

The Teacher

By Craig Cunningham

The Teacher

Even in the darkness, they shine.

2:25 AM

It was not unusual for me to awake with a premonition.

Ever since I was a child, visions came to me and often they came true. Once I predicted the outcome to the Super Bowl on February 1, 2015. The New England Patriots and Seattle Seahawks. I had seen that Malcolm Butler was going to intercept the ball to end the game, and he did. It all came to pass exactly as I had seen it, and the Patriots won against all odds.

I had not shared my gift with anyone in the compound, and so no one knew. I acted surprised by the outcome. I did not tell them of my gift.

But the premonitions were not limited to sporting matches. For instance, I knew when my father was going to die. I even warned him, but he was a stubborn and stupid man who listened to no one. He raised goats and sold them for less than they were worth so that his rivals could never have the satisfaction of making a sale. The profits from the goats were enough to fill his pride, but not our pantry. By the end of his life, he had become more like a goat than a man. Now, he and my mother are both dead, and I do not miss them.

This is all to say that one morning I awoke with the premonition that The Teacher was going to die.

I saw the helicopters circling our house, the soldiers sliding down ropes onto the roof, bursting through windows, firing machine guns into Ernest's chest as he tried to organize the guards. His clothes became drenched in blood, but he continued to scream profanities, you federal dogs, you filthy federal dogs you'll burn for what you've done, you filthy federal dogs. Then he fell against the wall and pounded his fist on the ground before he could do so no longer.

The air smelled of fire, and I grew so disgusted that I began to vomit out the window into the courtyard. The women had no place to go, and so they huddled in the corner of my room without a word like mice. A soldier walked past all of us and did not aim his gun in our direction, as if we were invisible, and though I

am a man, he did not feel threatened by me. His footsteps did not make a sound. I looked among the women for Edith but she was missing.

I then saw The Teacher sitting up in his bed at the commotion, a machine gun resting on his chest. His face showed no surprise, as he had been anticipating this moment for years. The soldiers kicked in the door to his bedroom and shot him so fast that he did not have time to raise his gun. Two bullets in his face, and blood ran down his long cheeks, that grew longer, longer, longer like the face of a horse.

The Teacher looked at me one final time and said, "No one brings me peace like you, Gabriel. You are different than the rest of them. You are like an angel among men. Shh, shh. I'm going to sleep now."

Then, he died, and the soldiers carried his body away into the shadows of a strange night.

I turned over in my bed and considered lighting a lamp, but I did not want to wake the others.

"It was not a premonition," I tried to convince myself. "It was just a foolish dream."

Even then, I knew all that I had seen would come to pass.

5:27 AM

When I awoke from the night I lit the lamp beside my bed.

I looked up and he was sitting at my feet, dressed for the day in his usual attire. He was looking old, and his beard was becoming greyer. He reached out and touched my shin.

"Good morning, Gabriel," he said.

"Good morning."

I looked at the clock beside my bed. The sun would rise in another hour, and the room was cold. Those I shared a room with were already gone, preparing the morning meal in the kitchen.

We said nothing for a few moments, and he just watched me with his hand resting on my shin, as if waiting on me to ask what he was doing, and why he had come to me.

Several weeks ago, The Teacher had said to me, "Gabriel, if one had to wait on you to speak, they would still be waiting in the grave." He thought it was a very funny thing to say, and those around us smiled. Even Edith covered her mouth. When The Teacher saw how I was wounded by the words, he quickly said, "But you have a pure heart, Gabriel. If the sign of a fool is that he speaks too much, no one can ever call you a fool."

Edith had already left the room when he said this.

The Teacher carefully removed the gold watch from his wrist and placed it on my chest. The watch was a gift from a man in Chicago. It was given after the great subway attack, and it was The Teacher's most treasured possession. I do not recall how much the watch was worth, but I know the amount was significant. He once joked that if the accounts ever dried up, he could at least sell the watch and live out the rest of his days in splendor.

"Look at it, and tell me what you see," he said.

I glanced down. The watch was broken.

"It's not much use to me if it doesn't work, is it? I want you to take this into town and have it fixed. There is a watchmaker in El Dorado who can do it. There is only one jewelry store, so you shouldn't have any trouble finding him. Tell him to have it finished by the end of the day. Take every precaution to make sure it stays safe."

The Teacher handed me a fold of hundred-dollar bills.

"He will be glad to have it," The Teacher said when he noticed my hesitation.

I nodded and took the watch and the money and placed it on my bedside table.

“Get dressed, Gabriel. The day is burning away.”

He patted my shin one last time, stood up, and left.

As he walked out the door, I considered warning him of my premonition, but I said nothing.

We first met in the Davis Mountains, near my family’s trailer. After my father died, I was left to care for the goats. I was only ten years old at the time. One of the goats escaped into the mountains and lost its way, and my mother sent me to find it. I tracked the goat for two miles into the mountains when I came upon The Teacher sitting around a campfire. Everything had changed since the great subway attack, even for a boy. His face was known all over the country, and those in my hometown often shared stories of having seen him in the markets at dusk, though the visitations had become less frequent.

A guard stood up from the campfire and came after me, but The Teacher called for him to show mercy. I was brought to the fire and sat across from him. He watched me for a long time, and I said nothing. I looked over his shoulder and saw my father’s goat tied to a tent post.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” he asked me.

“You have my goat,” I answered, and the men laughed.

“What is your name, little one?”

“Gabriel.”

He turned and looked at his companions, and said to them with a laugh, “Look how innocent. His face is pure enough. No one could say this boy has a secret he is keeping. Light emanates out of his heart.”

He turned back to me and asked, “Gabriel, would you be able to find your way back here?”

I nodded.

“I would like for you to bring me something. Could you bring me something

from town?"

"Yes."

From that day on, I was employed in his service.

6:22 AM

We all gathered in the courtyard for our morning prayers. The sun would be rising soon, though we could not see it from within the confined courtyard. I dropped to my knees and looked up. A video camera was pointed down at us, and the red light seemed too bright in the morning twilight.

We began to pray.

I looked over at him and saw how deeply he concentrated on God. To some, it comes easy. To others, like myself, it is a struggle. For a moment, he seemed like he was transported out of the troubles of this world and taken into the very presence of God. I wished to be able to experience the same kind of spiritual awakening, but my heart was not wise enough. I watched him longer. He never lost his focus, and I wondered what he said to God, and what God said to him.

Two years before, I made the mistake of asking The Teacher if he had ever asked forgiveness for his violent actions. He slapped me so forcefully that my whole face was bruised for a week. No one in the house asked me about it, not even Edith.

But now, as I watched him pray, I wondered again if he had ever asked forgiveness. If there ever was a time to be forgiven for so many deaths, it was now.

If I killed so many people, I would seek God's forgiveness. But I was never like the others.

"You are too pure, Gabriel," Benjamin once said to me. "You must remember, for one to live, another must die."

I nodded at him and went on my way. As I have grown older, I have thought of those words many times, and tested them. For man to live, the mountain lion

must die. For the mountain lion to live, the goat must die. For the goat to live, the grass must die. For the grass to live, the rain must die. For the rain to live, what must die? At some point, the list must end.

After the prayers, we all stood and gathered our prayer stones. I was on my way to the kitchen because my duties included serving the meals, but The Teacher stopped me on my way.

“What did you ask God to give you today, Gabriel?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Then you’re wiser than you look,” The Teacher replied.

6:55 AM

As soon as I entered into the kitchen, I bumped into Edith. She was the youngest and newest wife of Benjamin and was very beautiful. I believe we were the same age. They had married when she turned fourteen.

“I’m very sorry,” I said, and walked away to grab the pitcher of water. My face must have turned red because she began to laugh.

“Don’t worry yourself so much, Gabriel. But you should learn to watch where you’re going.”

I walked out of the kitchen and to the table where The Teacher and the other men were lounging. I filled their glasses with water, bowed, and returned to the kitchen for the bread. When I reentered the kitchen, Edith was holding the basket of bread. She handed it to me, and I am not certain, but it seemed like she made it to where our hands touched on the exchange. I made an effort to avoid this, because she was Benjamin’s wife, but still we touched. It must have been her doing, but I said nothing, and took the bread to the table.

When I returned to the kitchen, Edith was gone.

I never told anyone, but I longed for Edith. I even fantasized of being with her, as a man is with a woman. Of all the women I had seen, Edith was the most beautiful. But she belonged to Benjamin. I think she knew of my affections, but

we had never spoken of the matter.

I gathered the second basket of bread and took it out to the men.

As I set it down, Benjamin looked up at me and asked, "When are you going to take a wife, Gabriel? It's not good for a man to be alone. You should be fathering children at your age."

The other men grinned at me, and a few of them laughed.

"Leave him alone," The Teacher said. "Gabriel has other duties to concern himself with. Like having my watch fixed. Go now, Gabriel."

7:59 AM

The shopkeepers of El Dorado swept their doorsteps and wiped the sand from their windows. The scent from the baker's shop next door filled the entire square with a pleasing aroma, and I realized I had not eaten after I served the men their breakfast.

I entered the shop and approached the watchmaker, who sat behind a glass window. He was fat, and he filled the entire space of the window, as if an animal in a cage. He wore a gray beard with missing patches, and beads of sweat gathered on his forehead.

"I need to have my father's watch repaired."

"Let me see it," he said.

I placed the gold watch through the slot in the window, and he looked down at it. He did not touch the watch and looked through the window at me, and then over my shoulder to see if I had come alone.

"This is your father's watch?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where did he get it?"

"I don't know."

The watchmaker lifted the watch and inspected it from all angles. The other watches for sale now seemed like toys with The Teacher's held up into the light.

"I'm afraid to fool around with this," he confessed. "It's too expensive. What is your father's name?"

"Can you fix it?"

"I can. But I won't. It's too expensive. I don't think my insurance policy is big enough."

He pushed the watch back through the slot.

I took out the money and placed it on his counter. He nodded, as if hearing some great charge read against him.

"I can maybe have it ready by five," he muttered.

I turned to walk away, but the watchmaker called me.

"Hey kid, who is your father? You could at least tell me who it is I'm working for."

"It doesn't matter," I said, and I walked out of the shop.

This response would have raised more questions in any other town but El Dorado. People came here to escape, that was a part of the quiet agreement between all of the citizens. I knew the watchmaker would not make trouble.

The compound was still occupied by a retired military colonel and his family the day before we moved into it. The location was perfect—outside of Fort Davis and on the outskirts of El Dorado. Other houses in the area were less grand, but this one came equipped with an expanded level of security to protect the colonel's wife. Legend has it that the colonel believed his wife would one day run away, and so the security measures were not taken to keep people out, but to keep her in. She must have been quite beautiful.

We moved into the house six years ago in the middle of the night.

Night fell, and dawn rose, and no one in El Dorado realized that the house was now occupied by The Teacher. Security cameras were added, gates installed, barbed wire tripled over the walls, and ten guards hired to patrol the inner walls,

and ten guards to drive pickups around the area and report anything strange.

As time passed and it became clear that the federals could not, and would not, find The Teacher, the security loosened. After five years, only The Teacher believed they were still looking for him.

10:22 AM

I stopped by the farmer's market to purchase some of the items I knew we needed in the kitchen. My duties included keeping the kitchen stocked with fresh foods, along with a vast storage of preserved goods. The Teacher believed in the possibility of being trapped inside the house, and he wished to have enough food to last at least a month at a time. He treasured stories of outnumbered warriors and fascinated himself for hours on end reading books on the art of laying siege to a castle.

Still, he wished for the pantries to be well stocked.

I filled two baskets with fresh vegetables and dried fruits and went to pay for them.

"With all of these vegetables, you must have a big family," the lady said.

"Not too big," I answered.

"Then you've gotten too much."

"I'll take all of this," I replied, offering her the money.

"Take only what you need for the next few days," she insisted. "Then come back when you are all out. We like seeing you around here."

"This is what we need," I replied, and left the money on her table. I walked away.

I looked down at the supplies to make sure I had not forgotten anything. The food looked odd in the basket, and I began to think of how strange it was for man to chew on these plants and swallow them for energy. God has a strange imagination. Water gives life to seeds, and life rises from the ground. The plants give life to man, and man feeds God with prayer. Then the cycle begins again.

Life gives birth to life, and death gives birth to death.

Benjamin had told me, "For one man to live, another must die."

But I am not sure if that is the case with men, because men don't eat one another.

1:40 PM

After lunch, a local official named Bruce visited The Teacher. He visited at least once a week and brought newspapers and flash disks for the computer. The Teacher did not like him or trust him. But he trusted no one, not even his own sons, not even myself.

The Teacher once told me, "Gabriel, you are a good boy, and like a son to me. But be careful what you desire. Don't ever let the light in your heart fade."

He said these kinds of things to everyone in the house. We all knew of the million-dollar price on his head. I think he feared being betrayed, because the allegiance to Stonelight could be easily broken by a sum so heavy as a million dollars. Any one of us could have become rich beyond compare.

I once lay awake thinking of what a million dollars could buy, and I imagined myself riding in a speedboat with Edith and shopping for clothes in a two-story mall. It's not good for a man's heart to be filled with avarice.

Bruce snapped his fingers at me and said, "Bring me sweet tea."

The Teacher looked my way and nodded, and I went into the kitchen to prepare the tea.

I overheard them talking about recent newsworthy events in the world. Bruce said the downfall of the United States was imminent, and that the perverted federals may not survive another year.

To this, The Teacher replied, "We gave them a cancer, but it will take longer than ten years for the cancer to kill them."

I returned with the two glasses of tea on a platter and placed it on the table. Bruce glanced up at me and motioned for me to go away. I nodded and left. I

should not have stayed in the kitchen to listen, but I always did. I think The Teacher knew of my eavesdropping, but he never warned me to go away. It was bad for only two men to know one thing, he once told me, because if one of them disappears then the one remaining cannot be held accountable.

Bruce murmured something about a council.

"Let them ask all the questions they wish to ask," The Teacher replied. "Cooperate. They are too polite to call you a liar."

"Of course."

"Our agreement still stands?"

"Of course. That is what you pay me for, is it not?"

Bruce took a deep breath, and I heard it from the kitchen. He had come for money but did not want to ask for it outright. The arrangement of our stay in El Dorado was made clear from the beginning. The Teacher would funnel money into the accounts of certain officials, who would reroute every investigation into his whereabouts. For this reason, the safest place for us to hide was in El Dorado. Those who asked questions were given answers, just the wrong ones, and we remained safe beneath the noses of those who did not know how to sniff.

But why did they not claim the million dollars?

First of all, no one believed that a million dollars would ever change hands. Anyone close enough to reveal significant information about The Teacher would be considered a terrorist, or one who aided terrorists, and therefore imprisoned. Secondly, most of those who knew The Teacher's whereabouts were devoted to the cause of spreading Stonelight throughout the world, whether it be through peaceful methods or violent ones.

I refilled their glasses and saw a satchel of money opened on the table, next to four newspapers and two hard drives for the computer.

"I don't need to count it," Bruce said. "We have an agreement, do we not?"

"Of course," The Teacher replied. He turned to me and asked, "Gabriel, what is the news of my watch?"

"The watchmaker said it will be ready this afternoon."

“Good.”

“A very beautiful watch. A treasure,” Bruce said. “Given to a worthy man.”

The Teacher waved his hand to deflect Bruce’s praise for his accomplishments.

“Yes, yes! A beautiful watch for the only one worthy to wear it. You alone, my friend. No one else.”

“God be praised,” The Teacher replied.

“God be praised,” Bruce replied.

He looked up at me as if he knew I had been there all along.

I said softly, “God be praised.”

I was only eight years old when word came to me that the trains in Chicago had fallen. I did not understand at that time why it was supposed to be a good thing, and my first reaction was to wonder how long it would take to rebuild the tracks. A few people in my church began to cheer in the streets, and I was nearly trampled by my father as he rushed to join them. For years they had been reading the pamphlets and booklets distributed by Stonelight. Many of the memories I have of my father are of him sitting at the table flipping pages and taking notes.

I escaped into an alleyway and watched as someone revealed an American flag. The men doused the flag in gasoline and set it on fire, and then stomped the flames until the flag was reduced to ashes. I thought to myself, they will ruin their shoes. Their shoes are going to be ruined from the fires. But no one else seemed to be considering these things.

My father looked over and saw me, and he said, “Gabriel! Come out here and become a man!”

But I turned and ran away from him.

That evening, the crowds remained outside the church chanting the name of

The Teacher. I climbed on the roof of our home with my childhood friend, Casper.

“Did you see the videos?” Casper asked. “The explosions?”

I said nothing.

“It was done by The Teacher, the hero. See how they chant his name.”

Casper’s eyes glistened with wonder as he watched the men in the streets dancing in circles.

“One day I will become as famous as The Teacher.”

“No,” I said.

“Yes, you will see.”

“That means you will have to kill people.”

Casper thought of it and shrugged his shoulders.

“See how they chant his name,” he said. “One day they will say, ‘Casper!, Casper!, the hero’.”

Many years later, I heard that Casper planned to carry a bomb onto a bus, but the bomb exploded before he left his home, and he was killed.

I have not thought of Casper in many years.

3:21 PM

When Bruce had left, The Teacher lay on his back on the couch and asked me to bring him his prayer stones and a glass of water, and to close the doors to the room. I did so. He said he did not want his napping to be interrupted by the endless nonsense of women.

I handed him the glass of water and he drank half of it.

“Sit in that chair, Gabriel. Watch over me as I sleep,” he said. “No one brings me peace like you, Gabriel. You are different than the rest of them. God sent you here to be an angel among men. Shh, shh. I’m going to sleep now.”

He lay there looking up at the ceiling, and then he closed his eyes and began to breathe heavily, turning the stones in his hands. I sat in the armchair watching

over him, just as he had asked me to do.

Ever since that day in the mountains, I had watched The Teacher with fascination. He was taller than most men, and thinner. His hands were gentle, though they had been steeped in the blood of his enemies. I never saw him act violently, with the only exception being when he slapped me for questioning his forgiveness. He filled his days with eating, praying, reading, and writing his pamphlets. He rarely took fresh air. Sometimes he walked about the courtyard. I had never seen him carry a gun except in my premonition that morning.

Still, the legends of his exploits abounded in our house. I heard of his days fighting in the Middle East, and of his conquests leading up to the great attack. But I saw nothing to give credibility to these legends. Bruce and other guests recounted the stories to us, though the details changed with every storyteller, and The Teacher never corrected them with the truth. I do not know if he even remembered the truth. The Teacher once told me that I was not fit to be in his company because I had never shed the blood of an enemy. I said nothing, and he began to laugh and laugh and laugh, and then he called in his sons and told them the joke, and they began to laugh at me as well.

“But you are an angel,” he said. “And angels don’t have to shed blood to do the will of God. Men, on the other hand, have a different destiny.”

Thirty minutes later, I awoke. He was still sleeping and I saw another premonition.

This time, news of his death covered the front pages of newspapers all around the world. The news reporters showed his face on television screens, and all the world cheered, just as the men in our church had cheered when they heard the news of the great attack. I saw him wrapped in a white sheet that soon became soaked in blood, and a holy man saying prayers over his body at the edge of a canyon. When the prayers had been finished, three men lifted the body and cast him into the abyss. They leaned over the edge of the canyon to make sure the body disappeared and then shook one another’s hands. They did not have to cheer, because the world cheered so loudly that they could hear it. The

image faded as vultures began to tear through the white sheet at the scent of blood.

The Teacher stirred and he opened his eyes. He looked at me.

“How did you sleep?”

I wiped my eyes, and he smiled at this.

“You’re a bad watchman, Gabriel. No bad dreams, I hope.”

I considered telling him of my premonitions, but I thought better of it.

“No,” I said. “No dreams.”

He sat up from the couch and looked at his hands, and then at his empty wrist.

“That’s because angels don’t have bad dreams. Go into town and check on my watch. The watchmaker has had long enough.”

5:17 PM

As soon as I entered the shop, the watchmaker said, “We are closed for the day. Come back tomorrow.”

I approached his window and saw him admiring The Teacher’s gold watch. He did not notice me standing there, and whispered something to himself, and even draped the watch over his own wrist. I waited until he looked up. My presence startled him.

“I’ve come to pick up the watch,” I said.

“Of course, of course,” he said, sifting through papers for the order form. “Your payment covers all of the work. There is no balance.”

“Ok.”

“I will only need a small amount of information for my records,” he said, and glanced up at me. “First, the brand of the watch. Has your daddy mentioned where he bought this watch?”

“No.”

“It wasn’t made in the USA, that much I know.”

"I don't know."

"Custom made, perhaps? Did he have a master watchmaker build this for him? The diamonds alone would have cost a fortune. They're all real. Every one of 'em. What's your name?"

"Gabriel."

He waited.

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"Your daddy's name?"

I reached through the window and grabbed a hold of the watch.

"Hey!" he grunted at me.

"Our business is complete," I said and turned away.

I stepped into the square. It no longer smelled of fresh bread and most of the shops had closed. A few people walked about the square with items they had just purchased, but most people had already returned home for the evening. I realized I had not even checked to see the quality of work done on The Teacher's watch. I looked down and saw the hands working perfectly, tick, tick, tick, as if brand new. He would be well pleased with my errands.

As I walked back to the compound, I noticed one of the hands of the watch make a full circle around the numbers, and I began to think of the cycles again. I could not stop thinking of such strange things.

A baby turns into a boy, and then a young man, and then a man, and then an old man, and then a baby again. The rain comes down and plants grow, deer eat the plants, and the mountain lion eats the deer, and when the mountain lion dies he goes back into the earth as soil, from which the plants grow. All of life could be explained in this way. For this, I could not reconcile Benjamin's philosophy that one man has to die in order for another to live. Had he said, "Something has to die in order for man to live," I think he would have been correct. But since men do not have to eat other men in order to live, I believe his philosophy is illogical.

I had long believed Benjamin to be a foolish man, certainly unworthy of Edith. I kept track of her smiles, and she offered a hundred more to me than she ever did to him. But she belonged to him. As foolish as Benjamin was, he was not so foolish to dream of having another man's wife. Only I was that foolish!

My thoughts must have blinded me because I tripped over a stone in the road. I stumbled but could not regain my balance. I fell, and my knee came down upon The Teacher's watch, crushing the glass face and even bending the ticking hands.

"No," I said very softly, ignoring the blood on my knee.

I looked down at the watch for a long time. I knew it was beyond repair. Only the gold and the stones could be salvaged. Everything else would have to be replaced, which was not possible because it was one of a kind.

I gathered the pieces of the watch and stepped a dozen paces off the road and hid it all beneath a bush.

Then, I ran home to the compound.

Years before, The Teacher became very sick with a fever, and everyone thought he was going to die.

"Warriors don't die from bullets," he would say. "No, no. In the end, a warrior is bitten by a fly, and that is what kills him. He can conquer an empire one day and the next he can slip into the river and drown. Man is nothing, and God is everything. Remember that, Gabriel. God be praised."

We had yet to move into the house in El Dorado, and he still lived in the caves along the border. One night I left the camp and asked my mother how she would cure a fever. She felt my head for the heat.

"I'm not sick. It's for a companion of mine."

"All these secrets," she replied. "Everything with you must be a secret. No more. I won't help you unless you tell me who is sick. Is it Casper? Why aren't

you still friends with Casper?"

"It's not Casper."

"Then who?"

"The Teacher."

At this, she almost fainted, and began to assemble the herbs into a healing mixture. Half an hour later, I arrived in the camp with the medicine and The Teacher took it.

Two days later, he was healed.

Two days after that, my mother died.

They put prayer stones all over her body but she never resurrected.

6:01 PM

The Teacher must have heard me enter through the security gates. He was waiting in the courtyard.

"And?" he asked, standing on my arrival. "Did the watchmaker do quality work? Bruce recommended him to me."

"I have bad news," I replied.

The Teacher's face tightened, and he took two steps towards me.

"Bad news?"

"Yes. The watch will not be ready for pickup until tomorrow."

The Teacher sneered and placed his hands upon his hips.

"The man cannot fix a simple problem? Some watchmaker, eh Gabriel? It sounds to me like he is a fool. I send him a watch with a simple problem, and he says 'tomorrow, tomorrow'."

"I'm very sorry," I said.

"When you pick it up tomorrow, bring back half of the money you took to him. He won't get away with this kind of behavior."

"Yes, Teacher."

"Good. Now, go prepare the meal with the others."

I left him pacing in the courtyard, reaching toward his wrist for the trophy of his greatest conquest, the trophy which was now broken and lying beneath the bushes in a place only I knew. I had not yet considered what to tell him tomorrow when it became obvious there was no longer a watch. Perhaps I would have a premonition to guide me.

I entered into the kitchen and saw Edith among the others. She chopped vegetables to put in the cooking pot. She glanced at me and offered a smile. I turned away.

“You may clean the dirty dishes, Gabriel,” the cook called to me.

I walked over to the sink and began to soap the knives and dishes from earlier in the day, including Bruce’s teacup. Halfway through my work, I felt a body pressed against my back, and I smelled her.

“Excuse me, Gabriel,” Edith said, and she reached around me for the large ladle I had just cleaned.

I said nothing and continued my work. She said nothing and took the vegetables to the pot.

After the men had finished their meal, I prepared the evening tea. The dishes had been cleaned away. The computers were now on the table, along with the new hard drives and disks brought by Bruce.

Each night around this time the men examined their data and topographical maps and discussed what actions should be taken. I was not invited to these meetings, or welcome to listen from the kitchen. The Teacher caught me listening once and threatened to cut off my ears if it ever happened again. I believed he would do it.

He then kissed my face and said, “Some men are made for this kind of work, and others, like you, are made for a different kind of work.”

I took the tray of tea into the room and placed it on the table. By accident, I saw an image of the computer screen in front of Benjamin. The screen showed a list of names along with their ages and a few words to describe them.

On the way up to my quarters, I passed Edith on the staircase.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Gabriel?" she asked playfully.

"I'm not feeling well. I need to rest."

She reached out and touched my arm and rubbed her thumb back and forth across my bare skin.

"I will bring you a glass of water."

I remember the night I first saw Edith. She had just been married to Benjamin, and he sent her away to his quarters for the night to wait for him. He and The Teacher lounged at the table, laughing together, for it was a joyous day.

"You have a long night ahead of you, old friend," The Teacher said. "Go along."

"Isn't she beautiful?"

"Quite."

The Teacher motioned for me to refill his glass of tea.

As I filled the cup, Benjamin asked me, "Isn't she beautiful, Gabriel?"

I nodded and said, "A worthy wife of a worthy man."

Benjamin burst into laughter. "Very good. You may make a politician yet with that kind of honey on your tongue. Tell me what you like about her."

I hesitated.

"I'm in no place to speak in such a way."

"Be honest with me, as you would with a friend."

"I—I don't know how to answer. She will be a good wife to you."

"Yes, yes but how? What do you see in her?"

The pitcher of tea shook in my hand.

"Leave him alone, Benjamin. He does not concern himself with these things," The Teacher interrupted. "Go now and enjoy your woman."

Benjamin stood from the table and leaned in close to me.

"One day you will know the pleasures of manhood, Gabriel," he said.

8:42 PM

I came down the stairs, feeling refreshed from the water Edith had brought to me. I must have fallen asleep because I never saw her enter the room.

In the courtyard, the men and women mingled about, listening to a stereo play music. Often, The Teacher invited everyone in the house to these kinds of gatherings and encouraged one another to be more than friends and companions, and to consider one another as family.

Just as I entered the courtyard, I saw Benjamin take Edith's hand and guide her toward his quarters. She glanced at me for a brief moment and obeyed her husband's wishes without hesitation.

Then, I noticed The Teacher staring at me. He had seen the way I looked at her, the longing in my eyes, and he would not turn from me. I smiled at a few of the other servants, and even danced to the music, but he would not stop looking at me. I began to fear that he knew everything—the broken watch, my love for Edith, and even my strange philosophies about the cycles of life.

I began to feel very hot, and I walked outside.

The goats roamed within the outer walls, and they scattered at my presence.

"Don't run," I said. "I'm not here to hurt you."

But they did not listen, and they ran to the other side of the compound. I could hear the music from where I stood, and the stars were bright as electric lights. I refused to look up at Benjamin's room and see if his candles were still burning or not. The marriage bed of a man and his wife was none of my business.

I went down to my knees and prayed to God for guidance and direction. I asked him for these things, even though The Teacher had told me that morning I was wise to ask for nothing.

Once long ago, I prayed for the souls of all the men who died in the great attack. The prayer came as a surprise to me. I even asked God to forgive The

Teacher for what he had done if The Teacher had not asked forgiveness himself. It was a foolish prayer. I cannot seek the forgiveness of another man, any more than I can win the heart of another man's wife. I was asking strange questions and thinking strange thoughts.

After asking God for guidance in my own life, and for thoughts of purity, I said, "Wash my hands of any blood that may be upon me. Forgive the path my life has taken and honor the souls of those who have been slaughtered."

At this, I felt foolish. But I also felt an awakening in my heart, just as light breaks through the night sky in the form of stars.

10:35 PM

After the final prayers of the day, The Teacher stopped me as I walked through the courtyard. The others filtered past us on the way to their sleeping quarters.

"I'm very tired, Teacher," I said.

"Wait here, Gabriel. I have something I need to ask you about."

I took a seat on one of the benches. My heart began to beat faster, faster, faster, and my face flushed with heat in the coolness of the night. He smiled at all of those passing us. Goodnight, goodnight, he said to each of them. The final pattering of footsteps disappeared around the corner, and I knew we were alone.

"You scraped your knee," he said, pointing at the cut I received from the glass face of his prized watch.

I covered the wound with my prayer tunic.

"It's nothing," I said. "I'm clumsy."

He shrugged. "Stand up and face me like a man, Gabriel."

I stood up.

"You have something to tell me," he said. "Now is the time to do so."

"I don't understand," I replied, though my words faltered.

He grinned and came near me, his frame towering into the night sky.

"You have nothing to tell me about your feelings for Edith?" he asked. He placed his hand on my shoulder. "I have seen the way you look at her. Someone your age must have desires for a woman. Powerful desires."

I shook my head, immediately, too aggressively. "No. She belongs to Benjamin."

"Yes," he answered. "She belongs to Benjamin. It's good to be reminded of these things, isn't it?"

"Yes, Teacher."

"You are a good boy, Gabriel. Like I've told you, some are made to fight as soldiers, and others to fight in different ways. You, I think, are an angel, and do not have to fight at all. But God has a plan for your life. Remember this always. Look at my hand. Every finger serves a different purpose."

"Thank you, Teacher."

He nodded and motioned for me to go up the stairs. I bowed and left him in the courtyard alone, where he looked down at his wrist. He reached over and felt the bare skin, usually covered by the treasure of his achievements. He seemed lonely without it, lost in the small world of our compound. He glanced up and caught me watching him.

"Tomorrow I'll have it back," he said.

I nodded and retired to the bedroom.

Many years ago, they sent me to a camp with other boys my age to learn how to use weapons of war. At one moment, each of the boys took turns firing the guns into targets far away.

Some of the boys were very good at this, and I thought of Casper. Casper would have been very good at this. Whenever one of the boys hit the target, the men who ran the camp shouted their praises to the others, and it became a source of pride for each of the boys to hit the targets.

When it came time for me to shoot, I had great difficulty. The gun weighed

too much for me to balance and I could not find the target in the sights. The other boys laughed at me. One of the men shouted, "Shoot it, shoot it! We don't have all day!"

I pulled on the trigger and nothing happened, and the boys began to laugh even harder. Even the men laughed. One of them bent down and clicked the safety to fire.

He snatched the gun away and announced, "Some boys are more like girls!"

When the camp ended, they transferred me back into the care of The Teacher's men. That night The Teacher called me to him and he said, "The leaders of the camp said you were different than the other boys. Is that true?"

"Yes, Teacher."

He placed his hand on mine and said, "Some boys make good fighters, and others do not. You will serve in other ways. See my hand? Each finger has a different purpose. Each boy, or man, has a different purpose. So do not be discouraged, Gabriel."

12:41 AM

I awoke with a third and final premonition, this one the most frightening of all. I tried to convince myself it was nothing, but I knew better.

A great commotion of gunfire and screams erupted in the courtyard, and I saw a vision of Benjamin's bedchambers. He cast aside the sheets, and Edith rushed towards the door, but Benjamin caught her arm and pulled her back to him. She screamed as footsteps pounded down the hallway towards them. Benjamin reached beneath the bed and took out his machine gun. The door burst open, and Benjamin pulled Edith in front of him to act as a shield, and he fired wildly at the doorway, though most of the bullets scattered across the walls. The men in black fired six quick shots, and Benjamin and Edith both fell to the ground covered in blood, dead.

I reached for Edith, but she lay flat on Benjamin's chest, her eyes open and

cold.

The premonition ended, and I sat up in the bed, feeling nauseous. The others must have heard my heavy breathing because someone called for me to quiet down and go to sleep.

"You've had a nightmare," a voice whispered. "Go back to sleep, Gabriel."

I lay back down, but knew I would not be able to sleep, and so I left the room.

1:15 AM

For those of us who had been living in the compound for six years, it was not difficult to escape. I think the general's wife must have learned to escape, too. A small section of the barbed wire on the north wall had no spikes, and the wall itself had several foot holes to climb up. I told Ernest, one of the night guards, that I was unable to sleep, and he gave me a boost onto the wall.

"Thank you," I said to him from atop the wall. "How should I come back in?"

"Just come to the front gates and call for me. I will let you back in."

"What if you're patrolling?"

Ernest smiled at this. "Look around you. There is nothing to patrol."

"Do you have a light I can borrow?"

"Of course," Ernest said. He reached to his belt and handed me a flashlight.

I found a foot hole on the other side of the wall and dropped down to the ground.

I ran to the main road leading into El Dorado and stopped at the place where I had hidden The Teacher's gold watch. I turned on the flashlight and walked a dozen paces off the road to the bush. The broken watch remained just as I had left it. I imagined The Teacher standing in the courtyard, looking down at his bare wrist, stripped of his greatest treasure. I could not leave him this way for another day.

The fault was mine alone. The watchmaker had done his duty.

I bent down and organized the pieces, knowing it was a lost cause. The only

choice I had was complete confession, or my soul would never rest. Tomorrow, I would tell The Teacher all that had occurred and seek his forgiveness.

A thought came and went. If I were to turn him in and claim the reward money, I would be able to replace the watch. I would even be able to rescue Edith. What a foolish thought. I gathered the pieces of the watch and placed them in my pocket.

Then I began to walk the road home.

The darkness has a way of making one afraid, but I looked up and felt comforted by the stars. Even in the darkness, they shine. I wished for my heart to become like the stars of El Dorado.

2:04 AM

I heard a sound like a strong wind but felt no breeze in the still night. I turned around on the road and shined my light toward El Dorado. The path was empty. But the noise grew louder, like a fan spinning above my head.

I hurried my steps towards the compound, and that is when I saw the black helicopters descend out of the darkness, just as I had seen in my premonition the previous night.

I leapt off the road and lay flat on the ground, waiting, my back rising up and down with the heaviness of my breath.

Perhaps they were coming down the road with tanks, as well, and I thought the tires of the tanks may crush me. But I was too afraid to move.

I watched as men descended from the helicopters on ropes into the compound, and I heard the first few shots of gunfire, and then silence. Then, even from a great distance, I could hear the men of the compound shouting, "Wake up! Wake up to fight!"

The gunfire increased, as did the heaviness of my heart. My arms and legs were as heavy as stones, and I felt the watch digging into my hip, but I did not adjust to take the pain away. I just listened, and listened, and imagined the

images from my premonitions coming to pass. I thought the soldiers might hear my heart and my breath, but this was a foolish thought.

I would not allow myself to see Edith lying dead on the floor. I wished to call out her name, to run and save her, but my body felt too heavy. I forgot how to breathe. My lips began to tremble, but I was not saying any words. I was only watching, watching, trying to be as still as a tree branch as the helicopter fluttered back up into the sky and the sounds faded into silence.

If you seek a treasure, you will find one buried in the dirt on the road to El Dorado.

You can have it.