

THE ABSENCE  
OF

G



MIKE DEMILIO

## *Chapter 1*

### *Sunrise*

Gordon hunches in a halo of light at his work table, forgotten cigarette in his left hand as his right sketches another line across the page. Through the windows at the end of the loft, the Georgia sky lightens with a winter's dawn. His forearm tenses and relaxes as he works the pencil. Around him on the table are sheets filled with equations, angles and curves generated in three dimensions with a precision that might challenge even the fastest computer. The glow comes from a cellphone resting on top of a whiskey tumbler, casting its tiny flashlight down onto the drawing.

A woman lies in his bed, mounded in comforters and sleeping amid a tangle of golden hair. Just past the bed, a potbelly stove squats next to one of the upright girders that march across the loft space and support its ceiling. He glances back at the woman and returns to his work. After a few more strokes, he sets down his pencil, moves his phone and drains the rest of the whiskey, then takes one final drag and drops

the cigarette into the glass. He lifts the sheet and studies it closely. Smoothing it back onto the table, he opens a phone app and photographs the drawing. He taps an icon on the screen and begins to work the digitized image with his fingertips, smoothing lines and tapping in numbers from his pages of mathematical notes. At last, he puts on a pair of tinted safety glasses and stands holding the phone in front of his face. Ceremoniously, he presses his thumb to the screen.

A deep hum rumbles below the floor, and bluish light begins to rise. Gordon can picture the machinery that lives in the graffiti-covered shipping container outside in the alley, an intricate array that generates blast-furnace temperatures and turns ingots of metal into liquid. The molten material will course up through electromagnetic veins within the two massive pipes that rise from floor to ceiling along the brick wall. The blue light grows, emanating from gaps in a metal sphere held in place by four articulating arms that connect to the pipes. The arms slowly begin to move, separating four rounded plates that form the sphere as a higher-pitched note rises behind the bricks. He closes his eyes and sees the injection mechanism that will deliver the stream of steel to the fingers of light within the sphere. The arms move wider, the plates flexing and spreading to hold the curve of a growing ball of electricity against which Gordon stands in silhouette. He is tall and lean, his hair wild and unkempt. There is a word tattooed on the inside of his right forearm: 'facio.'

He watches as a web of tiny lightning bolts forms within the sphere and sounds cycle up behind the wall like suppressed screams. The arms extend even further. A mist of silvery metal begins to stream from each plate along precise lines toward the center of the glowing orb and take the shape of the drawing on Gordon's paper, its outline coalescing in pulsing bolts of light that draw the mercurial liquid to them.

Roughly three feet long, the object oscillates as it grows, rapidly solidifying as the arms twitch back and forth to add material. Within seconds, the arms stop moving and the finished piece hovers within its electromagnetic cocoon.

The whine cycles down. From the surface of a steel shelf below the light sphere, thin rods telescope upward to align perfectly with the shape of the object just millimeters from its surface. He smiles with pride at the word etched into the edge of the shelf: "Shiva." The light grows white, then yellow, orange and red as it fades and the metal form settles gently onto the rods. Gordon lifts it and runs his fingers around its curves, then holds it up to the sunrise and inspects it more closely. He lifts a set of calipers and begins to measure its dimensions, checking their precision against his scribbled calculations.

"Ain't you cold?"

Confused, he turns to see the woman smiling at him from her pillow, and he realizes that he is only wearing shorts and that the fire in the stove has long since died out.

"You didn't look right at the light, did you?" he asks.

"At the what?" She stares at the object in his hands.

"Cause without safety glasses..."

"Oh. No, I didn't." She brushes her hair away from her face. "Listen, sorry I passed out before we..."

He shakes his head and mumbles, "No big deal. Show ended late anyway."

"Y'all were really good. My ears are still ringin'."

He sets the piece down on the table and steps through the clothes strewn on the floor, past an empty whiskey bottle and an acoustic guitar, slumps onto the bed and gathers his tangle of black hair. His face is angular, with eyes the hazel of old bronze. Around his neck is a leather thong attached to an almond of polished granite. Reaching, he gently moves her hair out of the way and cups the side of her face in his palm.

“What was your name again?”

She laughs and pushes him away. “Least you’re honest. I don’t know yours either.”

Still wearing her t-shirt and underwear, she slides out the other side of the bed and pulls on her jeans.

“Listen,” she says, “you’re real dreamy and all, but let’s just say, no harm, no foul. I generally don’t hook up, anyway. Especially with rock stars.”

“How about auto mechanics?”

“Them neither.”

Gordon smiles back at her and accepts a kiss on the cheek as she leaves. Shouldering into his thermal hoodie, he steps into jeans and a pair of motorcycle boots and clammers down the metal stairway at the far corner of the room. As he walks through the auto shop, he sees his old Yamaha and smiles. Soon, it will be riding season again. The garage sits a hundred feet or so back from the street at the end of an alley slick with melting frost. He walks to the street with his hands jammed in his pockets, his breath fogging as he studies the ground.

Small bells jingle when he pulls the door to Martín’s bar. The sun is beginning to stream through the large front windows, playing across the mahogany to a shelf where bottles of brown liquor shine with false innocence. A Georgia Bulldogs decal peeks out from the mirror. Behind the bar, a wiry man grins at Gordon through a grizzled beard, his salt and pepper hair cropped short, deep crows’ feet etched into skin like saddle leather. He holds out a fist. Gordon slides onto a barstool with a wince and bumps knuckles in greeting.

“Little brown demons dancing on your head again?” Martín nods back at the bourbon.

“Didn’t sleep, is all. But I finished my last test, Tío. Shiva is ready.”

Stunned, Martín stares at him for a moment. With a whoop, he vaults over the bar and hugs him, then dances

around with his arms in the air. Gordon laughs as Martín sings “Ai yi yi!” so loudly that the families eating breakfast in the back look up. He hugs Gordon again and sits down next to him as Julia, Martín’s wife, opens the kitchen door with a look of concern. Martín speaks to her rapidly in Spanish, and her worry vanishes. She rushes around the bar and hugs Gordon’s neck. When she finally lets go, Martín beams at him.

“You been working on that machine since I known you, G. Since high school.”

“Not that long but yeah, a long time.”

“Vato, we gotta celebrate! Your mother would be so proud of you. She’s the only one besides you who ever understood the physics of that thing.”

“Tonight, maybe. Now, I have to go see the Stainfields.”

Martín’s face clouds over, but brightens again with a new thought.

“Hey, I forgot to tell you! I seen Caroline. She’s back here, in Athens.”

Gordon’s expression freezes. Slowly, he stands and takes a few steps away from the bar. Rubbing his forehead, he walks back to Martín and studies his face as if the answer to something much deeper might be hiding behind his eyes.

“You sure?”

“Yeah man,” Martín whispers. “I seen her.”

“Where?”

“Walking past the bar.” He points. “Right out there. Yesterday.”

Gordon stares at the spot outside as if Caroline might materialize at any moment. He looks at the ceiling. The pain on his face prompts Julia to touch him gently on the chest.

“That ain’t a good thing?” Martín wonders out loud.

Abruptly, Gordon turns and strides to the door. It tinkles and bangs closed behind him.

“¿Que demonios?” Julia asks.

Martín shakes his head. “Caroline makes him loco. Always has.”

There is a grinding roar and Gordon flashes by on the Yamaha, hair whipped back by the wind.

“He may be a genius,” Julia says, “but he’s always been crazy. She just makes it easier for everyone to see it.”

Searing cold blasts Gordon's face and scathes his knuckles. His right elbow dips to roll more throttle as tears stream into his hair, gathering and freezing it into long shafts. He gulps air in spasms. Downtown Athens yields to smaller houses and empty fields as the road cuts like wet obsidian through the gray-brown heartland. His mind empties, yielding to the ferocity of sensation, the pounding of iron and hard rubber and tarmac, the violence of machine and man connected by the thinnest overlap of purpose, a truce struck at the ragged edge of control. Death trails inches from his heels and taunts from beyond his handlebars. In the blur, he can barely see.

A face, then another; father, mother. He wants to close his eyes and see them clearly, but if he does he knows he will join them. He will end. His wrist begins to relax before he is aware that he wants to slow down. The thought forms as the pitch of the motor deepens, the ends of his hair lower and his tears thin enough for him to blink them away. He recognizes the intersection, the angled signpost without a sign, the rotted fence. Downshift, lean. His tires claw into the turn at first, but halfway through the arc they let go. Sudden terror, almost free fall. The motorcycle skitters away and the pavement, no longer an abstraction but a reality against which he must gather and slide, threatens deliverance to a God that he has never understood, as much as he has tried.

Motion ends with the bike slicing into the mud and Gordon's bent knees crashing into its seat, the side of his

ribcage bashing the handlebars, his arms wrapping around his bare head and bouncing against the front tire. He bites his own lip. Then he lays still, listening to the idling Yamaha pant beside him like a deranged lover. Scanning his body, he senses the laceration in his side, notes his bruised but unbroken forearms, his raw thigh and hip. The taste of blood. His head, undamaged. Slowly, he rolls to all fours, crouches and stands, reaches down and kills the engine then lifts the bike and sets it on its main stand. It is filthy and scraped and the end of one hand grip is shorn off. When he restored it, he stripped it of things like fenders and mirrors and added the fiber-wrapped pipes and knobby tires, matte paint and wires buried inside the frame tubes, all of which look even better with their new bruises and stains. The steel handlebar mount for his phone protected that device as planned. Under his hoodie, the long slash oozes red across his pale ribs. He lifts a leg over the seat, kicks the engine back to life, toes first gear and rolls on.

The tired ranch covers on a bare patch of earth, flinching at the judgments of the elite and refined. A mildewed tractor guards an outbuilding with a bowed spine and failing shingles. A wealth of neglected land sprawls beyond the small fenced plot. Gordon feels the weight of the place. He knows the trails of habit walked by those who long ago stopped questioning their melancholy routines. Absently, he notes that the sun is climbing in the sky and this makes him think of his town waking up, of people meeting for coffee and shops opening and friends beginning their Saturday routine. He doesn't think of Caroline, but then he doesn't have to, just as he doesn't have to think of the blood in his heart, the bones holding him upright. She is there, always. Her exposure is never a comfortable thing; more, it is an evisceration.

He feels under the tank for the flask his father left when he

deployed for his third -- his final -- tour in Iraq and is relieved it's still there. He brushes mud and grit from his torn jeans, from sleeves shiny with the friction of the slide and blackened by tire grime. Blood on his lip tastes like metal. He sweeps hair out of his eyes, inhales and exhales, squares himself to the door, to Wendell Stainfield's father. He wonders why the man is so angry all the time. Tire ruts from the family's gator lead from the garage through a break in the fence and into the fields beyond where, when food money gets short, they take the occasional out-of-season deer to get by. The tracks look fresh. Earlier in March, Gordon replaced the rear differential in the small four-wheeler, and he thinks about that bill now, relieved that he never collected on it, as he steps past the debris in the yard and mounts the concrete stoop.

Inside, a television blares faux-patriotic blather, all split-screen chatterboxes and alarmist chyrons. The usual breathless consensus about 'threats' and 'emergencies' will have Wendell's father worked up if he hasn't already drunk himself to sleep. Gordon knocks and the sound cuts off. The door opens a few inches for a florid face, a vertical line deep and permanent between the man's eyes.

"I ain't got it yet."

Stainfield keeps his left hand hidden behind the door.

"Sir, I'm not here about the bill. No rush on that."

"What is it then?"

In the room behind Wendell's father, Gordon sees a woman slumped in an armchair, head lolling, semi-conscious. He has met Wendell's mother before. The ridges in her gapped teeth and her blotchy, leathery skin told him she was smoking more than menthols.

"Mr. Stainfield, Wendell has not been to the Lab in a couple of weeks. I wanted to make sure he's okay."

"He's fine."

Gordon hears the thud-clank-clank of a baseball bat

dropped on linoleum. Stainfield opens the door wider.

"Been workin' for me since the car broke down. He ain't got no way to get to Athens without it."

"Mind if I take a look at it?"

"We can't pay for the one, much less the other."

"No, don't worry about that. No charge for Wendell's car."

"Ain't *Wendell's* car."

"All the same. Can I take a look?"

"Suit yourself."

The door slams, and the television volume rises again.

Gordon walks to the garage. As expected, there is deer blood on the gator. Next to it sits an old Ford sedan, its vinyl roof shredded to expose metal hoary and red with rust. Gordon slips behind the wheel. Seeing no key in the ignition, he lowers the sun visor, catches the keys and turns it over, the engine screaming urgently but not catching. He climbs out and clocks Wendell ducking behind a corner.

"Hey, bud," Gordon calls to him.

The boy steps out into the open, seventeen, bone thin and hesitant to peek out from under his shaggy ginger bangs.

"I can fix that, no problem," Gordon says. "How you been?"

"Fine."

"Missed you in the Lab."

"Yeah."

"Tell your Pop I'll get Henry out here with the wrecker soon as I can. Meantime, I'll pick you up for class Monday morning."

Wendell brightens. "On the bike?"

"No man, not on the bike. Damn near killed myself on that just now."

Gordon lifts the hoodie to show the four-inch gash, which has bled all the way down to his waistband and soaked into his jeans. Wendell follows and watches Gordon kick the

starter and rev it. The curtain inside the front window moves slightly.

“Monday,” Gordon says firmly.

He shakes Wendell's hand with mock solemnity, clunks the bike into gear and roars off down the rutted driveway. Wendell watches him go.

*Caroline. Here, again.*

Gordon rides slowly, as if the limbo of the road could forestall the reality of her. Steam rises from the pavement but the air still holds an edge. Of course she has not left the palm trees and power plays of Silicon Valley for him. Rolling back into their sleepy hometown, he wonders what she might think of it now, and of him. She probably has not thought of him at all. In the alley next to Martín's bar, he looks up at the weathered sign: “G.L. Auto Repair.” He taps an icon on his phone to open the door and lets his head hang down.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Lightning*

Church bells ring in Sunday morning, distant and muffled by snow as Gordon puts on his backpack and ducks into the weather. On the bus to the Lab, he scrolls through pictures of Friday night's show posted on social media with the hashtag '#Martins.' The bar has become an institution at the university, music at night and breakfast tacos all day. His screen flashes the usual group selfies, drunken toasts and one or two random views of him playing his hollow-bodied electric guitar and bellowing into the microphone. He is about to close the app when one photo catches his eye: in the background of a group shot, a striking woman with streaky blonde hair leans against the wall and sips a glass of bourbon. Her blue eyes are locked on the stage; amused, intense, almost predatory. If not for the camera flash, she would have remained shrouded in shadows, which is why Gordon did not see her from up there. His skin tingles as he zooms in. Long silver earrings shine against her glowing cheekbones.

Gordon looks out the bus window and sees snow on the red tables in front of the burger joint where a little less than five years earlier and not ten feet from that very spot, everything changed. He leans back and closes his eyes.

The doors open, and pinpricks of ice blow in to wake him. Disoriented, he looks around and realizes where he is, then stands and follows a few students down the stairs. He flips up his hood and trudges past several institutional facades to a two-story steel and glass building. It occurs to him that he may have dreamed the picture of Caroline at the show so his hand closes around the phone in his pocket to check again, but he reconsiders and leaves it there. Turning around to let his backpack touch the security card reader, he bodies the revolving door and steps into the lobby.

"G, how you doin'?"

Gordon smiles at the white-haired African-American man at the desk.

"Mr. Williams, good to see you."

"Snowing, man. Believe this shit? Whole damn town is shut down."

"Except us," Gordon winks.

As he walks past the desk, Mr. Williams leans close.

"He's in there."

Gordon scowls. He lifts his pack to the reader on the interior door, waits for the beep and pulls it open. Inside is a workshop the size of a small basketball court. Across the twenty-foot ceiling are two rows of skylights, dimmed with a rime of snow. Around the perimeter is a series of drill presses, lathes, table saws and other machines, and across the middle of the floor rows of worktables are interspersed with seating areas and whiteboards. On the far wall is a Shiva device identical to the one in Gordon's apartment.

Two middle-aged white men sit over a folder of papers, one well-groomed and hair-dyed in rimless glasses and an

executive suit and the other wearing a Purdue University t-shirt. Down the second man's arms, a series of tattoos have melded to form greenish-blue sleeves. His gray hair and beard are trimmed tight and his brow is furrowed behind dark-rimmed glasses. He slaps the table and shakes his head and the executive sits back in his chair. They do not notice Gordon until he drops his backpack.

"G, hey." The tattooed man barely looks up.

The executive turns to Gordon, who extends his hand. The man considers Gordon's callused palm and clasps it reluctantly.

"Mr. Longmeier," he says solemnly.

"Dr. Carson."

Gordon elbows the other man's arm.

"Stan, 'sup?"

"Money shit." Stan's accent is clipped, Chicago.

"Is the military industrial complex offering us thirty pieces of silver again?"

Stan nods.

"What do we need with all of that?" Gordon asks Carson.

"Well, your 'Maker's Lab' may not need it, but it could help the rest of the university to do a lot of good." Carson patronizes the words 'Maker's Lab.'

"Like what," Gordon challenges, "buy more flatscreens for the locker room?"

"We were thinking of scholarships, Mr. Longmeier."

"For linebackers?"

"For gifted, at-risk students."

Stan puts a hand on Gordon's arm to silence him and addresses Carson.

"You do know the mission of the Lab -- the Lab that I founded with my own funding -- is to serve exactly those at-risk students. People like him." Stan points at Gordon. "Creators, inventors. He was sixteen when he came here.

Now he's your cash cow. And we got another one coming back tomorrow. You remember Wendell Stainfield?"

"I'm sorry, I don't."

"He lives way out on the county road. He's seventeen, doing a dual-enrollment here with his high school. His family is... challenging."

"Mom's a tweaker," Gordon interjects.

Carson purses his lips and raises his eyebrows.

"Methamphetamine addict," Stan clarifies. "Perhaps we could offer Wendell a full scholarship. His designs show tremendous commercial potential."

"Professor Malkovich, the board has not yet decided exactly how to allocate the funds."

"So, not scholarships?" Stan challenges.

"As I said, we are considering that. There are many areas of need on campus."

"Do these papers shed any more light on your 'areas of need?'" Gordon pats the folder.

Carson closes the folder and tucks it under his arm.

"These have to do with a confidential proposal from North Industries. We appreciate your, er, 'help' with the Lab, Mr. Longmeier, but this really is a matter for university administrators."

Carson offers each man a handshake. As he walks out, he wipes his hand on his pants leg.

"He's always trying to pimp us out to those goddamn defense contractors," Gordon complains. "What have they ever made except more dead people?"

"Screw it, let's work."

Gordon brightens. "Hey, check this out."

He walks over to the four-armed machine on the wall. A tablet computer is mounted next to it and when he boots it up the splash screen bears a single word, "SHIVA." He scrolls to the drawing he created on Saturday morning and taps it.

Slipping on tinted safety glasses, he taps the screen once more and steps back. Behind the wall, the same deep humming cycles up, along with the higher-pitched tone over it. The blue light rises, and soon the finished piece floats above the shelf. Stan peers at it through his own tinted glasses.

"Jesus Christ," he whispers, turning to stare at Gordon. "That looks perfect. You solved it?"

"That was the last hurdle, yeah."

Stan puts an arm around Gordon's shoulders and appraises the gleaming metal shape resting below Shiva's folded arms.

"You know," he says quietly, "this patent is gonna change everything."

Gordon nods but does not smile.

"And that's a good thing." Stan looks to see if Gordon understands.

"Everything..." Gordon whispers.

"You did it, son. It was a helluva long fight but you did it."

Gordon lifts the piece and walks to his station. Hours later, a pang of hunger tells him it is well past dinner time. His plastic cup is choked with cigarette butts and a pile of drawings and documents lays in a semicircle around his laptop. He still wears the safety glasses. Stan is long gone. Gordon sits back, pushes the glasses up to hold his hair back and rubs his eyes. The skylights are black and he needs to eat so he piles the papers onto his laptop and shoves it all into his pack. Outside, he waves good night to Mr. Williams and shuffles through the gloaming to the bus stop where he digs out his phone and scrolls... And there she is.

*Damn. It wasn't a dream.*

The bus crunches to a stop and hisses its brakes. Gordon flops into a seat, bone tired, his head lolling forward as his eyes close. The motion is soothing. His breathing slows to a sleeping rhythm until suddenly his skin flashes with an

electric charge, like a net of thin wires was laid on his body and touched with a battery. It's been nearly five years since he felt this sensation. He looks down the aisle and sees dirty blonde hair, a flash of silver. His stomach flips.

*Christ, it's her.*

His first instinct is to run.

His second is to wonder why Caroline is on the bus at all. In high school, she hated buses and would walk or ride her bike to Clarke Central every day. He always thought she got her disdain of public transportation from her father, who had inherited one car dealership and built it into a chain across rural Georgia. His shameless self-promotion made Caroline blush, but when it resulted in a successful run for Congress even she had to admit that she had underestimated him.

Gordon and Caroline had been teenage townies, running through the outskirts neighborhood where their two bungalows sat catercorner from one another. Two families, glued by proximity and station and common cause. Gordon's mother, Emily, professor of physics at the university. Gordon's father, George, auto mechanic and national guardsman. George was called to serve ride-along duty -- convoy support -- on supply runs from Baghdad to Fallujah to Ramadi and back. One night, two soldiers knocked and whispered to Gordon and Emily and left. Sixteen and fatherless, he learned for the first time what an improvised explosive device was and what it could do to a family. Caroline held him as they cried until they fell asleep on the couch.

On the bus, she looks over her shoulder and sees him slumped in his seat. She saunters back to his row and sits directly across from him. He looks her over. She holds a soft leather satchel that contains a MacBook, a Moleskine and a thick textbook.

"Fancy bag," Gordon observes.

"A gift."

"Teaching now?"

"Kind of. Doing a Masters in Social Psychology."

"Palo Alto didn't pan out?"

"No, it did. But I wanna do that work here."

The bus slows.

"This is me," Gordon mumbles.

He grabs the seat in front of her and stands. She takes off her glove and touches his hand and the lightning flashes across his skin again. Her wince tells him she felt it too.

"Gordon," she says softly, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left the way I did. I didn't know Emily--"

He holds up his hand to silence her and looks away. When the bus stops and he turns back, she sees his tears. He hops down to the sidewalk. The doors close and he does not look back.

In his apartment, Gordon lights the potbelly stove and scoops some leftover chicken and rice into an iron skillet. Standing over his simmering meal, he feels that familiar emptiness again. Caroline was his best friend, the girl across the street from as early as he could remember. His first kiss, his first... everything. When she left for California, it was like an amputation. He sees his reflection in the tall window; his wild hair, his blue mechanic's work shirt, his hard hands darkened by labors of love... so ill-suited to pampered prosperity. And now so ill-suited to her.

"The hell with it," he says to the window.

*Not one more second of brain time on this.*

Along one side of the loft are a series of cabinets that rise to the ceiling, accessed by a heavy metal library ladder. Gordon rolls the ladder to the third set of doors, climbs and opens one to reveal a neat bookshelf of bound volumes and periodicals. He runs his finger along the bindings and stops at a

translated version of a Russian physics journal. He flips it open to confirm that the article he wants is there, then climbs down, retrieves the skillet and sits at the island, eating with the spatula as he reads. After a moment, he digs his laptop and drawings out of the backpack and starts making notations and adjustments to his designs as the rest of his dinner grows cold. A few flakes of snow flutter silently past the window. His head lolls, then drops onto his forearm. At some point he wakes up long enough to eat a few more bites, stumble out of his jeans and fall into bed. Within minutes, the journal drops onto his face as he falls asleep again.

*The bright March sky was splashed with clouds and while Athens was not yet green and leafy, it was redolent with promise. On spring break from his freshman year at the University of Georgia, Gordon stood on the sidewalk beside red metal benches where people ate heaps of food from tinfoil wrappers. He was peaceful, even happy, a Hiroshiman blind to the force about to vaporize him. At T-minus-zero, he turned his head and saw Caroline crossing the street toward him, walking with his friend Warren and wearing black shorts small enough to show off her tanned thighs. Sun glossed her hair and flashed in her eyes. He had not seen her since June, and she looked like a different person. She held her shoulders back, rippling at him like a tigress, drawing him in and terrifying him at the same time, so familiar and yet utterly foreign. The air around her shimmered and blurred everything but her face, her body, her... Her.*

*Gordon had not known the presence of a woman could challenge him like this, or that his childhood friend might be that woman. That the sight of her, the immediate and permanent need for her, could shatter him into a million fragments that would only gather from this point forward into a form that she might find worthy; that would either be worthy of her or stay shattered forever. He saw her that day as if for the first time, as if she had risen like a redwood from a pot of geraniums slowly blooming by his back door for a*

decade.

*Her easy smile evinced no changes on her side, no fragmentation of her own. To her he was still simple old Gordon. He contemplated the unremarkable thing that was Warren, oblivious to or perhaps equally decimated by the apotheosis of the feminine with whom he dared to 'grab a burger.' Prior to that moment Gordon had very few concrete ambitions, but in the wake of her scent he wanted desperately to sack Rome, to cure cancer, to kick moon dust. He had become a massive, gibbering compass and she his magnetic north. He spent most of the next week in a state of shock, the hollow she had made of him not yet missing its mass. Like a ghost unaware it had died, he drifted to the Lab, tinkered on projects and concepts and prototypes and played his guitar at Martín's, wasted on the emotions to which Caroline's sudden and unexpected magnificence had condemned him.*

*The following Saturday she and two friends walked into Martín's, where Gordon sat at the bar with Martín and Julia. Martín Espada was in his forties, a former priest who had left the Catholic church for love and eventually found his way back to Christianity for the same reason. He and Julia had migrated from Mexico City fifteen years earlier, shortly after they married, and with a few dollars he had saved they bought the bar. By day, Martín served drinks and tacos and heard confessions across the polished mahogany. At night, he was the drummer in a cover band. When he needed a guitarist, he recruited the wild son of his first and best friend in Athens, George Longmeier, who had recently died in Iraq. Gordon had fronted the band ever since.*

*That night, Martín and Julia were having a spirited debate about the combination of spices used in a proper mole sauce, while Gordon listened to his ear buds and scribbled on a small piece of paper.*

*Too loudly, Gordon interrupted. "Ever notice that 'Migra' leads almost directly into 'I Want Candy' by Bow Wow Wow?"*

*"Jesuchristo!" Martín exclaimed. "Do not mention Santana in the same breath as that pop shit."*

Gordon pulled one of his ear buds. "I'm telling you, we should play it."

"You should," Caroline said.

Gordon turned and saw her. Her jeans did even more for her figure than her running shorts had. A charcoal t-shirt hugged her breasts in a way Gordon had to work to ignore.

"We don't have a female singer."

"Sure you do."

She smiled and tipped her head a little.

Gordon gave her an appraising look. He turned to Martín and handed him the ear buds.

"Here, you can pick this up in a few seconds. I already know the guitar. The guys can put their horns down and have a beer."

"And you think little Caroline can sing it?" Martín asked.

Julia looked at Caroline with a warm smile and informed Martín in Spanish that she was not so little anymore.

"Oh yeah, Tío," Gordon said. "I'm pretty sure there's nothing she can't do now."

Later, near the end of Santana's scorching indictment of the border patrol, Gordon waved Caroline onto the stage. She danced, comfortable in the glare and sanguine about the braying of the drunken boys in the audience as Martín hammered his drums and Gordon picked through the final jam to wind down the song. Before it could end Gordon shifted the tune and played with the beginnings of 'Candy.' Martín's hands flew around the timpani with the new, faster beat, so Gordon got out of the way and nodded for him to keep it going. The crowd began to pulse with Martín's energy. When at last Gordon launched into the iconic opening riff, he smiled at Caroline and she stepped to the mic, working the moment, her voice strong and clear, leaning close to Gordon as she sang. At one point, she put her palm to his face. He felt a surge of electricity course over the surface of his skin like a fine sheet of lightning. His guitar screeched. She pulled her hand away as if it had been shocked. No one seemed to notice so they kept going,

*finishing to a raucous ovation. She touched his arm, kissed him lightly on the cheek and took his hand to hop back down from the stage... and no lightning. By the end of the night she had forgotten it completely. But Gordon had not. When the set was over, he walked directly to the bar and started drawing furiously on the back of a concert flyer; a network of circuits, then another, all spiraling toward a center point where they formed a sphere.*

The Russian physics journal is stuck to Gordon's face when he wakes up. He reaches up to move it, but his hand is blocked by something hard. Sensing a draft around his body, he opens his eyes and turns his head and the journal flutters down to the bed far below. Rigid with panic, Gordon begins to flail. His hands hit the metal rafters as his feet kick air, and instinctively he grabs the rebar and pulls it close. He looks down at the island, at his laptop and the skillet of chicken and rice, at his jeans by the bed, at the journal open on top of the comforter. Hands trembling on the cold metal, shivering in a t-shirt and briefs, breathing fast and shallow, he is alone, nearly naked and pinned to the ceiling -- by nothing at all.

## *Chapter 3*

### *Lucidity*

Gordon starts to laugh. He knows he is lucid dreaming even though he has never experienced a lucid dream before. Tentatively, he lets go of the rebar with one hand. His torso and legs remain stuck to the rafters. He loosens his grip with the other hand but senses no change in his stability. Grabbing the rebar with both hands again, he pushes away from the ceiling with his feet. His body swings down but then slowly drifts back up until it is stopped once more by the ceiling.

*“Cool! This feels so real.”*

He gathers his feet under him and works himself forward until he is effectively sitting upside down on one of the rafters. His hair hangs down like it is not subject to the same rules as the rest of his body. Gathering courage, he puts his arms straight over his head and pushes off. His body drifts as if through water until the minor force of his push is expended, then floats back up. His heels hit the ceiling, then his back, then his head. The physical rules of the dream are

becoming more clear to him. Feeling chilled by the draft, he gathers himself again, aims for his jeans and pushes harder off the ceiling but his arms are not braced for the impact. They buckle and his nose smashes against the floor. As he rises, he realizes he forgot to grab his jeans. While he cups his bleeding nose, his back bumps hard against the metal beams and he decides that he does not like this dream very much anymore. He closes his eyes and imagines a new one.

*A sunny day. Summer. Maybe a beach.*

When he opens his eyes, the first thing he sees is a bright red stain on the white pages of the physics journal, one drip wending its way down the length of the crease. Gordon lifts his shirt and wipes a thick handful of blood, his back tense as his bare skin grazes the rafters. Absently, he wonders how much heat his apartment must be losing without proper insulation, but gradually he is pulled back to the moment by the terrifying awareness that this is not a dream.

*"Shit. Okay. Okay. Shit."*

His mind races. He needs to get away from the cold roof, get some clothes on, get... what? A doctor? A priest? Jesus, get *down*, for a start. He bunches for another push, this time aiming at the bed. When he hits the comforter he grabs it with both hands but it begins to slip away from the bed. He hangs onto the blanket as he floats up again and this time he notices that he does not rise to the ceiling as quickly as he did before.

*The added weight matters. Okay, think.*

He grabs a corner of the comforter with one hand and slides the other down the length of its edge until he is holding the other corner, which he stuffs between his feet. Extending himself out long with a corner at each end of his body, he pushes off the ceiling with an elbow to start a flat roll. The comforter winds around him. Coming to rest again, he notices the library ladder and the four-foot gap between the

ceiling and the top rung. He frees one arm from the comforter and begins to pull himself along the rafter toward the cabinet wall.

At the ladder, he once again pulls his feet up, presses them against the ceiling and with some regret lets the comforter fall to the floor. Slowly, he straightens his legs, reaches down for the top rung and works his way hand over hand to the ground. He hooks one arm through the ladder and gathers the comforter with the other. It seems like a very long way to his jeans where his cell phone hides in a front pocket. For a moment, he sits very still.

*What in the absolute fuck is going on?!*

*Monday. I'm supposed to pick up Wendell... send the wrecker for the car... help Stan fight off the military industrial complex... work with students... file the patent application on Shiva... Stand up without drifting away.*

He scans the room for ideas. If he can dive sideways, maybe he can scoop up his jeans, but to get there without floating up will take a hard push and there's a brick wall just a few feet beyond the pants. He turns around and opens the cabinet behind him. A few pairs of jeans hang above a pile of boots and sneakers, a few random tools and a box of shotgun shells. He grabs the pants and works them on with one hand. He pulls out his heavy motorcycle boots, puts them on and relaxes the muscles in his legs. They rise, slowly now. He scoots himself and the ladder across to the next set of doors, digs out a sweatshirt and puts it on. His eyes find the cabinet nearest the stairway. He scuttles over to it and takes out a climbing rope, then hooks a leg around the ladder and plays out half of the rope and ties a loop around his waist. He slides the ladder back to its original spot, eyeballs the distance to the jeans that contain his cell phone and ties that length of rope to the ladder. He lowers down to the bottom rung, squats up his legs and pushes hard at the jeans.

He sails along the floor, hands ready, but just as he is about to grab the pants the rope pulls taut and whips his face and arms to the ground. He is momentarily stunned. The sudden tug pops the top wheels of the ladder off their track and leaves it yawing on one bottom wheel. He claws at the jeans and pulls them close as his feet kick for a floor that is already out of reach. With sickening helplessness, he watches the heavy ladder pirouette and start to fall directly at him. Drifting upward in a slow somersault, he curls into a ball against the impact. Everything goes dark.

The dream involves hammering, or cannons maybe. Gordon feels every pounding blast at the base of his skull. He opens his eyes and realizes that someone is knocking violently on his door.

"Gordon!" Martín hollers. "You are late. Were you drinking again? Stan called me."

"I'm awake," Gordon croaks. "Please help me!"

Martín's key chatters in the lock and he climbs the metal stairs. With a stream of Spanish exclamations, he surveys the wreckage caused by the fallen ladder: skillet dumped on the floor, a corner of the soapstone countertop broken off, the ladder itself on Gordon's bed and most disturbingly, Gordon suspended fifteen feet above it, tethered to a rope, supine and bleeding from the head and nose, barely conscious. Martín stops talking, walks over to the rope and slowly, very cautiously, touches it. He sees Gordon sway a little in midair and crosses himself, praying rapidly in Spanish.

"Tío, please," Gordon rasps. "Help me."

"How, son? What can I do?"

"Pull me down."

Martín grabs the rope and begins to pull very gently. Feeling little resistance, he reels Gordon in and holds him in a bear hug.

"Who did this to you?" Martín's face clouds. "I will tear them apart!"

"No, it's not like that. I don't know what's happening but I'm pretty sure I did this to myself."

"Tell me what you remember."

Gordon recounts as much as he can, from waking up with the journal on his face until the moment the ladder began to fall. Martín's eyes are wide. He pulls a stool closer and begins to set Gordon down but Gordon stops him.

"I'll just float up again." He looks around the room. "Tie me to the island. That post there."

Martín does this. Gordon's feet hover a few inches off the ground as he takes his phone out of his jeans and sees three missed calls from Stan. First, he calls Wendell's house and gets no answer, then he calls Stan and apologizes for his absence, then gives him Wendell's address and asks him to drive Wendell to the Lab.

Martín raises his eyebrows. "And now?"

The hand holding the phone begins to shake. Gordon covers it with his other hand and tries to steady his breathing.

"Now... I need to gain some weight."

Before Gordon gave up entirely on his infrequent workouts, he dabbled in a free weight phase. Luckily, the plates came in handy down in the garage so he saved them. In a few trips, Martín is able to bring up a hundred pounds of assorted sizes. Gordon begins to load his backpack, testing the weight against his hovering body. He is surprised that it only takes fifty-five pounds to keep him on the ground, but the pack leaves him top-heavy. At first, he shuffles across the rug, hesitant to lift his feet, but gradually he begins to understand how to balance himself properly. He reties the climbing rope so that it will tether him to the island but allow him plenty of slack. Martín busies himself replacing the ladder on its track and cleaning up the spilled food. Neither

man speaks. Martín makes a trip out to the wood pile, fills the stove and lights the fire. Eventually, there is no more work to distract them so they stand at opposite ends of the island, silent and strange.

"Iron," Gordon says at last.

"What...?"

"That's probably the heaviest workable metal I can get," Gordon explains. "I can coat it with a layer of steel to keep it from rusting." He grabs a pencil and paper. "Here, like this." Gordon starts drawing ovals on the page that begin to connect into the shape of a vest, then leggings. "We could print up a hundred of these little guys in a few minutes. Maybe I can string them together with monofilament or embed them in some kind of rubber sheathing."

Martín walks over to him and puts his hand on Gordon's forearm. Gordon stops drawing and looks at him.

"I have to solve this," Gordon says urgently. "I'm weightless, and I need a better source of gravity. I can't waddle around in this--"

"Son. What is happening?"

Gordon's composure cracks.

"I don't know," he whispers, eyes tearing. "It's like a weird dream, only it's not. I keep trying to understand what could have done this. I thought maybe the electromagnetism in Shiva's sphere? But Stan, the kids, dozens of people have been around that and they're fine. So...?"

"Do you want me to call a doctor?"

"Oh yeah. Let's bring in the local anti-gravity specialist."

He sees the wounded look in Martín's eyes and softens.

"I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"It's okay. This is... frightening."

"Well, I guess I'm lucky it didn't happen when I was outside."

Gordon rubs his forehead and touches the bloody spot at

the base of his skull.

"Could have been a lot worse without a ceiling to stop me."

"I think we should pray," Martín says softly.

"Stop it."

"This is a miracle."

"It's not!"

"How else you gonna explain it? Do you think it has something to do with her?"

"With Caroline? Why do you say that?"

"¿Quién sabe? Who knows?"

Gordon stares at him. He remembers the way she removed her glove to touch him, the way the electricity coursed through him again. It was that same lightning sensation he had when they first played on stage together, the feeling that had made him think of the original design for Shiva. He had named the device after the four-armed Hindu god of creation, but Shiva was also known as a destroyer. Could he have harnessed a power that was beyond his control? Once again, he rubs his forehead and looks at Martín as if an answer lay just behind the older man's eyes, as if everything would make sense if he could just bore in there and see it for himself. It is a look that Martín has seen many times, when Gordon brings the full weight of his intellect to bear on a problem and still comes up short. Gordon shakes his head and looks at the ceiling.

"What could Caroline possibly have to do with this?"