

40. ISOLATION

I was anxious to learn what was going to happen with my life. I heard voices coming from the office. I slid down the hall with the hopes of hearing what Lee was talking about.

“You’re a bit of an ass. You almost lost the fucker!”

“I had my reasons. What was I supposed to do? I needed to get him back. Especially after all the work that I had put into the project.”

“Lee, you could have killed him. You almost did. I’m surprised no one found out. They didn’t see the needle marks.”

“We didn’t use a needle. We hooked him up to an IV.”

“People have gone to jail for less. You could be charged with attempted murder.”

“No one know about any of it.”

“It’s at least torture.”

I was frozen outside the door. They didn’t know that I was there. But if I moved away, they’d hear me. I held myself in place. I had no idea what to do. I kept listening.

“I don’t know what you’re going to do now.”

I had no idea who was the man talking to Lee. I couldn’t tell if he was some kind of superior. But he sent the fear of the lord through a tough guy like Lee. Lee had made a calculated risk. And it did pay off. I had no idea what it all meant. But it sounded like some kind of experiment that they had been conducting on Cody. It was some kind of mind control.

The man kept talking, “I don’t know why you involved the girl.”

“She’s not really involved.”

“She was at his side all the time. All the time that you weren’t there. What was she doing?”

“It was all part of the program. She was reading to him. I do think that it helped. We were able to accelerate the process. He’s not the same guy anymore.”

“Did you make him nicer? He was always a bit of a cur.”

Lee couldn’t say much back.

“So you are sure that the mission was successful.”

“We have done tests. I told you that. His mind is sharper. He has none of that hesitation. He communicates much more effectively.”

“What next?”

“It is still going to take a lot of time. He can barely sit up in bed. He really can’t go public.”

“So it was worth it.”

“As much as I can tell at this point. There’s so much to figure out.”

“You are going to have to put the pieces in place. This can never get out. You know what that means.”

“That I have to tie up all the loose ends.”

“What were you thinking? Do you really believe this kind of things can work?”

“I’ve been experimenting on stuff like this for years. The lab work just paid off.”

“I’m still waiting for that pay out of yours. I suppose that you can take it from here.”

The conversation had a life of its own. The two men just kept pressing each other. I

wanted to know more.

“I’m completely in control now.”

“Tell yourself that. What do you have to do to make him come alive? Is there an on off switch in his neck. Or do you have a secret password that you use to detonate him.”

“This is not the Manchurian candidate. He has a free will.”

“I thought your programming was supposed to eliminate that.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll stay in line. I’ll make sure of that.”

“How do you propose to do that?”

“Blow his whistle.” said Lee.

They both laughed. This was seeming creepier and creepier.

“Tell me again why you employed the girl.”

“We had to super-charge his brain. Part of it was the drugs. And the psychological commands.”

“Like brainwashing?”

“A little. But not so narrow minded. A little more wide open.”

“And the girl.”

“She fed him the information that he then processed. His body was living off all that new data.”

“So he’s a super-genius.”

“I’m a little too modest to take credit for those kind of strides. Let’s just say that he’s made progress.”

“You were lucky that the accident happened.”

Lee laughed a strange laugh: “I was lucky.”

“Really?”

“I did almost lose him.”

“If you had have lost him, it would have been your fault. We would have had to start all over somewhere else.”

Lee admitted, “Those last few days were the worst. What did you do? Increase the dose?”

“We wanted to bring him out of it. We just tried to soon.”

“Are you telling me that he never was in a coma.”

“I’m telling you that we brought him out of it. Finally.”

“You could have made it happen at any time in the past.”

“I wish that I could say that.”

“What are you saying.”

“There’s only so much that I can tell you. Only so much that I want to tell you. There’s only so much that you want to know.”

He asked Lee, “You’re not hiding something, are you?”

“I’m not going to acknowledge that I put him in a coma, any more than I’m going to say that I wanted to leave him like that. I will tell you that I did what I could to keep him alive. And we tried to work his brain while he was out.”

“You’re a really bizarre character, Lee.”

“I do what has to get done. That’s why you trust me.”

“There are no lose ends.”

“What are you saying?”

Lee played dumb, “I’m not sure.”

“Does Helen know anything?”

“Helen is on our side. She’s behind most of this shit.”

“What about the girl?”

“The girl did her job.”

“And she knows too much.”

“I can give her some money. And send her on her way.”

“The girl knows too much. You have to make her disappear.”

“I’m going to tell her to get as far away from here as possible.”

“That’s not good enough. She’s going to have to go away for good.”

“You’re not saying what I think that you’re saying,” Lee acted surprised.

“Don’t tell me that you haven’t thought about it.”

“I never imagined that we’d have to go through with it.”

“Lee, quit trying to pin this on me. It was your idea in the first place. You told me that you were going to hire her. Some drifter. And when he woke up, you were going to get rid of her. We can’t have any lose ends. We simply can’t.”

They were talking about me. It was so shocking that I could hardly catch my breath. It was like a hard punch in the face. I had to sneak away before they caught me listening. I thought about what they had been saying. Lee sounded a little hesitant. So I knew that he was going to give me a little time. I needed to figure this out. I wanted to get out of here with as much money as possible. I still had a little from when I left home. And I had been doing this job for quite a while. I had had no expenses. So I had quite a bit saved up.

I needed to think this through. They weren’t going to kill me in the house. That would be too messy. And they wouldn’t risk trying to drug me or kidnap me. They’d simply wait for an appropriate moment for me to leave. Then they’d go through with their plan. So I had to work that knowledge to my advantage.

I had found a home with Cody. In a sense, I had never had this kind of comfort. I had been living my own life on my own terms. Now, the apple cart was being tipped over. Sure, I had helped Cody back to life. But I couldn’t even wait around to enjoy the accomplishment of my work. Besides, Lee had been interfering with everything that I did so I had no idea what was really going on.

I wanted to see Cody, but he was too weak. It wasn’t as if I could alert him to what was happening. He was part of the plan even if he didn’t realize it. My revelation would only set up a chain reaction that would not be in my best interest. And that itself assumed that he could actually understand what I wanted to tell him. The nurse was in his room when I walked on by.

Lee had made the point that Helen had been an accomplice. She again visited briefly. I felt that she too was up to something. But I had no idea what. She didn’t take very well to me. I guess that she was just suspicious. I was glad that she had left. She would have only been another obstacle.

I had no allies in my plan. All that I could count on was what I knew about Lee. I could have enlisted Ella to help. But she seemed a little unreliable. She was so absorbed with gossip

and faith-healing. She wouldn't be able to make any sense out of Lee's intrigue. I needed to get going as soon as possible. I just felt paralyzed by the brunt of what was happening. At least, I probably could get a ride with her. If I was going to do that, I needed to make it happen quickly.

I didn't want to let on that I knew anything. Lee was going to call me in to the office for a talk. I would have to take that opportunity to learn more. I wanted to be able to ascertain exactly the moment when he was going to strike.

"We'd like to have you stay. But I think that Cody's going to be all right. Here's some money for us to settle. I also got you a bus ticket to St. Louis. That should be a good starting point. Maybe you can catch a flight to Nebraska from there."

I just stared at Lee. I was making him uncomfortable. He had no idea what I knew. I used surprise to my benefit.

"You're sure that there isn't something that I can do around the house?"

"Chloe, I'd love to keep you on. But I have a large enough staff. And as soon as Cody is well, we'll probably be moving somewhere else. I hope that we've settled things in a fair way. Anything else that I can do, I'm willing to try. I'll be a reference for any jobs in the future."

"When were you going to run me into town?"

"I was thinking Friday. That will give you a couple of days to get everything in order."

He needed a couple of days to work up the nerve to kill me. I recognized that I had to get ready as soon as possible. I had to talk to Ella. But she wasn't going to be back to the house until Wednesday. And I'd make sure to leave with her. That would put me in town Wednesday afternoon. I could catch a bus from there. After today, I would have one full day in the house.

As we continued talking, I recognized our uneasy truce. I knew enough not to push him over the edge. Then I would be face to face with a wildcat. He'd have to get the job done here and now. Even a little slip on my part could be deadly. June's interrogation had prepared me well for a time like this. I told Lee as little as possible. I simply played along.

Even though I had escaped with my life, I had to be careful not to become over-confident. Lee was the suspicious type. And he would be sure to take my easy acquiescence as a sign.

Lee wasn't concerned with nurturing his image. He didn't care what people thought of him. He was all about getting things done. So he preferred to work behind the scenes. Despite his intentions, he was too willing to reveal things about himself. Like the proverbial bull in the china shop, his attack was always too obvious. He relied upon the fact that he usually commanded superior strength. But that belief itself was a weakness.

On the other hand, his plan had been born of stealth. And he was working with a whole network of supporters. So that gave him more of an opportunity to venture out there on his own. He never thought of himself as demented. He believed that he was protecting the world against a menace that knew no morality. For his own part, it didn't hurt to invoke any means to achieve his success. And if he raised the ante in cruelty against his enemies, then that was what he needed to do to become victorious.

We were enmeshed in this nasty chess game. He was a completely ruthless opponent. But he lacked something as a man. And this was my in. I had to exploit my knowledge for what I could. I always feared June and Bill. And I wondered if my feelings were based on some deeper truth. But I never believed that they would slash my throat in the middle of the night. I didn't think that they grasped that level of fury.

I wanted to think that civil society was different. Lee represented a power grab that knew no limits. I couldn't appeal to his altruism to help detour his worst impulses. He thrived on his own nefariousness. I had the python in my midst. And I watched him slither here and there. I had to make sure that I didn't lose sight of his movement.

Now that Cody was conscious, I believed that he might be the ultimate deterrent to his assistant. That assumed that Cody wasn't part of the plan. Had Lee's psychological experiments produced him the ultimate assassin? I needed to find out for myself. I convinced Lee to allow me to visit Cody.

For Lee's sake, it was probably unwise to allow me to see Cody. But Lee didn't want to raise any unnecessary suspicions. It just seemed like the natural thing to do.

"You're the girl who helped me out."

I nodded.

"I wanted to thank you."

He seemed weak. The rehabilitation process had only just begun.

He continued, "They told me that you read to me everyday. I really appreciate you doing that."

It was strange. It was almost as if all our efforts had had no effect on him. For all Lee's craziness, it didn't amount to a hill of beans.

"I enjoyed reading."

I wanted to say more to him. I wanted him to tell me something profound. I felt as if he had come back from the land of the dead. So I expected him to know something important about life. He seemed as if he had just been crushed.

"I always wanted to be more of a reader. I didn't my share in school. Heaven knows, in college, I did nothing but read. You look like a college student. Are you in school?"

"No, I took some time off to work. Then I landed this job."

"Lee, told me that you were going to do some traveling. I really wish that you'd stay a little longer. If you could only wait until I was a little healthier, I could show you my appreciation in a more formal way."

"If you get better, that will be enough for me."

He did his best to manage a smile.

"The world's a big place. There are adventures galore out there. I'm sure that you don't need me to tell you that."

"I guess that it's all a little scary. But there's a lot that I'd like to see."

I wished that I could have revealed Lee's plan. What would he make of it all? At this point, he would probably believe that it was just intended to make it better. Did he have any recollection of the accident? What had actually transpired between him and Helen?

He added, "I still feel so tired. It's going to take a million years before I am up and walking."

"You don't want to push yourself. You have to regain your strength."

He had to make up for lost time. There was a whole life that had gotten away. What was the strategy for his rehabilitation? Were they going to review the events in his past with the idea of sparking some kind of deeper realization about himself? Would Lee continue on with the mind control experiments?

I couldn't imagine anything that significant happening here. It appeared that he would take a million years just to make it back to normalcy. He didn't seem to have much of a will. He was barely here. And in the back of my mind, I wondered if he could even hang on. After hearing Lee, I had envisioned him as the focus of this apocalyptic transformation of the body. Looking at his helpless form, he hardly seemed able to function at all.

What were the magic words that I needed to say to get him moving again? I didn't want to give in to my impatience. We had waited all this time to get him conscious. And it would take quite a while to develop his strength. This was a new world to him. He was almost like an infant. I was reaching out. But it was impossible for him to reach over to me.

"I'll try to stop in before I leave."

"I want to see you. You're always welcome here."

Tears came to my eyes. I had given so much of myself to Cody.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Could I even recognize what I had become? I had been here for six or eight months. Why did it seem like years? I had kept track of time, but now it was all just a blur. I looked so much older.

When I hung out with Rose, I always felt like a baby. If I looked at myself in the mirror, I'd see all my flaws. I looked like a little kid. Now, I saw none of that. My hair had darkened. My face had changed. I had gone through a complete metamorphosis. I felt as if I had this chameleon-like power. For any situation, I could become whoever I pleased. A lot of good my power would do me with Lee.

For the time being, I was seeing myself as my own creator. I had taken this raw material and made it into something new. I wasn't like June. I wasn't going to stand by the mirror and admire my creation. I wanted to know more. How far could I push my skill? I had no plans to disguise myself. It wasn't as if there was a nationwide hunt for me. If I was smart, Lee would never have any idea where I was. I could disappear for good.

Lee had done his best to reshape Cody. He had taken the clay and molded it into a desired shape. He had employed me to help. It was as if I was giving the clay statue a brain. My teaching could totally upset Lee's plan. But he believed that his understanding of psychology could be applied for the final effect. Cody would be controlled by such dominant impulses that any contrary information would only serve as a more powerful argument for Lee's intent. Thus, nothing could hinder his efforts. I was simply pushing his plan forward.

Would Lee's monster find his own way? Would he turn against his master? It wasn't as if Lee had started from scratch. That may have been his most serious regret. I imagined that I was also the result of his tinkering. His methods had been more refined than June's. he was not restrained by a pedestrian morality. So he was willing to try anything.

Cody and I were two subjects of Lee Tate's mind control. My nightmares convinced me that something really was messed up with me. And I was able to follow it right back to the source. Here was the puppet master. And I delicately detached the strings. And I learned to move independently from my controller. But Lee remained in the dark. He thought that he was pulling all the strings. I needed to keep him with this belief.

When I looked at my fellow guinea pig, I wanted to do more to rescue him. But I was already in jeopardy. I had been too much of an independent soul. Lee saw that his whole plan could be destroyed if I was allowed to stay here. Who knew what I would tell Cody?

If Lee had stolen something from me, how could I get it back? How could I piece together my psyche so that it wouldn't no longer bear the effects of his mischief? I believed that my escape would give me the distance that I needed. But the man had entered my dreams. Perhaps, he had drugged me.

I had been counting on the fact that my knowledge gave me a head start. But could I be all wrong? With this character, there was nothing that I could count on? The drugs may have been in my soup. I looked all over my body for little puncture wounds. I found nothing. Despite my enhanced fears, there was really nothing that Lee could have done. He never prepared a meal for me. He couldn't have dosed my juice. I felt OK for the moment.

I was my own person. This was the foundation of my future. Lee had tried to pull me into the web. He was ready to deliver the poison. But he had become too easily distracted. I was using the break to my advantage. I would have to be quick. Any delay, and that would give Lee a chance to regroup.

The clock was ticking. It was almost time for me to make my move. I wanted to have one last session with Cody. But if I tried to interfere with his schedule, Lee would wonder why I was feeling so desperate. There would be no way to express the urgency. The best that I could do was walk past the room and say good bye.

I went up to my room and got all my things together. Lee was getting careless. Since he had made his plans to get rid of me on Friday, he thought it would be all right to go away for a bit. That meant he would not be able to figure out anything until it was too late.

Ella had promised to pick me up at the agreed time. So I had less than half a day to get everything in order. The nurse was attending Cody so I couldn't sneak in his room. I would have to be satisfied with my one visit. I was in danger and couldn't afford to slip up.

When I left here, I realized that it was important to get as far away as possible. So I couldn't end up in Saint Louis or Chicago. I also couldn't go to New York or LA. Lee might have friends there who would spot me. I had to find some city in the middle of nowhere, and then I could just blend in with the crowd. And I would be gone for good..

You walked around one of these cities, and you see everybody rushing off to work. They all have stories. But it all becomes part of the fabric. And in the end, everyone disappears inside the weave. It allows sleepers to hide in their midst. They don't work. They don't stand out. They just hide in the woof. You hardly know that they're there.

I was waiting to disappear. When I succeeded, would I even realize what had happened? Or would my mind be erased as well? The giant loom would just move on. Then no one could get me out. I would have lost all trace of ever having existed anywhere else. I couldn't be interrogated with the hopes of remembering. I would cease to be there.

In some countries, they made their political enemies disappear. They hoped that the people would soon forget. In America, we just faded into the mass of people. We didn't even realize that we were gone.

Could Lee then declare victory? He would have no one to speak against what he had been doing. After all, that was why he wanted me silenced. At this point, I couldn't bother trying to fight him. I had no one on my side. I simply needed to avoid his wrath.

I had started off trying to get away from June and Bill. Once I escaped them, I was always afraid that someone might turn me into the police. And I also felt that I couldn't go to the

police for help against Lee. All in all, I had been seriously reminded how terrible my time had been with parents. Lee was just a little crazier, and he felt that might was on his side.

I realized that Lee and his cohorts were up to no good. And whatever they were doing was way beyond the comprehension of most people. It wasn't just about messing with Cody or wanting to kill me. They had this grand plan for the world. But I didn't think that it was my job to expose them. I was already marked for death. I wasn't about to become their sacrificial lamb. So I would blend in the woodwork just in the hopes of surviving.

As the minutes ticked down, I was becoming anxious. This wasn't as intense as leaving home. But I was scared. I was being cast out into the world. And I had no idea what I was doing. If I had any motivation, it was to escape Lee. But that wasn't sufficient to give me direction. I was a lot tougher than the day when I left Bill and June. But that didn't make me a hard ass. I felt as if at any moment, I could just break down completely. That made me really frightened. I could feel that I was falling deeper and deeper. I had no idea what was going to break my fall. I just spread my arms out, and let it ride.

I saw Ella pull up in the driveway. My backpack was all ready. I had made a snack for the road. I had everything. I was ready to go.

The nurse was still watching over Cody. I just kept moving

In the car, I didn't say too much. Ella wasn't a big fan of Lee's so I could rely on her to keep quiet. In all my time working for Lee, I had seldom left the house. It was almost as if I had forgotten that there was a world anywhere else.

When we arrived at the bus station, Ella gave me a big hug. She wished me luck.

"I want you to stay safe."

"Thanks!"

"You helped get Cody back for us."

I wanted to believe that I had done a good thing. But I wasn't sure.

I had about an hour to kill before my bus

I started to speculate about the details of Lee's experiment. He had devised a system of rewards and punishments that would yield the appropriate responses in his subject. Lee was working on a deep program of Cody's behavior. In his efforts, he could not rely on observed behaviors. So he had to resort to monitoring changes in blood pressure and heart rate. Slight alterations in these levels served as the confirmation of his success. This was the foundation of behavioral modification. All the while, I was feeding Cody information that he would process according to the model created by Lee. It was as if he was opening his mind to a series of more and more complex arrangements. Lee was constructing the architecture. And I was filling in the ideas. These were techniques that Lee had perfected on political detainees. He could implant them with the most bizarre scenarios that would eventually serve as the basis for their remorseful confessions.

How could Lee make sure that things would turn out the way that he wanted? If his experiment worked, then Cody would have all this understanding to draw from in relating to the world. Why wouldn't he immediately see through Lee's efforts. Lee was counting on the fact that he was not dealing with a totally clean slate. Even if my education led Cody to an altruistic end, his basic nature would be repulsed by such naivete about the important matters of life world. Lee's hard-fought lessons would override my selfless intent. The very fact that I had

schooled Cody in this material meant that he would be the perfect advocate of Lee's opinions. He would understand my arguments from the inside out, and, therefore, he could analyze all their weaknesses.

If Lee had been so adept at getting what he wanted from Cody, could he have tried to do the same with me? Had Lee taken liberties with me? Had he been able to invade my dreams with the hopes of trying to redirect my will? I almost felt that my body was not my own. I didn't want to think of myself as a pleasure machine for some lecherous creeper. I had to do a double take to remind myself that I was all here. I gripped my chair hard and pushed back against the support. I needed to reassure myself.

If Lee had hoped for any lasting effect, this had been a failure on his part. I had put up total resistance against his techniques. Although I had the weirdest dreams, I believed that they had no basis in fact. At no time did Lee Tate enter my bedroom and do strange things to my body. I was intact. Despite his lack of success, I felt some kind of trace of his mischief. Maybe, he did nothing at all. But he surely thought about it. Was he so wrapped up in Cody, that he barely noticed that I was around. He wanted to believe that he had thought of anything. I was still a loose thread that could make his whole fabric unravel.

Lee was used to making events go his way. And if someone realized what Lee was up to, it was easy to observe that every one of his dirty tricks had his grubby finger prints all over them. But his continued success depended on being able to hide his influence on the final outcome. So any novice would assume a natural phenomenon had run its course. This was simply the realization of a providential design for the world. Even the most egregious human wrongdoing could be rendered as the invisible hand of a higher power. In this way, the ultimate expression of wantonness could be attributed to the long-awaited apocalypse. There would never be any accountability for Lee's destructiveness.

He was tapping into a belief about divine agency that appeared to share little in common with actual human behavior. He was calling out to people who mistrusted scientific explanation, not because it didn't apply, but, rather because they preferred to sustain a laxness in their own cognitive ability. These eventual believers were more accepting of a world view that fostered their fears about the unknown. That way they could remain ensconced in their tightly woven cocoon. And they could pursue their dream of a transcendent shopping trip to the mall, while the supreme being arranged the natural order to facilitate such desires.

If a flood was coming that was going to wash us all away, then these modern day Noahs would leave it up to their spiritual guide to effect the final judgement. Even if their own sacred tales were cribbed from other original sources, that didn't preclude their commitment to the literal character of the more recent revision. This gave the author an historical precedence that could not be overcome. If we weren't meant to hop on board the ark, then we would really have to test our swimming skills.

Lee's view meant doing anything that he needed to succeed. The dreaded flood would wash away all the contrary evidence. So it didn't matter if he was making the mess worse. As well, he also saw himself at the center of an historical inevitability. If he wasn't the one to triumph, then the forces of time would find some other suitable candidate. For that reason, he had to maximize all his resources to win the competition. And if he failed, then he wasn't the chosen one after all.

As long as Lee prospered, there would be a time when we might again cross paths. Making a life without him did not mean forgetting that he was around. My vigilance would have to be constant. I would never know if a business associate was a former colleague of his. He wanted to believe that his reach was universal. He was running things from this small town, but he had contacts through out the country. He did what he could to make them active. When I first arrived here, it had seemed like such an un-assuming place. Who knew that Lee would be lurking in the shadows?

For all that my concern with Lee seemed dominant, I also wondered about Cody. I had put my life in him. Whatever I was able to do, he was again collaborating with Lee. I wanted to believe that the desire for freedom would allow him to liberate himself from the confines of Lee's ideas. But any devil could distort scripture to his own end. A few changes here and there, and any good book would read like its opposite. The former war crimes could be forgiven, and the dishonored phantoms could re-emerge from the shadows. This was Lee's one great salvation.

Forgiveness was one thing. But if the resident evil was allowed to fester, it would make its way back to the surface. And the old ways would again return. All the bad habits would again manifest themselves in public. Types like Lee could never no repentance. They made it all up as they went along. Did he really believe that rest of the world would be so acquiescent? This was the key: he wasn't exactly a charmer. But he knew about Cody's talents. And he felt that he was the one pushing all the buttons.

I imagined that there was a life out there for me. It had nothing to do with running away or hiding out. If any of my recent experience were part of my ideal, they would only be distant memories. And with time, those memories would fade completely. I would have friends. I would have co-workers. I would have a family of my own. I would be loved.

If there was an imaginary life waiting for me, I had no idea where it was. What would even be the first step? Living with Cody, I had learned to create a routine. I felt emotionally stable. At the same time, I was able to distance myself from Lee. So I found a relative calm that convinced me that I was a healthy person. I just needed a more accepting situation. Now I was cast out into the cold wilderness. I couldn't envision my next step.

It was a chilly day. Winter had still not abandoned its commitment. And a cold rain was falling. I held my backpack with me as I got on the bus. When I found a seat, I put it on the ledge above me. Then I sat down.

I wasn't looking forward to a conversation. I had too much to think about. I could do with a rest. The bus ride wasn't going to that long.

There had been a vague plan that had motivated me for the last few months. I was still hanging on to that idea. The bus ride was the last part of the plan. But when I arrived in Saint Louis, I would be completely set adrift. I didn't know what would be my next step.

It wasn't as if I was going to work things out on the trip. There was no way that I could come to any kind of final resolution. I didn't want to remain in Saint Louis. Not even for a day. And I didn't like bus travel. Did I have any choices? I couldn't see hitching a ride. I wasn't looking forward to another Iron Mike. And her horror stories sent enough of a chill through me. What did I not know?

Fortunately, there weren't a lot of people on the bus today. So I didn't have to listen to the woes of my fellow passenger. I could sleep if I wanted to.

Once the bus got going, I surveyed the town one more time. Where the hell was I? How had I landed in this place? What difference had it made in me?

If this was going to be my future, I wanted it to be more than drifting in and out of other people's stories. I also dreaded hitting rock bottom. Things were going to be all right for a while. But I could see that dark cloud looming on the horizon. The hard rain pelted the windows. And the bus moved through the storm with confidence.

I could have pulled down a book from my bag. But I wasn't in the mood to read. I needed to distract myself. I just couldn't concentrate on words.

Every time that I was about to doze off, something hit me. Maybe it was the bus ride. Or the storm. I sat up and tried to look at the other people on the bus. That didn't help. I just felt tired again.

I wished that someone could offer me life to share. I could have sat down next to my next friend. We'd arrive in Saint Louis to begin the adventure of a lifetime. Maybe, we'd stop off for a milkshake. I knew nothing about Saint Louis. I had no idea where was the bus station. I could be dumped off in a dangerous part of town. There could be someone waiting there for helpless kids like me.

I needed to put on my adult face. I wasn't much older than the time that I left Bill and June's. But I could effect a more adult demeanor. I had saved my best acting for a time like this. As I settled into my nap, I could sense my body changing. When I woke up in Saint Louis, I would be all ready for the life ahead of me.

When I finally woke up, we had arrived. The reality hit me. I was here. I had escaped Lee. What was I supposed to do now?