



*The Golden
Ziggurat*

AND OTHER STORIES

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Part 1 - The Ziggurat

As evening came, our guide led us to the ruins of the great temple of the Aztecs where, I confess, I stood rooted to the spot for upwards of ten minutes. My imagination ran away from me, forming vivid images of the human masses flooding toward this place of worship, music floating through the air, and perhaps, above all, the screams. Here, right where I was standing, thousands upon thousands of men and women had been slain as offerings to the bloody Aztec gods.

Adrian stuck a bookmark in the page and clapped it shut, tucking it under his left arm and opening the car door. Getting out and circling round to the other side, he glanced at the long line of vehicles that had arrived before him. Late again. He had only just managed to make it. When he was younger, he had always been socially active, but now that he was twenty business stole away most of his time. He sighed, then made himself smile and walked forward with a whistle on his lips.

Children were playing yard games out front and he had to navigate around a web of energetic tag-players. Adrian waved at a few of the children he knew and his smile broadened. He took one last glance at his book before he entered the main social circle of adults. Just one more section to go and he would be through with the chapter. Both the history and narrative style of the book were excellent. A rare find.

“Hey! Adrian,” called a brassy voice with a note of rough laughter to it. “So the ‘ole boy finally shows up, huh?”

Adrian approached the ring of adults and shook hands with a muscular, roundish fellow with wild, wavy hair and a face that masked an inner intensity with an expression of easygoingness. “Hey, Brent! How’ve you been?” He gave his best smile and smoothed his hair back. “Seriously sorry I got here so late. I’m just going to excuse myself by saying that tardiness is part of my zesty personality.”

Brent raised his eyebrows and folded his bare arms. "You? A zesty personality?" He rolled his eyes and opened up the grill beside him from which he drew a hot bratwurst and shoved it into Adrian's mouth. "There," he said, smirking dryly. "See if *that* don't add zest to your personality."

Cayenne and other spices exploded in Adrian's mouth, hot and juicy. He kept the shock from showing on his face and calmly made an exaggerated expression of magnanimous condescension. "Yes," he said, breathing in through his mouth to cool his tongue. "That does add zest to my personality."

As he finished the rest of his brat, Brent nodded his head to Adrian's right. "Drinks that way."

"Thank you," Adrian said. The cooler was beside the back door, a good ways from any of the partiers. Adrian walked over by himself and looked through the options. Beer. Soda. Lemonade. Water. He turned to look at the attendants again, searching for a girl of about 5' 4" with whitish-blond hair and blazing blue-grey eyes. He could only vaguely remember what her face looked like, and perhaps that was why he wanted to see it. He ought to have had her appearance ingrained in his mind, but it was as elusive as the clouds above a mountain. Whenever he saw her, he forgot her appearance the next day as if his mind were keeping the memory from him on purpose to taunt him.

Just as he had expected, she wasn't there. His heart beat a jerky rhythm and he whirled impulsively back toward the cooler and snatched a water at random.

Turning back to the partiers again, he wondered what to do next. The water bottle's cold surface sent numbing chills up his shaky hands and snapped his dizzy mind back into focus. He gripped the water bottle tighter and took a deep breath, smiling at the general view before him.

The scene was a peaceful one, though perhaps too peaceful. The sun was sinking toward the horizon with a sense of finality and Adrian couldn't help but feel that he had arrived far too late. The book under his arm felt heavier at that moment and he half-consciously pulled it out and opened it to where he

had left his marker. Bright colors on the page attracted his attention and his eyes drifted to a picture in the bottom right corner. It was an artist's representation of the great ziggurat from the time of the Aztecs. The very stones of the ziggurat shone gold in the picture and its majesty was such that it seemed more godlike than the gods worshiped inside it. Under its shadow, a group of warriors and priests brought forward captives to be sacrificed.

Adrian glanced up and found a tree only a few yards away. It was far enough from the others to avoid interruption, but close enough that he would seem open for conversation. He made his way to it and sat down. His nerves refused to rest and he nearly jumped every time he saw a teenage girl out of the corner of his eye. But, of course, none of them were her. After all, she probably didn't even know Brent. Adrian committed himself to his book.

"What you reading there?"

Adrian dropped the book. "Oh! Speak of the devil. I mean—sorry, I was just thinking about you. Well...sort of."

Brent growled, but his eyes sparkled. "I never knew I was *frightening*." He downed a large swig of beer, patted his chest, burped, laughed, and then looked fixedly at Adrian's book.

"You like the cover?" Adrian asked, eyeing it critically and fidgeting with his sports jacket.

Brent only scratched his chin and squinted harder.

The cover was facing up and read: *A Pedestrian View of Aztec Culture*. The design was simple but faintly tropical in style and would appeal to any armchair explorer or fanciful academic. The chances were good it would sell. Adrian picked it up and rose to his feet. "It's our newest acquisition. We're going to do a print run of 10,000. I got a beta copy. Figured it looked interesting."

Brent still had his eyes fixed rigidly on the cover. "The *Aztecs*, ey?" He nodded twice, knowingly. "Man. Those guys were brutal. I learned all about them on the history channel. If you ever want some gore, that would be the book to go to." He made an imitation of ripping out his own heart.

Adrian gripped the book protectively against himself, coughing. "Oh, my interest in it is merely academic."

Brent shrugged and shifted his footing, taking another sip of beer. "You're sure different than anyone else I know. How do you do it?"

Adrian relaxed a bit of his tension. That was the typical way Brent talked. He said what was in his mind and expected you to understand. "Oh? What do I do?"

"Humph," said Brent, scratching his belly then his nose. "Just that you're serious about life. Come on, man, how rich are you now? Do you have two flocks of girls chasing you or three?"

Adrian's smile broadened. It was a thin smile, but it stayed there. "None."

"None?!" Brent lowered his beer bottle and widened his eyes.

Adrian shook his head. "I generally avoid them."

"Well, I never knew of such a person..."

Adrian, on his part, had never seen Brent in such a state. Brent stood perfectly still, his mouth formed an "o" shape, and his eyes seemed to be permanently stuck in a quizzical stupefaction, all of which was probably exaggerated for effect. The entertainment quality of it was better than Adrian's book on the Aztecs. Adrian stuck his free hand in his pocket and casually leaned up against the tree. "You know, Brent, I *am* entitled to be just as different as you are."

Brent relaxed from his frozen state and scratched his stubble-covered chin. "Well, you're a funny one. Please tell me you have *friends* at least."

Adrian didn't even have to think about that one. He laughed. "I think everyone I meet is my friend."

At this Brent looked over his shoulder, searching for something. Adrian waited to see what it was. After a moment, Brent pointed at a young man of around nineteen sitting by the radio and singing along with two other crazy adults. "Dallas is here. Did you know that?"

Adrian hardly heard Brent. His voice had faded to the back of his mind. Dallas, however, consumed all his attention. He clutched his Aztec book

tightly against himself and bit his lower lip.

Dallas had been his best friend since sixth grade. At least, that was, until Adrian's schedule had torn them apart. His schedule and...other things. Adrian listened to Dallas' voice. It wasn't very good, honestly, but it was performed with plenty of gusto. Dallas was still his exact opposite—he lived for the moment without concerning himself too much with the future, he was the practical one who got his hands dirty and the one who was always seeking something crazy to do. A good solid guy, but not headed anywhere. Adrian found himself trying to smile, but it was hard to do. A tingling came into his mouth and he wet his lips, then bit them, then clenched his jaw as a metallic taste entered his mouth.

"You should catch up with him." It was Brent speaking.

"Oh..." Adrian entered back into reality and tried to relax. "Maybe. I haven't talked with him in quite a while, actually. We just haven't been as close since..."

"Well you're not going to get a better chance than this," Brent grunted, shuffling off to socialize with other people.

Adrian said nothing. He remained alone and looked off to the horizon where the sun was beginning to set. He had arrived much, much too late. Maybe it would be best to just leave and go back home. *No, no I should stay.* There wasn't any particular reason to do so, but it felt right. He gazed over the party, looking one last time at all the participants and seeing who was all there. An empty feeling formed in his stomach and he swallowed. It was time to go socialize and have fun like he had planned, but instead he opened his book and stole one last look at the image of the ziggurat. It shone bright and inviting. He almost didn't even notice the sacrificial victims being brought to their deaths. The architecture—somehow it made the Aztec faith more reasonable.

"Adrian?"

He sucked in a breath and turned sharply. That was it. Her voice. He had been readying himself to hear it the whole time since he had arrived. "H-hi,

Cassy," he barely managed. Somehow, he wasn't sure what to say next. She didn't seem sure either. Finally, she smiled. It was a shy smile that managed to seem exotic and pastoral. Her whitish-blond hair hung free around her shoulders and her eyes had a crystalline glow that was sharp and wintery.

"Um...I don't know if anyone's ever told you, but there's something about you that reminds me of a gypsy," Adrian said, fumbling with his free hand before finally hooking it in his back pocket.

She was taken aback in a way that was mesmerizing, blinking several times in complete confusion. "Oh...really?"

There was nothing fitting to say in response. Or, rather, he didn't think he was bold enough to say it. His gaze drifted over to where Brent was starting a fire in a metal fire pit and using far too much lighter fluid. Its sudden blaze lit up the now half-dark yard and reminded Adrian that it was colder outside than when he had arrived. Cassy was cold too—not as a person, but she reminded him of those winter days where the icicles glittered on every tree like the ornaments of a fairy queen. Those were special days. Up till then, winters would be cruel and life-killing, but then *those* days would come and they would wake his soul like an electric shock.

Cassy hung her head and clasped her hands in front of her, blinking. "I haven't seen you in three weeks."

He looked the same place she was looking—at her toes. She had a nice pair of shoes with fancifully intertwined leather twisting around a gold-colored ring in the center. He couldn't put words to it, but something about that golden ring sparkling in the dim light excited his imagination. It was like a symbol of glory or everlasting happiness. "Yes—I suppose that's my fault. I'm such a terrible hermit. I shouldn't be." He laughed tragically and clasped his hands behind his back.

There was a pause and then Cassy raised her head quickly. "Will you be this busy forever?"

He started to answer, but the words caught in his mouth. He was forced to meet her gaze without anything to say. Her eyes were piercing and they

wouldn't leave him. He wouldn't leave them either. He made himself meet her gaze.

"You know, Cassy," he finally began, finding his words as he spoke, "I think constantly about the future." He took a deep breath, and urgently tried to quell the faint quiver in his voice. "But sometimes it's so grey." He still held her gaze unflinchingly. "It's like—this won't describe it—but it's like a world of giant stone statues where nothing grows. Nothing at all." He realized suddenly that he had spoken too freely and they both released each other's gazes simultaneously.

Adrian could hear the voices of people chatting around the fire and little children cheering over their lawn games. Cassy took one step back in her quick fluid way, rustling her summer dress.

"Are you staying long?" Adrian asked impulsively, impressed with the idea that she was about to leave.

"No," she said, halting her retreat. "I came with my brother, and he has to get up at four tomorrow."

She was leaving soon. If she would have stayed later, he could have talked with her, but if she was leaving, he wouldn't have time. At least, not for anything but small talk, and that wouldn't satisfy him. He nodded slightly. "Well, I shouldn't monopolize you then. I hope we may meet again soon."

"Yes," she said perking up. "Maybe you'll arrive on time then." In her spontaneous style, she flitted away. He watched her as she disappeared into the lengthening shadows, then, without warning, an image thrust itself upon his mind's eye like a battering ram knocking down a gate, and his very legs trembled. A grip like iron seemed to clutched his heart. Adrian gasped and tensed his muscles. In an instant, it was gone and he breathed a deep exhale.

He stood there stunned for a moment, contemplating what could have made him form that image in his mind, then, feeling a little dizzy, he walked away from the tree toward the fire.

About ten adults were huddled around the flames, chatting louder than they needed too. Or were his ears just extra sensitive at the moment? Perhaps

it had something to do with his dizziness.

Adrian sat down next to a young guy named Nick. All he knew about him was that he was nearly seven foot and a maniac for politics. Adrian only had time to place his book on his lap before Nick scooted up to him. “Hey Adrian, did I hear you’re voting for Senator Bartman this year?”

“Actually,” said Adrian, coughing and leaning a little away from the aggressive political theorist, “I can’t say I’ve made up my mind yet.” He searched for Cassy out there in the growing night and found her. Nick came back with a flurry of words, but Adrian didn’t catch much of it. *On last night...voted for a tariff...she endorsed him, but like that matters...* Adrian could see Cassy over the flames of the fire, just through the gap between a man and a woman on the other side. She was with Dallas. They were both playful—like the flames. They both had cheeks that glowed like the flames. Cassy laughed with Dallas. Dallas had a posture of earnestness that made him look princely. Such naturalness between them.

Adrian noticed that his breathing had become heavy and his heart pounded in his chest. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

Just then, the flames shot up, obscuring his former friend and Cassy. Adrian gave a sour smile and looked away. Straight at Nick.

“Well?” the theorist asked.

“It’s...shameful,” Adrian muttered.

“Why exactly!” Nick smiled broad as a barn. “You’d have to be a fool not to think so. It makes me sick when I hear that people are voting for him.”

Adrian closed his eyes and let the picture that had stung his mind just minutes before reformulate itself. There was still a frightfulness to it, but a satisfying frightfulness. He didn’t dare focus on it too long, but just for a moment, he indulged in the awful beauty of it. The sky in the background was dark, but the object itself burned like fire—like the fire that raged in his chest. Was there a connection between the object’s hue and his own emotions? Was his mind showing him a picture of himself? And the woman, she—

Adrian shook his head to clear the image. No. He jumped to his feet and wiped his hands on his legs. “Uh, hey Nick, I’m going to go stretch my legs for a moment. Nice talking with you. I can tell you’ve got some smart ideas.”

He walked away, trying not to blush at the thought that he had just cut Nick off in the middle of a sentence. He just needed a moment to work himself out. Work had kept him busy lately and his brain wasn’t in prime condition. Maybe his dad was right. He needed to get out more.

Just ahead, his eyes picked out two figures heading for the line of cars along the street. Cassy was one of them, her brother Adam the other. *Well, they’re leaving. Slim chance I’ll see them again soon. I was a fool for getting here late.*

He began contemplating his schedule. Friday he was busy, but Saturday there was a party he could make it to. Monday through Wednesday were taken, but maybe he could find some free time on Thursday. Cassy—and her brother—wouldn’t be attending every event, but if he tried enough of them, he might get lucky with one or two. Asking for a meeting wasn’t his way. Cassy was ethereal and distant. It wasn’t right to ask things of her.

Adrian came to a stop when he realized he was twenty feet behind Cassy and Adam. Following them had seemed natural. He hadn’t noticed what he was doing.

He held his breath, waiting for them to discover he was there, but they didn’t. They walked up to their car and Cassy reached to open the passenger door.

“Cassy?” That was Adam. He spoke hesitantly, but at the same time explosively, as if he had to speak this very instant or forever hold his peace.

Cassy whirled around. “Yes?” Adam was an athletic figure, but the liteness of Cassy’s movements made him seem pathetic.

Adrian crouched on one knee, trying to blend in with the shadows.

“Look,”—he seemed to search for words for a moment—“you’re nineteen now. You can make your own decisions, but I’ve gotta ask you. Adrian or Dallas?”

Cassy started then completely froze. "I-I..." She closed her eyes tightly, then buried her face in her hands. "Don't ask me that question."

Adam humphed and leaned against the car. "Look," he said with stressed gentleness, "I'm not forcing you, but I think common sense says you can't have it both ways."

She nodded and bowed her head, removing her hands. "Adrian is like no one else I know. When he talks, he makes the world seem like a fairyland and the future hopeful, but with Dallas I'm...peaceful."

Adam nodded slowly. "They're both fine. Maybe what you need is to look at things from the cold, logical perspective. With Dallas—I mean, I like the guy, but he's never gone to college and the way he goes through life, well, it isn't in a hurry. I doubt he'd be able to support you for another several years. Just being honest here. Adrian though,"—Adam laughed—"he's crazy. Too rich for his age. Too rich. I'm just saying."

Cassy looked away. "Perhaps...." She raised her head, throwing back her hair. "Dallas says though that he might get a job soon. I think it pays enough." "What job?"

"I don't know. He said the company was Morrison's Heating and Air."

Adam and Cassy stood silent for half a minute. Finally, Adam walked around to the driver's side of the car. "Well, okay. You just can't wait on him forever." He and Cassy got in and the headlights turned on. The night was thick and there was something lonely about those headlights. It was worse when the car began to drive away, for then they faded farther and farther into the distance until at last they disappeared completely.

Adrian rubbed his forehead, bending over as if in prayer. He took deep, regular breaths. *You can't wait for him forever...Dallas says though that he might get a job soon...Don't ask that question. Don't ask.*

Adrian raised his head, facing the direction Cassy and her brother had left.

Slowly, calmly, he reconstructed the image in his mind that had so assaulted him earlier, taking a craftsman's care to get each detail ingrained in his mind before moving onto the next one. What he saw was a ziggurat of

fiery gold like the one he had seen in his book, only this one was alive with a power that he could feel inside him. Enthroned in majesty upon its summit was a goddess of terrible beauty formed of such bright steel that it gleamed like silver. Moving down, he saw a worshiper at the feet of the ziggurat prostrating himself and ripping his flesh open with an obsidian knife for joy that he could offer his blood up to the goddess.

That was the one thing that troubled him most about the image. The worshiper was him.

Part 2 - The Goddess

It was a good day when Adrian entered his office the next morning and sat down to browse through his email. He had read two more chapters of *A Pedestrian View of Aztec Culture* and he was running high on coffee. If the room seemed a bit warmer than normal, he didn't care particularly. Doubtless his dad had messed with the thermostat and there would be time to compromise on a perfect medium after lunch.

Scrolling through his inbox, he ignored the hum-drum complaints from bookstores and the notifications from distributors. In his private email, he surfed through listings of real estate in the area. Real estate was better than the book business by far. Someday he would leave his dad's company and go out on his own. He actually could whenever he wanted to, he just had a desire to leave his position with everything in top shape and a good replacement trained and ready.

Once he could commit all his time to real estate, his life would be set. Except, of course, in one area.

Adrian pushed his chair back from the desk and reclined with his hands on the armrests. What was success? He was too careful an intellectual—too honest to truly believe it lay in the possessions he owned. Great books had shaped his life, and he held to the archaic position that a man's success lay in his relationships with people. It was all so simple in theory, but life was never simple.

Adrian gazed at the rich, cream walls of his office—the ones with no decorations. He had an elaborate plastic tree in the corner and a plush chair for guests, but he needed to frame some pictures on the wall. Maybe his championship soccer photos. Or maybe a picture of the goddess.

He laughed impulsively at the childish idea and quickly got back to work even as an empty feeling formed in his mouth—the type he had felt as a child when he hungered for a treat that was out of reach. He paused and his hand

slipped over to grab a pencil, but he thought better of it. After all, his artistic skills as far as he knew were zero. And besides, he was more mature than this. There was a whole day of work ahead of him and he needed to resist the temptation as long as he could.

Shoving a lollipop in his mouth, Adrian started chugging away at his work. Two hours passed before his hand reached for the pencil, and as soon as he touched it his defenses kicked in and he dropped it. Adrian pushed the pencil away with a scowl. He was more disciplined than that. These were work hours.

In a half an hour, he reached for the pencil again. *Oh, seriously? You can hold off longer than that.* Nevertheless, his fingers curled around the pencil and he slowly drew it toward himself, facial muscles tightening. At the last second he shoved it away and slammed his hands back on the keyboard with a sickened grunt. He panted and got up to make a call. The man on the other end was frighteningly polite and brutally efficient in his communication. The call lasted only ten minutes and Adrian was stuck at his desk again.

The clock ticked tirelessly in the background and Adrian cursed himself for buying an analogue. Many times he glanced up at it. *It's eleven now. If I just put in a half hour more, it wouldn't be too much to take an early lunch break.*

Ten minutes later, he glanced at the clock and told himself: *Come on, Adrian, put in five more minutes. You can do it.* He put in four more minutes and then leapt for the pencil.

He grabbed a single sheet of paper from his printer and plopped it in front of him. His desk was too exposed if anyone burst through his door, so he rummaged through his desk drawers till he found an empty three-ring binder. After propping it up and adjusting it several times, he got it so he was sure nobody entering the room would see his paper when they walked in.

Adrian let out an exasperated breath and ran his free hand through his hair, staring with boggled eyes at the blank paper. He wasn't an artist. Why did he think he could turn out something beautiful just because he had a concept for it? But the picture in his mind was so clear. If he just followed

what his brain was telling him, it might be okay.

He sketched a very basic outline, then gasped, crumpled it, and threw it in the wastebasket. Yanking open his printer's paper compartment, he yanked out another sheet, then, on second thought, grabbed ten more.

This time he was careful. He moved his pencil with painstaking exactness so it wouldn't wobble and he drew a very straight line. He breathed raggedly and a warmth settled in his chest, rising to his head like intoxicating fumes.

It was magic. The outline came out how it appeared in his mind. Adrian felt light and airy and he held his breath under the impression that if he breathed the magic would vanish. The basic form was before him. Now he just needed to add in the details of the face.

He started drawing the eyes, but his pencil slipped and he threw his hands in the air. "Oh, Adrian!" Clutching his hands into fists, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. "Well," he said, "what artist doesn't need practice? I'll just try it again."

The next few pieces of paper became an art lesson for him as he meticulously analyzed what he was doing wrong and how he could improve.

It was coming together. A unified picture. He could see the resemblance now, though it wasn't like in his head. He sat back for a moment to look at the picture and compare it to the one in his mind. He laughed at how bad it was, glad that nobody else was there to see it.

Someone entered his office.

Adrian shot forward and slammed the three-ring binder down over his drawing.

"Adrian, how's the day been?" his dad asked. He was wearing a loose-fitted grey button-down shirt, a dotted bow tie, and his usual sharp, rectangular glasses.

Adrian plastered on a smile—one of those warm, cheek-burning smiles that he normally gave in situations of great excitement. "Uh, all is well and good!"

His dad walked forward without expression and laid his hand on the desk,

looking at the three-ring binder. It was hard to read the face of someone with such straight, razor-sharp eyebrows. Adrian fidgeted with his cuffs.

His dad reached for the binder, furrowing his brows and muttering, "What's this?"

Adrian's stomach almost flipped. "I, uh—unfortunately imagined I had a creative streak." Heat rose to his cheeks.

His dad pulled the binder aside and picked up the drawing, examining it scientifically for what seemed a minute. *What will he think of it?* Adrian asked himself, feeling the urge to bite his fingernails.

Finally, his dad laid down the paper with a very slight nod. "Most people who imagine things do have a creative streak. It's not that bad. With a little bit of practice, maybe you could make something of it."

Adrian simply nodded, totally dumb.

His dad looked at the page for a second longer and asked, "Do I recognize the woman there?"

Adrian's froze. "Um—it's just a picture."

His dad nodded and adjusted his posture, the ideal image of a straight back. Looking at a random section of the wall, he said, "The air conditioner stopped functioning. That's what I came to tell you." He waited.

Adrian coughed and leaned back, tapping his fingers. "Do you have someone to call?"

His dad adjusted his glasses and stared down at him. "No, I was thinking you could look someone up."

Adrian felt like a band was tightening around his chest. *Morrison's Heating and Air. Morrison's Heating and Air*, his mind kept saying. He buried his head in his hands, even though some part of his mind told him it would make him look awkward. Through the cracks in his fingers, he could see the drawing lying on his desk. The golden ziggurat gleamed with fire against a black night sky, the goddess enthroned on top. He hadn't drawn himself as the fanatical worshiper. While the goddess was beautiful to him, there was something disturbing about the image of him cutting himself before her. Something dark.

Yes, it was a dark picture. Why had he even drawn it?

Adrian let out a sigh. "I'll call Morrison's Heating and Air."

His dad shrugged and began to head for the door. "Do you know them?"

Adrian sighed again, shaking his head. "Only indirectly. I don't know why I decided on them actually." As his dad left, he repeated, "I don't know." He stared at his blank office wall for a moment, then crumpled the image of the goddess and threw it away.

Part 3 - The Sacrifice

It had been two days since Adrian had called up Morrison's Heating and Air and he knew that they were busy working on the broken air conditioner. At noon, he headed out for his favorite Asian grill, returning only when time absolutely required it. When he arrived back at work, he entered through the back door so as to avoid any contact with the owner of Morrison's. The entire afternoon went by smoothly. He got in a solid chunk of work, never taking a break except to stretch, and that he did inside his office.

When working hours were over, Adrian rose from his chair with a half yawn, half yell of triumph. It had been one of those days where he felt a keen youthful strength and vigor that could tear down any obstacle and climb any mountain. He smiled smugly to himself and donned his favorite sports jacket. Likely, Mr. Morrison had left by now. He didn't know for sure, but it *had* been all day. Picking up his copy of *A Pedestrian View of Aztec Culture*, Adrian headed out the office door.

He whistled as he walked down the hallway, head in his book and learning about the Spanish conquest of Meso-America. It seemed a bloody affair, but the historical insights were titillating and Adrian found himself taking mental notes.

Too late he heard the man coming from the other direction and collided. "Oh! So sorry!" Adrian said, snapping his book shut and instinctively reaching out a hand lest the other man be hurt. The man didn't seem at all upset and excused the matter with a wave. He tugged at his antiquated overalls as his rather thick and fluffy eyebrows drew together on his round, hearty face. "Hey, you're Mr. Fuller's son, aren't you?"

"Yes, and you are—?"

"Morrison, from the air company," said Morrison, sticking his thumbs between the straps of his overalls.

"Oh. Oh!" Adrian tried to hide the shaking in his limbs and laughed a

wobbly, high pitched laugh. “Oh, Morrison?” It was a few seconds before he could quiet his jumpiness. “Yes, I know you. I’m the one who called. Is everything fixed?” He forced his best professional face.

“Purrs like a kitten,” said Mr. Morrison, making a kittenish face which his fluffy hair and eyebrows permitted him to do remarkably well. “Didn’t you feel the air coming out?”

“Oh,”—Adrian scratched his hair and grimaced sheepishly—“I suppose I did. Just a little distracted, you know?”

“Good,” grunted Morrison. “Well, hey, uh”—he held up a clipboard he had been holding at his side and offered it to Adrian—“I always like to get feedback from my clients after every job. You don’t mind filling this out, do you?”

Adrian took the clipboard and held it before his face, squinting and skimming through the general contents. *One thing at a time*, he reminded himself. Taking out the pen at the top of the clipboard, he clicked it and answered the first question carefully. *On a scale of one to ten, how satisfied were you with our service? Ten of course. You did what you were supposed to do.* Adrian circled “10”.

Next one. How satisfied were you with the timeline it took us to complete the job? Adrian thought about that one for a moment. Of course, a shorter timeline would have been nice, but Morrison seemed like the type to do the best he could, so he wrote “Very satisfied.”

Another question. What is one way our company could improve their service? Only one idea came to mind, so Adrian wrote: “I don’t know, an ice cream social once a year? I would probably attend.”

Now for the last one. How did you hear about our company? Adrian stared frozen at the question, his mind a rush of thoughts. This was worse than running into Cassy. Adrian shivered. He squeezed his eyes closed, rubbing his fingers into his forehead. “Um...here, I’ve completed it.” Adrian handed back the form.

Morrison accepted it with the easy manner of a man picking up his lunch.

His eyebrows made expressive movements as he muttered the answers quietly to himself. On the last question, his eyebrows rose very high and he peeked over the clipboard like a librarian peeking over her glasses. "Did you call us on accident then?" His belly wiggled slightly from internal laughter.

Adrian bowed his head and licked his lips, smiling the question off. "Actually, I heard about you from...I heard an old friend was going to apply to you for work."

"Dallas?" Morrison—not fat, but round in a natural, robust looking sort of way—wobbled forward a few inches as if to hear better. "I was planning to schedule an interview with him this weekend. What do you think of him?"

Adrian took a deep breath as images of Dallas formed themselves in his mind. Not the casual, excited Dallas, but the fiery impulsive Dallas. He felt vaguely that the images of Dallas were somehow walls that he couldn't get past. He pursed his lips. "I was friends with him for a long while, but then..."

Silence.

Adrian looked down and noticed that he was twisting his fingers together. "But then, well, truth be told, he stole something from me."

Morrison made an exclamation that was too sharp to make out. "Stole! You don't say?"

Adrian nodded weakly, rubbing his forehead. He wasn't sure what he was thinking. "Yes," he muttered, words coming out of his mouth that he hadn't planned to speak, "but please don't misunderstand me. I don't think he's a thief so much as competitive in a crude sort of way. I...I shouldn't be saying this. It was nothing, really."

Morrison frowned and his expression had a remarkable likeness to a grumpy Garfield. He spoke darkly. "I don't take dishonesty in my work. Thank you for telling me."

Adrian's mind was frazzled and he couldn't form the words very quickly. "Uh...yeah. Don't mention it. Thanks for your work." He walked past Morrison with a bowed head and furrowed brows. *What have I just done?*

When he got to his car, he instinctively checked his book to see how

much he had left of his chapter and found that there was only one short paragraph on the next page. He read it.

Though the opinion may strike some as uncultured, I cannot help but feel a certain burning satisfaction at the mass destruction brought upon the Aztecs by the Spanish conquistadors. It is not that I condone the Spanish atrocities, but when I remember the Aztecs' own brutality, I can only conclude that there was a measure of beautiful justice in the oppression that finally came upon them. This is, unfortunately, the history of Meso-America. One dog devours another.

Adrian closed the book and got in his car. *Not a very happy thought, he pondered. Couldn't the author have given me a more positive note on which to end the day's work?*

Part 4 - Tears

Dallas turned off the engine and opened the door. He got out slowly, gripping the roof of his car iron tight—not because he was weak, but because he was strong. Carefully regulating his breathing, Dallas closed the door.

He was here. Adrian's mansion. No, not just Adrian's. Cassy's too. He needed to remind himself of that.

It wasn't actually a mansion, but it was a far larger house than any twenty-year-old had a right to. A small pond sparkled out front, a fountain shooting crystal water into the air. Dallas had come shortly after supper when there was still an hour or two of daylight left. While it would have been easier to come at night, it was bolder to come with the sun out and Dallas had a feeling that what he had come to do was best done without any hiding.

Just for a moment, he imagined the whole house in flames, and in that picture, he was standing watching it burn and doing nothing to stop it. Dallas quenched the image, but it did nothing to reduce the burning in his chest, that warriorly energy. His feet clicked like warriors' boots as he walked up the sidewalk. There were two parts to his mind: the impulsive part that acted, that directed his steps and controlled his passions, and the observant side that was afraid of his other part and hid in the shadows.

In the front landscape bed there was a ground cover of some blood-red succulent. Dallas passed it by and walked up to the door. It too was red. Seeing himself in the glass of the door's window, he adjusted his hair—wavy brown with a red tint. Everything was red today, like fire and blood and the dying sun.

Dallas dropped his hands from his hair and pushed the doorbell with a shaking finger. He wasn't sure why he had adjusted his hair for such an occasion. Again, he reminded himself that there were two parts to his psychology at the moment: the normal, steady side of his personality was no longer in control and an incomprehensible, fanatical side roamed freely.

He waited, breathing shakily and clawing his hands into his face, running them back through his hair, and then down his neck. He jumped when he heard footsteps from inside the house and stood to attention. The door opened all the way and he saw Cassy—her whitish-blond hair and her coy, flighty, piercingly intelligent face.

The scared, observant part of Dallas took a tentative step out into the sunlight. “Hello, Cassy,” he said in a perfectly calm voice. No, it was a dead ghostly voice. Well, it was calm enough for him.

She stepped back, bewilderment washing over her face with the speed of hummingbird wings. She folded her hands and bowed her head. “Oh, Dallas,” she said in a hesitant, but still otherworldly lilt. “It’s you. It is nice of you to come.”

Dallas twisted his fingers behind his back. “Well,”—his chest heaved and he looked Cassy in the eye as he finished his sentence—“I’ve come to talk to Adrian, actually.”

Her face colored slightly and she flashed a worried smile. “Balcony. Second floor.” In a wind-like movement, she fled down the hallway and disappeared.

Dallas wiped his boots on the mat and walked in, closing the door behind him.

It wasn’t hard to find the stairs; they were straight to his left at the border of the entryway and what appeared to be a living room. Dallas walked over and stood still, gazing at the furnishings. The wall was a light-hued lavender, something Adrian would have never picked. On the wall opposite the couch hung a large, masterful painting of a mountain rainforest. On the coffee table in the center of the room stood a small brass figure of an Arabian beauty and next to her sat three articles of what Dallas guessed was Asian pottery. Then he saw it. Wedding pictures on the cabinet in the corner. Dallas breathed deeply in and out through his nose, then turned with a furrowed brow and plodded his way up the staircase.

The balcony was a little harder to find. He had to take the right turn at the

upstairs hallway and follow it as it curved back to an alcove where a door led out onto a wooden overlook. Dallas knocked before he opened the door.

A steady breeze greeted him, but nothing else. Adrian shuffled around a large, roughly ten by ten foot, gold-painted object sitting at the end of the balcony—a ziggurat, Dallas noted. Adrian was admiring the edifice, or perhaps just wandering in his thoughts, and he didn't notice that Dallas had joined him on the balcony.

Dallas allowed him to remain in ignorance and studied his former friend with an insane sort of fascination. Oh, yes, Adrian was handsome, intelligent, confident, charismatic. He would have made the perfect tragic character for a movie and the whole world would have loved him, yet by some breach of equity his life lacked any tragedy whatsoever. His life lacked tragedy and he was still loved. Loved with a perfect adoration.

Dallas felt a sharp stab in his mind and tried to remember something more positive about Adrian. There was the time they had made their own explosives at fourteen and caught the house on fire. It was a bad memory, but it had been a bonding experience. Adrian had been the one to put the fire out. Meanwhile, for a month afterward, Dallas had suffered under the affliction of his horrified parents.

Dallas flinched and thrust the memory from his mind with clenched teeth. *Just get it over with*, he told himself and stepped forward with a cough. Adrian jumped and turned around.

"Oh my!" Adrian panted, stumbling back as he clutched his hand to his heart. He collapsed on the ziggurat like a human sacrifice and hastened to exchange his shocked expression for a sheepish smile, though Dallas noticed his body shook.

Dallas folded his arms and stared coldly. "Do I frighten you, Adrian?" he asked in a cynical tone.

Adrian laughed, still shaking and he wiped his brow. "Dallas, I..." He swallowed.

Dallas finished for him: "—Were wishing I would leave you alone?"

Adrian didn't meet his eyes.

Silence.

"So, what's the obscure artifact for?"

Adrian relaxed halfway and offhandedly waved with a short, choppy laugh at the ziggurat. "Oh, this? It's for viewing the sunset from. I'll have two seats installed at the top."

More silence. It was filled only by a strong gust of wind.

At last, the breeze died down and Adrian asked in a voice much like a cold breeze itself, "What have you come for?" It was a disquieted, soul-felt question and he looked Dallas in the eyes as he finished asking it.

Why had he come? Dallas had asked himself that question several times since entering the house and he thought he knew, but the answer that came out of his mouth was different from what he had planned. "I've come," he said, clenching his fists and lowering his voice so it would be as intense as possible, "...to forgive you."

Adrian frowned and slowly backed away, feeling his way up the ziggurat with his hands. "F-forgive?"

Dallas gave a sardonic smile and folded his arms. Adrian was more intelligent than him in many ways, but in others he could be frankly dense. "Adrian, you've thought a lot about...Cassy, but sometimes you don't even notice that other women exist."

Adrian was silent. Frozen. Dallas continued, pressure building in his lungs. If his voice was thick and forceful, he kept it low. If he considered hurling Adrian from the balcony, he restrained himself. "You are aware of Morrison's Heating and Air, I think? But perhaps it didn't enter your mind that if there was a Mr. Morrison, there might also be a Mrs. Morrison." As he spoke, Adrian seemed less and less of a man to him and more like a beast. His voice became sharper. "She is an older woman with little to do but listen to the news around town. Mr. Morrison might not have known that we were..."—he formed his hands into fists again—"competitors, but a month after the wedding, his wife heard how you had kept me from the job and put two and

two together.”

He no longer saw a man before him. He could not see the terrible strain in Adrian’s eyes or the way he clenched his fists in a sort of horror. All he saw was a weasel.

The weasel swallowed hard and whispered, “You didn’t tell Cassy, did you?”

Why didn’t the weasel cringe and grovel?

“Oh, did I?” Dallas asked, feeling he would rush at Adrian any minute. He could not fully resist. He was drawn irresistibly toward Adrian who clutched the ziggurat with white fingers. Dallas reached out one hand and raised it to strike him on the cheek, and then he nearly collapsed under his own weight, weeping. “Oh, Adrian!” He was a mere foot away from his friend’s face, but it was blurry through the tears. The world spun as if tearing apart. “I can keep from throttling you. Keep from telling Cassy—telling the world. But I can’t—can’t forgive *you*.” He swung his arm in front of his face, crushing the air with his hand. “I won’t take vengeance on you. You take vengeance on yourself. I’ll leave you knowing what you’ve done and let that secret rot away your soul. If you are a man, you’ll tell *her*. Tell her! But you won’t do it. Wouldn’t dare to do it. So—” He crushed the air, then turned violently away. For a minute, the only sound was the wind. It blew quietly and without fail. After the minute was over, Dallas said in a quiet voice, “So goodbye.”

He groped his way back through the house where all was dark after the light of the balcony. He prayed to God he wouldn’t run into Cassy. He didn’t. To all appearances, he was alone in the house. He had a strange sensation as he exited through the door and closed it behind him, for though he had left of his own will, he felt as if he had been thrust out. When he looked back at the door, he had the sensation that it would never open to him again. The red of the doorway was no longer the red of blood on fire, but the red of blood spilled—a horrific red that he knew would stay in his mind forever. He wished now that he had not come during the day and that darkness would hide him. The sun was tyrannical in its brightness.

By what force of will he knew not, his legs moved him over to his car. He passed by the red ground cover and a little lawn ornament that spun when the wind blew it. He reached his car and lay a hand on it, leaning against it. A whole minute passed. With his last ounce of will, Dallas made himself plod over to the hood where he sank down and bent his face to the ground, not even thinking, just...numb. He didn't know how long he stayed there, but when he became aware of his surroundings again, the sun was beginning to fade and cast shadows all over the ground. It had been, what? An hour?

Something had roused him from his stupor. It wasn't just the natural world around him, it was something...meaningful. The wind whisked about him like whispers tingling his ears.

Dallas raised his head, taking in the green grass and the trees, taking in the bird songs and other sounds. There were many sounds.

Then he heard it. Tears.

They weren't wails of anguish, but they weren't soft either. He wasn't sure what they were. Not angry tears. His mind had a hard time getting his body to respond to its commands, but after a second he pinched his brows.

He had parked on the side of the house where the driveway ended. With just one step, he could see the back of the house.

Dallas got up and took that step. Somehow he felt what he would see before he saw it.

Turning the corner, he gazed up at the same balcony where he had just been. The strange golden ziggurat rose from its midst and on its first step sat Adrian and Cassy. They were weeping into each other's arms. Tears tried to well up in Dallas' eyes also, but they weren't able to. His eyes remained dry. He softened though. He nodded to himself, realizing now what type of tears those were. The bitter, relentless tears that changed who a person was on the inside and left them feeling better afterward. He focused on the ziggurat and his scarce knowledge of history came back to him. Ziggurats were blood things. People died there. He stood watching for half a minute longer, now focusing on Adrian and Cassy with a strange thought in his mind. *Then again,*

perhaps tears can wash away blood. Who knows? Dallas went back to his car

He turned on the engine and maneuvered back and forth so he could pull forward out of the driveway. He turned on some music, but he didn't listen to it. *So he really did love Cassy?* Part of the tension in his chest eased. *I guess, despite it all, he was actually the better man than I was. Maybe...maybe Cassy will be happy with him.* He pursed his lips and breathed peacefully.

Adrian lived on the border of civilization. Turning left out of his driveway brought one into the city. Turning right led out into nowhere. Dallas took one long glance in the left direction and turned right.

The sun faded. The day passed away, though he knew it would never leave his memory.

Dallas snacked on the roasted sunflower seeds he kept on his passenger's seat. When they ran out, he gazed at the empty seat. *All alone. I'll be alone for quite a few years.*

He drove many miles that night, planning to make a new start at life. The music continued in the background. He thought back to the brutal events of that day, hoping that somehow they could be wiped away. That he wouldn't be stuck forever with the man he was. For a while, his thoughts turned to what type of work he should apply for, but then they returned to the ever-looming subject. The road kept going on and on. Dallas constructed bright plans for the future, but at the back of his mind he was always thinking about the past—that time when he and Adrian had been friends. Perhaps one day he would drive this road again. Drive the other direction.

Perhaps one day he could be forgiven.

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