

# WANDERING STARS

by Robert Zoltan

## 1

Sam Sterling rushed through the strangely quiet side streets toward the frenetic neon buzz of Sunset Boulevard. He swung his arms with a careless range of motion as he turned downhill and felt the grinding burn in his right shoulder again. The pain was always there, circling like an eagle and waiting for him to make the wrong move, to draw attention to himself, so it could dive in once again and tear out his Promethean heart.

He cursed himself for oversleeping his early evening nap. Every Friday night after hours, he met Doc and the little gang at Doc's bar supply store, The Medicine Cabinet, for conversation and top-shelf liquor. It was the only time he didn't drink alone. But it was past eight p.m., so chances were that they had already locked up and cloistered themselves on the back patio.

Sam felt the panic of a man about to be left on a sinking ship by his mates. Doc's little group was like a life preserver for him these past few weeks. But in the seven days in between each Friday night, he always sank back down into the depths. What he needed was a sorcerer or a saint to raise him like Lazarus from the dead. He didn't believe in magic or miracles, but that wouldn't have stopped him from happily accepting either. It didn't matter from where the intervention came, Heaven or Hell, or someplace in between.

When he reached the traffic intersection at Sunset, the stoplight turned red. That made him think of the red star he had seen a couple of nights ago walking home from a bar. At least, he had thought it was a star till he'd seen it moving. Then he had assumed a plane or helicopter, but it had traveled in a strange arc, so his next guess would have been a spaceship, but it had shot down awfully fast and not anywhere near the rocket ports of San Pedro, but instead northeast and seemingly close. His final guess had been a meteorite crashing right in the vicinity of the Quicksilver Reservoir. But there had been no boom, and when he'd reached home, nothing on the news. He had finally decided he was too drunk to be sure of anything and gone to bed. Maybe the falling star had been Lucifer cast from Heaven a second time. And maybe he had crashed down right at the reservoir and was living there near the coyotes like a homeless man. But to be cast out a second time would mean Lucifer had been given a second chance, and Sam didn't believe in second chances any more than he believed in God or the Devil. He definitely didn't believe in second chances for baseball pitchers with chronic injuries, no matter how exceptionally talented. Pain was pain, and as Sam had learned, you can only throw through it for so long.

He broke into a jog for the last couple of blocks and grimaced from the twinge in his shoulder. The pain triggered the same tired memories, etched like grooves in a record: the sports specialist's diagnosis that his pitching arm would never fully heal, and pills that eased his pain so that he could keep pitching long enough to make the injury even worse, leaving him in the end with only the pills. It had meant the end of his major league baseball career before it had begun. Talent scouts had compared him to the great pitcher, Bob Gibson. Had he been merely good, the loss would have been more bearable.

Sam felt the same way about losing Marissa. She had been not just a good wife, but the kind a man dreams of. She had tried to hang in there, but by the end, Sam had hated himself and anyone who could love him. He had kicked the pills, but the bitterness still flowed like blood through his veins, and the only thing that could temporarily supplant it was liquor. Maybe that was all that was keeping him alive now, but it had caused the final ordeal that drove Marissa to divorce, and it was the reason that he got fired from his coaching job at a local high school.

Sam almost laughed thinking how fast everything had spiraled downward. He had been like a rocket shooting toward the stars, then, unforeseen catastrophic malfunction, and he had plummeted back down even faster than he had risen. Like Lucifer cast from Heaven. Like that red star he had seen the other night, plummeting toward the reservoir.

Wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.

He remembered that from the Bible he had read long ago, and he wondered what it meant. And he wondered if perhaps he was wrong and there was a God, and that God had cursed him, a uniquely gifted baseball pitcher, with a bum arm. And he wished that red star, instead of falling near the reservoir, had fallen on him and cracked his head open to let out the new gods so they could kill the old one.

## 2

When Sam finally reached The Medicine Cabinet, the “closed” sign was out as he expected. Lights were on, but he saw no one inside. He couldn’t tell if the back door to the patio was open from this angle. He knocked. No one appeared. If they were in back, they might never hear him. He knocked again and waited. Then he tried the door, but it was locked. He knocked again, harder. And again.

The shop remained empty. He felt claustrophobic, as if his skin were shrinking in upon him. He stepped out onto the sidewalk and watched the cars pass. Growing faint, he leaned against a streetlight and closed his eyes. He seemed to be sinking down into a dark tunnel, suffocating. He opened his eyes and looked around, trying to find something to focus on, something that would pull him back up to the surface.

Then he saw the flyer on the pole. And he realized he had seen several of the same advertisement on the walk here, but had not noticed the details.

QUICKSILVER CARNIVAL  
Held in the temporarily drained Quicksilver Reservoir  
Games of Chance and Consequence!  
Rides to Thrill the Senses!  
Plus: The Funhouse of No Return!!!  
FREE Entry for Quicksilver Residents  
One Night Only  
July 13th  
Presented by the DWP

Presented by the DWP? He assumed “presented” meant sponsored, but why would the Department of Water and Power sponsor a public event, especially since the DWP had just abandoned the site?

How thrilling could a DWP-sponsored carnival be? Funhouse of No Return? Most likely because your shoes would get stuck to the filthy floor crusted with spilled soda and discarded bubble gum. Yet something about the ad stuck in Sam’s mind, like a raspberry seed lodged between his teeth. He tore off the flyer, folded it up and put it in his pocket.

“Sam, are you being a public menace?” said a voice from behind him.

Sam turned and saw Doc standing in the open doorway of the shop, smiling at him with his bright blue bloodshot eyes.

“Doc!” Sam immediately felt embarrassed by his relieved enthusiasm.

“Didn’t think you were coming,” said Doc. He opened the door wide and ushered Sam in.

“Sorry, I fell asleep,” said Sam.

Doc re-locked the door. “The guys had to leave early. I’m still here ‘cause I have to wrap a bunch of glasses I bought this week to put in storage.”

“Oh,” said Sam, pausing by the door. “Well, I don’t want to bother you if you have work to do.”

“Forget it. Always happy to see you, my friend. We can talk while I pack. Have a seat.”

They sauntered to the back of the shop, and Sam sat in one of the high stools at the bar-like counter. Doc went around to the other side and continued his work.

“I went to Ohio this week and bought around two thousand vintage glasses,” said Doc.

“Wow,” said Sam.

“I already sold a lot of them to the Edison Bar downtown. For the rest, I have to decide which ones to put in the shop and which to put in storage. The guys were asking about you.”

“Sorry I missed them.”

“Well, they didn’t stay long. Nathan’s shooting some indie film early tomorrow and Sergio’s kid is sick so he had to get home and help the wife.”

“I see,” said Sam.

“You doing any better?”

“Not really,” said Sam.

“I know it’s a tough time for you, my friend. There are no easy answers. You just have to hang in there and ride it out.”

“Yeah,” said Sam.

“You know Timothy, that heavy-set curly-haired guy that works here sometimes during the day?”

“Mm, I think so.”

“Everything was going great for him. He was playing bass with his band on tour and they were doing well, growing their fan base and getting paid for their shows. Things were looking really good. Then one night, he collapsed on stage.”

“Oh my God, what happened? Drug overdose?” asked Sam.

“No, it was his heart. Turned out he had some heart defect and had to have a major operation he couldn’t afford. I helped him out a bit with that and gave him a part-time job in the shop till he could fully recover and get back out on the road again.”

“Damn, that was nice of you.”

“I’m just saying that shit happens. That’s life. Things go up and down. And right now, for you, they’re down. They will go up again.”

“I can’t see it,” said Sam, shaking his head.

“That’s the hardest part,” said Doc. “When we’re in the hole, we can’t see a way out. Just keep climbing.”

“I feel more like I’m digging,” said Sam.

“Then dig. Sometimes you have to go deeper. Or maybe you have to dig sideways.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea,” said Doc. “Just said it. Sounded good.” Doc stopped his packing and looked up at Sam. “I’m always here if you need to talk, my friend.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you getting unemployment checks?”

“What?” asked Sam, startled. “How’d you know I lost my job?”

“I see you walking around during the day, so I figured you couldn’t be working at the high school anymore. I notice these things.”

“Yeah, I got fired,” said Sam. “I’m getting enough to get by.”

“That’s too bad they let you go, because you’re the closest thing to a major league baseball player they’ll ever get.”

“They didn’t really have a choice. I wasn’t happy there anyway.”

“You had a lot to offer those kids.”

“I don’t know,” said Sam, staring down at the floor.

“So, what are you doing tonight after you leave here? Just don’t tell me you’re going to that carnival.”

“As a matter of fact,” said Sam, pulling the flyer out of his pocket and unfolding it, “I was thinking about it.”

Doc stopped packing and came to the edge of the counter. “I made Nathan and Sergio promise me they wouldn’t go.”

“Why?” asked Sam.

Doc held out his hand and Sam gave him the flyer. Doc stared at the ad and frowned. “Maybe I just have a feeling about it. Maybe I’ve heard about these people.”

“Who, the Department of Water and Power?” asked Sam with a laugh.

“The DWP. Advertising is the art of lying,” said Doc. “And sometimes, the best way to deceive people is to tell them a truth they won’t believe.” Doc handed back the flyer.

Sam glanced it over again. “What do you mean?”

“Not sure if it’s something I can explain. I’m just urging you to stay away.”

“It’s better than getting drunk,” said Sam.

“I disagree,” said Doc.

“It’s just a stupid carnival. What’s the worst thing that could happen? It’ll kill me?”

“There are worse things than dying.”

“I know,” said Sam.

Doc sighed and looked Sam in the eye. “Sam, you’ve been hell-bent on self-destruction for weeks now. So, I won’t try to tell you.”

Sam shrugged and looked down at the counter.

“But before you go, I’ve got something you’ve gotta try,” said Doc. He walked into the back room and emerged a couple of minutes later with a bottle of clear liquid, placed it on the counter, and pulled out a shot glass.

“Now you’re talkin’,” said Sam.

“This, my friend, is some very special stuff. I only pull it out on rare occasions.”

Sam looked at the red writing on the bottle’s white label. He didn’t recognize the language, or if it even was a language. The symbols were strange, possibly stylized Arabic or Persian.

“What is it? Where’d you get it?” asked Sam.

“Doesn’t really have an English name. I bought it from a merchant who was visiting from very, very far away.”

Doc pulled out the cork and filled the shot glass.

Sam noticed something floating at the bottom of the bottle, which tumbled about as Doc set the bottle down. “What is that?” asked Sam. “A gold coin?”

“Is that what you see?” asked Doc.

Sam leaned closer to the bottle and squinted. “Looks like a gold coin, a thin round piece of metal of some kind.”

Doc handed Sam the glass. “Drink up.”

Sam took the glass. “Aren’t you joining me?”

Doc shook his head. “I already had one earlier tonight with the guys. Too potent to have more than one in an evening.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Really?” He threw the shot back. It was warm, almost hot going down, but somehow it didn’t have the burn of most alcohol. The texture was velvety, the flavor unfamiliar. The only word Sam could think of to describe it was *expansive*. “Wow, that is smooth!”

Doc nodded. “Like I said, it’s very special. It will help you to see more clearly, among other things. And you might need that tonight.”

“Liquor that helps you see more clearly?” said Sam. “That’d be a first.” He glanced at the bottle. The gold coin at the bottom seemed to be swimming through the liquid, like a tiny sea skate, or even more like a leech.

“Good Lord, Doc, what is that!” asked Sam, staring wide-eyed at the bottom of the bottle.

“You said you thought it was a gold coin,” said Doc. “That’s as good a description as any.”

“Yeah, but it was moving, swimming with that up-and-down rolling motion, like a leech.” It now rested at the bottom again. But Sam wasn’t sure if it was a gold coin or something alive.

“Maybe this is like the worm at the bottom of a tequila bottle,” said Doc, looking at the gold object.

“Yeah, but the worm should be dead,” said Sam. “It’s not moving now. It looks like a gold coin again.”

“I’ve got to get back to this packing,” said Doc, stopping the bottle with the cork and pulling it off the counter, out of Sam’s sight. “I hope you go straight home and read a good book or watch a good movie, or even a bad movie. But I have a feeling you’re

going to that carnival and I can't talk you out of it." He led Sam to the door and they shook hands.

"Always good to see you, my friend," said Doc.

"You too, Doc," said Sam. "See ya soon."

"I hope so," said Doc.

### 3

As Sam headed back east on Sunset, he experienced a heightened sense of wellbeing similar to the effects of high quality Tequila. But that wasn't all. Everything around him, the cars, the people walking by, the lights and sounds, took on the aspect of a lucid dream. And it seemed as if a far-distant window had opened, and through it he could hear the sound of an ocean. He felt that soon, he would pass through that window, or that ocean would pour in. He suddenly became aware that the anguish that he had carried around inside him for months was now only a dull ache, and that the pain in his shoulder had eased as well. It was not gone, but faded; he was a ship no longer run aground, and a slight wind bellied his sails after being trapped too long on a dead sea.

His ship lurched when he saw Marissa. She was just stepping out of a restaurant called Purgatory Junction, arm in arm with a tall handsome man. Sam was about to turn around and walk back the other way. But Marissa noticed him right when she was in the middle of a delightful laugh, charmed by something the man had said. The sound pierced Sam like a dart and, not for the first time, he wished that she had moved out of Quicksilver after their breakup.

Her eyes grew wide, and her vivacious smile faded to a polite one. "Sam. Hi."

"Hi," said Sam, pausing in mid-stride.

"We," she said, and glanced at the man beside her, "were just trying this new restaurant."

Sam nodded. "How was it?"

"Good," she said. "I'm sorry, this is Talbot. Talbot, this is Sam my ex-husband."

"Nice to meet you," said Talbot, holding out his hand.

"Likewise," said Sam dully as he shook the proffered hand.

"What are you up to?" asked Marissa.

Sam shook his head and stuttered. "I don't know. I was just..."

Marissa pursed her lips. "Well, we better get going. We're going to this carnival thing. Did you hear about it?"

"Oh, yeah," said Sam. He felt something surge through him, adrenalin or something else echoing Doc's warning. "You want to go to that? I heard it was—not that great."

"Really?" she said, looking doubtfully at Sam. "We saw the flyer. It sounds like fun. We want to check it out."

"Yeah," said Talbot, supporting her position.

Sam wanted to say something clever and profound about advertisement like Doc had, but it made no sense in his head. So he simply shrugged his shoulders and nodded. "Have fun."

"You should go too, unless you have other plans," said Marissa, showing a concern that only pained him.

"No, I don't think so. Maybe. Well, it was nice seeing you," said Sam.

“You too,” said Marissa. “Take care of yourself.”

“Nice meeting you,” said Talbot with a nod as he ushered Sam’s wife away.

“You too,” lied Sam. Then he continued down the street, feeling like he’d been hit by a line drive. But the stuff Doc had given him flowed stronger, and that kept him from shattering into a million fragments and spending the rest of the night picking himself up piece by piece, or drowning himself in a cheap bottle of booze. He focused on taking one step at a time, back up the hill toward his apartment.

*Do what Doc said. Go home, lock the door, get in bed and read a good book.*

He made it back to his studio apartment, switched on a small lamp and fell onto his bed, fully clothed. He stared into nothing, pondering Doc’s warning, trying not to wonder if Marissa was having sex with that guy (of course she was!), and feeling the shot of strange liquor still coursing through him like time-release medicine.

*Let it do its work. Close your eyes. Maybe you’ll luck out and fall asleep and it will be tomorrow or a year from now or ten years, and maybe you’ll be a different person, someone you could like.*

Though he knew he would settle for someone he didn’t hate.

Sam drifted in and out of sleep. After an hour or so, he had a dream or a waking vision, he wasn’t sure which. Whatever it was, he jerked up in bed as if an alarm clock had sounded. He had seen Marissa, hanging lifeless in a huge web. Next to her had been Talbot, which didn’t bother him as much.

He rolled out of bed, pulled the flyer out of his pocket, and looked at it once more. At first he saw the same text. Then he noticed something like a watermark in the background that resembled one of those hypnotic discs. And it was spinning. The text faded and the disk became more opaque until it was the only thing on the page. Sam found himself unwilling to look away. Words came into his head in a voice that sounded like his own.

*“It sounds like fun! I want to check it out.”*

But Sam knew the words were not his, even if the voice was. After that, the hypnotic disk vanished and the normal text returned. A chill came over him as he crumpled the paper violently into a wad and threw it in the trash.

What was in that liquor Doc had given him? A hallucinogen? Sam had done LSD once and it hadn’t felt like this. Doc said he would see things more clearly. Then Sam remembered Marissa speaking the exact same words that had just entered his mind.

*“It sounds like fun! We want to check it out.”*

It was a common enough phrase, and could have been a coincidence. But the shot of Doc’s liquor was pulsing a warning in time with Sam’s beating heart. Marissa was in danger.

He switched out the light and went out the door. As he strode with purpose toward the Quicksilver Reservoir, Sam wondered who on Earth would be capable of creating an invisible hypnotic disk that spoke words in your head.

#### 4

Sam descended the stairs leading off his street toward Sunset Boulevard. In the night sky above the reservoir, a red spotlight shot up intermittently like the pulse of a giant heart. Maybe that red star he had seen two nights ago had crashed there and filled the

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empty reservoir. When he crossed north over Sunset, he noted the relative lack of traffic, and wondered if perhaps that red pulse was the beating of thousands of hearts instead, for it seemed that half the population of Quicksilver was missing.

Once across Sunset, he stuck to the backstreets, moving ever closer to the source of that eerie red beacon. As he passed the houses of his neighborhood, it was as if he were seeing them for the first time. They grew up from the humble hills like boxes of flowers lining the streets, precious abodes of warmth and safety. The glow of each little light coming through a window signified a soul, living a life, perhaps in this moment contemplating that life, surrounded by objects grown familiar to help identify itself and make it feel at home in this strange world. And for the first time, Sam felt an invisible connection, and even beyond that, a love for all of these fragile confused beings, of whom he was a model representative.

This feeling brought even more into focus a sense of concern over how few lights shone from inside the homes. It was too early for bedtime, and if everyone was out, where were they? A sense of finality to the darkness in the windows made Sam lengthen and quicken his stride.

He had done a lot of liquor shots in the last year. Most hit you pretty quickly. Some had a delayed reaction and then sucker punched you, like cheap tequila. Doc's stuff had been smooth. And now, he thought he could actually feel it flowing through his veins, like an electric current along live wires. Instead of a leveling off and a decreasing influence on him, it seemed to grow. He felt that distant ocean approaching, like a huge wave coming toward the shore at night, and that ocean was inside him, expanding from his solar plexus in a wave that was going to break the boundaries between his self and the universe.

As Sam crested a final tall hill and reached the winding steps that led down to the reservoir, the ocean hit him. He was imbued with a vitality and awareness he had never experienced, as if he were expanding beyond his skin.

Far below, filling the entire reservoir, was the largest carnival he had ever seen in his life, and half the population of the neighborhood attending. Then his vision wavered and he perceived the carnival as something else. It was glowing, multi-colored, totally alien, and somehow alive. And half the population of Quicksilver was entering it and swarming about its insides.

## 5

It was a carnival. But in an inexplicable way, it was also the other thing. For some of what he saw, Sam's mind had no frame of reference whatsoever. And for the first time he understood the real meaning of the adjective *alien*.

He proceeded down the stairs toward this terrifying strangeness. He would have even without Doc's juice bolstering his courage, for he knew that Marissa was there. The entrance to the carnival was located at the ramp leading down into the dry reservoir that the DWP had built during their pipeline construction. Above the entrance was a banner stretched between two poles. On it was written: *Quicksilver Carnival*. And on the second line: *Brought to you by the Department of Water and Power*.



Sam paused by the entrance as people filed down the ramp. He looked up at the banner, and as if he were in a dream, the words *Department of Water and Power* shifted, becoming unintelligible for a moment. Then, they read: *Dream World Productions*. But that too seemed to waver, and Sam had the suspicion that the actual words were trying to hide from him, as if the banner knew he was watching. He blinked his eyes and focused on the words, and again they shifted, first back to *Department of Water and Power*, then to some other languages, then nonsense, until finally they solidified. The second line of the banner now clearly read: *Brought to you by the Demon World Princes*. Whoever they were, Sam was sure they were running the show.

He glanced up at the banner once more as he passed beneath it, and once again the words read, *Department of Water and Power*. But he now believed those words no more than he would have believed a painted cardboard facade was the front of a building.

The carnival was a labyrinth of rides, attractions and events. When Sam simply accepted what he saw, it appeared as an earthly carnival. It had many features common to carnivals, such as the Ferris wheel and games of skill like Skee-Ball, as well as others more exotic, such as the sideshow tent that advertised a real live mermaid. But when he focused his attention on something without labeling it or taking it for granted, he found he could pierce its apparent surface. Then some features of the carnival became incomprehensible aspects of a weird disturbing dream, while others, although bizarre, had a purpose that Sam could vaguely comprehend.

As Sam was nearing the tent that advertised, *See a Real Live Mermaid! Dare to Swim With Her and Steal a Kiss!*, a woman approached holding the hand of a tall man with a beard and moustache. Something odd about the man caught Sam's attention. Sam stared at him, and as the man passed, he was no longer a man. The woman was holding hands with a gray anthropomorphic figure that had the general shape of a man, but was faceless and featureless. The thing was more like a clay model of a human in the early stages, less realistic than a sewing mannequin. It walked with a mechanical gait and stared straight ahead with its blank unshaped face as the woman pretended to have a conversation with it.

"What? Oh, come on! Just ride one time with me on the Ferris wheel," she said. "I don't want to ride it alone; that's no fun. I let you..."

The rest of her plea was lost in the noise as she passed by with the gray thing. Sam scanned the milling crowd. A woman held the hand of a small child that wasn't a child. It was another of the gray dummies, child-sized, its fingerless hand wrapped around the mother's. Husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, siblings, extended relatives, lovers and friends, the automatons were everywhere and in every size, comprising about one third of the carnival attendees. Sam's sense of horror increased as he suddenly wondered what had happened to the actual people they were impersonating.

He was pulled out of his thoughts as a voice beckoned him into the mermaid tent.

"Come in sir, come in!" said the carny, holding the tent flap aside, as a dozen people in front of Sam entered. The carny was a pale man with large round eyes. He was dressed in a blue-green suit and smiled with a wide, open mouth.

"Perhaps take a swim with our treasure of the sea?" the carny asked.

Sam entered in the chance that Marissa was inside. As he passed close by the carny, Sam saw through his human guise. The man looked as if he had evolved directly from a

fish. His skin was pale green, his mouth impossibly wide, his huge wet eyes were round, gold and unblinking. He stared back at Sam, and Sam forced a smile.

Sam walked up several steps and joined the other spectators on a walkway that overlooked a large circular tank. He didn't see Marissa, but became entranced by the contents of the pool. Spotlights shot out from both sides underwater, revealing what appeared to be a mermaid with golden hair, seashell cups covering her small breasts, and a blue tail that curved down into the water. She swam about in an elliptical pattern near the center and never surfaced. Sam could detect no apparent breathing apparatus.

"Do we have a volunteer?" asked the carny, scanning the male customers who stared down into the tank with fascination. "Anyone willing to get wet and kiss the mermaid? She does grow ever so lonely for male companionship. No extra charge! And we will provide you with swimming trunks and towel."

A young man of healthy physique raised his hand. "Why not? I'll do it!" he said. The other spectators cheered as the carny guided him behind a curtain in the tent.

Sam turned his attention back to the tank. *What am I seeing?* he thought.

His eyes followed the curve of the mermaid's tail deep into the pool. The tail seemed to have no end, continuing down and disappearing into the dark, undefined bottom. Then the image became clear and he backed away in terror. Sam had once seen a fish on a nature program that had a tongue resembling a worm. The fish would keep its mouth open and wiggle its tongue about, attracting a smaller fish. When the smaller fish went for what it mistook for a worm, it was swallowed whole.

What Sam saw might not have been a fish, but it was some kind of enormous marine creature. He could only see its huge maw that stretched almost the entire width of the tank. From that gigantic mouth, a large, long tongue protruded, which ended in a vaguely human female shape. He also saw the glint of two enormous eyes. The creature's head was pointing straight up, which meant the rest of its body was sunk down into an incredibly deep tank that would have had to reach far below the bottom of the reservoir.

Sam was appalled when the young man came out a couple of minutes later dressed in swimming trunks, ready and eager to dive into the monster's giant maw.

"Wait!" said Sam to the man.

Everyone turned to Sam in confusion.

"Is there a problem, sir?" asked the carny. "Perhaps you would like to go first?"

"Hey, no way," said the young man, and leaped into the tank.

Sam watched in horror as the man swam toward "the mermaid" with a smile. As soon as he embraced the tongue, it shot down into the maw of the monster. It snapped shut, creating a slight disturbance in the water's surface. The man was gone. Everyone clapped, cheered, and whistled as they no doubt saw the young man kiss the mermaid. Sam watched the monster open its mouth again and re-extend the tongue. A side panel slid open in the tank, and a gray form emerged and swam to the surface. It climbed up the ladder and stood before the spectators as they clapped. It was one of the gray automatons. The gray thing walked behind the dressing curtain and appeared again dry with nothing on. The friend of the young man who had been swallowed greeted the doppelganger with a laugh and slapped its back.

Sam stumbled down the stairs from the platform and headed toward the exit.

"Wait, sir!" called the carny. "Don't you want a kiss from the mermaid?"

Sam burst out of the tent. He stepped out of the way of the passing crowds and wiped his face with his hands. The whole carnival was impossible. He had last walked by the reservoir two days ago, the day of the evening when he saw the red star fall. All of this could not have been assembled since then. And a swimming tank dug down into the concrete of the reservoir would not have been allowed. He wondered if anything he was seeing was real, but he had no choice but to trust his senses. They had either been heightened or completely distorted by what Doc had given him. Or both.

Sam moved on, searching the crowd for Marissa.

The Mad Hatter's Tea Party ride was run by a red-suited carny that resembled a beetle. Children climbed into colorful giant cups that sat upon huge saucers. The saucers spun, as did the cups, and as they whirled, the children dropped down into the cups and in their place emerged gray dummies. People walked into the entrance of the Funhouse of No Return and in their place exited gray manikins. Every ride, game or exhibit was different, but with the same result. The purpose was apparently to capture people, and if they had been with companions, to replace them with the gray automatons until everyone had been taken. What on Earth could be the purpose of it all?

Sam had walked through half the enormous sprawling carnival. He had recognized a few people from the neighborhood, but no Marissa. He feared he would come upon her new boyfriend Talbot walking hand in hand with a gray manikin. He almost hoped he would find her holding the hand of one instead, but immediately felt ashamed of the thought.

He came to a section called Chance Row, an alley devoted to games of skill and luck. They were mostly luck, as Sam knew. The ring toss over the glass bottles whose mouths were nearly the size of the ring's inner circumference; the basketballs that barely fit through the hoop; the hand-held bean bags that were almost too flimsy to break the strong balloons. Even with such odds stacked in a carnival's favor, Sam's skill had given him many wins on the Santa Monica Pier. He remembered winning the large plush unicorn for Marissa, back when his arm still worked, back when they were still happy. He wondered if she had kept it.

He stopped when he saw the sign over one of the stalls called, *Intergalactic Worlds' Series*. He felt a slight sinking of his gut at the sight of the baseball motifs. A man was paying the carny for three throws of a baseball to make it through the holes in the back wall. The wall was painted in a psychedelic space pattern, with each hole representing a swirling nebula. On the side walls and from some top netting hung dolls that were apparently the prizes.

The round-bodied carny wore a tight black and white striped suit. He sat on a high stool with his long slender legs drawn up so that his knees almost went over his bald head, which craned forward in a rather unnatural position. Sam focused his perceptions and saw that the carny resembled nothing so much as a humanoid spider. And the netting above, from which some of the dolls hung, appeared to be some kind of web.

The customer pitched his baseballs. The first two missed. Sam could see with his excellent spatial sense that the balls could barely fit through the holes. Unless the throw were nearly perfect, the ball would deflect off the edge. The man's third pitch also missed, and just as the ball bounced off the wall, it was as if the man had been connected to a rubber band stretched to its limit. The man shot forward, simultaneously shrinking as

if he were flying into the distance. And there he hung, another two-foot tall doll in the web above.

Stepping closer, Sam suddenly noticed that one of the dolls on the left side wall was moving. Those were all miniature versions of the gray manikins, and this one climbed down from its place onto the front counter and leaped to the ground. It inflated to life-size and walked off into the crowd, a replacement for the losing customer.

Sam turned his attention back to the dolls that hung in the web above. These dolls were different, all incredibly life-like. He froze when he saw the face of one of the dolls in the front. It was Marissa.

## 6

There was no mistaking her. Brown curly hair, slightly upturned nose, dark eyes, full lips, even the mole on her right cheek. The doll was an exact duplicate of his ex-wife. Then he saw her eyes blink. He gasped. She was alive.

The carnies spoke in a voice like silk passing across steel. “Two through the hole wins a doll from the wall. Three through the hole wins a top-hanging doll.”

A boy stepped up and paid the spider carnies for three throws. The boy missed all three and was flung forward to land as another shrunken doll in the web. A gray doll left the sidewall and took his place. No one noticed. Sam was apparently next in line.

“Well, my friend,” said the carnies, “do you have the skill and the will? The first three throws are free and you’ve nothing to lose, as you see.”

*Nothing to lose? Only my body, my mind, and maybe my soul.*

Sam knew that if his arm were good, he could do it. He might be the only person at this carnival who could. But fear welled up as he looked at the people hanging from the web. What would happen to them? Were they aware? Suffering? If he missed, he had no doubt that he would find out. He shrank back. But then his eyes fell on Marissa. And as he watched her hanging there, he knew he still loved her and would always love her, no matter what did or didn’t happen between them.

Sam stepped forward.

Something inside him steadied and grew. It mixed like a cocktail with Doc’s brew still swirling through his system and exploded. Light burst like a star from Sam’s head, shooting out his eyes, ears, nose and mouth. It coursed through his veins like a radioactive river, washing away all the fear. It spread through his shoulder, charging it with a million volts, eradicating the pain and loading his arm like a laser cannon.

Sam held out his hand. “Ball, please.”

“Ahhhhhh,” hissed the carnies. His eight eyes, now all visible, lit up. He handed Sam a baseball.

Sam took a deep breath, assumed a sideways stance, hands behind his back, head tilted slightly down. The pose was as natural for him as walking. He inhaled once more as he wound up and exhaled as he threw. The ball shot through the hole like a rocket.

The carnies made an alert movement, like a spider sensing something in its web that might be too large to trap. It rotated its head sideways and stared at Sam.

Sam held out his hand. “Ball, please.”

The carnies handed over another ball and scrutinized Sam’s every movement.

Sam threw again. Another clean shot straight through the black hole.

The carny became agitated.

“Ball, please,” said Sam.

The carny handed Sam the ball. Sam threw. The ball vanished through the hole.

The carny reared up on its stool. For a moment, Sam was afraid it was going to leap on him and sink poisonous fangs into his neck. But it only shifted its eyes back and forth between Sam and the hole.

“Well?” asked Sam.

“You win,” said the carny in disbelief. “Choose your prize.” It pointed one of its slender fingers toward the webbing above.

Sam pointed at Marissa. “That one. The woman with the brown curly hair.”

Sam tensed as the carny reached out its impossibly long arm, gripped the doll, and gently tugged. The doll came free. The carny handed it to Sam. Sam took it gently in his hands. He almost expected it to feel like warm flesh and blood, but it felt like a normal doll. He had what he came here for. He looked back at the other dolls hanging from the web and realized that Talbot had been hanging right behind her. He had no reason to risk himself for his ex-wife’s new boyfriend. Then he noticed the girl that worked at the Quicksilver Cheese Shop, hanging to the left of Talbot. Jasmine. Yeah, that was her name. Such a sweet girl. And the man on the left end of the row. Wasn’t he the man from the post office?

All the dolls hanging from the web—men, women, children—were neighbors of his in Quicksilver who had come here for a fun time and met a horrible fate instead.

*I could win Jasmine back, thought Sam. I could even win Talbot back. He’s done nothing to me, nothing to deserve this. I could win them all back. Tonight, maybe only tonight, I could do it.*

He set Marissa’s doll gently on the counter to the side. The electric juice crackled through his veins and Sam stepped forward again.

“Ball, please.”

“No more free throws,” said the carny.

“How much?” asked Sam, reaching for his wallet.

The carny shook his round head. “Money’s no good.”

“What then?” asked Sam.

The carny pointed at Marissa. “You must bet what you win if you want to throw again.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sam.

“You bet a doll and win three throws, you win another doll. You lose, you lose the doll. That’s all.”

Sam balked. He couldn’t chance losing Marissa again. But he couldn’t leave those people up there either. He felt poised upon the rim of a precipice. He could either shrink back, fall, or fly. He knew what Marissa would expect of him, and what he should expect of himself. Was she watching and listening now? He stepped forward and held out his hand.

“Ball, please.”

“You agree to it all? A doll for a doll?” asked the carny.

Sam sneered, and responded by mimicking the carny’s tendency toward rhyme. “I agree to the wager, a doll for a doll. Now please stop your stalling and give me a ball.”

The carny stretched its wide slit of a mouth into a grotesque smile, exposing its sharp fangs as it handed Sam the ball. “You were lucky the first time.”

*How wrong you are, you ugly son of a bitch,* thought Sam.

He wound up and pitched. The ball went through the hole and Sam sighed with relief. But he couldn’t bring himself to choose Talbot. “Give me Jasmine,” he said, pointing at her doll.

“Jasmine?” asked the carny, lifting a thin black brow.

“I mean, the blonde woman, just left of center.”

The carny narrowed its eight eyes at Sam, and without changing the direction of its gaze, reached out and plucked Jasmine like a piece of fruit and handed her over.

Sam placed her next to Marissa. “One for one,” said Sam. “I bet the blonde doll.”

The carny handed Sam the balls.

Sam wound up and threw. Another win. He stared at the dolls.

“Well,” said the carny, “choose your prize.”

Sam sighed. “The male doll in the middle with the blue button-down shirt.”

The carny handed Talbot over. Sam grabbed him and almost tossed him on the counter, then thought better of it and set him down gently. He moved Marissa aside, away from the other two dolls.

“Betting those two dolls,” said Sam, indicating Talbot and Jasmine and holding out his hand.

The carny made a slurred hissing sound and handed him another ball.

Doc’s juice swirled through Sam like a plasma hurricane, and he pitched as he had never pitched before, each time betting all his dolls but Marissa. A crowd grew around Sam as he won pitch after pitch.

He wound up: a lightning bolt from a summer storm cloud.

His arm pulled back: the perfect strike of a cobra.

The unerring flash of a scorpion’s tail.

A computer-guided laser beam.

A star through a black hole.

The finger of God.

Sam had won back half the dolls. He was about to place his final bet when the carny held up his skeletal hand.

“Wait!”

“Wait for what?” protested Sam. He didn’t want his momentum broken. He didn’t want time to think.

“Before I risk all to loss, I must get permission from the boss,” said the carny. Then he just stared at Sam times eight and did nothing.

“Well?” asked Sam, rubbing his hands together.

“He’ll be here shortly,” said the carny. “Ah, here he is.” The spider-like man turned to his right.

Striding above the crowds like a giant praying mantis was a man in green stilted pants. The man stopped a few steps away from Sam and looked down. Then his stilts shortened, and he descended as if he were on an elevator until he stood in front of Sam, with normal sized legs in green pants and suit coat, about six feet tall. He had a perfectly trimmed short black beard and moustache, a wide strong-boned face with thin eyes and a

wide mouth. On his head was a purple top hat upon which a hypnotic disk continually spun, exactly as Sam had seen on the carnival flyer.

“Greetings and felicitations!” said the man in a dark, sultry voice, making an elaborate gesture with his gloved hand. “It seems you’ve been having a streak of good luck. So good, in fact, that you’re about to clean out old Mr. Fiddles.” The carnival leader gave a brief deprecatory glance at the spiderish carny, who fidgeted.

“I’m doing all right,” said Sam. He made sure to keep his eyes averted from the swirling disk on the man’s hat.

“Better than all right,” said the man. He stared intently at Sam and Sam had the uncomfortable feeling that the man was trying to pickpocket his mind. The man raised his brows and let out a short laugh. “My apologies. I didn’t give you enough credit. There’s obviously much more than luck going on here.”

Sam stared hard at the man, trying to see beneath his facade. But the man remained as he appeared.

“Oh, I assure you, Mr. Sterling, I’m just as human as you.”

Sam started. “How did you—?”

“Or may I call you Sam? I do hope we’ll be friends. My name is Wheeler, the manager of this carnival.” He made a short bow.

Sam nodded. “Pleased to meet you.” He glanced at the crowd gathered round them. They were talking nonchalantly and watching the proceedings as if nothing strange were afoot.

“Now, shall we get straight to business, Sam?”

“What business is that?”

“The business of power,” said Wheeler.

## 7

“What kind of power are you talking about?” asked Sam.

“The kind I have. The kind you want. You held it in your hands once, not long ago. You were in the ascension, a prince standing upon a hill, his fingers wrapped around the world in the shape of a ball. And then, regrettably, the fall.”

Sam looked down at the ground.

“But that which was lost can be regained, Sam,” said Wheeler.

“I just want to win those dolls back,” said Sam.

“Those *people*, you mean,” said Wheeler with a faint smile.

Sam narrowed his eyes at Wheeler. “Then it’s true.”

“Oh, yes,” said Wheeler.

“Well? How about it?” asked Sam.

Wheeler sighed. “You stare at the ants in a sidewalk crack when you could be gazing at the stars.”

“I’ll wager all the dolls I’ve won, except this one,” Sam said, indicating Marissa’s doll set apart from the others on the counter, “against the ones hanging above.”

Wheeler’s gaze rested on Marissa’s doll. His brow furrowed. “I have a much better wager for you. How about, all of the product above wagered against only *that* doll?”

“No deal!” said Sam.

Wheeler laughed, and Sam realized he had shown his hand. A wave of panic washed over him as he wondered if Wheeler would take the doll back by force.

“So,” said Wheeler, “her life is more valuable than all of these individuals put together.” He waved his arm out to encompass all the Quicksilver residents hanging from the web.

Sam bit his lip and remained silent.

“Why should she matter to you?” asked Wheeler. “True, there was a time when she stood by your side. But now? If only you could have seen the thoughts that I saw in her mind. They weren’t of you, Sam. They were of her and Talbot. She carries on with him in ways she never did with you.”

“Shut up,” said Sam.

“That’s who you want to save at the expense of all these worthy people? The woman who left you when you needed her most, and spends her evening hours riding Mr. Talbot as if she were trying to tame a wild stallion.”

The spidery Mr. Fiddles snickered.

Sam wanted to lock his fingers around Wheeler’s neck and squeeze until his face turned purple as his hat. But he knew the carnival master was taunting him, so he just gritted his teeth together and said, “That’s none of my business now.”

Wheeler gave Sam a short bow. “Of course, you’re right. My apologies for resorting to vulgarity. I simply wanted you to be aware of certain facts, so that you could properly assess the value of your assets, or lack thereof.”

“All the dolls but her,” repeated Sam. “That’s my wager.”

“Mm,” said Wheeler, brushing the back of his glove against his beard. “No deal.”

“Why not?” asked Sam. “She has no special value to you.”

“She has no more value to me than a worm on a hook,” said Wheeler.

“Then what can I wager? What do you want?” asked Sam.

“I want *you*, Sam Sterling,” said Wheeler.

“Me?”

“You.”

The furrow between Sam’s brows deepened like a chasm. “Why?”

“You have a gift, Sam, the extent of which you have no comprehension. Your amazing dexterity and perception are only two of its manifestations. You are one of the special ones, like me.”

Sam stared hard at Wheeler again. The man remained as he was.

“As I said before, I am a man, like you. A hundred years ago this carnival came to a small town on the Eastern seaboard. I was a young man from a broken home, a grifter fighting back against the world with nothing but my wits and an impotent rage. I ran into a long spell of bad luck, and had wandered into the carnival to escape some men who meant to kill me. The carnival master at the time recognized the special gift I had, saw my potential, and offered to take me away from my dead end life. I’m offering you the same.”

“You want me to join the carnival?”

“I think you realize by now, this is no earthly carnival. I’m offering you a chance to go places, do and see things you’ve never even dreamed of. You would be part of a team again—a player in games of cosmic consequence that make your misnamed World Series about as exciting as watching bingo in a home for the senile. And the prizes would not be



meaningless titles, numbers in a bank account, ridiculous product endorsements, and fame amongst insignificant beings on a backwater planet. You would be playing for cities, planets, even solar systems. In time, perhaps entire galaxies.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sam.

“Of course you don’t. But the exciting thing is, you will.”

“And you can make all this happen?”

“I have the authority to sign you,” said Wheeler. “It is my superiors that will make it happen.”

“The Demon World Princes,” said Sam.

Wheeler barked out a brief laugh and clapped. Mr. Fiddles applauded too, as well as several more carnys that had joined the scene.

“Excellent, Mr. Sterling!” said Wheeler. “My faith in you is not unfounded. Even with the substance that I sense you ingested earlier this evening, most humans would not have been able to penetrate those masked symbols at the gate, nor the true nature of my fellow carnys.”

Sam’s mind raced. He had no idea what he had gotten himself into. His only intention had been to save Marissa. *That* he had accomplished. Or had he? He wondered if Wheeler would let him leave with the dolls. And if so, would they return to their normal state?

“Why not just take me by force?” asked Sam. He nodded his head toward the crowd gathered around them. “You seem to be able to control what people see.”

“To a certain extent, and only for the purposes of conducting business properly and fairly with other races. Well, as fairly as any carnival,” added Wheeler with a friendly smile. “But we are not soldiers, Mr. Sterling. We are game players and gamblers, and though we make most of the rules, we must also follow them.”

“What will happen to the people here, if you take them?” asked Sam.

“*When* we take them. What happens to our product will be explained to you if you join us.”

“Product? These are people,” said Sam.

“Human ethics are irrelevant to our work. You’ll realize how irrelevant they are once you leave this planet. And why would you stay? You have nothing here. You have lost your wife, you have lost your job, you will soon run out of money. Your friends are not as reliable as they seem. Your family is estranged. You have lost the use of your arm, and thus your lifelong dream of playing in the big leagues.”

“My arm seems to be working fine tonight,” countered Sam.

“That will last only until the strange substance in your system has broken down and worked its way out. A matter of hours. But as I said, what is lost can be regained. Permanently. I didn’t mention before. Those men who wanted me dead? First they gave me a warning by taking two of the fingers from my left hand.” Wheeler pulled the glove off his left hand and held up his five fingers, fluttering them in the air.

“But how—”

“How is unimportant,” said Wheeler. “Your lame arm can be replaced with an even better one.”

Sam felt both terrified and excited by the idea. But he didn’t want to play for human lives. And what about the people of Quicksilver? What about Marissa?

Wheeler seemed to sense his doubt. “Walk away from this opportunity and you will hobble back to your small lonely studio and hobble through life, hiding in the bottom of a bottle, merely existing for no reason but that you do, like a bug crawling across a sidewalk. Meanwhile, Mr. Sterling, out there, among the stars...” Wheeler looked up and waved his arms outward. “Well,” he said, wrinkling his nose, “you can’t really see them because of the garish lights and smog, but you get my meaning. You’ll always stare up and wonder, what if? What if I had taken the chance? Opportunities like this come along only once in a lifetime. Yours will last a few more decades if you’re lucky. Come with us, and like me, your span of life will be increased tenfold.”

Sam wanted to believe that he was going to turn down Wheeler’s offer because he objected to their way of life, but he wasn’t sure if it was that or because he was just afraid, or both. And did he really care about the people of Quicksilver that much? He thought of Marissa, Doc and the guys, Jasmine at the cheese shop, and all the people he passed each day on his walks—simple lonely humans like him trying to find some love and meaning to enjoy their few brief days in the sun. At that thought, Sam felt something welling up inside him. He wasn’t sure if it was Doc’s juice again or just love for these people and his humble life on Earth.

“Well, Sam, which will it be?” asked Wheeler. “The gutter or the stars?”

“Okay,” said Sam. “I’ll go with you. But in exchange, you release all the people of Quicksilver.”

Wheeler shook his head, looking disappointed. “A very heroic gesture, Sam. But we are neither soldiers nor traders. You must make the proposition in the form of a wager. *The game*, Sam. The game is *everything*.”

“All right,” said Sam. “If I miss, I go with you, become part of your team, and you keep the people you have won up till now. If I make the throw, you let all the human beings you took tonight go.”

“Not quite, Sam. Here is the wager, and you must take it or leave now and be satisfied with your winnings. And I will have to be content with my take by the end of the night, which I’m guessing will be about three quarters of the population of your little town. If you make the throw, we will let all the people go and never return to Quicksilver. If you miss, you join our team and we take the entire town.”

“Not her,” said Sam, pointing at Marissa.

Wheeler sighed. “You concern yourself with such trivia, and thus needlessly misdirect your energies. But you will learn.” Wheeler gave a dismissive wave. “Very well, she remains.”

“And she’ll be turned back to normal.”

“Of course,” said Wheeler. “Once away from the influence of the carnival, she will revert.”

Sam felt a sense of relief, but also guilt for caring less about all the other people in Quicksilver.

“And I have to make only one throw,” said Sam.

“Agreed,” said Wheeler. “But then, you only *get* one throw.”

Sam was scared, but he knew he could do it. He had done it over a dozen times this night. And his arm was working better than it ever had before.

“Deal,” said Sam.

“A very big deal,” said Wheeler. “And thus, one we must shake on.” Wheeler removed the glove on his right hand and held it out.

Sam clasped his hand and shook. Wheeler’s hand was like the first bad blast of winter air in autumn. Sam jerked his hand back. Cold ran up his arm to his shoulder like frost moving across a field. Doc’s juice collided with this new element and kept it at bay. But the damage was done. Sam could feel the old twinge of pain return in his shoulder, and he clutched it with his left hand.

“What did you do?” asked Sam.

“Only evened the odds, Mr. Sterling. Now it is just you, the ball, and the hole.”

“Ball!” said Wheeler. Mr. Fiddles tossed a baseball to Wheeler and he snatched it from the air without looking. He tossed it to Sam, who caught it with his right hand by reflex. He grimaced. The pain was back in full force.

Wheeler stepped to the side and motioned with his hand. “When you are ready, Mr. Sterling.”

“This isn’t fair,” said Sam. “My arm—”

“Is exactly the same arm you live with every day,” said Wheeler. “The deal has been made in front of witnesses. Either you throw or you forfeit. And soldiers or not, *that*, I assure you, *is* something I can enforce.”

Sam tentatively lifted his right arm and felt the grinding pain. He lowered it. It hung like a dead tree limb. He knew he didn’t have a chance pitching with his left arm, so his only choice was to throw through the pain. He had done it before. The difficulty was to not let the pain affect his throw. And he knew that was nearly impossible. But *nearly* impossible was not impossible, and he had no choice.

Sam took his stance as if he were on the mound, his arms behind his back, his right shoulder pulsing with a steady ache. He closed his eyes and remembered the last competitive pitch he had thrown. The pain in his shoulder had been so great that he had collapsed on the mound in agony. But he had still thrown a strike.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. He felt the ball in his hand, and pictured an imaginary line that connected the ball and the hole. Nothing existed but the ball and the hole and nothing else would exist ever again until the ball passed through the hole.

Sam took one breath in and out. Then he inhaled as he wound up and pulled his arm back, gritting his teeth at the pain. He followed through, sensing nothing else but the ball, the pain, and the hole—they became as one thing. He exhaled as he threw the ball, and screamed out at the grinding fire that ripped through his shoulder, and it seemed, through his entire being.

As he collapsed in agony, his head struck the edge of the front counter, and everything went black.

## 8

Sam’s first waking awareness was of throbbing pain in his shoulder and his head. Then he heard a man’s voice.

“You’re right, he’s drunk again.”

“He hit his head!” That was a woman’s voice, and he recognized it.

Sam opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground in front of the baseball throwing counter. Marissa was hovering over him. Her delicate fingers cradled the back of his neck, and she carefully brushed his hair away from his forehead. Sam concentrated on this moment, because he knew it would never come again.

He looked over Marissa's shoulder and saw a red star shooting like a reverse meteorite into the night sky until it was lost from view. Then he noticed Talbot next to her, and he realized it was Talbot's voice that had made the comment about him being drunk. Some people had stopped to watch, but he saw no sign of the strange carnys.

Sam sat up. Wheeler was gone. Mr. Fiddles had been replaced by a young Latina who was chewing gum and watching Sam with concern.

"You okay?" asked Marissa.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Sam.

"You've got a bump on your forehead. You better get some ice on that. What happened?"

"I fell," said Sam. "Hit my head on the counter." Talbot had walked a few steps away and was staring into space, waiting for Marissa to finish with her drunken, loser ex-husband.

Sam struggled to his feet. The carnival looked similar, but not the same. It seemed to be a normal carnival, and was much smaller.

"I'll be okay. I'm just glad you're safe," said Sam.

"Me? Why wouldn't I be?" asked Marissa, frowning her brow.

"No reason. Just a bad dream I had," said Sam.

He wanted to embrace her. He wanted to say he was sorry for the drinking, for losing hope, for everything, even for the things that were not in his control. But Talbot stood there waiting, and it was all in the past and there was no going back, so he just squeezed her hand. "Thanks, Marissa. Go on and have fun. I'm gonna head home."

"All right, Sam," she said.

A sad shadow passed across her face, and Sam knew it might be love, but it was not the kind of love that lovers share, and never would be again. And, for the first time in a year, that was okay.

Sam walked up the ramp and out the carnival entrance. He hadn't seen his final pitch pass through the hole, but neither had he heard it strike the wall. He must have made the throw.

He paused at the top of the concrete stairs and looked down at the carnival that now took up less than a quarter of the reservoir. It was a humble carnival, a bit shabby even, with silly rides, and full of games that were nearly impossible to win, with nearly worthless prizes when you did. Just as it should be.

As he walked home, he wondered if the carnival would return to Earth in his lifetime, and how it had appeared and disappeared so quickly. Had the entire thing taken place in his mind, or in the minds of the people of Quicksilver? And if so, did that make it any less real?

But he had seen the red star arrive and depart. And he believed Wheeler was a real man. He wondered who the Demon World Princes were. Perhaps Doc could provide some answers, because it was clear his shopkeeper friend had suspected something. Doc was the only person Sam would have the guts to tell. Hell, maybe Doc and his liquor

were responsible for the whole thing. But he had a feeling Doc would only say, “I told you not to go to that carnival.”

The pain didn’t bother him as he walked home. He was just happy to watch the people of Quicksilver returning to their quaint houses, and to see so many more lights inside those homes than he had on the way to the reservoir.

He reached his studio, turned the key in the lock, and walked in. The apartment was dark. He almost switched on a lamp, then changed his mind and went out the back terrace door, where he stood watching the lights of Hollywood twinkle in the distance.

Sam knew the effects of Doc’s liquor had mostly passed, just as he had known when he had come down off his one and only LSD trip. And yet there was something still left inside his head, whether a gift from the universe or self-created or both. It was like the seed of a star. And as he gazed up at the few visible lights in the sky, it grew to impossible dimensions and shone out of his eyes, ears, nose and mouth, blazing with the light of a billion suns. It burst open his head, and new gods were born.