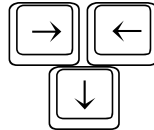


“No man has ever seen Death.
No one ever heard Death’s voice,
but Death is real and Death is loud..”
- The Epic of Gilgamesh
- Tablet X, Column V, Lines 231-233.



2.0 The Lost, Aging Crime

Caleb had not ever willingly walked into a police station before. It had a shoddy hospital feel about it; the walls were clean, but not too clean, the furniture industrial, the floors linoleum. Uniformed men – some young and lean, the others old and fat with their bellies falling out over their belts – sauntered about very much at home in their cinder-block hive.

The waiting room was divided, precisely in half, by a glass wall – presumably bullet-proof – behind which a desk sergeant patiently waited for retirement in a green leather swivel chair reading a paperback. Caleb felt himself drawn, against his will, towards the slotted grill in the bullet-proof glass before the desk sergeant. His steel-blue Pontiac had driven him, apparently of its own volition, to the police station but now Caleb was obliged to force the inane phrase out of his own mouth.

“I think I want to report a murder.”

The desk sergeant carefully dog-eared the page he was reading, placed the paperback cover-side down on the desk before him, leaned back in the chair and stared up at Caleb over his reading glasses. “You think there was a murder or you think you want to report it?”

This was not the response that Caleb had expected. “No, I want to report a murder,” Caleb stated firmly, “I saw a woman die. I saw the knife. I saw the blood. I saw her die.”

The desk sergeant now took a professional look at Caleb. He noticed the dark traces of vomit still staining Caleb’s shirt and the look of panic about his eyes. He nodded reassuringly and drew a pale green carbonless three-part Police Report form towards him. He removed a ball-point pen from his left shirt pocket, clicked it three times until he saw that the nib had

been extruded, and began the laborious process of filling it out. He looked at his watch and wrote down the time and date. “Your name?”

Caleb gave him his name.

“Address?”

Caleb gave him his address.

“Phone number, home phone first, work phone last?”

Caleb gave him his phone numbers.

The desk sergeant came to the section labeled **Nature of Crime** and laboriously wrote in **HOMICIDE** in block letters. “Location of crime?”

Now the conveyor belt of questions and answers abruptly ground to a halt. “I don’t know, Caleb finally answered, “I saw it on the Internet. I can give you the URL, but I don’t know where the murder actually took place. Not physically... not in the real world, I mean.”

The desk sergeant stopped writing. He put his pen down. He took off his reading glasses and carefully laid them on top of his paperback. He analyzed the sincerity of Caleb’s face. “Maybe you should talk to one of our detectives?”

Caleb nodded.

The desk sergeant got up from his green leather chair and motioned for Caleb to follow him to the far end of the glass wall where a double-paned and chicken-wired security door allowed admission into the police station proper.

Caleb – like a mass of iron filings in a fifth grade science experiment – felt himself pulled by an invisible force on the other side of the glass towards the door. The desk sergeant pressed the buzzer to unlock the door and Caleb turned the handle. It opened inward, away from him, and Caleb was ushered into the land of the police.



2 . 1

The desk sergeant led Caleb through a maze of green-gray desks towards the back of the room. He stopped in front the work area of a young acne-scarred detective who had applied far too much mousse to his hair and was wearing a dark single breasted suit, black shirt with a maroon tie, black pants and black Italian shoes polished to a high gloss by a black man who stationed himself daily outside the BART station. He had a black silk handkerchief in his outside left breast pocket.

The desk sergeant made the introductions, “Detective Massey, this is Mr. Caleb Mach who believes that he *may have* witnessed a murder on the Internet.” He handed Massey the clipboard with the police report.

Detective Massey, apparently, was the hippest thing in the San Jacinto Police headquarters. He was routinely assigned all the Internet crime. So far he had cracked three credit card scams and fourteen password thefts. Detective Massey was very interested to hear what Caleb Mach had to say. Detective Massey had never, before, been asked to investigate an actual murder that had taken place on the Internet.

Detective Massey licked his lips in anticipation and focused his attention on Caleb even as the desk sergeant retreated into the background to resume his station in his green leather chair reading his paperback. Massey was naive enough to think that this was the case that was going to make his career.

“Tell me all about it - start at the beginning – don’t leave out any detail even if you think it irrelevant,” Detective Massey instructed Caleb as he opened up a new window on his computer desktop, his fingers poised over the keyboard, waiting to take notes.

Caleb began the story at the beginning – he was good at following instructions – and the detective busily entered most of what Caleb said into a Word 6.0™ document. After Caleb had regurgitated his now standard explanation – honed by two years of recitation - of how it had come to pass that he had joined the ranks of the techno-veal, Massey stopped him.

“Heyyy, you wrote that dinosaur game, right?” the detective asked.

Caleb shuddered inside. Ten years ago he wrote *that* dinosaur game. “Uh, yeah,” Caleb ran his hand through his hair, “yup, it was a long, long time ago. That publisher still owes me about five years of royalty statements, too.”

“Man, I loved that dinosaur game when I was a kid,” the detective gushed. Massey excitedly rocked back and forth in his county-issued office chair.

“Uh, well, thanks!” Caleb tried to sound sincere. He forced out a dry, brittle laugh. He could still taste the vomit in his throat; he saw the dark yellow streaks of regurgitated breakfast burrito on his shirt and pants.

“Man, I just *loved* that dinosaur game!” Massey responded nodding his head from side to side. “You had to be ‘special good’ to get computer time in fourth-grade. I was a brown-nosing fool, just so I could get my computer time and play your *dinosaur game!*” Massey straightened up in his chair and beamed.

Caleb squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. It means a lot to me to know that it meant so much to you; you know, it was an important part of your childhood,” Caleb lied. He thought, “I am sitting in a police station, streaked in my own vomit, reporting the murder of my high-school girlfriend and I’m being interrogated by some kid that is an adoring fan of a throwaway game I did years ago just to pay the rent. How can this possibly get worse?”

It got worse.

“So, Mr. Mach, you were looking at some porn on company time?” Massey resumed the questioning.



2 . 2

A sign of maturity might be acknowledgment that there are some situations that you just can’t weasel out of.

There is no point in trying to explain that life as a techno-veal was mind-numbingly boring - that you once had the number one game – that you wrote that damn dinosaur game detective Massey loved as a kid in a week and a half (most of it one 48-hour balls-out caffeine-fueled session) that you were now reduced to just trying to put the Tender Vittles™ on the table for Sonny, the tabby cat. “Yeah, okay, I was porn surfing.”

“But you hadn’t realized that ‘Heather’ was in fact ‘Bethany Jean Rosemont’ your high-school girlfriend?” Detective Massey resumed the questioning.

“No.”

“You had visited this site a number of times in the past?”

“Yes, many times.”

“But you did not recognize your high-school girlfriend?” Detective Massey leaned forward, towards Caleb, sincerely concerned, sincerely puzzled.

“She wore a mask. She wore this,” Caleb threw his hands up, his fingers carving out great hunks of the thick police station air, “this plaster, painted mask. It had this face on it. It wasn’t her face. It was like a renaissance face; a carnival face. She wore a mask.” Caleb wanted a smoke more than anytime before in his life.

“But then you recognized her?” Massey continued the questioning.

“Yeah, from a birthmark. I recognized the birthmark on her...” *oh, jeez, I’ve got to say it, Caleb realized*, “her inner thigh. She’s a redhead, you know – freckles - and sometimes the freckles just seem to come together and form a pattern, or whatever, and - Beth had this birthmark – I think they call it a *café au lait* birthmark, but it was *recognizable*. I recognized her. I *knew* it was Bethany Jean from the birthmark.”

“So... you’re watching, *observing*, this web site and then...”

“And then I saw somebody fucking kill her! I saw somebody put a fucking knife into her belly!” Caleb was well and truly pissed off, “I saw her die. I saw the blood just pour out of her. I saw her fucking die, live on the fucking Internet. I saw it all. And – truth be known – there had to be about half a million other horny bastards out there that saw it, too.” Caleb, disgusted with himself, the shitty situation that he was in, his life – *everything* – fell back into his county-issued chair and, with one half-conscious movement (he no longer gave a shit), reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette and lit in violation of God-knows-how-many City, County, State and Federal laws and dragged the smoke deep into his lungs. “I fucking saw it.”

“And the URL of this site was?”



2.3

Caleb told Massey the URL of Heather’s site.

The detective stopped, opened up another window, launched Netscape™ and looked up expectantly at Caleb.

Caleb slowly repeated the address as Massey carefully typed it in:

H	T	T	P	:	/	/	W	W	W	.						
G	I	L	G	A	M	E	S	H	C	O	N	T	R	I	T	E
.	C	O	M	/	H	E	A	T	H	E	R	.	H	T	M	RETURN

Caleb and Detective Massey stared intently at the screen.

Waiting to connect to server...

93% loaded. Caleb and Detective Massey sweat it out. 95%, 97% – what shitty algorithm doesn’t hit every percentage along the way? – 99% and then it hung on a 100% for an eternity before the screen built.

And then, in a top-down flood of animated .GIF images a 320 by 240 web cam displayed:

Nothing, *nothing* but black and random static.

No Heather, no Bethany Jean, no knife, no unseen hand, no gouts of blood pouring out from just above her gem-studded navel. Nothing.

Detective Massey turned towards Caleb.

Caleb turned towards Detective Massey his head slowly nodding *no*, no, wait, *wait*...

Nothing.

Five seconds - the screen refreshed - another black screen with the white static pixels now in different positions.

Five more seconds and the screen refreshed, again. More black; more static.

Ten seconds and the screen refreshed. More black; more static.

Detective Massey turned towards Caleb Mach – every five seconds the screen refreshed behind him, black with new random white static pixels – and he slowly shook his head.

“Mr. Mach, I do not see anything at this site.”

“I know what I saw,” Caleb firmly stated, “I saw Bethany Jean Rosemont murdered, live on the Internet, at that URL. I saw it. I will sign an affidavit – or whatever you want – I know what I saw, I saw...” Caleb took a deep breath, “I saw Bethany Jean Rosemont murdered, live, on the Internet. I saw it.”

Detective Massey looked down at his hands and saw that he was rubbing them. “Mr. Mach, I have no body, no crime, and no evidence. I would very much like to help you.”

“I know what I saw,” Caleb said, his words fell like dying fish left gasping for breath on the deck of a trawler.



2 . 4

A shadow appeared as if cast by a blimp slowly darkening the no man's land of the detective's desk between Caleb and Massey. Caleb looked up to see the looming form of the desk sergeant, holding a clipboard, obscuring the overhead lights.

"Mr. Mach?" the desk sergeant asked, "there seems to be a problem. I would almost laugh, but it's no laughing matter."

Caleb squinted trying to make out some feature of the desk sergeant's face but he was gazing straight up into the corona of light that encircled the officer's head. "Excuse me, sir," Caleb began, "what kind of a problem?" Caleb tried to force a smile but it appeared as a grimace.

"I ran your name through the computer. It came up with a few things." The desk sergeant detached a six-foot long printout from his clipboard. "These are the problems." The printout accorded out to its full length.

Caleb picked up the last two feet of the printout that fell to the floor and tried to make sense of the abbreviations, dates and dollar amounts.

"Parking tickets, Mr. Mach," the desk sergeant explained, "over \$700 in parking tickets. This is a very serious matter."

Caleb tried to put a sympathetic spin on his explanation: the IRS, the bankrupt publisher, the loss of his house.

"I'm very sorry to hear about your troubles, Mr. Mach," the desk sergeant continued, "but when the amount exceeded \$500 Judge Smithfield issued a bench warrant for your arrest. Nothing personal, Mr. Mach, but this is standard procedure." Caleb looked up to find the desk sergeant holding a pair of handcuffs.

"You're going to arrest me?" Caleb sputtered, "I came here to report a murder and you're going to arrest me? For parking tickets?" Caleb's eyes grew wide in panic. He looked towards Detective Massey for some sign of compassion. Massey just shrugged.

"I'm sorry, but unless you can pay the \$745.22 immediately, I will have to book you." The desk sergeant tried to look paternal.

"Will you take a check? I'm not in the habit of keeping that much cash on hand."

"Sure, but it better be good. Bouncing a check for over \$500 is a felony."

One felony later Caleb Mach was back in the steel blue Pontiac driving home down the 880.



2.5

He remembered nothing of his arrival home or how he, again, threw up in the privacy of his own bathroom this time, or how he picked up the Jamestown High “Panther Tracks” yearbook and turned to Bethany Jean Rosemont’s senior class picture.

Caleb was the picture of shock. And then he realized that he still had a ZipDisk™ in his pocket that he must have ejected and carried the whole time - because his torn nail was still wedged underneath the metal disk slide - and he put the disk into his home machine and watched the death of Bethany Jean over and over, frame by frame, pixel by pixel.

Caleb’s first thought: he had no first thought.

His mind would alternate: depression, anger, denial. He knew he was missing something (bargaining and acceptance to be precise). He analyzed each frame, he reached for the phone, he enlarged a pixel field, he put the phone down, he picked up the yearbook, he dropped it back down on his brown, stained carpet. He stared at the large, colorful blocks on his screen. He enlarged the knife and printed out dozens of pages on his ink-jet printer.

Eventually, he remembered Jimbo’s number and called. Jimbo had been dating Bethany Jean’s best friend, Mandy, throughout high school. From Jimbo he got Mandy’s number. Mandy sounded like she picked the phone up in a trailer that was overrun by squalling infants. After 15 minutes of,

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Oh? You’re doing okay?”

“Oh, yeah, I married Billy “Meat” (who, apparently, was plenty fertile but liked to bounce Mandy off the paneling).

“Oh, yeah, NO, I don’t have Beth’s phone number; her Mom moved after the divorce; oh, yeah! You haven’t heard?

“Oh! Yeah! Mr. R. was doing his secretary! Beth’s Mom saw them – OH YEAH! – and then – you know – Beth moved down to Texas. She’s doing real good in Austin, you know. Has her own office and all. Can’t find

her card just now – think Meat took it after the last time Beth was up here (musta been three years ago!) but her Mom’s moved a few times. So – say – whatcha doing? You ever coming back? We could get together; talk over old times and stuff?”

“Yeah; sure, I’ll be back next year. Do you have Beth’s mom’s number?”

“Naw, it’s unlisted – listen Caleb don’t jerk me around – you coming back up here?”

“I doubt it.” Caleb blurted out in a nanosecond of honesty, “I don’t think there’s any amount of money that would ever make me come back to that shit-hole.”

“Yeah. Figured so. Beth’s mom lives over on Montmorrisey, in one of those new apartment buildings. I think it’s around 1200 Montmorrisey. Got it?”

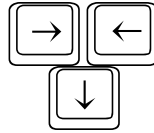
Caleb put the phone back in its cradle.

Before he realized, he was on the way back to the Jamestown shit-hole.

“Go careful through this risky, bold adventure,
mighty lord. Be sure of your own safety first of all.”

- The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Tablet III, Column VI, Lines 105-106.



3.0 A Girl, Something, Etc.

Caleb was embarrassed to take a cab from the airport. Maybe a limo – or a friend – he thought should pick him up when he finally came home. But he never imagined just walking out of the terminal and taking the first cab in a very short line of yellow over-sized cars.

They pulled up in front of the pastel cinder-block apartment building much sooner than Caleb wanted. The cabby pulled the flag down and Caleb gave him the money and then he found himself outside, on the street with his bags, staring towards what was, obviously, her bedroom window.

Caleb could tell because he saw the lampshade in the second-floor window covered with a red gypsy shawl and – somehow – he knew that this was the room where Bethany’s Mom entertained her once-a-week suitors.

He walked into the vestibule and looked about for a button to press but there was none; just ‘Ms. Jane Rosemont 201’ on the mailbox so he walked up the poured concrete stairs and found himself at her door.

He thought to ring the buzzer, but – in the end – just knocked on the door – and Mrs. Rosemont answered somehow appearing flustered and expectant (though he hadn’t called before). Sweeping back a great bang of Clairol 20A Amber Sunrise hair she ushered Caleb into her living room.

“Please call me Jane” Rosemont sailed off to the kitchen to retrieve a cold bottle of Stolichnaya Vodka from the freezer before Caleb could say, “No! No, no, Mrs. Rosemont, I haven’t moved back home. I just want to talk to you about Beth for a second. Does she still live in Austin?” But then Jane was back and she handed Caleb the stiffest straight Vodka that he had seen in his 28 years.

Jane had a tall electric lemonade waiting on the teakwood coffee table; rivulets of condensation flowed down the outside of the glass and pooled

onto a soggy copy of *Cosmo* (cover story: ‘*How Tantric Orgasms Will Make Him Your Slave*’). She settled back into an original Charles Eames leather lounge chair that Caleb vaguely remembered had once been in the study of Bethany Jean’s house. Twenty years ago it had set Mr. Rosemont back at least twenty-five hundred for it and the matching ottoman and now it was part of a collection of pre-divorce furniture in Jane’s too tiny apartment. Fifteen rooms of furniture (minus what had been sold off) were now crammed into three.

Jane was aging unevenly.

Caleb could still see much of Bethany Jean in her mother. But Jane had had too much sun (the cruises in the Caribbean looking for a second husband) and her porcelain skin had become freckled and the freckles had merged the way that drops of mercury will find each other on a tabletop and the freckles had become the beginnings of liver spots. The flesh on her arms had begun to droop.

Mrs. Rosemont still prided herself on being able to pour her body into size 6 designer suits (even if the last *ensemble* had cost a hand-carved 1860 Stanford mahogany English hutch). Jane still had her *shape*.

Caleb suddenly understood that Mrs. Rosemont was dyeing her hair *back to her original color* to camouflage a shock of gray-white hair that was just beginning to erupt to the left of her widow’s peak ten years ago. As a teenager he had seen it starting.

Jane Rosemont inserted the third finger of her right hand into the vodka-lemonade – slowly – stopping just short of the marquis-cut cocktail ring set in a platinum mounting (Caleb wondered if the center-stone was real or now replaced by paste-glass) and, slowly – *slowly* – sucked the finger into her mouth; sucking greedily, sexually, fixing Caleb with her stare.

Caleb started, “Mrs. Rosemont.”

“Please call me Jane.”

Caleb started, again, “Jane. Mrs. Rosemont. I need to talk to you about Bethany. Bethany Jean.”

“Funny. I wanted to talk to you about Bethany Jean.”

Surprised. “Yes, YES! (a self-conscious smile) Bethany!” Caleb was grateful to find a common ground for a moment.

“Yes, Bethany Jean,” Mrs. Rosemont replied.

“Yes Bethany Jean,” Caleb agreed.

Mrs. Rosemont settled back into the Charles Eames leather lounge chair protecting her drink with both hands.

“Do you remember the night of December 24, 1991, Caleb?” Mrs. Rosemont fixed him with a stare. “I remember it quite clearly. Do you?”

Caleb fumbled around a bit for a second, flipping through the Rolodex of his mind. A date about ten years ago? No, he didn't have a clue.

“No, Mrs. Rosemont. I don't remember that date.”

“Let me give you a hint: do you remember that sofa just over there?” Mrs. Rosemont pointed towards an overstuffed camelback striped settee placed before the bay window.

“No, Mrs. Rosemont. I don't remember a thing.” Caleb was feeling decidedly uncomfortable just now.

“Well, Caleb Mach, I remember you, that settee, and Bethany Jean. It was at our old home on Oak Lane and Mr. Rosemont and I had just returned from Midnight Mass.” Mrs. Rosemont fixed Caleb with a feline stare.



3.1

CHRIST! CHRIST! OH, JESUS! OH, CHRIST!

The folders of the mental filing cabinet came pouring out now.

Caleb Mach and Bethany Jean sweating, panties down, groping on the striped camelback settee. Hands, fingers, tongues, kisses. The feel of petrochemicals around your genitals and the scent of rubber and lubricants. The sweet scent of Bethany Jean.

Stuff he would rather forget. And, yet the stuff that Caleb Mach thought of every day of his cubicle veal life.

Midnight Mass, the night the grown-ups went away and left their daughters and their liquor cabinets unprotected. The giant Scotch pine in the hallway, twinkling in Republican splendor, the English hunting engravings hung on the paneled walls, the staircase leading up to the bedrooms, the pocket doors opening onto Mr. Rosemont's library, the camelback settee beneath the family portrait, they all underlined the fact that Caleb Mach had no business being here. Here on Oak Lane, on December 24, with a rich man's redheaded daughter.

It was Bethany Jean's idea to do it in her father's library, on the camelback settee, under the family portrait.

Bethany Jean calling Caleb that afternoon, Bethany Jean waiting in the foyer, Bethany Jean holding the decanter of her father's favorite 25-year-old scotch, Bethany Jean in her mother's lingerie, Bethany Jean playing at being the seductress, Bethany Jean sweeping back a lock of bright auburn hair behind her right ear – her mother's Nakamoto pearl earrings refracting the light – Bethany Jean opening the great oaken door and inviting Caleb Mach into her parents' home. Caleb knew that he was out of his depth, playing above his station, and this knowledge made his testicles race each other back up into his thoracic cavity.

The fear made Caleb suddenly detach from this reality.

The deep, dark, Republican paneling which should have been reassuring – given Caleb's penchant for all things British – was only ominous, the eyes in the staid family portrait leering. Caleb understood that he had become a walk-on player in his own life.



3.2

Caleb Mach had first caught sight of Bethany Jean Rosemont out of the corner of his eye. She was brushstroke of scarlet against the pale midwestern sky. Caleb was soaked in his own honest sweat on the varsity practice field under a dying autumn sun.

The thick, elastic straps of his shoulder pads bit into his armpits and his ribs. A lineman, into the trenches, with white plastic armor, he took up his three-point stance and stared down the whimpering juvenile across the line, gnawing on his mouthpiece, champing at the bit, straining at the leash, waiting for the snap, to put his man down and pursue the ball-carrier with a single-minded obsession.

Across the line. Caleb was always pushing the line.

Caleb was one of those kids who always pushed across the line just a little bit too far. Never knew how far he would go. At first his teachers embraced him. And then he pushed just a little bit too far.

He started doubting. He started questioning. He started bringing up embarrassing questions in Civics.

He picked at political scabs.

It's strange.

One day he was in. The next day he was out.

And it was just then – when Caleb Mach thought he had touched social bottom – that Bethany Jean appeared like an auburn brushstroke on the Midwestern horizon.



3.3

In retrospect it made perfect sense.

Bethany Jean Rosemont was as flawless as a Ming vase. Flawless skin, flawless face, flawless hair, flawless ruby eyebrows. Flawless body, upturned breasts, flawless hands and flawless clothes. A dozen generations of breeding. A perfect child bred for perfection. Porcelain perfection.

And one day – out of the blue – she decided to go bad. And when she went bad she wanted to be as bad as she could be.

Before the snap of the ball all time hangs like a dark, cold, stone hovering over Caleb's heart. Time stands on end.

And then the ball is snapped and then we do things – in the trench – that we would rather forget. Bad things. Very bad things.

In the trenches, Caleb made his move. He took the meaty part of his right forearm and laid it down across the scared boy's neck just where the helmet rests. He stood, upright, and smashed his arm down on his enemy and he watched his man crumple down *like how Gilgamesh slew the sacred Bull*.

And then, out of the corner of his eye he saw that contrail of red against a dying autumn sky and saw that she wanted.

She wanted the sweat. More than anything else she wanted the sweat.

She wanted to suck the sweat from Caleb's body.

She had a hunger.

It's funny, but it was exactly that hunger – that hunger for *him* – that made Caleb love *her*.

Bethany Jean Rosemont wanted to defile her daddy's library and her daddy's paintings. She wanted to rut like the horned beasts in the Bible. And Caleb wanted to give Bethany Jean Rosemont all the nasty things she wanted.



3.4

Bethany Jean Rosemont and Caleb Mach were The Item those last two semesters at Jamestown Public High School. Inseparable and intertwined, Bethany Jean and Caleb stumbled towards graduation holding on to each other.

Caleb was surprised to discover that a brilliant mind lay behind that gorgeous face. Bethany Jean knew full well going into it that Caleb was almost her equal. Caleb ghosted her papers for Modern Civ. Bethany Jean gave him the answers to the Logic finals.

Sometimes, these things that cross the tracks do work out.

Caleb had a heart like a bull and Mr. Rosemont was warming up to him (Caleb was looking at football scholarships to Wisconsin, Yale and USC). He showed some promise, reminded Mr. Rosemont a bit of himself at that age, might just consider bringing him in as a junior partner – not right away, of course, but after graduation, marriage, a couple of years of clerking, maybe at the state Supreme Court, you know, for seasoning – well, this Mach kid did show some moxie. We could put him to work on some of those long-shot personal injury cases to begin with and see how he does.

Mrs. Rosemont didn't approve. Well, that's what Caleb assumed; she was always so distant, so detached. What Caleb didn't know was that Jane Rosemont was already hitting the bottle before noon. Detached and distant were just euphemisms. Jane knew her husband was screwing around.

It was 1991 and the decade of the trophy wife had begun.

Jane knew she was on the way out. Her natural beauty could no longer compare to the new crop of fresh-faced fillies coming onto the market. The sagging had begun but, frankly, she just no longer gave a shit. She deserved better than Jim Rosemont and she knew it. What no one else knew, however, was that Jane Rosemont was the brains of the operation. Bethany Jean had inherited her mother's savvy as well as her allure. Jim Rosemont just paid the bills and looked senatorial in tailored suits.

Privately, Jane Rosemont envied Bethany Jean and Caleb Mach and their first-love rutting. She wasn't so old that she couldn't still remember that electricity – that smell in the air just before the thunderstorm – waiting for your lover. Jane wished them all the luck in the world. With the first sip of every drink she took that summer of 1991 she silently wished Bethany Jean and Caleb all the luck in the world.

Not that it mattered.

Bethany Jean disappeared one night in April. The next morning Jane found five hundred dollars and a gold card missing from her Gucci purse. She wasn't surprised at all.

Caleb, however, had been struck dumb.



3.5

A deep gulp of Stolichnaya vodka.

Another swallow.

Breathing between the fumes.

“Yes, Caleb, I *saw you*. You and Bethany. On that settee. I saw *everything*. You left quite a stain, didn't you, Caleb Mach?” Jane Rosemont, settled back deep into the leather of her chair and, again, greedily sucked on her vodka-lemonade.

Caleb was stunned. A good ten seconds ticked off on the mantle clock before he remembered why he had traveled back to Jamestown. “Mrs. Rosemont, may I please have Bethany Jean's last address in Austin?” Caleb fidgeted with the handle of his unborn calf-hide suitcase that he had bought for this trip with a soon to be worthless American Express card. He desperately regretted paying for, yet another, calf abortion. He thought it would make him look *respectable* but it only made him look *nouveau riche*.

He toyed with the handle a bit more and then opened the matching attaché case and withdrew a legal pad and a Montblanc Classique Platinum pen. Caleb, poised with pen on paper, looked up towards Mrs. Rosemont and tried to fix her with a business-like gaze.

“Bethany Jean's last address?” Caleb inquired as matter of factly as possible.

“Caleb, Caleb Mach, there is no way in God's green earth that I'm going to give you Bethany Jean's last address – even if I knew it – which I don't.” And, with that, Jane Rosemont unfolded herself up out of the Charles Eames leather lounge chair and rose up to her full five feet and six inches. “I cannot conceive of any reason that my daughter would ever,” and here Jane Rosemont fixed Caleb Mach with a green-eyed feline stare, again, “ever, would want to see you again.”

“Now, little man, what I would very much like is if you would take your luggage, and yourself, and get the hell out of my house.”



3.6

Caleb was alone on the dirty streets of Jamestown.

There was not a cab in sight. He walked up towards the north corner and then back down south.

This was not like a novel: a cab should pick him up.

He waved his right hand far above his head even though no cab was in sight. Then he picked up his bag and his attaché case of unborn-calfskin and started walking back toward the airport.

He had been home for less than two hours and was already getting the bum's rush back out of town. The prodigal son returned and nobody cared.

Maybe he should have come back for his fifth high school reunion. Caleb did the mental arithmetic: he'd had the number one game in the world then, his company was running full-throttle and life was good. He could have thumbed his nose at all the rich bastards that had given him so much grief for dating Bethany Jean. He'd had his own company while they were still sucking hind teat at Daddy's firm.

Not that any of that mattered now.

Real life isn't like a computer game; there's no undo, you can't save a moment of real life onto a disk and restore it later when your plans don't work out. You can't go back in time in the real world. Caleb could not load a file and return to the day before yesterday, before he had witnessed Bethany Jean's murder live on the Internet, anymore than he could go back to his missed high school reunion.

What had Caleb been doing that week five years ago that was so damn important, anyway? The control tower of the Jamestown airport came into view on the horizon just as Caleb remembered: he'd been in Austin, Texas partying with his good friend Moses Gold.

He couldn't go back in time, but he could go back to Austin.