

Song of Fire

By Joseph Bentz

Original Beginning

Chapter 1

I

There are details about death I am not permitted to tell, not yet anyway.

I am permitted to tell you that I died, and that afterward I was taken to a place where certain events of my life were relived in front of me. I was being prepared for a journey, and these moments and fragments of moments were to be my only provisions, the only past that I would be allowed to remember. I show them to you exactly as I saw them.

Fresh apples sliced and sitting on a dish. The morning sunlight is in the kitchen.

These were the first things I saw after I died.

The apples and sunlight kept disappearing and then coming back. I was learning to see. I was in my grandmother's house, and I could hear her singing in another room. In that instant I was the little boy who had once lived this moment, but at the same time I was also my present self, for I could remember everything that would happen to my grandmother. My senses were different in this place. What

I knew I did not see or hear or touch or smell or taste or remember in the normal way. I sensed everything indivisibly at once. I sensed Grandma was there not only because I saw and heard her, but because every detail related to her—every moment, every thought—enveloped me, and I *knew*.

I was with her in the garden as she took the big scissors and clipped the flowers (the blue ones on the vines, the ones she would pick and say, “Them things are so hard to grow.”). I reached for the scissors and said, “Grandma, let me do it,” but she kept them in her own hands. The smell of orange juice and flowers in vases and Grandma whistling in the morning (always morning). I wanted to stand on the chair so I could look at the yellow bird in his cage. Grandma sang and the yellow bird sang and I knew one day (for Mommy took my face in her hands and told me so) that Grandma flew away to heaven.

Grandma was with me now in the place beyond death. I did not know where I was, but she took my hand and said, “You must follow me, though I can take you only so far.” I was still learning to see. I did not see her face at first, but then I saw it. Seeing was different here. Grandma was flower-like, dainty, even young. She was bathed in light as we moved forward.

I was not afraid. The dying was over. The black of loneliness was washed away. I felt as if something warm were wrapped all around me, as if love and well-being were something tangible in this place and were enfolding me. We walked toward the light.

I knew Grandma and I were not alone. Others were all around us, though I never saw them. I kept my eyes toward the light and my hand in Grandma’s hand,

but I knew there were others close by sending out from themselves the love and encouragement that was covering me.

I ran as fast as I could toward the light. The light was delicious and glorious. It was not like regular light, which is only for seeing and which can hurt or blind if it gets too bright. This light was something you would want to cover yourself with, and drink and eat. It pulled me forward. It energized me with a sense of expectancy and joy I had never known. Grandma was on one side of me, but someone else was on the other side. He prevented me from moving into the light. I struggled against him, but Grandma said, "Jeremy, honey, let him lead you. Slow down and look at him."

The light-soaked man stood in front of me, and his arms clasped my shoulders and slowed me down. He spoke my name, and I stopped, as the light swirled about his face and shone from his eyes. "I am Abdiel," he said. "I will lead you."

"Into the light?" I asked.

"You must not enter the light, for you do not know how to see. The light has always been around you, but it has been dispersed in a million directions and you have rarely seen it. You must pay attention now and try to see it."

Abdiel placed his hands over my eyes.

Immediately I was in a different place, a room where a patch of morning sun poured on the shiny wood of the living room floor. Abdiel was teaching me to see. I saw a little boy, a baby, chewing on colored plastic keys, struggling to stand up in the swath of light. I not only *saw* the boy, but I *was* him at the same time. The little boy—I—gurgled with laughter, my arms bobbing up and down in joy, eyes wide and blue.

Across the room sitting on the edge of the sofa was the young woman—so young!—saying, “Come on, baby. Come on.” Her expression was exaggerated, vibrant. “Can you walk to Mommy? Come on, little man.” As I reached her, I felt her arms wrapping around me, crushing me to her. Her voice in my ear. The shininess of her hair in the young day.

But this house. This house. These curtains. This rug as it was when it was new. I screamed out for Abdiel to not let it be this. Not this house as it was before my mother went.

Abdiel pushed me forward. He said, “You must see.”

A dead woman is in the bed, her face gray and puffy, as I feel weak and hide my tears in the blanket by her head. Dear God not this house.

Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are on the kitchen table.

I see the swing set as I drink the sweet redness.

Mommy is dancing in the living room. She has me up in the air and is twirling me past the pictures and the ceiling and the floor.

Mommy is lying out in the sun.

Mommy is yelling about the broken things. God not this house.

Can I go, Mom? Can I go out and play?

The backyard is cold. The steamy breath of five boys bent over, ready to spring toward five other boys, the football between them. The ball is tossed to the quarterback next to me. I feel my legs running. I turn, the boy is right on me. I am

looking for the pass. The boy is too close. Quick fake to the left, a jump back and right, the ball is already in the air. I see nothing but the ball and the sky. It thumps into my chest harder than I thought it would, but I have it. I feel it against my chest and my legs pump frantically I cannot see through the panic it spins I am smothered I am not on the ground the earth rises to smack me and the boys pile on top. My jarred body stands. I am over the line! I hear them screaming touchdown. I feel their slaps on my back. My team cheers. Stadiums cheer. Nations cheer.

Flowers are scattered in the living room that is lighted only by the television. Dad stares as he slouches in the well-worn chair. She is gone.

Come here, you little stinker. Come and let Mommy give you a whippin'.

But. But.

What is it like to die, Mommy? Is it like sleeping in all morning? Mom I'm sorry I will be good I will be brave.

Buzzers ring Jeremy. It's time to get up.

Just a few more minutes.

Jeremy. Now.

Let us roll the trucks through the grass. Let us build cities. Let us be kings. Let us be criminals. Let us die valiantly.

Hair in marvelous strands to pull. Twisting wrought-iron bars. Glasses to grab. Paper to squish. Toys to squeak and clank and whir.

Whirring Jeremy. It's time to get up.

I ride my bicycle down the long neighborhood street on a fall evening. Along both sides of the street for nearly a mile piles of burning leaves spew white smoke in to the air. The place looks war-torn, bomb-ravaged. The enemy has gutted our city and left us to ride sadly through smoldering remains. The people are demoralized, General. The women do nothing but cry. You must help us. See over there, amid those white ashes, was our church. And over there our burning school. And farther down our homes. We don't know where to turn.

Yes, I tell them. We must rebuild. My men are here now. We will help you reconstruct the city brick by brick. We will search out and destroy those who have brought such incredible anguish. I have brave men with me. I have weapons that will bring swift and deadly justice to any who dare disturb this city again.

By the time I reach home the air is chilly and the sun is almost gone. I put away my bicycle and go inside.

I get out of bed in the darkness and go to the window. Snow is heaped everywhere, so that I cannot tell where the snow ends and the street begins. Snow is piled in the birdbath. It is smothering the shrubs. The snow that in the daylight was so appealing, so good for providing ammunition for snowballs and building blocks for forts, tonight has an eerie blue color to it, as the streetlight reflects on the whiteness. All is still, frozen, gripped by the white monster. I touch the window and it is cold. My face is cold when I press it against the window to look. I run back to the

bed, hide myself in the blankets, make myself into a tight ball, lie very still and pray that no monster will take me away.

Take out the garbage, Jeremy. Cut the grass. Button your shirt. Wash your hands. Flush the toilet. Stop blocking the light.

Grape-flavored bubble gum from a machine. A big round piece that hurts my jaws as I try to bite into it.

What if you tried to count every single leaf on that tree?

What if you tried to count every single leaf on every single tree in an entire forest?

What if you tried to count every single leaf that has ever fallen off every tree since the world began?

Let go of your sister. Get your elbows off the table. Get out of the way. Keep your hands to yourself. Cut out that noise.

I hide in the closet while raspy-voiced monsters fight the war. In my bunker I hardly breathe at all. I don't twitch, I don't squirm, but I can hear them in the hallway smelling around and getting close.

I want to demolish your face. I want to rip your skin off. I want to see you scream in agony. I want to watch your blood oozing into the sidewalk. I want to hear

you screaming Stop! Stop! To me while I keep pumping the bullets into your chest. I want to stab knives into you so far that they will come out the other side so I can laugh. I want to fail. I want to die. I want to hide.

As I lie in bed staring at the ceiling I see headlights spray across it, down the wall, and away. I hear a car door close. A man coughs. The screen door opens and slams shut. I hear him walk across the living room and into the hallway. I hear water from the bathroom sink. I see the light under the door. The light goes away. My door opens. As Daddy walks toward me I close my eyes. I feel one finger slide across my forehead. He walks away and shuts the door.

Time for dinner.

Are you going to keep it all for yourself, or are you going to pass it around the table? Mashed potatoes. Corn. Juicy roast. Glasses and glasses of milk.

Daddy says, Did you pick up those cans of paint I need to paint the door?

Mommy says, No, I didn't have time yet. Jeremy, let your sister eat.

What were you doing all day?

Jeremy, I said knock it OFF unless you want to spend the whole night alone with no TV.

I can't paint the door without paint.

I'll get it tomorrow. Were you going to do it tonight? Shall I leave my supper and go get it now?

Now don't get that way. You're the one who didn't do what you said. I don't want to hear that kind of stuff now.

I don't see why we have to argue about things at dinner. Can't you just enjoy the meal? It just wears me out.

This stuff is good.

I was just asking a question. Not every question has to be twisted into an argument.

JEREMY! (Slap. Silverware clinking on the table. I cover my face and lean away from her.)

He's burning up, Mommy whispers. He's just burning up.

I lie in bed, covered to my neck with a white sheet. My face is puffy and sweaty, my hair sticks to my forehead. I squirm. I feel words coming from my mouth, but I can barely hear them. My head tingles and hurts. Everything beneath me is buzzing, floating, and it scares me. I try to stand up to go to the bathroom. I am walking on balloons, but when I try to explain this to Mommy she says, What, honey? What?

I want the lights to stop stinging me. So piercingly bright it hurts and the noise is too deep in my head. When I get to the door of the bathroom my head starts buzzing louder. Like a snowy television screen everything's fuzzy all around me. It's getting awfully dark. I hear Mommy saying something, but she's too far away to tell what it is. Somebody's holding on to me. I can't even stand up anymore because everything's so crooked.

Then everything's too confusing to explain, but next thing I know I'm lying down again and looking up at Mommy hovering over me, looking like she could spill over and crash on top of me. She's holding some rag or something on my head. She says, It's okay. Just try to go to sleep.

I hear this just fine, and pretty soon I feel the sleep start pulling me down.

I am riding my bike as fast as I can to the drugstore. Tommy is bigger, so he can go faster. He's in front of me, but Danny is beside me. He can barely keep up. When we get to the hill, he'll drop behind. Breathing the wind so hard makes my throat hurt. My legs feel mushy. When we finally get to the drugstore we go right to the counter. Tommy gets there a few minutes ahead of us, so he's leaning against the counter like he's been there all day. Jerk.

Thought you guys weren't coming, he says.

Danny says, We saw you come in. We know you just got here.

I pick up the package of baseball cards and put a dime on the counter. I take the package outside and stand by the bikes. The stick of gum in the package is pink and hard and has white powder on it. I put it in my mouth but it takes forever to soften up. I'm hoping for a Hank Aaron, but there isn't one.

I'm shuffling through my cards, and Tommy says, Who'd you get?

Damn, I say, and Danny laughs. I have all these. I'm going to have to trade every last one of them.

Watch me shoot now, Dad. Watch.

“Daddy, they’re on Fire! Daddy, they’re all on fire! Daddy! Daddy!” The door of my dark bedroom flies open and the light comes on. “Wake up. Wake up.” But I am not asleep. I am dragged off. The light goes away.

It is late in the evening in the summertime. I sit in a lawn chair on our porch, where our neighbors huddle in chairs and talk, smoke, eat pretzels. I see yellow dots of lightning bugs. I see the glow of the ends of cigarettes. I am fourteen years old and it is summer. My body is numb with exhaustion. I sit with my legs stretched out and listen to the conversation, feeling completely good. I played softball in the morning, then went swimming, then played softball again. In the summer the game is all. Phil and Jan stand up to leave, but I am too tired to move my legs to let them out. Phil acts like he’s going to step on them. Jan says, You look dead, Jeremy. You better get some rest.

Dad says, Yeah, these kids have it rough, don’t they?

I don’t say anything. I sort of smile. Finally I move my legs and they pass, talking the whole time. Jan shouts something at us when she gets to the end of the driveway, but nobody hears what she says. Dad stands and slaps me on the chest. I knew he was going to. As soon as he stood I braced to be slapped somewhere. Come on, he says. I don’t come. I stay on the porch alone and watch the lightning bugs. I finish my drink, one sip at a time. I think about how I will lift myself up, float numbly to my bed, and sleep.

The boat is noisy as it chops through the water of the lake.

This is great! Will shouts. This is fabulous!

Finally Will's grandparents have let us take out their boat by ourselves, and Will is driving it as fast as he can, turning it in all directions. Barely hanging on, I wonder if I'll be thrown overboard. The wind is so loud I can barely hear Will yelling. He is screaming and laughing his head off. To one side I can see houses along the bank. Will is yelling something at the people there, but no one can hear him. As he stands at the wheel he yanks his shirt off and throws it to the back of the boat. Then he kicks off his shoes. Then he leans down and takes off his shorts, driving the boat ever closer to the shore. When we're as close to the shore as it's safe to get he peels off his underwear and shouts "Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!" to the rich people sitting at their umbrella-covered tables.

They do not know what is wrong with him. They do not feel the speed as the waves toss the boat up and down, making you think it may lift you up and let you soar on your own, hurtling you through the sky, naked, free, exhilarated. They do not feel the lake become infinite space. They do not feel the boat detach itself from the physical world and slice through time.

To them Will is just pulling a prank.

An incredibly long line of girls in the shopping mall. I see girls in the hall. Girls at the pool. I stare at them and enjoy them. I could fall in love with any one of them in a minute and be happy forever as long as she was by my side. In the hall at

school she walks up to me as if she will speak. Even before she says a word, I imagine our lifetime together. A million girls pass by; a million more are needed.

The red lawnmower sits on the driveway. I bend over and pull the cord. Nothing. I pull it again. Nothing. After one more pull, I hear an agonizing choke and the engine starts to chug. One round around the yard. The cut grass forms a border. Another round. I am sweating. The yard, out of control, like a boy with shaggy hair, gets a haircut. The hum of the engine is the background music to my fantasies. I cut round after round. On a sunny afternoon I walk through the Rose Garden of the White House with the visiting Prime Minister. He bends his head toward me to catch every word. Just outside the Oval Office, we stand in the sun while the cameras click like tiny hands applauding.

In my Oval I sit with a pensive gaze as the sun filters in. I am the one who walks in the sun. I push the world to the brink but save it. I chop off the last blade of grass and turn off the engine. In silence I wheel the machine into the corner of the dark shed.

I am getting ready to go to the parade with a couple of friends. Dad is in the garage working on the car.

Mom says, I wish I was invited to the parade.

She tries to sound breezy, but I can feel the sadness.

Why don't you go? I say. You should go.

No. There's no one to go with. Your dad has to work on the car. No one else is home.

Surely somebody must be—

No. It doesn't matter. You go on.

Mom—

No. I have all these dishes to do.

Well, I have to go.

You'd better, she says. I have stuff to do.

The smell of perfume hugging me with tears Jeremy I am so sorry saying
Jeremy your mother is d .

In the room with so many curtains her casket Do you want something to eat?
Can I go and get a sandwich? Saying What? What? What?

Your mother is d .

II

Abdiel took me out after my mother died when I was seventeen years old.

“I don’t want to see any more of this,” I said. “It’s too hard on me. Why can’t we just go wherever we’re going?”

“We are not finished yet. But before you go back in, would you like to see the music?”

“See it?”

Before he could answer, I was flooded with light and sound from all around. The light and sound were not separate things, but were part of one another. Each sound had its own appearance, each bit of light its own sound. The sounds of flutes, trombones, trumpets, violins wrapped around me in strands of red and blue and yellow and propelled me forward. Inside the sound and light, I found my body could move as fast as my thoughts. At what must have been millions of miles an hour, I pierced through the melody that was faster and more complicated and glorious than any sound my ears had ever had the ability to hear.

As I sliced through the music, it also pierced through me like bolts of energy. Every cell in my body tingled with power, with the very Spirit of God. I never wanted to leave it. I wrapped myself in it, flung myself thousands of miles through it, sang in it and danced in it.

I don’t know how long I stayed in the music, but eventually I felt Abdiel pulling me away. I did not want to go. I resisted. I need nothing beyond this joy I felt.

Abdiel said, “You are not finished.”

“I don’t need to go back to that old stuff anymore,” I said. “I have seen enough.”

He said, “You have work to do.”

“No more of this! It hurts too much to see all those people again—everybody so young.”

“Just a little more, Jeremy. I’ll go with you this time.”

I could not stop him. We swooped downward into the darkness. Below us I could see the lights of a city. We headed toward the lights. We came down in a neighborhood of old houses in the midst of trees. I recognized this neighborhood from when I was in college. We came to a house I knew, a white wood-frame house built so that a second-story window looked out over a flat roof. Five or six people stood on the roof drinking and laughing, and rock music poured from the inside. It is Tim and Beth and Ricky’s house. They rented it for two years and held parties there almost every weekend of the school year. It felt good to see it again, but I wanted to stay separate from it and not become myself inside that place. I said to Abdiel, “Let me just stay apart from it and look on,” but he said no.

I am standing on the porch. I am one of the guests at the party. I see myself and I am myself. I know Abdiel is with me, but I don’t see him. I stand on the porch and I feel a little drunk. I step from the cool darkness into bright living room, steamy with the bodies of dancers. As soon as I walk in I see Sherry, my girlfriend. She stands in the doorway by the kitchen. Her face is flushed because she just stopped dancing. The music is so loud and I have drunk so much that I am starting to feel

confused. Sherry walks towards me. Seeing her face so lit up and her hair brushed back like that and her blouse clinging to her in the heat, I feel the rush of love that I had for her for so long. I feel it so vividly that it startles me, and I almost call Abdiel to take me away.

I feel Sherry's hand and then I feel her close to me. She wants me to dance. I dance, because I'm too confused to try to talk to her. The room is hazy with smoke. It is lit by an ancient lamp that has red tassels on its shade. When I face on wall I see posters: Gandhi gazes down at the dancers with a smile, a sun-tanned girl sweats in her leopard-skinned bikini, Dorothy and the Tin Man and the Lion and the Scarecrow stand before the Wizard's door. The heated faces of the dancers seem too close to me. I try to keep looking at Sherry, so incredible. I want to be alone with her. When the song ends I take her hand and lead her to the next room.

It's the kitchen. Marcie takes tomatoes off a cold hamburger. She says, "I don't see how they can make ketchup so good when tomatoes are so bad." Nobody answers her. Sherry puts her arms around my waist, and I feel Abdiel pulling me away. Not yet, I think. Not yet. Then I am gone.

To Abdiel I say, "Why make me see these things at all if you're just going to pull me away." Abdiel does not answer.

I am in my dorm room. I stare out the window and see a girl by the fountain. Her boyfriend takes hold of her arms and pretends he is going to throw her into the water. She screams and struggles. They lean way over toward the water and kiss.

For the fifth time I read the same page of the book that rests in my hands.

I cannot find my pen. I find that when I stand a penny on the edge with my finger and flip one edge of the penny firmly, the penny twirls for a time like a graceful skater, and then it flattens out. I need background music to help me study. I stand up and head toward the stereo. On the way I pass the two aquariums. In the biggest one swims Alvin, a cannibal, an enormously sweet guy, a bloodthirsty fellow. I put one finger into the water. "Hey, buddy, come here. Alvin. Come here. You hungry?" From the little aquarium I scoop three guppies and plop them in with Alvin.

The discovery. The approach. The big gulp. Bravo, Alvin. One more. Eat man, eat.

I turn on the music. I cannot find the pen. Only two hours until dinner. What is happening to me?

Sherry and I sit in the library. She massages my shoulders. Books and notebooks are stacked in front of me. I say, I just feel all stretched out inside. I don't want to do this anymore. My mind is beyond the caring point. It is just stretched out long and thin and flimsy.

I know, Jeremy, and she says. Just go on to the end now. Finish.

I go on, but I don't know if I'm doing it well.

Don't to do it well, then. Just go on. Finish. Finish it. Don't stop till you've finished.

Stretched and tired and mindless.

Go on.

At 3:30 a.m. I am wide awake in bed in the dorm. I have not slept at all. I am kept awake by the arguments in my brain. By explaining. Justifying. Sloughing off the blame. I am absolutely awake. I need to turn on the music loud to sing and dance the words away. Will is asleep. I get up and put my clothes on. I walk outside into the artificial loneliness of the white lights. No one sees me. No one knows who I am. Everything is frighteningly, unremittingly, clear tonight. No musical background. No laughter. No smoke. I am no big deal, standing alone on the sidewalk in the middle of a cold night.

I stand by the tallest building in the city. I am working for the landscaping company and have just planted seventeen yews in the courtyard. My cap is stained with a ring of dirt, and my hair sticks to my forehead. My back hurts from bending and digging. I have straightened up so I can lean on my shovel and breathe easier for a few minutes. Walking toward me on the sidewalk are three men not much older than I. They wear suits. They talk and laugh. I think, their backs do not hurt. Their hair is not sticky. Their suits are not covered with dirt. They do not have to stand upright to breathe better. They do not lean against a shovel in the afternoon sun. They have an office, probably a secretary. They eat hot lunches in nice restaurants. I eat a cold sandwich in a truck.

Donny sends me to the other side of the building to spread mulch around the ivy plants. The mulch is piled high in a big pick-up truck. It was moist when they loaded it and now it stinks because of the heat. When I stick a shovel into it, steamy vapors rise from it. After a while an old man dressed in ragged, unmatched clothes

walks by and yells, "Whoo, man, how can you stand that smell? How can you work in the stuff all day?"

I mumble, "You get used to it," but I feel dirty and smelly and low.

Later a sophisticated middle-aged woman comes up and says, "Is that the stuff that's making it smell so bad out here?" When I say yes, she pretends to gag and then walks away.

A man on a bicycle stops and says, "Hey man, is that horse manure?" He laughs his head off. I just smile and keep on shoveling.

When I go back to the courtyard Donny is trying to start the tractor. I stand and watch him. When he finally gets it started, he shouts over the noise, "There's something wrong with it, ain't there? It act like it wants to die."

I say, "I know exactly how it feels."

"Huh?" he says, but I don't answer.

It is a month before I graduate from college, and I am at the bank waiting for my job interview. Across the lobby I see Doug, whose interview was before mine, step out of one of the elevators. I have never seen him dressed up this much before, but as he clicks across the floor he fits right in with the bustling executives.

"You won't believe this guy," he says. "You won't believe his office. He has a window all along the back that looks over the fountain in front of the building. And the sun rises and shines in at the back of him so when you walk in with this shining on you and it's like, I don't know, walking in on God or something. He's sitting there

smoking a cigar, leaning back in his chair. He's a nice guy, though. Stood up and shook my hand. Talked about sports and everything. Very nice."

"Did you get the job?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I think. He offered me a drink and everything. Showed me what office I would work in. A cushy chair and all. This would be a great place to work. This place is just exploding with women."

I am sitting at my desk in the bank. My legs are rubber bands. I cannot keep them still because there are six hours and forty-seven minutes to go. I have the two o'clock feeling but it is still morning. My legs are practically running under the desk. This office is crammed full of time. It oozes out everywhere and will not end.

Anne and I walk into the restaurant. I have just received my first paycheck from the bank, and we are celebrating. I am wearing the new suit. My shirt is crisp and white. Anne holds my arm as we're led through a dining room glittering with intimate yellow lights.

I watch Anne's face in the candlelight.

I feel a surge of power I can't explain. In this moment I love my job at the bank because it lets me take Anne to this restaurant, because it buys me this suit and my car, because it brings all the sparkling things that surround me and become me.

Everyone else in the office is working quietly, except for the two standing at the secretary's desk. I hear only the peaks of their phrases:

“... I said...”

“... he opened up the...”

“... she looked at me like...”

They laugh. I try not to hear. I try to keep my pen moving on the page. My thoughts are all smashed out. I am trying to cut through time. I am trying to win this grueling test of endurance.

Can anyone tell that I am barely breathing? No, they are working quietly. Can they tell that I am being squished by the old desk that I am growing fat that I am growing hollow and old? No, they cannot tell because my pen keeps moving on the page.

Let me be sane.

Let me stay at my desk and do my work until it is time to go home. Can they tell that outside the sun is blazing on a real world where legs are allowed to move where we don't have to stand around the desk and laugh at stupid things where we don't have to go to the bathroom fifty times a day to see that our stomachs are growing to see that we are two hours and thirteen minutes older than we were before with nothing to show for it No. No. No. I work at the bank. Let the pen keep moving.

Am I screaming am I throwing things off the desk am I running out to the sun? No, I must not be because my pen is still moving and they are sitting quietly at their desks.

I make a list:

Getting cups of coffee is all right.

Going to the bathroom is all right.

Breaking windows is not all right.

Throwing telephones is not all right.

Pinning a fat mouth to the wall is not all right.

Sitting in a chair to rot and die is just fine.

She says, You're stronger than I thought, Jeremy.

I am not strong. I go on only because I don't know what else to do.

That is strength.

No.

You go on with all your might. That is strength.

At the amusement park I stand in line for 76 minutes for a two-minute thrill on the Monster roller coaster. Back and forth between the rails the lines twist, formed by teenage boys and girls, sticky-faced children, and fat-bellied men with their clinging, disheveled women.

Just as the roller coaster train jerks into motion toward the big hill, the cold, driving rain begins. As I am flung forward into the screams and seeming doom of the plunge toward the bottom, the rain pelts me with stinging slaps. I gasp for breath as I am whipped around every corner and down each drop. I think, this is how it should feel all the time.

I talk to Will:

“Adulthood has been somewhat disappointing.”

“It’s been a disaster.”

“Yes.”

I work on the fifth floor but have to get to the eleventh floor. Instead of waiting in front of the mirrored elevator that makes me worry whether my waistline is growing or my hairline is shrinking, I run up the stairs as fast as I can. I smash right into a man by the seventh floor, but I say excuse me and keep on going. I run to take away the screaming in my legs and the shouting in my mind that is so loud it could disintegrate the walls. When I get to eleven the secretary laughs and says, “Do you want to sit and rest a minute?” I say no. I take what I came for and run all the way back down.

I tell Will, “If I could, I would quit the bank and go back to that landscaping company I worked for in college.”

“What would you do there now?”

“Just what I did then. Prune trees. Plant flowers in front of the buildings, get dirty. Work till my back was killing me. Stay out in the hot sun all day. It was the best job I ever had.”

“You can’t live and have what you do now on the kind of money you made there.”

“You can live.”

III

I sit at my desk thinking of Anne. I haven't seen her in three days because she went out of town. Her face keeps going through my mind as I try to work. I put down my pencil and let my mind rehearse the way she'll look at me when I first see her. I see the way her eyebrows raise just before her gaze fixes on me. I feel her hugging me. I hear her laugh, her voice breaking on the high notes. Her image is such an elaborate ghost in my brain that she seems like my own creation. When I see her tonight I'll have this irrational amazement that she's real, that I see her and touch her and know her in the present.

Anne is next to me in the church sanctuary. I am here for the fourth time. When we first went out she would let me take her nowhere but here. I feel formal, the way I do at weddings. I try to concentrate on her and hope this doesn't last too long.

I feel stiff and uncomfortable. I don't relax until we start singing hymns, and then it isn't so bad. In the pew in front of us a little girl combs her doll's hair. As the organ begins the play the second hymn, the song leader asks us to stand. The girl is between her parents. As they stand, she raises a hand to each of them, and they pull her up so that she stands in the pew between them. She squirms from side to side, squeezing her mother's waist, then her father's, leaning on their shoulders and singing. I watch the little girl and put my arm around Anne's waist. It feels good to her my voice blending with hers.

When the song ends, someone in the congregation begins a chorus, and soon we are all singing it and some of us are clapping. I'm surprised at how much they sing, one song leading right into the next. When we finally stop I hear people all across the sanctuary saying "Amen" and "Praise God" and "Praise Jesus."

After a while we all sit down and a girl in front begins to sing by herself, accompanied only by the piano. She sings,

My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Oh my soul!

The woman's song is so deeply from the heart, so saturated with spirit, that when I look over at Anne her eyes are filled with tears and one hand is raised in praise to God.

When the singer stops, the whole place is filled with shouts and Amens, and the pastor stands up in front and just listens for a while.

He says, "The Spirit of God is with us tonight." Amens everywhere. His voice is full of emotion. "What you heard in the music isn't just Carolyn's beautiful voice, good as it is. What you heard in the music is something deeper, isn't it?" Shouts of Amen and Praise God. "Do you hear God's voice in the music? Do you hear him calling out to you, drawing your spirit to his? Listen to the Spirit. Listen."

I am with Anne at the waterfall in the state park. We stand arm-in-arm in the stream looking up at the waterfall crashing down from about twenty feet above us. We find a place along the edge where we can climb up.

She climbs ahead of me, the water drenching her, sometimes pushing her hard against me. The water makes her laugh so hard I'm afraid she'll fall. I try to steady her with my arms. "Don't laugh," I say, but she can't help it. When we finally get to the top, she runs along the smooth rock splashing water into the air with her feet. Before long she decides to climb back down, and is so excited she is halfway down the fall before I even get started. She doesn't slip at all, but I slide off a rock once and nearly plunge to my death.

When we get to the bottom she pulls me right into the center of the spray, so powerful it nearly washes her blouse off her shoulders. She screams and laughs. I hold onto her as tight as I can until the force of the water knocks us into the cool pool below.

I am in the sanctuary, but not just to be with Anne. I am here to encounter the Spirit, the one I have always known in the back of the music, the one these people single out and identify with a name.

The Spirit comes in the singing voices first, just as it had before. We sing a hymn with the words, "Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin, . . ." A later verse says "My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed thee." All around me people sing the verse with such force and conviction that the song leader asks us to sing it again. At the end the room is flooded with "Amen" and "Praise God," and to Anne's great surprise I throw in an "Amen" of my own.

I am drenched in the Spirit. I have never known it so powerfully. Up to now I have known only hints of it, and in unexpected places—in the music, in my nights alone at my piano, in my love for Anne. I never thought I would find it in a church.

When Pastor Fletcher stands to speak a few people still are shouting praises. He just stands there at the pulpit looking out at us. Even after everyone gets quiet he still waits, as if he is listening. He is listening to the Spirit.

He preaches a sermon about fire, the fire of the Spirit. It is a fire that burns away what is old and dead, a fire that refines. Malachi said, “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears! For he will be like a refiner’s fire. . .”

I feel Pastor Fletcher looking directly at me. I feel the fire. Pastor Fletcher reads from Luke, where John the Baptist says, “I baptize you with water. But ones more powerful that I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

He reads, “And when the Spirit came, it was with the sound of a rushing wind, and with what seemed to be tongues of flame that came to rest on each of the disciples.”

Pastor Fletcher says something about burning for Jesus. He tells some kind of story but I miss it. I can only hear one phrase. Burning for Jesus. Burning with the Spirit. I feel the burning in my own soul.

When I pick up his message again he’s saying, “. . . Spirit will fill you as it filled Jeremiah, who said, ‘His word is in my heart like burning fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.’ The Spirit can burn in you as it burned in

Abraham, who went out by faith to a strange land. As it burned in Paul. Burned in Peter. Burned in John. Burned in our own singing a while ago. Who is the Spirit? The spirit is Jesus Christ.”

The Glittering city. I am at a conference in Chicago, and I am supposed to meet Anne at the Palmer House Hotel at seven o'clock. It's almost seven now and I'm still on the twenty-seventh floor of the bank looking out at the millions of yellow lights. I see the lights and think of Anne somewhere out there in the midst of them. I take the elevator down and rush out to get a taxi. The driver has a whiskered face and a dirty cap. He does not speak to me at all. He lets out a disgusted sigh as if I have named some bizarre and unreachable destination, though the hotel isn't far. He drives too fast. We dodge the lights of the cars all across town. I am headed toward Anne, wondering how she will look in that first moment I see her.

Outside the hotel a well-dressed group of men and women stand huddled together in the cold, the steam from their mouths reflecting in the light. As I walk by I smell a lady's perfume. Thinking *Anne Anne*. I find her underneath the big chandelier. She sits on the edge of the sofa, looking at the lights. She is surrounded by little groups of strangers in a city filled with strangers. I know only her. Only she looks up at me as I walk across the floor. I feel a surge of love for her that I think I'll never get over. She is my refuge in the swarming strangeness. She is the love. When she stands up and hugs me, I want only to never let go.

Anne sits across from me reading a magazine. She catches me watching her and says, “What?”

So I go ahead and tell her. “Even the way you sit there and read a magazine is sexy. You would think you’re posing to make it look just a certain way, but it’s completely natural. You were doing it when I walked in the room. You’re not even aware of it.” This embarrasses her and she squirms and puts down the magazine. “Honestly, Jeremy. The things you say.”

I sit across from Pastor Fletcher at the restaurant. I have just explained to him that I believe I have to quit my job at the bank. I say, “I feel like I’m supposed to do something else, but I’m not sure what it is. I feel like I’m part of something bigger than I know about yet completely. What I have right now just isn’t enough—working at the bank, going to shopping malls, all that—but quitting seems so—”

“Irresponsible?” he says.

“Yes. That’s what Anne calls it.”

Pastor Fletcher looks at me and nods. I believe he burns with the same fire that burns in me. He says, “Jeremy, you are going to have to face the fact that you are not going to have the luxury and comfort of a normal life. Some people are granted that, and some people are called to something else. You just followe your call and let God take care of the rest.”

Thinking Jesus you ask too much.

The realtor takes Anne and me to the house in the neighborhood with all the trees. Anne squeezes my arm and whispers, "Oooh" as we pull into the driveway.

In the empty rooms she describes every improvement we could make and how each piece of furniture would be arranged. In just a few minutes she takes the nothingness of the rooms and with her words creates our home and future. She talks of cookouts on the deck in the backyard, evenings with just the two of us in front of the fireplace.

I picture other things. I see the suns streaming through the kitchen window in the morning. She sits at the kitchen table. I come up behind her and caress her shoulders.

Yet even as I imagine it I feel it vanishing. The fire burns. Do you hear God's voice in the music? Do you hear him calling out to you, drawing your spirit to his? Listen to the music. Listen.

I tell Anne, "It's like Pastor Fletcher says, I think God is purging me in fire, burning away the chaff to leave only the grain, burning away those things that aren't necessary – the job, the car, so that I am left standing in faith before him, all the chaff burned away."

"Oh yes?" she says. She is angry. "And am I part of the chaff?"

"No! But I need you to understand why I have to quit the bank. I have to take the risk, see what there is for me to do. My faith can't just be a game."

She stands and walks silently to the kitchen. She says nothing, but her clanking of dishes shouts, "No. No. No."

It is three o'clock in the morning on the day I will quit my job. The music holds me. The saxophone walks through the smoke, easy and black. The lights are red and dancing, dancing through the air, across the floor, across the sky. The light and the music become one.

The Spirit in the music says, you are free from the bank. You are free to go out and sing.

(Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.)

The music flows in wavy rhythms, and my spirit follows, casual at first, unsure of its freedom, but then intensely, and I dance around the living room thanking God for the beauty of it. The Spirit in the music says, you don't have to stay where you feel squashed down, where your tie strangles your neck, where the gray partitions block your movement and the chair and desk for you to sit, where the eyes all around you make you keep the pen moving and your face toward the page.

(Is not life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.)

I take everything that belongs to me out of my desk and put it into a box. I take the posters off the wall of my cubicle, roll them up, and put rubber bands around them. Cindy, the secretary, walks up for the third or fourth time in the last fifteen minutes and says, "I can't believe you're quitting. It won't be fun anymore. I

can't believe you're doing this. You can still change your mind. They don't want you to go."

When I leave I hug her, and I say goodbye to the others, and we promise to keep in touch. I am not sad, though, as I walk away from those gray cubicles. I remember the torturous eons of screaming decay I spent there. I remember the days I thought I would rot to death or explode with frustrated energy before five o'clock hit. I remember the hundreds of times I imagine doing just what I am doing now—leaving for the last time.

I take the elevator down to ground level. I walk through the lobby and out the door onto the sidewalk. It is the middle of the morning. I am free.

On the afternoon of the day I quit my job I lie on my bed asleep because last night I never did go to bed. I'm still wearing the white dress shirt I put on to go to work this morning, but it's wrinkled now, and I'm not wearing a tie. I'm wearing sweat pants and heavy white socks. I'm having one of those dreams where I'm chasing something through narrow streets I've never seen before. I'm lost and everything is so fuzzy and dark I can hardly see.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and hear a voice, and these things are not a part of the dream. My eyes open to see Will's bearded face. He smells like the winter air. He steps back and leans against the dresser to laugh at how startled I am. His own ruggedness—an illusion created by his beard and husky body and heavy winter coat and boots and the winter smell and the way he leans so casually—makes me feel all of a sudden small and weak and foolish. I have quit my job and left myself with

nothing, and now I have to explain it to this self-sufficient man who would never let himself be carried away by a Spirit in the music in the middle of the night.

I sit up and say, 'What are you doing here, Will? How did you get in here?'

"I saw your car. You didn't hear me knock but the door wasn't locked. Are you sick or something? What are you doing asleep?"

I stand and say, "What time is it?"

"It's almost six. What's going on? My God, you're scary-looking."

"I'm supposed to pick Anne up at six. I have to take a shower."

"You'd scare her to death if you went looking like you do now. What's the matter with you?"

"It's too long to get into." In the mirror I see my hair sticking in all different directions. My eyes look puffy and squinty. I have that panicky feeling I get when I first wake up, especially when I'm running late. The last thing I want to do is explain to Will why I quit my job.

"Something's up, I can tell," he says.

"I've got to take a shower, buddy. I'm running late."

"Go ahead. I can talk to you from out here."

Will is not going to leave.

I wait until I'm in the shower, and the hot water is stinging my face and feeling really good, before I yell out to him, "I went ahead and quit at the bank. Today was my last day." I hear his caveman grunt of disapproval. He begins to ask questions. When did I quit? Does Anne know about it? Was she the one who made

me do it? How will she react? I give short answers and pretend I can't hear him very well because of the noise in the shower.

By the time I get out of the shower and am drying off he is silent, a silence of disapproval.

I put my clothes on without saying anything. He sits on my bed picking at one of his boots. I know exactly how he feels about this whole thing, but I know he won't be satisfied until he tells me again. Once I'm dressed, I turn and look directly at him and say, "So what do you think?"

"I think it's crazy."

"Why am I not surprised. Anne will probably think so too."

"You mean you haven't told her yet?"

"I told her I was planning to quit, but she still think I won't go through with it. She doesn't know this was my last day. I have to tell her tonight."

He runs his hands down his face and over his beard.

"Jeremy, what's happening to you?"

"I had to do it, Will."

"I know you hate the bank, but come on, most people take a vacation or something."

"You know there's more to it than that." I am starting to feel annoyed.

I say, "I hope I don't have to go through this same thing with Anne tonight. I'm tired of everybody acting like I'm doing some horrible thing. This is what I want to do. I feel good about this. This is what I feel like I should be doing."

"You know what your problem is, Jeremy?"

“Tell me, Will.”

“Your problem is you sit around here worrying all the time about whether you’re doing the right thing and you read the Bible and get yourself so twisted up and warped that you’re likely to do anything.”

“And what do you think I should be doing?”

“Play racquetball. I don’t know. Go dancing. Get a few drinks. For God’s sake, don’t up and quit your job. Look how ridiculous this is.”

When I see Anne standing there in the open door I wonder whether I’ll be able to bring myself to tell her I quit my job. I love her so much I take her in my arms and hug her as hard as I can. I lift her up and swing her outside onto the snow-covered porch.

She screams and tries to hold onto the doorframe so I can’t get her any farther outside. I break her away and carry her out into the yard. She is heavy, and I’m afraid I’ll drop her. It’s cold all around me except where her body touches me. She screams, “No! Put me down!”

“Put you down? Out here in the snow? Is that what you want?”

She is pounding me on the back. “Take me inside. I’m going to catch pneumonia.”

I hold her tight and carry her into the house. I feel so relieved to be with her that I can’t tell her about quitting.

We’re supposed to go ice skating at the park, but first we’re going out to eat. Maybe I’ll tell her there.

The windows of the restaurant are steamy, and the food is hot. Anne is happy tonight. She is talkative. She talks about her little nephew who came over the night before. "He is the cutest thing you ever saw. They dressed him in these little overalls and a baseball cap. He looked like a little farmer. I taught him to sing 'Old McDonald Had a Farm.' Whenever we got to the animal noises he would just laugh his head off. It was the cutest thing. But he would only sing it for me, nobody else."

That doesn't surprise me. The whole world plays to Anne. It plays by her rules.

The atmosphere is all wrong to tell her, but I decide to do it anyway. Just before I start she says, "We'd better go, honey. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

Maybe it will be easier in the dark, in the middle of the frozen pond.

When I finally tell her I botch it up pretty badly because I let her pull it out of my with questions. She casually asks me why I was late to pick her up, and I tell her because I was asleep until Will came in. She asks me how I found time to sleep when I was supposed to be at work. I tell her then, pretty clumsily, that today was my last day. My reasons for quitting, as I repeat them to her, sound weak even to myself. I can feel the anger building in her as she skates close to me across the dark pond. She pulls away while I'm still explaining. I just can't tell her what I really want to do. I can't tell her about the music spinning around inside me making me know it was the right thing to do. I can't tell people that kind of thing. Not even Anne.

She says, "How can we have a future together if you're going to do crazy things like this? How can we get married and buy a home and raise a family if you're going to act this way?"

I don't know.

The fire burns.

She skates away, and I have to chase her. When I catch up to her she's on the verge of tears, but her anger keeps them from coming.

She says, "What happens when this wears off, Jeremy, and you realize what a stupid thing you've done?"

"Anne, it's no use going over this again and again. I can't explain this to you. But I just had to do it. I believe the Lord will show me what to do."

She skates away again. I don't chase her right away. What I really want to do is sit down somewhere, and think, but we are already in the middle of the pond, far from the bank. It is so dark I can't even see where she went. I think I hear her, so I skate in that direction. We're not really supposed to skate in this part of the park, so none of it is lit up.

I can't find her. I keep calling her name and skating in every direction, but I don't see or hear her. I am ready to give up and go back to the car to wait. I skate in the direction I think the car would be. I hear nothing but the squeaking noise under my feet. The light I see way off there must be the bank where the car is parked. The squeaking is louder. I hear the ice crack. I stop. I feel hot all over. I don't want to move.

Nothing looks familiar. I may be headed toward the wrong bank. At least it's a bank, though, and the ice must be better there than it is here. I will skate toward the light. No problem.

I don't get much farther before the front tip of my right blade catches on something and I fall on one knee. "Dear Lord protect me." My knee smashes through the ice. I feel the frigid water surround it. I lose my balance for a minute, but then I jerk myself up and plunge forward again.

Everything around me seems to be cracking. The entire lake seems to be falling into a huge abyss, sinking, ice upon ice. I fall again, my legs in the wetness turning to stone. As water covers me I turn to cold, hopeless stone. I feel myself thrashing, I hear my voice scream Anne, but she is nowhere. I am a stone. I cannot breathe. Dear Jesus. Anne.

I call to Abdiel. He brings me out and wraps me in the music.

"You're ready now," he says. "You don't need to see any more. You asked to sing for the Lord, and now you'll get to do it. You are going far beyond everything you have ever known. It is a new world to you but you should not be afraid. The people look like you, and the land and sky are not so different from your own. The people will ask you where you came from, and they'll want you know all about your home, but you must tell them only that you come from the Bright World, which is where you are now. You will know their language, for I am going to teach it to you. As for what you must do when you get there, I can tell you nothing more than you have always already known: walk in the Light.

