on Catalina Island, right in front of you. Right next to you! I whispered it to you, the whole plan, remember?"

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

"Yes, we did."

"Yes... we did," she repeated. "And, when you were whispering it to me, where were those thoughts coming from? You never considered a plan like that before. Not even close."

She sat up in bed and faced him directly. "This is the strangest thing I've ever said to you, James, but I feel like I'm hearing Zolar speaking to me right now, for your benefit."

"Oh, *come on*, Sunny. You're going to scam *me* now, for my own good?"

"Are you at least willing to hear me? If I'm wrong, and it doesn't change anything for you, then you're right, it's a scam! But what if it does?"

"What if it does *what*?"

"What if it changes everything?"

"Okay, fine. But seriously..."

"*Listen!* James. Just stop and listen now. Here is Zolar's message to you...."

James covered his face with his hands and shook his head cynically.

She closed her eyes, just like she used to do on the YouTube videos and the book tours.

"James, you want to know if I'm real, or if I am your lie, or if I am Sunny's lie. But the important question to consider at this very moment is this:

"Would it be wise to follow my guidance, even if you don't know for sure who the guide is?"

"If you think the *guidance* is also a hoax, or another worthless theory, then discard it. Tell the world it was a scam. And consider your confession to be the ultimate truth. However, if the guidance is truer than your doubts, and if it makes it easier for you to love, and to forgive, and to breathe life in more fully -- despite the suffering and pain you've experienced -- then why question it? What would be the point of that?"

Sunny's voice got louder, "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 cylinder.... He had five, in fact. But there was no bullet in *that* one single chamber. He pulled the trigger only once,

then stopped. Now, ask yourself - *why* would a man like that stop pulling the trigger?"

James pulled his hands away from his face and looked at Sunny. Her eyes were still closed.

"Think about it -- why would a man like that pull the trigger *only once*?"

"*I don't know.*"

"Because, James, he failed the first time, and then gave up. He surrendered. That's what this man always did, all through his life. He experienced failure, and then expected nothing to change, even if he tried again. So he'd refuse to try again. He simply expected failure."

James understood the metaphor. Sunny was very good at this kind of thing.

"Sunny! If Zolar's real, if he's not our hoax, *then why did he let him die*?"

"Who?"

"*The baby!*"

"*James!*"

"Why?"

"It wasn't his time. Maybe he was part of a lesson we had to learn..."

"That's crazy! *Why?*"

Sunny's eyes teared up, "Because, he *had* to be. He couldn't have been anything else."

Tears fell from her eyes, but she remained calm and motionless.

James stayed quiet for a long time, then he said, "Sunny, I don't want to surrender. I don't want to give up. But I'm angry. I've never been this angry in my life. And I'm

scared.... really scared. But I trust you... so just tell me what to do."

Sunny smiled, with tears still streaking down her face. She said, quietly, peacefully:

"Your task now, James, is to act upon what you discovered during our time together. Remember to acknowledge the wonder, whenever you sense it, and *reach out.... Reach out!* It will always and forever be reaching back toward you."

The End  
~GM