

Highway 61

by **Richard J. Kerk-Hecker**

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For Adam and Melissa

*Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61"*

Bob Dylan

Chapter One

Abraham had done a lot of killing in his life. It was never a pleasurable experience, but he had grown used to it, and it had become more of a routine than anything else. He had learned to stretch the victim's neck, and twist the head so the blood spurted away, and not all over his clothes. And he knew exactly where to slice, and how deeply, so there was a minimum of struggling, and - he hoped - a minimum of pain.

For Abraham was a good man. A kind man. But he was also a man of God. The one and only God. The Creator of all that is, and the Destroyer of all that was. The One known as Yahweh.

And Yahweh required sacrifices.

He required that animals be laid on a sacrificial altar, and ceremoniously killed, the blood allowed to drain from their quivering bodies before they were consumed by fire, and their life force offered up to Him who had created them. Not old or sick animals, but animals in their prime, strong, and fat, and full of life. This is what Yahweh required. This is what Yahweh demanded.

Abraham did not know why. Oh, he had a theory or two, but when it came right down to it, he had a hard time imagining why this bloody ritual was so important to Yahweh. It seemed a bit wasteful to Abraham, although he would never speak such a thought. Even to think it sent a chill up his spine. Yahweh had a history of dealing harshly with dissenters.

So Abraham did as he was told. And there was no mistaking Yahweh's instructions, because He spoke

directly to Abraham. He spoke in a voice that came from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It was a voice that rose up out of the ground and vibrated through the soles of Abraham's feet. It was a voice that rained from the sky, and boomed from the trees, and whispered in Abraham's ear.

Sometimes Abraham thought he had gone mad. That he was just imagining the voice. That it was all in his head. Certainly no-one else seemed to hear it! But it wasn't quite that simple. It wasn't only a voice. It was a force, an energy, a presence, that entered Abraham and profoundly stirred his soul, filling him with the greatest of joys and the greatest of fears all at the same time, and leaving no doubt in Abraham's mind that Yahweh was undeniably all powerful - and undeniably real.

So he did Yahweh's bidding, no matter how strange or difficult it was. After all, who was he to second guess the Creator of all things? If Yahweh wanted Abraham to slice open the throat of a lamb, or a goat, or a calf, so be it. He would do it without question. After all, it was just a dumb beast.

But now Yahweh had moved this sacrifice ritual to a whole new level. And as Abraham trudged wearily up the steep path that led to the summit of Mount Moriah, and the horror that waited for him there, the world was silent as death itself, except for Yahweh's last words, echoing around and around in his tortured mind:

“Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering...”

Chapter Two

There were many in Palestine who wanted to kill. There were more than a few moments when Jamal himself wanted to kill. When he wanted to beat to a pulp the faces of his enemies. Allah - may He be forever praised - knows they deserved to die: the Jews, and their western friends. The ones who kept his people trapped in a nightmare existence of poverty and hopelessness for as long as he could remember.

Since the day he was born, Jamal has hated Jews. He could not even think of them without spitting on the ground in disgust. How dare they come to his homeland, and steal the best land, and defile the holy sites walked by Mohammad himself - may his name be blessed. Jamal's parents cursed Jews every night at the supper table. His teachers told him that the only good Jew was a dead Jew.

He was taught that killing Jews was a holy, righteous act. They were evil. They were only interested in profit, no matter how much suffering it cost. All the major wars in history were started by Jews, in the name of greed. When will the rest of the world wake up, and finally realize this?

And of course, there were the personal tragedies. The day an Israeli rocket killed his mother. He will never forget running and dodging bullets to get to her, only to find her torn and broken, lying in the street, beyond help. How hot tears covered his face for days afterward. How his father died of sadness at the overwhelming loss, just a few months later. So many cousins and friends, killed or horribly maimed by Israeli bullets, and bombs, and rockets. Or else left to rot in an Israeli prison.

There were many times he was almost killed himself. Life in Palestine was lived day by day, in constant fear of Israeli attack. And there was almost nothing they could do about it. They had no money. They had no army. They had nothing. They were lucky if they even had a roof over their heads.

Oh, yes, the Jews deserved to die alright. And someday - Allah willing - they would finally be driven out of Palestine. Driven into the sea. Driven back into the darkness from whence they came.

But he was too old now to do much more than talk. A bitter smirk crossed his face. Too old! He had not even reached 43 years! But in Palestine, where things like medical care and good food were more dreams than anything else, a man aged quickly. Jamal already walked with a limp, and his eyes were becoming dim. His fighting days were over.

But when he heard that some brave young person had managed to wrap himself in explosives, and walk into a crowd of Jews, and kill at least some of them in an act of holy martyrdom, Jamal would feel a touch of inner pride. Because as he had been taught in school, every time even one Jew dies, the world is a little better off. He encouraged martyrdom.

But not this time. This time was different. This time the youth sitting in front of him, proudly telling him of his plans for martyrdom, did not receive encouragement from Jamal. Only a look of shock and despair. Because this youth was different. This youth was Jamal's only son.

Chapter Three

Nanuq hadn't killed for almost a month. So he was stalking his prey with unprecedented patience and stealth. His huge body was stretched flat against the ice, his white coat making him virtually invisible - just one more mound of wind whipped snow among the many that covered the surface of the ice floe. But this mound was moving. Very slowly, inch by inch, it was moving toward a small black form, lying still and quiet about 100 feet away near the edge of the floe.

It had been three times that far away when Nanuq first spotted it. He had been crawling towards it on his belly for the better part of an hour. He knew that seals always sleep with one eye open, so he couldn't take any chances. The wind was in his face, and the smell of the seal was strong, making his stomach ache, and his jaws drool. He wanted so badly to get up and run and attack, but he knew it was too soon.

Twenty minutes more of painstaking crawling and he felt the wind begin to shift. He knew this was not good. He was still almost 50 feet away, not as close as he'd like to be. *What should he do?* He crawled another inch as his instincts battled within him. *How close was that seal to the water?* He needed to crawl just a little bit closer.

Then he felt the wind come full circle, and he knew it was now or never. His massive 1200 pound body was on its feet and running full speed in an instant, but in that same instant the seal was up and lunging toward the open water, just a few feet away.

It took Nanuq slightly more than two seconds to reach

the seal just as it slipped below the water. His head and shoulders plunged after it, massive jaws gaping, somehow finding the seal's tail, clamping down on it, and in one powerful swing of his head, pulling the seal out of the water and throwing it back onto the ice. Before the seal could even begin to react, Nanuq was on top of it, crushing its skull in his powerful jaws like an eggshell - killing it instantly.

Nanuq began consuming the seal immediately, swallowing large chunks of the warm flesh whole. The fur around his head and neck became matted with blood as he ravenously devoured the entire seal. In better times he would have casually eaten the skin and the blubber only, and moved on, leaving the carcass for scavengers. But his starved body would not allow him that luxury today. Within ten minutes all that was left of the seal was a large red stain on the ice, and a few scattered fragments of bone and fur.

Tired, and temporarily satisfied, Nanuq curled up and slept for a few hours. When he awoke in the perpetual pink dawn of the arctic spring, his thoughts immediately returned to hunting. The ringed seal (*Pusa hispida*) had been small. He needed more.

But something was wrong. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that something wasn't right. It was the smell in the air. It should be more... earthy. He looked out over the empty sea. He had lost sight of land some time ago, which always happened this time of year, but he had never lost the smell of land before. And he had a nose that could smell a seal twenty miles away. The fact that he couldn't smell the land made him nervous. It wasn't time to return to the land yet. It was too early. But why couldn't he smell it? He needed to smell it. His instincts told him to forget about hunting for now, even though he was far from finished

replenishing his fat reserves to get him through the stark months ahead. For some reason it was more important to find that smell of rocks and trees. To get off this ice floe, and get back to terra firma.

So Nanuq stood up on his hind legs - all ten feet of him - and lifted his nose high into the air, his breath whuffing big white clouds as he inhaled deeply. Yes, there it was, just detectable, the faint aroma of land. He eased into the water and began swimming toward the source of the smell. With paddle-like paws a foot wide, and a five inch layer of fat to protect him from the cold, Nanuq was almost more at home in the freezing arctic water than on solid ground. With all that fat giving him extra buoyancy, he could swim for miles. If he was well fed, he could sometimes swim as much as twenty or thirty miles if he had to.

But Nanuq was not well fed. And Nanuq didn't know that spring had been coming to Hudson Bay earlier and earlier each year for the past two decades, causing the pack ice where he spent the winter to break up and pull away from the shore much sooner than it used to. He didn't know that the floe he was on had already retreated over 50 miles from land, and he had one very long swim ahead of him that he would most likely not survive. Nanuq, the great white bear (*Ursus maritimus*), didn't know about global warming.

Chapter Four

Abraham thought about the first time God spoke to him. It was in the hills surrounding Ur, the city of his birth. He had taken to wandering the hills after the death of his younger brother, Haran, and the mental collapse of his father, Terah.

That was back when his name was still Abram - *exalted father*, before Yahweh changed it to Abraham - *father of many*. And it was a bad time for Abram. His world was falling to pieces around him. In addition to his personal family tragedies, war was coming to Ur, and it seemed their patron, Nannar, the moon god, had deserted them.

The people of Ur had done everything the priests told them to do to appease the moon god. They had constructed an immense ziggurat in his honour - three four-sided pyramids, one on top of the other, connected by long, steep stairs that seemed to reach to the stars. And on the top, the temple itself, where young women were taken, either to serve their turn as temple prostitutes, or to be ceremonially killed, their female essence offered to Nannar. For Nannar was also the god of female fertility. He visited every woman once during his 28 day cycle of lunar transformation, having intercourse with them while they slept, causing them to bleed, and making them fertile.

At least that's what the priests proclaimed. And as long as women honoured Nannar by going to his temple and offering their bodies for the sacred act of conception, and occasionally submitting to the even more sacred act of baring their breasts to the sacrificial knife, Nannar would protect the city of Ur, and the

inhabitants would prosper.

But the moon god was not keeping his part of the bargain. Abram could not forget the sight of his father, Terah, on the temple floor weeping, and crying out in utter despair for Nannar to spare the life of his son, Haran, who had been injured in battle. But Haran died, despite the pleas, and Terah was convinced it was because he had somehow offended the god, and he retreated into a world of guilt and shame. He became unable to manage his large household, full of family, extended family, and all the children, servants and livestock that came with them.

But Abram knew it was not his father who had angered Nannar. If it was anyone at all, it was Abram himself who was causing all this grief, because lately he had been doubting the words of the priests. He had never attended the sacrifices, and never visited the temple prostitutes. He wasn't sure why. It just didn't seem right, somehow.

And now his family was paying the price. And his city would soon be paying the price as well, as the marauding armies of the Gutti conquered, killed, and pillaged their way towards them, moving closer every day.

Abram's other, older brother, Nahor, was unable to manage the household in his father's stead, putting all his efforts into preparing to battle the approaching invaders. But Abram knew it was futile. From all reports, the enemy was savage and ruthless, and outnumbered them ten to one.

So he retreated into the hills, to think, to try to find an answer. He ate little, and slept less. The situation seemed hopeless. There were no answers, no solutions. One night, reason seemed to leave him, and he found

himself running naked beneath the stars, cursing Nannar, screaming up at the moon until he was hoarse, finally collapsing in a sobbing heap onto the cold, dew dampened ground.

That's when it happened. That's when time seemed to come to a stop. A million buzzing locusts suddenly became silent. The rustling of the wind in the trees stopped. There was no lowing of cattle, no bleating of sheep. The usual murmur of nighttime voices from the city and the camps surrounding it were gone. The silence was so heavy, it filled Abram with dread. It was like the uncanny calm that comes just before the onset of a fearful storm, and Abram trembled, waiting for the onslaught to begin.

When a breeze suddenly brushed his face, his heart jumped, and he braced himself for the worst. But instead of thunder and rain, the breeze brought warmth and a sweet fragrance that seemed to still his pounding heart, and calm his worried mind. It carried away his troubles as if they were dust or dead leaves, and a sensation of great joy spread through him.

Then he heard the voice. The voice of God. Not some silly moon god, but the God that was whispered about when there were no priests around. The one known as Yahweh, the one true God, who created the earth and the sky, and everything that filled the earth and the sky. The one who created Man himself. The voice of God surrounded Abram, immersing him in its deep, rich resonance, lifting him up and filling him with wonder, and contentment. All powerful, all knowing, the voice was both male and female, old and young, and the words it spoke would be etched into his consciousness for the rest of his days:

“Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred,

and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:

“And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:

“And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”

Chapter Five

Abdul Salaam Ameen they had named him. The Faithful Servant Of Peace. It was his wife's suggestion. A vague, irrational attempt to give their first and only child a small bit of hope, even if it was in name only. It was a woman's fancy, and Jamal did not object, although he did not think it would help. But it certainly couldn't hurt he told himself, and it made his wife happy. Six months later she was dead from pneumonia. There was no medicine to help her. There was never enough medicine in Palestine.

So Jamal raised the little Servant Of Peace himself, often going without, so that his son would survive. His life revolved around his little Abdul. In a land of hopelessness, his son became his hope. But as the years slipped by, the situation in Palestine just became worse. Less food, less medicine, and less hope. Every day, Jamal grew more distraught about the future happiness of his son.

It became an obsession, the only thing that mattered. It was too late for Jamal himself. He had lost his parents, his wife, his country, his pride, and his future. There was really little point in carrying on such a meaningless existence - except for Abdul. For him there was still a chance. He was young and strong, and full of smart ideas. He could still do something with his life. He could still make a difference. So Jamal devoted what remained of his pitiful life to helping his young Abdul escape the despair, and make something of himself.

Many times he thought of taking his son out of Palestine. But that was easier said than done. The neighbouring Muslim countries would not, could not,

take any more Palestinian refugees, and from all reports the conditions in the refugee camps there were no better than in Palestine itself. No, to escape their situation they would have to travel far, and it would cost much - far more money than Jamal could ever acquire.

He lost track of how many hours he spent trying to devise ways of removing his son to some place where he would actually have a future. Some place with opportunities. Some place with hope. But such an undertaking without sufficient funds was perilous in the extreme. Jamal had terrible nightmares of his son spending the rest of his days squatting in a tiny filthy jail cell in some foreign country... or worse.

Besides, how could he abandon his homeland? What would that teach his son about honour, and loyalty, and his historic birthright? This was their land, their home given to them by Allah himself - may His name be praised. Why should they be forced to leave? It was the Jews who should leave!

But for the time being, anyway, the Jews were going nowhere, and he watched the hatred grow in his son's heart. Jamal tried his best to give his son at least some of the pleasures of childhood, but they were hard to find. In the end, all Jamal had to offer his son was himself. His companionship, his encouragement, his praise, his wisdom, his love. They spent almost all their time together, finding strength in each other's company. They were as close as a father and son could be.

And now, it was all about to end. Abdul was going to become a martyr, and Jamal would be left alone, without his companion, his protégé, his pride. His only son was going to kill himself, and Jamal was going to lose his very reason for living. Somehow, somehow, he had to stop it from happening.

Chapter Six

Nanuq was drowning. He had been swimming continuously for almost 24 hours, the huge, powerful muscles of his upper body pulling him over 50 miles through the icy waters of Hudson Bay, but they could do no more. As superbly adapted as he was to an aquatic environment, he was in the end still a land mammal, and despite his instinct for survival driving him forward until his muscles became starved for oxygen, and quivered and spasmed and became useless, he had not been able to make it to solid ground.

Like all instinctive creatures, Nanuq didn't know he was drowning. All he felt was a vague sense of confusion, that things weren't going as they should. He was doing everything right, just as he had done for the past 19 years of his adult life - indeed as his species had been doing for millennia - but instead of standing on the shore, vigorously shaking the water from his thick fur before it became ice, and then immediately sniffing the air for the scent of food, he found himself still in the water. And worse yet, under water, and for some reason he couldn't seem to get himself to the surface for a breath of air.

Nanuq didn't know that it was another species of land mammal (*Homo sapiens*), much smaller and weaker than his own, that had caused his doom. A species he had never seen, and never even smelled. A species that had become so abundant, and developed such an inefficient and unnatural lifestyle, that their poisonous waste products had accumulated to dangerously high levels. Levels that far surpassed the ability of the environment to absorb and neutralize. And even though they lived

very far away, their poisons had spread all the way to the water Nanuq was drowning in. To the very air he was so desperately trying to reach, just inches above his nose.

But the toxins that now filled the air and the water and the very food he ate were the least of Nanuq's problems right now. The waste products of this rude and wasteful species that were poisoning the environment had actually changed the atmosphere of the entire planet. The very fragile and delicate atmosphere that all species all over the planet depended on for their very existence. For millions of years, the planet had maintained a careful balance of chemicals in that atmosphere to allow just the right amount of sunlight to reach the surface of the planet, and just the right amount to be reflected back into space, providing an environment in which life of all sorts could thrive, and evolve.

That balance of chemicals was now upset, and the planet was warming. It had already warmed to the point that ice from the polar regions of the planet was melting at an astonishing rate. The great ice continents of Greenland and Antarctica were shrinking, as chunks of ice miles long were breaking off and falling into the sea. And the enormous sheet of ice that covered that large inland sea known as Hudson Bay for six months of the year, where thousands of polar bears went to fill themselves with seal blubber to take them through their six months of walking hibernation back on land, was breaking up much earlier than it should.

But Nanuq knew none of this. All he knew was that his lungs had run out of air, and he had to get himself to the surface, just a few inches above his head, and stick his nose out of the water, and grab a breath of air. But try as he might, it just wasn't happening. His lungs, acting

on their own behalf, spasmed and sucked in some water. Pain tore through Nanuq's chest, and the muscles in his throat seized, momentarily pinching shut his trachea and shooting the last few remaining drops of adrenaline through his system, just enough to make his great paws take a few more desperate strokes. But it was too little, too late. Nanuq's world was going dark, the muscles around his trachea giving up the battle, and starting to relax...

But wait... what was that? Did he feel something with his paw? Another desperate stroke. *Yes! There it was again!* He stretched his three inch long claws out as far as he could, and yes! he was touching bottom! But it was too late. His lungs couldn't wait any longer. Oh, to come so close... But then he felt his entire body lifted and carried forward - a wave! He stretched his neck and felt his nose break the surface just long enough to suck in a gulp of air. The air mixed with the water in his lungs and fire raced through him. But so did a tiny bit of oxygen. Just enough for a couple more strokes with those mammoth paws, and now he was pushing along the bottom. And then another wave and another gulp of air.

Nanuq was barely conscious when his head broke free of the water, and he began to cough, and snort, and vomit, and the water around him was flecked with drops of blood. His legs were too weak to hold his weight, but somehow he managed to hold his head above the water as inch by painful inch, the waves of an incoming tide slowly moved him closer to shore. Then he couldn't hold on any longer, and his world went black.

Chapter Seven

This is the second son God is taking from me, thought Abraham, bitterly, as he wearily trudged up the path to the summit of Mount Moriah. It was all so sad and confusing. He remembered the day when Yahweh's voice had thundered from the sky, and whispered in the trees, and told him:

“Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: so shall thy seed be.”

But how could this happen, he had wondered? There was no seed, and there would be no seed. His wife Sarai, having seen more than seventy summers, “had ceased to be... in the manner of women,” and could no longer bear fruit in her womb. Was Yahweh going to perform another miracle? But then his barren wife, Sarai, knowing of Yahweh's words, devised a way to provide her husband with an heir from his own loins, without the use of a miracle.

Abraham would never forget the day his wife came to him in his tent, bowing her head and kneeling before him, and how his heart swelled when he heard her say, “Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid, it may be that I may obtain children by her.” He remembered how they had held each other, kneeling together in the dust, and wept bitter-sweet tears, the joy of knowing that Abram's seed would flourish, as Yahweh promised, tainted with the profound sadness that the child would not share Sarai's blood as well. Sarai, who had been the first to believe that he had truly heard the voice of God. Who had stood by him through the worst of times, and had shared the secrets of his soul for more than half a century. The

strongest desire in her life was to bear his children, and no-one deserved it more. She had proven herself and earned the right dozens of times over. Yet here she was, once again exceeding all limits of love and loyalty by willingly giving up that right, so that he might have an heir, and follow the will of God. He never loved her more than at that moment.

So it was in a maelstrom of mixed emotions that Abram went to his wife's handmaid, Hagar, and she conceived, and bore him his long awaited son. They called the boy Ishmael, and at the wizened old age of 86, Abram finally became a father.

And never was a father more devoted to his son. Knowing that Ishmael was destined for greatness, Abram tried to teach him all he knew, to prepare him for whatever Yahweh might require of him. Little Ishmael could ride a horse almost before he could walk, and rode with his father everywhere. Together they went hunting, and together they tended the herds, and Ishmael learned the ways of animals, both wild and domestic.

Together, father and son sowed crops and harvested orchards, according to the cycles of the seasons, marked by changes in the weather and in the stars, and so Ishmael learned the secrets of the earth and the sky.

When Abram met with the leaders of other tribes, Ishmael would sit quietly beside him, cross-legged on the ground. He would listen to his father cleverly negotiate the buying and selling of livestock and produce so that all parties seemed to profit. He would stare in wide-eyed fascination as Abram settled difficult and dangerous disputes with words, rather than knives. And thus he learned the ways of men.

And Ishmael listened, enraptured, as Abram spoke of

Yahweh. He listened in awe as his father described the voice of Yahweh, and how that voice rescued them from Ur, just before it was destroyed by marauding invaders, and all the inhabitants massacred. He was told how Yahweh saved Sarai from the Egyptians, and promised Abram and his people their own land, and a destiny in which they were blessed above all others. He was told about burnt offerings and how an angel of the Lord spoke to his mother, Hagar, and told her to name her unborn son Ishmael, and how he would be the father of multitudes. And so Ishmael learned the ways of God.

Abram showered Ishmael with love. Even Sarai showed the boy affection, although it was not the affection of a mother to her son. Hagar was Ishmael's mother, and everyone knew it, and although Sarai showed a brave face, she could never rid herself of that persistent ache within her that reminded her the child was not from her womb.

As the years went by Ishmael thrived, growing strong and wise, making Abram the proudest and happiest of fathers. He was content. He finally had an heir more than worthy to take over his household after him, and lead his many tribes into the future. A future in which his people would be blessed, as promised by Yahweh. Yes, Ishmael was the best of sons. A born leader of men, compassionate and clever, and Abram would smile, knowing that after he was gone, his people - God's chosen people - would be in good hands, with Ishmael as their leader.

He had no idea that Yahweh was soon going to take Ishmael away from him.

Chapter Eight

Jamal was about to do something terrible. Something that was going to cause him to draw deep from his well of personal power. He was going to break a promise... and he had never broken a promise in his life. And more, this was no ordinary promise. This was not a promise offered out loud, to be lost in the triviality of a thousand others, but a silent vow between himself and his newborn son, with Allah - the most merciful - as witness. The most sacred of promises, made the day his Abdul was born. A promise that as long as he lived, he would never, under any circumstances - lie to his son.

For life was lived in a sea of lies. It had always been so, and it would be so forever. It was the way of survival in a hard and cruel world. To keep above the lies, one needed a refuge. Somewhere to go, where there was no fear of deception, and one could breathe the pure sweet air of honest discourse. A place where trust lived. An island of insight in an ocean of uncertainty.

True to his promise, Jamal had been that island for his son during Abdul's entire 18 years of existence, and his son had come to trust him completely. And now Jamal was going to do the unthinkable, and betray that trust. He was going to abandon his honour, and destroy his integrity, and break a solemn vow. He was going to lie to his son.

Had it only been an hour ago, when he had sat speechless and dumbfounded, following Abdul's announcement, in the sanctity of his private chambers, of his imminent martyrdom? It seemed days, weeks, years ago. A different age, a long lost culture, faded in the mists of time. A world of innocence and aspirations,

replaced with a universe of guilt and desperation, in which sacred vows were smashed and broken like so much old, discarded pottery.

Jamal now saw with perfect clarity how his own words and his own passion had led his son to this day. How could he have been so blind? He had nurtured hatred in his son's heart. He had glorified martyrdom in his son's eyes. And worst of all, he had offered no alternatives, no solutions! What did he expect his son to do? As all these realizations swept through him, he fought to keep the bile from rising in his throat.

He must regain control, both of himself and the situation. It was his blunder, and now he must fix it. If ever there was a time to be a man, and face your demons, and stare them down, this was it. In the aftermath of Abdul's proclamation, Jamal had been struck dumb. After an eternity of silence, his son had asked, "Father, have you nothing to say?"

Jamal had swallowed hard, and forced the words from his mouth. "This is no small thing, my son, and I should like to take great care in choosing my next words. Leave me for one hour, I beg you, to form my thoughts."

Jamal had not moved during that hour, though his thoughts had traveled a million miles. But in all their journeys his ideals were unable to find the slightest notion of any honest course of action that would dissuade his son from his impending doom. There was only one chance to change things, and defer the upcoming horror, and that was to lie. And it made Jamal sick.

But not as sick as the thought of his beloved Abdul's body being shredded and torn... and his eyes began to fill with water. Then his son's soft, determined footsteps

were approaching down the hall, and Jamal began to compose himself, and prepare to do a great wrong, in order to prevent an even greater wrong. Somehow Jamal must find the strength within himself to look his son in the eye - and lie. May Allah - the eternal forgiver - have mercy on his foolish soul.

Chapter Nine

Nanuq rose to the surface of consciousness slowly. Like some great leviathan gradually floating up out of the deep, he returned from the very edge of the underworld, from the very fringes of eternal darkness. Somewhere within his mammoth form a tiny spark of life had managed to hide from the fog of death, and while he lay unconscious, and to all appearances dead, powerful instinct, honed by generations of hardship in a hostile environment, nurtured that spark, until it became a tiny flicker of flame. His damaged lungs were able to draw in just enough breath to fan that small flame until it gradually grew, and - just in time - began to feed life back into his massive frame.

For polar bears do not die easily. They are the largest land carnivores on Earth, living in the harshest environment on Earth, and have had thousands of years to evolve a physical toughness that could survive almost anything. But even the mighty must sometimes fall, and no-one had come closer to that precipice than Nanuq.

His first conscious thought was that his head hurt. One side of his head was experiencing a sharp, biting pain. His ear! Something was tugging on his ear! His eyes flickered open to see a small arctic fox (*Alopex lagopus*) worrying his ear as if it were some struggling rodent. Nanuq roared with rage, bringing his huge paw down on top of the fox, breaking its back and pinning it to the ground.

At least that was what he did in his mind. In reality the best his abused body could manage was a baleful stare and a weak snarl. But it was enough to make the

fox jump back a few feet and reconsider its options. *Just how dead, or close to dead was this bear?* The fox stared hard, looking for signs of life, and Nanuq stared back just as intently. He could see a piece of his own ear, hanging limp and bloody from the side of the fox's mouth.

The fox and the bear were so completely engrossed in each other, neither saw the pack of wolves silently racing towards them down the beach. The first wolf hit the fox hard, and a few chilling yelps of terror and pain were quickly and mercifully cut short as the pack descended on the small animal, snarling and snapping and fighting over its bits of flesh as they savagely tore it to pieces just a few feet away from Nanuq's quiet, still form.

Nanuq knew this was not a good development. Staring down a little arctic fox was one thing; fighting off a pack of large hungry wolves (*Canis lupus hudsonicus*) was something else entirely. Of course if he had all his faculties, he could have waded into the middle of them and killed at least two or three before the rest ran for the hills, and that would have been that.

But his faculties at the moment had abandoned him, and he was quite helpless. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to move his legs. Even breathing was difficult and painful. One or two of the wolves were starting to look in his direction, but they knew polar bears, so they hesitated.

And while they hesitated, Nanuq dug deep within himself and forced the muscles in his legs to start to quiver and twitch. His body was still submerged in the water. Only his head was clear, laying on the smooth gravel of the shoreline. One of the wolves was cautiously moving closer now, sensing the bear's helplessness, and

in one supreme effort of will Nanuq managed to inch himself backwards into deeper water.

His muscles were responding slightly better now, and helped by the buoyancy of the water, his legs were able to just barely support his weight, and keep his head above the surface. A couple of the wolves took a few tentative steps into the shallows, but the icy sea was not their domain, and the bear was looking more alive by the moment. So they contented themselves with pacing back and forth along the shore, eyeing the bear warily.

Slowly Nanuq felt pieces of his strength returning. He even managed one or two softly menacing growls, although they caused his throat and his lungs considerable pain. But it was enough to make the wolves consider looking elsewhere for their next meal, and as quickly and quietly as they had arrived, they were gone.

Chapter Ten

You want me to cut off my... what? Abram's mind reeled in horror! Had his ears deceived him, or had God just commanded him to cut off a piece of his manhood? And all the males of his people were to do the same? This was madness! This was butchery!

Yahweh had not spoken to Abram in over thirteen years, and when the unmistakable all powerful voice of God had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, Abram had fallen on his knees, with Yahweh's voice enveloping him, moving through him, and initially lifting his soul with words of comfort and promise:

“Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham, for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee... all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession... this is my covenant...”

And Abram - now Abraham - had rejoiced in his heart. His God had not abandoned him! He had returned after many years of silence, reassuring him that things were still going according to plan. He was still God's Chosen One. He was still the Friend of God. But then God began to explain Abraham's side of the covenant, and that's when things turned ugly. Yahweh went into great detail how Abraham, his son Ishmael, and all the men and boys of his tribe were to cut off the skin from the end of their manhood. This was their part of the bargain, their side of the covenant. And it was not to be just a one time thing. For all the generations to come, forever through all the ages, all male children at the age of eight days old would have to be surgically altered in the same way. And any male who did not have this done...

“...that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.”

Abraham was about to protest, and ask how he could possibly convince his people to commit this terrible act, but Yahweh wasn't finished:

“As for Sarai thy wife, thou shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her... and she shall be a mother of nations...”

What??? Now, this was too much! This was the final straw. First this, this... mutilation of his manhood, and now his ninety year old wife was to bear a child? Her womb had been dry and withered as a desert shrub for dozens of winters! Abraham became dizzy with confusion and disbelief. If he tried to tell his people the terrible thing Yahweh wanted them to do, they would refuse. Who wouldn't? They would revolt. They would desert him, and call him a madman. And if he tried to tell Sarah she was to bear him a child in her old age, she too, would call him a madman. And perhaps he was! He must be! That was it! He had finally become senile, and lost his mind. In a way it was a relief. He was, after all, 99 years old, and he'd been through a lot. Why shouldn't he escape into the surreal world of senility? He'd shouldered the burdens of a patriarch long enough. Let someone else take over the responsibilities of leading a nation. Oh, what a glorious, liberating thought! He would just become a crazy old man, with no worries, and no cares, and no responsibilities. And Abraham began to roll on the ground and laugh like a child. What a joke! Another son? Why? He already had a son. A wonderful son! What was supposed to happen to Ishmael? His beloved Ishmael! And suddenly Abraham's laughter turned to tears, and he truly felt as if he had lost his mind.

And Yahweh looked into Abraham's mind, and saw his thoughts, and did not rebuke him for his weakness and loss of faith. Instead he reached out to his Chosen One, and a sense of calm overcame Abraham. He raised his tear stained face, and there before him stood a man. A man with a look of ageless wisdom, and patience, and love, and Abraham knew at once that he was looking into the face of Yahweh Himself. And suddenly he felt his strength returning, and knew he was not crazy. Yahweh's face glowed with a soft light, and although His lips never moved, the words that came to Abraham's ears were clear and distinct. And there was no mistaking they were the words of God:

“Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac... and as for Ishmael, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.”

Yahweh's words filled Abraham with a sensation of peace so soothing and tranquil he closed his eyes, and sighed with contentment. And when he opened his eyes again, he was alone. Yahweh was gone, as suddenly and mysteriously as He had appeared. But Abraham did not feel alone. He stood up, once more full of courage and resolve, and began to walk back to his village, to do what he had to do.

Chapter Eleven

Abdul entered his father's room and stood before him, his youthful purpose becoming tinged with confusion when he saw the despair in his father's eyes. "Are you not proud of me, Father?"

Jamal knew he had started badly, and silently cursed himself for being unable to hide his desperation. *I must be strong!* He lowered his gaze, and said, "Forgive me, Abdul. Forgive the weakness of a father faced with losing his only son." Forcing his eyes to brighten, and his mouth to smile, he looked back up. "Of course I'm proud of you. I have never been more proud of you. Please, sit, and we will talk." Abdul's frown relaxed, and he sank down on the rug opposite his father.

First things first, thought Jamal, and gathering himself, he said, "Abdul, please, tell me everything."

Once again, confusion crept into Abdul's face, and he lowered his eyes. "But... but Father, I have sworn an oath of secrecy, in the name of Allah. I have sworn to submit to torture, and even death, before breaking that oath." And when he raised his eyes, there was cautious defiance in them.

Jamal, looking and sounding hurt, played his trump card. "Do you not trust me, my son?"

He saw the defiance flee from his son's eyes, saw the inner struggle raging within him, and Jamal's voice took a soothing tone. "It is I, Abdul. Your father, your protector, your guide. Your friend. This secret of yours, and your oath, are safe with me." With his eyes welling, Jamal's voice fell to a whisper. "With Allah as my witness, my lips would never betray you."

Abdul looked at his father, his own eyes becoming shiny, his own voice becoming a whisper. "I know, Father." And with a deep breath, he began to speak.

"The mission is called Delilah, for we go to Ashkelon, the city of Samson. The day after tomorrow, in the banquet hall of the Holiday Inn, there will be a reception, following the wedding of the daughter of a rich Jew. There will be hundreds of Jews, many from America. And I will be there, in the guise of a waiter. At exactly noon, when the crowd is the thickest, I will pull my detonator cord, and go to Paradise. And many Jews and American pigs will go to hell!" Abdul's face was flushed. His breathing had quickened, his eyes were wide, and he leaned forward expectantly towards his father.

Jamal was so taken by the look of intensity in his son's face, he could not think of an appropriate response. But the silence was dragging, and he had to say something, so he mumbled, "How will you get the explosives across the border?"

"They were smuggled in over a week ago, and are hidden in the hotel, along with a waiter's uniform. All is ready."

Despite himself, a smile crossed Jamal's face. His son was so excited, and proud of himself, and now looked so eagerly at his father, waiting for words of encouragement, and praise. And Jamal did not disappoint him. "Never has a father had such a son," he began. "A son so brave, and so selfless. A son willing to give up his very life for his people, his land, and for his God. In all the world there is no father as proud of his son, as I am of you right now." As he looked at Abdul's beaming face, tears began to trickle out of the corners of Jamal's eyes. He stood up, and opened his arms. His

son came to him, and they embraced, silent tears coursing down both their faces. Never had Jamal felt closer to his son, and he held him tightly, not wanting to let go, not wanting the moment to end. Burning the moment in his mind, to remember forever. Because he knew the words he was going to soon utter would destroy that closeness, probably forever. He had just a few precious minutes left. He pulled back and gazed into the face of his beloved Abdul, the flower of his very soul, and he lingered... because he knew that after tonight he would never see quite that same face, ever again. Finally, after a long moment, he said, "Let us make some tea, and we will talk some more."

Chapter Twelve

The wolves were barely out of sight when Nanuq starting moving into the shallows, back towards the shore. He knew if the wolves returned and caught him in the open he was a goner. But he also knew that he could not stay in the water. He felt dizzy and sick, and all he wanted to do was sleep. There was a clump of large boulders about 50 feet from the water's edge. If he could just make it there, he would be relatively hidden as he slept - just another big snow covered lump amongst the rubble.

As he slowly left the buoyancy of the water, his weary legs were forced to support more and more of his massive weight, and they trembled with the exertion, threatening to buckle underneath him at any moment. The pile of boulders seemed a million miles away. His stomach ached with hunger as he passed the remnants of the wolves' carnage. He longed to lick at the bloody snow, or chew on the scraps of fur they left, but he could feel sleep overtaking him, and he had to reach those rocks before that happened. His life depended on it.

So he staggered on, each breath a torture, each step a mammoth effort. Then, about halfway to sanctuary, a new tribulation assaulted him. A pair of arctic terns suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and began to attack him, shrieking and diving at his head. Under normal circumstances, a pair of angry birds would be of little consequence, an annoyance at the most. But these were far from normal circumstances, and far from normal birds.

Arctic terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) begin their lives in

the frozen, barren, arctic wilderness. Before they are three months old the short arctic summer is over, and they are led by their parents on the longest migration of any bird on the planet. They literally fly from one pole to the other, from one summer to the other, a journey that covers more than 12,000 miles. There on the treeless plains of Antarctica, their parents leave them to fend for themselves, and when the chill winds of Autumn herald the end of summer in the south, they must find their way back to the northern breeding grounds on their own.

Miraculously, they pull it off, flying from the bottom of the world back up to the top again, to the very place they were born. There they find a mate and lay two camouflaged eggs, hiding them among the rocks, and defending them with the fierceness of wolverines. Wolverines with 30 inch wingspans and dagger sharp beaks. As soon as their chicks are old enough to fly, it's time to head south again, and the cycle repeats itself. Every year of their lives these tireless birds complete one entire 25,000 mile circuit of the globe, the only birds in the world to do so.

They mate for life, and live to be twenty to thirty years of age, during which time they usually travel more than 500,000 miles - the distance to the Moon and back - a feat that qualifies them as one of the most daring and unique animals on the planet. Which makes it all the more tragic that their species is threatened. The arctic and antarctic habitats critical to their survival are diminishing, the first places to suffer the effects of climate change, and subsequently the numbers of arctic terns are declining. Just like polar bears.

At the moment, however, one of the great white bears had a more immediate problem. He was being viciously attacked by a pair of these flying wolverines,

and that was the last thing he needed right now. As he neared the rocks he stumbled and almost fell under their relentless onslaught. Pure blind instinct forced him on. The female tern brazenly landed, hovering, on top of his head, beating him with her wings and jackhammering his skull until she drew blood. But Nanuq was past caring. Through dimming vision he saw a hollow in between two large boulders right in front of him. A perfect little hide-away to curl up in. But a small chest high boulder blocked his way, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find enough strength to climb over it. Consciousness was slipping away; he was going to collapse out in the open, helpless and vulnerable, and most likely never wake up again.

Then a miracle happened. His sense of smell, which had become numb along with all the rest of his senses during his near death ordeal, suddenly came back to life. His nose, which could smell food dozens of miles away, was back! Immediately he was overwhelmed by the scent of two warm tern eggs practically right in front of him. Although his eyes were closed from exhaustion (and stabbing beaks), his sense of smell formed an image in his mind so clear and distinct, he could see the two eggs hidden in the back of the hollow as if he was staring at them with his eyes wide open.

The smell of those eggs pulled him forward, and gave him just enough strength to crawl over the boulder and fall into the hollow behind it. Two quick bites and two quick swallows, and two less baby terns in the world. The parent terns, defeated, flew away, their cries of outrage and loss echoing and fading in Nanuq's ears, as his world once again turned black.

Chapter Thirteen

There are sad days. There are really sad days. And there are days when you have to turn your own son out of your home. It doesn't get much sadder than that, and Abraham knew the depths of that sorrow. The day Ishmael left was the saddest day of his life.

It was Sarah. She went crazy! Maybe having a child at the age of ninety was too much for her, and her brain just snapped. Because as soon as Isaac was born she suddenly couldn't stand the sight of poor Ishmael anymore - the boy she'd raised as her own for fourteen years! And then to come storming into Abraham's tent demanding that he banish the both of them, Ishmael and his mother, Hagar. Send them off, out into the desert, to fend for themselves! It was unthinkable! Abraham refused to do it.

But she kept at him, day after day. *We have Isaac now... a son of our very own... we don't need them any more... every day they are here is an insult and a mockery...* She was relentless, like a woman possessed. Abraham didn't know what to do. Sarah had been his loyal, loving wife for more than sixty years. What was he supposed to do? Banish her? In utter desperation he cried out to his God, and to his surprise Yaweh answered immediately:

"Let it not be grievous in thy sight... in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of Hagar will I make a nation, for he also is thy seed."

So that was it then. A man might find the strength to

defy his wife, although it would be foolish. He might even find the strength to defy his God, although that would be both foolish and dangerous. But to defy one's wife *and* one's God? No man has enough strength for that. He had no choice; he would have to send Ishmael away. He would have to do the unthinkable, and turn him and his mother out into the desert, and trust their fate to the will of Yaweh. What else could he do? He was just a man.

So he resigned himself, but his heart felt like a cold black stone, heavy and dead within him, that would never know happiness again.

He found no sleep that night, and rose well before the sun. In a surrealistic haze he rummaged through the camp's provisions, wrapping up two piles of food and water, as much as he thought they could carry, and taking them to Hagar and Ishmael. And they knew as soon as they saw him, his shoulders bent with the weight of his sorrow. They had heard Sarah's ravings. Everyone in the camp had heard them, knowing that no man could resist them for long.

There was fear in Hagar's eyes as she looked out over the hostile emptiness of the desert, and she tried one last, weak protest. "Where shall we go? How shall we survive?" But when she looked at Abraham with pleading eyes, he could find no words of comfort for her, and she turned her face away.

Then Abraham went to Ishmael. His beloved Ishmael. He wanted to embrace him, and offer him words of love, and warning, and regret, and hope, but the look in his son's eyes struck him dumb, and froze his arms at his side. There was no fear in Ishmael's eyes. Just the wretched bitterness and hate of one who had been betrayed by someone they loved. Abraham opened his

mouth to speak, but no words came forth. The hard reality of the moment had turned this fourteen year old boy suddenly into a man, and he said, "Come Mother, let us not stay where we are not wanted."

Then Ishmael turned his back on his father, and taking his mother's arm, he trudged off across the sand, into the unknown. Abraham felt helpless, and weak, and ashamed, watching them walk away. Watching his son leaving him forever. Choking back the tears, he finally found his voice, and shouted after them, "God has promised, Ishmael. He will make of thee a nation! He has promised! You will father twelve princes, Ishmael. Twelve princes!" But neither of them looked back.

Chapter Fourteen

Easing back among his cushions, Jamal watched his son - the suicide bomber - calmly pour their tea, as if this was somehow a normal day. He looked into Abdul's eyes, and saw pride and determination. He saw passion and excitement. But when he looked deep, he also saw a hint of fear, and a tinge of doubt. That's what he had to work on. It wasn't much, but by Allah - may His praises be sung forever - it was going to have to be enough. Jamal knew he had his work cut out for him. He waited for his son to settle back and take a sip of tea, and then he said, "Abdul, may I tell you a story?"

"Of course, Father."

"It is a story about an Arab. A Palestinian named Muhamad. When he was a young man just about your age, he was working across the border in Israel. There were many Arabs working in Israel in those days."

"Traitors!" spat out Abdul. "They deserve to..."

His father reproached the interruption with a look, and Abdul fell silent. "This young Muhamad," he continued, "worked in a large hotel with many other young Palestinian men and women. He also worked with many young Israeli men and women. Everybody was mixed up with everybody else, all working together, and after a while, Muhamad began to realize something that completely bewildered him. He discovered that the Jews he worked with didn't seem like the monsters he'd always been told they were. They seemed just like him! He even made friends with some of them!"

"Those Jews are sneaky," Abdul interjected. "They suck you in."

“Well, Muhamad got sucked in so far he fell in love with a Jewish girl.”

“He fell in love with a Jew? That’s unbelievable!”

“Do you want to know what is even more unbelievable?” said Jamal. “She fell in love with him, too.”

Abdul was visibly disgusted. “And now you’re going to tell me they got married and had kids, and lived happily ever after.”

“No,” answered Jamal, his voice softening. “Not happily ever after. But they did get married. She was so much in love with Muhamad she denounced her family and her religion, and ran away with him into the Gaza strip. She changed her name and quickly learned the habits of Muslim women. Her heritage was never questioned.”

Abdul’s voice was quieter now, too. “If she did all that, she must have been very brave. But she was still a Jew!”

“But no-one ever knew,” said Jamal. “As a matter of fact the two of them went out of their way to frequently curse and revile Jews in public, so that no-one would ever even suspect the truth.”

“So then what?” demanded Abdul. “Did the Israelis come to rescue her with their tanks and their planes? And did they kill lots of innocent Palestinians in the process? Is that what this story’s all about?”

“No, my son. Although the Israelis did come all right with their tanks and their planes. But it wasn’t to rescue a runaway Jew. Her family had disowned her the day she left. I’m not sure what excuse the Israelis used that time, but they demolished many homes, and killed many Palestinians. Including Muhamad’s Jewish wife.

Abdul became smug. “Well, then she got what she deserved.”

Jamal gave him a sharp look. “You must never say that.”

“Why? She was a Jew, and all Jews deserve...”

But Jamal interrupted him. “Because she was your mother.”

Chapter Fifteen

Nanuq woke up buried under a foot of freshly fallen snow. He felt terrible. It hurt to breathe. He struggled to his feet and shook the snow off his back. Then he took a deep breath, and his body immediately went into an uncontrollable spasm of coughing, retching, and heaving, as his lungs tried to forcibly eject the salt water that had been sucked into them. Fortunately for Nanuq, there wasn't much, or he would not still be alive, but even the small amount of water that was there was too much, and it had to be expelled. His body understood that, even if his brain did not. And there was nothing gentle about the process. It was as brutal as an epileptic seizure. Poor Nanuq convulsed and shuddered helplessly as a mixture of salt water, vomit, and blood sprayed from his mouth.

After a minute or two that seemed to last for hours, his body could not take any more convulsing, and knew it, and the violent spasms subsided. Thankfully, it had been enough. Almost all of the water had been eliminated from Nanuq's lungs. But they had been permanently damaged, and would never be the same. He would have a persistent cough that would be with him for the rest of his life, and he would never again have much in the way of endurance. He would have to be far more careful in his habits from now on. There would be no more fifty mile swims for Nanuq.

But at least he was still alive. That was a miracle all by itself. And he could breathe much better now. But the violent spasms required to clear his lungs had taken so much out of him, he immediately collapsed and fell back asleep in his little hollow between the rocks.

This time he only slept for a couple of hours, and when he woke up, he felt much better. Still very weak, but well enough to start thinking about food again. He lifted his nose up high, and his nostrils became like two extra eyes. Super-eyes with the power to see very far away, through hills and around corners. The molecules that drifted across Nanuq's olfactory receptors created crystal clear images in his mind, every bit as distinct as those formed by photons passing through the lens of an eye.

He "saw" many things with his nose. The first thing he saw was a female in heat, but she was so far away, he couldn't even be sure of her direction. Besides, something told him food was his priority right now, and his nose informed him there were two major sources of food in the area.

The first was a colony of walruses (*Odobenus rosmarus*) gathered on the beach about ten miles to the south. But catching a walrus was no picnic. A healthy adult walrus had skin so thick, even a polar bear's powerful jaws had trouble getting through it. And then there were those formidable tusks. The walrus was one of the few animals that could actually kill a polar bear, if it landed a good blow with those tusks. And a male walrus could weigh up to two tons - over twice the size of Nanuq - and wield tusks over three feet long.

But the walrus was a clumsy, paranoid creature on land. It found security in numbers, often gathering together by the hundreds. A bear's only chance was a brazen frontal attack on the weakest looking edge of the colony, biting, and slashing with its claws, all the while trying to stay clear of those deadly tusks. If the bear made enough commotion, the entire group of walruses would often stampede into the sea, sometimes leaving some sick or injured member of their herd lagging

behind. But depending just how sick or injured the abandoned animal was, a bear could still have quite a fight on its hands. Attacking a walrus colony was a risky business that all too often didn't even produce a mouthful of meat.

The other source of food was a rotting whale carcass washed up on the beach about 20 miles to the north, but that would be no free lunch either, because Nanuq wasn't the only animal that had noticed it. His nose told him there were other bears there. Lots of bears. And wolves as well. He might have to fight them both just to get near the carcass. It would all depend on how big the carcass was, and how many animals were feasting on it.

So those were his choices. A colony of walruses, or a beached whale. Nanuq knew he was still very weak. He wasn't sure why, but he instinctively realized he was in no condition for a fight. The walruses were closer, but in that direction there would be no way to avoid some kind of fight. And he didn't like the idea of going south. All his instincts told him he should be heading north, to ultimately find some more frozen ocean, and move back out onto the pack ice, where the seals were. Of course, that was all a very long way away. Right now he needed food, no matter which direction it took him.

The whale was a lot further away, and chances were pretty good he'd have a fight on his hands there, too. But if it was a big whale, and hadn't been scavenged too thoroughly yet, there might be enough for everyone, and he might be able to sneak a few mouthfuls without being challenged. That's what he had to count on. And the whale was in the right direction, too. So, coughing and stumbling, Nanuq began to slowly plod north, hoping he had the strength to walk 20 miles, and that he wouldn't be attacked and killed when he got there.

Chapter Sixteen

There's only one thing worse than killing your own son, thought Abraham, and that was having to climb to the top of a mountain to do it! Abraham was 115 years old. Must he be tortured physically as well as mentally? Couldn't he have killed Isaac at the bottom of the mountain and just got it over with?

Abraham suddenly realized the absurdity of his thoughts, and found himself starting to laugh, until he glanced up at Isaac's strong young back a short way ahead on the trail, bent with the weight of the wood he carried for the sacrificial alter. The laugh stuck in his throat. There was nothing funny about any of this. This was deadly serious.

When God commands, you obey, or you pay the consequences. He had seen those consequences, and they were not pretty. He had seen the terrible plagues Yahweh visited on the Egyptians when they took Sarah. And he had seen Sodom and Gomorrah. There was no forgetting Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham was a man of peace. Yahweh, apparently, was not. Abraham had been aghast at Yahweh's plans to destroy the cities, and all who lived in them, because of their so called wicked ways. He pleaded with God not to do it. He bargained with God. He finally persuaded God to agree to spare the cities if He could find but ten righteous souls within them. Abraham felt sure that amongst the thousands of inhabitants there had to be at least ten that were not corrupt, and he went back to his camp feeling very proud of himself. He felt he had done a very great thing. He had appealed to Yahweh's compassion, and won the day. Single handed, he had

saved the lives of thousands, including his cousin Lot, who lived in Sodom.

But during the night his self assurance weakened when a loud sound like thunder came from the direction of the two cities. It was so intense it shook the ground beneath his bed. Rousing himself, he stepped outside his tent, and under the dim light of a slim crescent moon, looked down from the slopes of his camp over the plains containing the doomed cities. His self assurance disappeared completely when he saw the heavens over the plains open, and great flaming balls of fire fall from the sky. Although the cities themselves were out of sight, the wind was in his face, and carried the screams of thousands to his ears, as they were consumed by agony and terror, and Abraham's skin became prickly with fear.

Others of Abraham's tribe had been wakened out of their tents as well, but they did not stay outside for long. A dreadful angry presence was loose in the night, unleashing a vengeance and a fury not meant for mortal eyes. Abraham retreated back to his bed and pulled his blanket up over his head, in a vain attempt to shut out those far away screams.

The next morning there was nothing left on the Sodom and Gomorrah plains but smoldering ruins, and charred corpses. It was a sickening and fearful reminder of the power of God. Abraham had never seen such total destruction. Nobody had been left alive. Yahweh had killed them all. Almost. He had remembered Abraham at the last moment, and allowed his cousin Lot to escape with his family. Lot's wife, however, disobeyed God, and looked back, and paid the price.

That was the image Abraham would never forget. The image that haunted him even here on the slopes of

Mount Moriah. He had seen her that next morning, standing alone out on the plains, looking back towards the place where the city of Sodom had once stood. He had run up to her, glad she was still alive. As if it were yesterday, he remembered how she stood, her slim figure standing tall, her long neck leaning forward, her thin, bony hand shading her eyes, her mouth open in surprise. But when he got close, he saw she was no longer alive. He staggered back in shock. Although perfect in every detail, she was no longer flesh and bone. Just a ghostly statue of salt, crumbling in the desert sun.

That image was burned into Abraham's brain, and the message was clear. No matter how sad, or brutal or absurd the command, there was no disobeying God.

Chapter Seventeen

For a terrifying moment Jamal thought his son was having a heart attack. Abdul's face had frozen into a look of shock and horror. He clutched at his chest, as if he was having trouble breathing, and guttural, grunting sounds came from his mouth, as if he were trying to speak, but couldn't. Jamal was beginning to think maybe he'd gone too far, when his son finally spoke. In a broken, strained voice, he said, "But... but you said my mother died from pneumonia!"

"You were a baby. What should we have told you?"

"The truth!" Abdul shouted, leaping to his feet.

Jamal lowered his head. "I meant to tell you, when you got older. I'm sorry, my son. I was weak; I kept putting it off. I see now, that was a terrible mistake. Please forgive me."

"Forgive you? Forgive you?" Abdul yelled. Extremely agitated, his face flushed, he began to pace back and forth in front of his father. "How could you not tell me?"

"You're right, my son. I should have told you the truth. I am truly sorry. Now, please, sit down, and try to remain calm."

"Sit down? Remain calm? How can you expect me..." Abdul's voice cracked. "So that means... that means that I..."

"Yes," his father said. "You are half Jewish."

At that, the color drained from Abdul's face, and he did sit back down, not from resignation, but from the fact that his knees were buckling beneath him. He

mumbled “Half Jewish?” and his face took on a tortured, confused look, and he began to shake his head in disbelief. “It can’t be...” he muttered, “It can’t be...” Then he suddenly glared at Jamal and with bitterness and sarcasm in his voice he asked, “So who is my father then? You or this Muhamad person?”

“I am your father, Abdul. In those days I belonged to a group of young men who all took the name of Muhamad, in honor of the one true prophet. I was the young man who worked alongside the Jews in the Israeli hotel, and I was the one who fell in love with a Jewish girl. After she was killed, I was so distraught, I moved to a different neighbourhood, and resumed the name given to me by my parents. I had a little six month old baby son to care for, and I wanted to remove him as far as possible from the scandal of his mother’s secret, and the horror of her death.”

“So why tell me now?”

Jamal quietly gathered himself. This was the moment of truth. This is where he would find out whether one momentous lie was going to be enough, or if he would have to fall further into the shameful abyss he had created for himself. “My son,” he began softly, “Surely you see now that you can not go through with your plans. You could be killing your own cousins, your own flesh and blood.”

“But Father, I can’t back out of the mission now, with only two days to go. I know too much. I would be killed. Besides, what about loyalty? What about my faith? What about my homeland?”

“There are others who will take your place.”

“I don’t know, father. I don’t know.”

The pain and confusion in his son’s eyes cut Jamal to

the quick. He hated himself for putting his beloved Abdul through this mental anguish. But what could he do? It was still better than letting him kill himself, wasn't it? This was the most difficult conversation of his life, but somehow he must get through it. His son's life depended on it. Hopefully he had said enough. Hopefully he would not have to go any further, and say any more. Hopefully, there was enough doubt and fear and uncertainty now in Abdul's mind that he would stand down, and abort his planned martyrdom.

In an unconscious effort to end this uncomfortable talk, and without really thinking it through, Jamal's voice took on a paternal, authoritative tone, and he said, "I'm sorry Abdul, but I cannot allow you to go through with this mission."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew he had made a mistake. Abdul's look instantly became rebellious, and defiant, and he said, "Father, don't force me to disobey you."

Jamal knew his strategy was now hanging by a thread, due to his thoughtless ultimatum. It was going to be necessary to implement plan B. He was going to have to trespass further into the land of lies, to save his son. May Allah - the source of all strength - give him the courage to go on. With a supreme effort of will, he managed to keep his voice steady, and said, "Abdul, please pour us some more tea. There is more you need to know."

Chapter Eighteen

It took Nanuq two days to reach the whale carcass, a journey that would normally only have taken a few hours. But he felt much better at the end of his trek. The exercise had done him good. His head had cleared, and he felt much of his former strength returning. It still hurt to take a deep breath, so he instinctively refrained from over exerting himself, but other than that, he was beginning to feel more and more like his old self again.

But now a new challenge confronted him. There were a dozen wolves, and more than thirty other polar bears between him and the food that his battered body so desperately craved. He sat on a small rise about 100 feet from the carcass, to look over the situation, and consider his options.

The carcass was that of a bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*), the longest living mammal on Earth, often living for more than 200 years. They are also one of the oldest mammals on Earth, for some fossils of bowheads have been found to be over two million years old. And for the last several thousand years they have lived in harmony with the natives of the north, the Eskimos harvesting only as many of the whales as they needed for sustenance.

But the advent of commercial whaling changed all that. The bowheads became the target of choice for the fleets of whalers, and took the brunt of the slaughter. For they are huge, averaging over 60 feet in length, and 150 tons, second in weight only to the great blue whale, the largest animal ever to inhabit the planet Earth. Bowheads are also docile, and non-aggressive. They have no teeth, feeding exclusively on the plankton and krill

that inhabit the surface layers of the world's oceans, straining the tiny plants and animals through the numerous six foot long rows of baleen filters that line their massive down-turned (bowed) mouths. They are slow swimmers, and spend almost all their time near the surface, making them easy targets for harpooners, and because they spend their entire lives in the freezing arctic waters, they have a layer of blubber - highly prized in the days of whaling - over 20 inches thick. The large amounts of baleen and blubber in their bodies make them tend to float when they die, unlike other species the whalers had to pump full of air, to keep them from sinking after they were killed.

For all these reasons, they became the favoured targets of the whalers, who sought them out and hunted them down, annihilating an entire pod, and then moving on to the next one, until the bowheads were poised on the very brink of extinction, before whaling was finally banned in the 1960's. Then, just as their population was trying to recover, modern Man made another attack, indirect this time, but no less deadly. Having barely survived the horrors of commercial whaling, the whales are now being hit by the effects of pollution and climate change. The bodies of beached whales have been found to contain DDT and PCB's. To make matters worse, satellite surveys have found that the global warming of Earth's oceans has inhibited the growth rate of the phytoplankton crucial to their survival. And since adult bowheads consume about eight tons of plankton a day, any reduction in this food supply is potentially catastrophic. Bowhead whales are currently an endangered species.

At the moment, Nanuq was feeling a little endangered himself. He wasn't starving yet, but he was getting there, and there were a lot of sharp teeth and

claws between him and the food supply. He was a humbled bear, now. Nearly drowning will do that to you. He wasn't so quick to stroll into the middle of a feeding frenzy. He had to think about it for a moment.

The wolves and the bears seemed to have some sort of truce between them, the wolves having claimed the nose of the giant creature, high and dry on the beach, and the bears strung out on either side, right down into the water, each leaving the other alone. It was actually quite a peaceful scene, except for the odd snarl here and there. Everybody had their own little piece of territory, and for the moment, there was enough for everybody. But not for long.

The whale carcass had been there long enough that most of the edible parts had been consumed. What little was left was rotten, and rancid (not that that made any difference to any of the stomachs in attendance). Soon there would be only a few scraps, and then the fighting would begin. Nanuq knew he needed to move in now, before that happened.

There were a few other, smaller bears, sitting and watching, just as he was. They would wait for the older, larger bears to become bloated and full, and wander off, and then they would charge in and fight each other for the remnants. But Nanuq was not a small, young bear. He was probably the largest bear there. That counted for a lot. With any luck he could bluff his way to the dinner table. Most confrontations between bears was all posturing, anyway. Rarely do they come to blows. But Nanuq couldn't take the chance. Even though he felt most of his strength had returned, fighting involved a lot of heavy breathing, which would be a definite problem.

But he had to get in there soon, before it was all

gone. The upper part of the carcass was almost picked clean. Most of the remaining meat seemed to be around the tail, which floated in about four or five feet of water. Unfortunately, there were two bears, almost as big as he was, feeding there.

Then, as Nanuq watched, one of the bears chewing on the tail suddenly decided he had eaten his full, and started to walk away. A couple of the waiting, younger bears were looking, and sniffing, and taking a step or two in that direction, and Nanuq knew that for better or worse, it was time to make his move. He heaved his bulk up, and began to lumber down the slope towards the carcass.

Chapter Nineteen

Abraham was climbing up a mountain to kill his son, and he was the happiest man in the world. Because he had figured it out, and everything was going to be okay. He had finally figured it all out, and now that he had, all the anguish he had been going through the last few days seemed silly, almost funny.

It had taken them three days to reach the base of Mount Moriah. Three days of anxiety and tortured thoughts. He couldn't eat. What little sleep he found was invaded by nightmares. *Daymares* assaulted him when he was awake. Time seemed to be moving very slowly as if it wanted to prolong his pain as long as possible. When they finally reached the bottom of the mountain he bid the two young men who had accompanied them to stay there and wait for his return. He unloaded the donkey that had borne the sacrificial fuel, and strapped the large bundle of sticks onto Isaac's back, leaving the donkey behind as well. Then, with a fire brand in one hand, and the painted box containing the sacrificial killing knife in the other, Abraham followed his son up the trail, his face grim and set, the two of them walking alone into the hands of destiny.

He hadn't wanted any witnesses. He was scared. He didn't know what was going to happen on top of that mountain. But now that he had figured it out, he wished their companions were still with them. What an old fool he had been! There was going to be a great performance, and great rewards. Yahweh Himself would probably show up. There may even be a new covenant! There should be witnesses!

And the donkey! What was he thinking? Why would he

leave the donkey behind, and make poor Isaac carry all that wood? He had been upset - not thinking straight. That was his only excuse. But he was going to start making things better right now. "Isaac!" he called, "Wait! Stop! Put down that bundle. We're going to take a good long rest, my son. There's no hurry. Everything's going to be okay."

Because he had figured out God's plan. It was a test! That's all. God would never actually make him kill his own son. The idea was absurd. Besides, the Lord had promised:

"...in Isaac shall thy seed be called ...and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him."

It was all just a test. A test of his faith and obedience. Why God needed another test of his faith and obedience, Abraham didn't know. Hadn't he always obeyed every command Yahweh had given him? Was it that time Abraham asked God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah? Was that what this was all about? Was God angry about that, that Abraham would dare such a thing? Was this God's way of both testing him, and also punishing him by making him contemplate the horror of slicing open the throat of his own son and watching his body burn on the sacrificial altar? Was God that mean spirited? Was God that sadistic? Abraham didn't know the answers to any of these questions. Perhaps what seemed cruel to his limited, mortal eyes, was but one small part of some divine tapestry that would ultimately become something wonderful and good. That's what Abraham hoped for. That's what Abraham believed. He had to, or he would go mad. Unless, of course, he was already mad, which would also go a long ways towards explaining his current predicament.

It was all much too confusing. Abraham knew that all the whys and wherefores were far beyond him, and always would be. So all he could do was focus on the here and now, and it all boiled down to one inescapable truth: God had issued a command, and Abraham had to obey, or he would be punished. He and his entire tribe would be plagued, like the Egyptians who took Sarah. Or he would be turned into a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife. Or all of his people would be obliterated from the face of the earth, like Sodom and Gomorrah. Or worse. There was no telling what kind of fiendish terrors Yahweh was capable of, and Abraham didn't want to find out.

And he wouldn't have to, because it was only a test. God just wanted to see if he would actually do it, and then right at the last moment He'd come swooping down and grab the knife out of Abraham's hand, and congratulate him on his loyalty and faith, and give him some great reward. What kind of reward would it be? he wondered. It ought to be pretty damn good, whatever it was. I mean: killing your own son! That ought to be worth something! Something extraordinary, like... immortality! (Abraham's chest swelled with the thought) or maybe... wings! Now that would be something! Wings to fly through the air... like a bird... or like an angel. Abraham almost giggled, he was so giddy with relief. He was like a drunken man. He had been stooped and mired in the darkest depths of sorrow, and now, standing tall in the white light of his epiphany, the heights of joy made him a little dizzy. And although it didn't seem right somehow, he felt like laughing. Like he was the happiest man in the world.

Isaac shouldered his burden onto the ground with a grunt, and turned his sweat stained face back towards his father, panting for breath, and said, "Father, you know I would never question you, or the will of Yahweh,

but I still don't understand how we are to have a sacrifice without a lamb?"

Abraham shuffled up beside his son, and slumped down to the ground, his back against a tree. He motioned to the bundle of sticks and said, "Sit down, Isaac. You have carried a heavy burden a long way up a steep hill." A far away look crept into Abraham's eyes. "I, too, have been carrying a burden... (oh, my son, if you only knew...) but now we will rest, and do not trouble your mind about a lamb for the altar." Abraham smiled up at his son. "The Lord will provide us with a lamb."

Chapter Twenty

It was Jamal's last chance to save his son's life, and he knew it. He waited while Abdul poured the tea and sat back down, and then he spoke softly, "Do you know why I married a Jew?"

Abdul was sullen, his answer petulant. "Because you were bewitched."

"Yes," Jamal smiled. "I was bewitched. Your mother was very beautiful, and I was, after all, just a man. But she was so much more. She was the wisest, most compassionate, loving woman I had ever met."

"But she was a Jew!"

"Yes, she was. And that's the problem, isn't it? How can someone be a Jew, and be so very, very good? It goes against everything we have ever been told, by our parents, our teachers, our friends... how can such a thing be? Well, I am going to tell you, Abdul, how such a thing can be, but first you must promise never to repeat what I am about to tell you, because that would be very, very dangerous."

Abdul looked doubtful, but mumbled, "All right, I promise."

Jamal glanced around nervously, leaned forward, and whispered, "There's nothing wrong with the Jews. There's nothing bad, nor evil about them. They're just like you and me."

Abdul looked as if he had been slapped in the face. "How can you say that!" he exclaimed.

"Because I worked with them. I came to know them.

To be sure, some are better than others, just as some Muslims are better than other Muslims. But the point is, they are just people, Abdul, like you and me. They are our brothers and sisters. We are all the children of Abraham. Arabs and Jews, and all their descendants, all over the world. We are all the same and Allah loves us all equally.”

Abdul was aghast. “But... that’s blasphemy!”

“No, Abdul. Not blasphemy. Truth. Read the Book! Allah bestowed his blessings on Isaac and Ishmael both. Not Ishmael alone.”

“But father, all my life you have told me...”

Jamal held up his hand, silencing his son. Once again he glanced around nervously, and his voice lowered to a whisper. “Look where we live, Abdul. What do you think would happen if you walked into the local cafe and announced to the world that Jews were good, and we should stop hating them? How many days before your body would be found in an alley somewhere, with your throat cut and your tongue ripped out? No matter how hard you strive for the truth, my son, there always seems to be one lie you have to live with, purely for the sake of survival. If we could somehow escape this place, and live somewhere else, we could leave this lie behind. But some other lie would be sure to take its place. If it did not, we would know that we were no longer of the earth, and had passed on to Paradise.”

Jamal paused at this point, and since Abdul appeared too stunned to speak, he continued. “I am sorry, my son, to burden you with this dangerous truth, but considering what you are planning to do, I have no choice. Now you must be strong. Strong enough to accept this truth, and yet keep it hidden. All of us who worked across the border had to do this. The few who tried to speak out

were quickly silenced. Deep rooted hate is not dispelled overnight. The process can take a very long time. Many generations may have to come and go before a truth this radical and dangerous may be openly accepted. In the meantime, we have to keep surviving. We have to keep living with the lie. But that does not make the truth go away. And that is why, my son, you must now search your heart, and do what is right.”

Abdul lowered his eyes, and in a low voice, said, “I do not know, father. I am very confused.”

Jamal leapt on this promising statement like a starving man on a morsel of bread. “Yes, yes,” he exclaimed, “of course you are confused. Your world has been turned upside down. Even the strongest man would be doubtful, and afraid. But you are not alone, Abdul. I am here to help you. I will help you shoulder this burden of truth.”

“But father, it is too late. I can not abandon this mission now, with only two days to go. So many people have already done so much... risked so much. How can I betray them?”

Jamal tried to suppress the joy that was welling up within him. Abdul was coming around! But it was not yet time to relax and celebrate. The battle was not over. Father and son were poised on the edge of a knife, with life on one side, and horror and death on the other. It could still go either way. He knew he must choose his next words very carefully. “Allah - may he be forever praised - knows the truth. Allah is the Truth, and it is the Truth you must not betray. And I will be by your side. I will come with you tomorrow, and explain to your friends about a great family crisis that demands your immediate attention. I will tell them that I forbid you to go on this mission; that it is out of your hands, and you

have no choice.”

Abdul looked up at his father with pain and anguish in his eyes. “These are dangerous men. They will kill us!”

“No they won’t, Abdul. They will be sure to know me, and know that I have some very powerful friends. They will not dare to harm us.”

Abdul stared at his father, and his chin began to quiver, and his eyes grew moist. Suddenly he covered his face with his hands and began to weep. “Oh, father,” he sobbed. “Why is life so hard... so confusing?”

Jamal went to his son and put his arm around his shoulders, fighting to hold back his own tears. “Because it is the will of Allah, my son, and it is not for us to question, but to obey.” He turned his son’s face towards him, and stared into his red rimmed eyes. “Now, will you let me come with you tomorrow? We will leave in the morning, and I will do all the talking. I will convince your friends they will have to carry out this mission without you, and I will do it in such a way that your honour and integrity will remain intact. Will you let me do this for you, Abdul?”

The question brought on another bout of weeping, and Jamal simply hugged his son, and waited. There was no more to be said. It was up to Abdul now, to decide from which side of the knife they would both fall. Finally, Abdul pulled himself together enough to speak, and his words caused Jamal’s heart to soar with happiness and relief. “Yes, father. In the morning we will go.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Nanuq walked as if he owned the world. It was a grand performance. To look at him, you would never guess that three days ago he had been within a whisker of death, and even now barely had the strength to go forward. And there were plenty of eyes looking at him right now. Not overtly, to be sure - that could be taken as a challenge - but they were looking nonetheless. Although they didn't show it, every animal feeding at the carcass was aware of his approach. Surreptitiously, with sideways glances and quick peeks, dozens of eyes warily watched him as he ambled nonchalantly towards the newly vacated eating place near the tail of the dead whale.

As he waded out into the water, the bear just up from the spot he was heading to suddenly seemed to realize there was more meat closer to the tail, and started moving over. Nanuq was only twenty feet away, and without slowing his pace, he snarled. He couldn't manage a full fledged roar; that would have made him cough, and look weak. But he snarled with everything he had. It wasn't particularly loud, but it was dreadfully savage. It was the kind of snarl that makes hackles rise, and adrenaline flow. Every feeding animal that heard it inadvertently backed away a step - except for the bear in front of him. It was a large bear, brazen with food lust, and it turned towards Nanuq, stood up on its hind legs and roared. A long, loud, bloodcurdling roar that echoed through the surrounding hills, and caused all the other animals to stop what they were doing and take notice. A great white bear had challenged another great white bear, and that was no small thing.

Nanuq was tired. He'd been walking for two days. He didn't need this. But he did need food, and this bear was in his way, so despite his injuries, and despite his weakness, survival instincts bred through thousands of years of genetic engineering by Mother Nature herself took over. Maintaining eye contact, he slowly, but with the supreme confidence of a seasoned fighter with nothing left to lose, raised himself up on his hind legs, and the two bears stood face to face, ten feet apart. Although the bear in front of him was large, Nanuq was larger, standing at least a full head taller than his opponent. And he did not roar. He did not even snarl. He curled back his lips, exposing his huge canines, and hissed. Then he lunged, launching himself at the other bear with all the ferocity he could muster.

Fortunately for Nanuq, his bluff worked. The other bear was 50 feet away before you could blink. There it stopped and looked back, and although Nanuq was not giving chase, his steely glare spoke a thousand words. Deciding that maybe it had eaten its fill after all, the vanquished bear gathered what was left of its dignity, and began to walk away. Nanuq waited for a few moments to be sure it was not returning, inwardly wincing with pain from each deep breath brought on by his exertion, and carefully watching the other animals around him. But with the show over, the others quietly went back to their feeding. There would be no more challengers. Once again, as if the gods favoured him for some greater purpose, Nanuq had escaped disaster. He turned toward the ragged skeleton of the whale, and began to tear off strips of rotting fat, and skin, and swallow them whole.

Two hours later, his stomach full of putrescent yet nourishing protein, Nanuq abandoned the carcass. The wolves were gone, the younger bears had started to

fight over the few scraps that remained, and it was time to leave. Time to find a place to bed down and sleep off this big meal. But first he must put some distance between himself and the dead whale, and the dangers it attracted. So he headed north, his muscles obediently following the footsteps of his ancestors, responding to some ancient instructions laid down in his genes eons ago. Answering a call as old as Earth itself. The same call that drew birds back to their nesting grounds thousands of miles away. The call that drew sea turtles up onto the beaches to lay their eggs. The call to hibernate. The call to migrate. The call to hunt, and kill. The call to mate. An enigmatic force that no scientist can explain, that affects all life on Earth.

And it was this enigmatic, all powerful force that now drove Nanuq north, towards the frozen ocean that was fundamental to his survival. The frozen ocean that was shrinking, and melting earlier each year, and would one day be no more. And then he would be no more. Polar bears would be no more. The largest land carnivores on Earth would be no more.

And the longest living mammal on Earth, the bowhead whale, would be no more, after two million years of peaceful existence. The bird that migrated farther than any other bird on the planet, the arctic tern, would be no more. The arctic wolf, the arctic fox, would all be gone. The arctic and the antarctic would fall first. Then the storms, floods and fires would spread towards the equator, taking more and more lives, until finally the species that caused all the trouble in the first place, with their overpopulation and poisonous waste products, would drown in their own filth, and the world would plunge into darkness.

About two miles down the beach Nanuq found a small patch of willows, clawed his way into the center, and for

the first time in months, fell asleep with a full stomach.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Abraham and Isaac finally reached the top of Mount Moriah, the sun had sunk low in the west, sending forth long rays of amber light that illuminated the world in an eerie, magical way. The grass, the trees, even the clouds shimmered with a golden glow. The mountain top was lit up like a stage, set for a great performance, and Abraham was ready.

After a short rest, he directed Isaac to untie the bundle of sticks, and spread them over a large low rock, that would serve as the altar for the sacrifice. When Isaac had finished, he turned to his father and said, “Everything is ready, father. All we need now is a lamb.”

Abraham looked into his son’s eyes. “Do you trust me, Isaac?”

“Of course, father.”

“Do you trust me absolutely, without question?”

Suddenly Isaac understood. It was a test! His father was testing him! That’s why there was no lamb. He was to be the lamb! Did he love his father enough to die for him? That was the test. Of course his father would not actually kill him. It was just a test, and knowing there was no real danger, it was a test he would easily pass. He took a deep breath, and in a strong unwavering voice, answered, “Without question.”

Abraham smiled, and had to fight down the water that was rising to his eyes. Isaac was simply the best son a father could have, he thought. “Give me your hands,” he asked in a soft voice, and when Isaac offered them, Abraham pulled some twine out of his pocket and bound

his wrists. Then he had Isaac lie down on top of the wood that covered the altar, and bound his ankles as well.

Abraham took the razor sharp sacrificial knife out of its box and unwrapped it. Cupping it in his palms, he kissed it, and murmured blessings over it. Then he stood over his son, raised his face to the heavens, and in a loud clear voice, he prayed, “My Lord, God, Creator of all things. Creator of all life. You are the one true God. We praise your name, and love you above all else. To show our love we make burnt offerings to You. As You have given the breath of life to all creatures, so shall we offer it to You, for it is the greatest of all gifts.”

Abraham looked down at his son, and was met with such a look of unqualified love and trust, he was momentarily overwhelmed, and without intending to, he whispered, “I love you, Isaac.”

Isaac answered, “I love you too, Father,” and for a long moment they looked into each other’s eyes.

Finally, Abraham gathered himself, murmured, “Close your eyes, my son,” and placed the tip of the sacrificial knife against Isaac’s throat, as he had done so many times before with lambs, and goats and other sacrificial animals. As always, the tip of the knife was pressed against the far side of the neck so the blood would spurt away, and poised to stab deeply and slice quickly, in order for death to be as swift and merciful as possible.

Once again, Abraham lifted his face to the sky and prayed. “On this day, Lord, I offer you the greatest gift I can offer. Not just life, but the life of one who is dearer to me than all others. On this day I offer you the life of my son, so you will know how much I love you.” Here Abraham paused and waited, thinking *any time now, Yahweh, feel free to stop me...* but nothing happened,

so he continued. “My Lord, God, please accept the life of my son as a burnt offering. As much as I love him, I love you more. Please take my son, as a sign of my love.”

Again, Abraham paused, and again, nothing happened. Yahweh did not come swooping down from the sky and snatch the knife from his hands, and quite suddenly, like the opening of the trap door under a gallows, Abraham’s world fell away from beneath him. He suddenly realized just how big a fool he really was. Yahweh wasn’t about to be tricked by his little performance. How could he have thought, even for a second, that he could simply pretend to kill Isaac? Yahweh knows everything! As the true horror of the situation struck him, Abraham began to sweat, and his hand holding the knife began to tremble, and his thoughts screamed *No! God, please don’t make me do this!*

Feeling his father’s hand tremble worried Isaac. Surely he had proven himself to his father by now! Why was he still holding a knife to his throat? And why was he trembling? He wasn’t really going to... no, it was not possible. Was it? Despite himself, Isaac felt fear creep over him like a snake, making him shiver, and cold beads of sweat trickled down the sides of his forehead.

Abraham was losing control. This wasn’t supposed to happen! Could he do it? Could he kill his own son? For the love of Yahweh? How about for the *fear* of Yahweh? Would he kill his own son to escape the retribution of Yahweh? He couldn’t think straight. What should he do? What *could* he do? He had to obey the Lord. But he couldn’t kill Isaac, could he? The battle within him was so desperate and intense he began to shake and gnash his teeth.

He heard a whimper and looked down. His shaking hand had inadvertently driven the point of the knife into Isaac's neck, and a thin stream of blood flowed down his throat. At the sight of the blood, Abraham screamed, and dropped the knife. His knees buckled, and he fell to the dirt. Sobbing, he began pleading, "Please God, forgive me, I am weak... so weak. I cannot do it. I just cannot do it!" With tears streaming down his face, he begged God's forgiveness. "Please God, let Isaac live. Take me, God! Please, take me instead of Isaac. He is so young... please take me. I will give myself to you! Yes, here, you can have me!" and Abraham frantically felt around on the ground until he found the knife, and quickly brought it to his own throat. He cried out, "Lord, I give you my life, in place of my son!"

Abraham closed his eyes and began to pull the blade across his throat when he felt a hand on his wrist, stopping him. It was Isaac. He was no longer bound, and knelt beside his father in the dust. There was an unearthly glow about him, and he spoke softly. "I think it is over now, father. Yahweh is here."

Abraham gasped as indeed, standing behind Isaac was the figure of a man. He was clad in long flowing robes, glowing with a soft white light, as if bathed in moonlight. The entire mountain top was glowing, and without moving his lips, Yahweh spoke:

"Be at peace, Abraham, friend of God. You have done well, in my eyes, and those of your brethren. You have saved yourself, and all Men. You will never again need a sacrificial knife."

And the knife crumbled to dust in Abraham's hand.

"Rise, Abraham, father of nations. You have shown that Man can use his free will to read his heart, and see the truth. There will be no more burnt offerings. There

will be no more killing. From this day forward no Man will kill another, or any other living creature, in my name. For I am the God of life, not of death, and whosoever now kills in the name of God will be cursed for all eternity.”

In a daze, Abraham struggled to his feet, leaning on Isaac’s strong arm, and tried to speak. “But Lord, I... can it be true?”

Yahweh smiled:

“It is true, Abraham. Go forth now. You will not see me again, though I will be with you always. Make this truth known. Go and live in peace, for the glory of God, and the glory of Man.”

And with those words, the figure of Yahweh began to fade, until it was no more, and Abraham and Isaac began the long trek back down the mountain.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jamal slept little, his mind racing, trying to devise the safest strategy for extracting his son from this mess. Abdul had been right, these were dangerous men they would be dealing with. If they were not handled properly, things could go very wrong very fast. Maybe he should go alone to talk to these men. Abdul could falter, at the last minute, face to face with his comrades. Better yet, bring cousin Sama with them. He was big and mean looking, and knew how to fight...

No. It would have to be Abdul, and his father. His father who would say *I'm sorry, my friends, but I've been forced to forbid my son to go on this holiest of missions - praise Allah. It breaks my heart to have to do this, believe me,* (here he would put his hand on Abdul's shoulder, and give him a loving look) *I was so proud of my son, the martyr.* Then he would give the others a firm, determined glare, and say *It is a family matter.* (Here he would drop a couple of names that would be sure to impress them.) *Both my son and I are needed urgently, immediately. I'm sure you'll have no problem finding a replacement. Now, we must go. The blessings of Allah on you, and on your holy mission. Allahu Akbar.* Then grab Abdul and get the hell out of there before the others even knew what hit them. A plain and simple plan... that could go wrong in a million different ways.

When Jamal woke and found the rays of the morning sun already well up the bedroom wall, he silently cursed himself and immediately arose. He wanted to have the meeting first thing in the morning, and get it over with. He slipped on his watch. *Almost 9:00! How could he have slept so late?* He splashed some water on his face

and walked down the hall to wake Abdul. As he approached Abdul's doorway he called out, "Wake up my boy! We have a meeting to go to and we've overslept. Breakfast will have to wait until..." The words caught in his throat, and he stood in the doorway with his mouth open. Abdul's bed was empty.

No! It can't be! But as Jamal ran frantically through the tiny house and out in the yard shouting "Abdul! Abdul!", he knew he had been duped. The twin sins of pride and arrogance had deceived him into thinking he had been manipulating his son, when in fact it had been his son who had been doing the manipulating. Abdul had only pretended to believe the story about his mother being a Jew, and all the rest of it. For a brief moment Jamal felt a surge of paternal pride, thinking about how clever and quick his son was, putting up just the right amount of resistance, and then seeming to capitulate, and telling his father just what he wanted to hear.

Then, like a slap in the face, Jamal knew with dreadful certainty that Abdul had lied about the mission. It was not tomorrow; it was today! Panic overtook him. All he could think of was that somehow, he had to get to Abdul and stop him. If the detonation was planned for noon, he had three hours. But what if Abdul had lied about the time as well? What if it was planned for eleven, or even ten o'clock?

Frantic with desperation, Jamal ran down the street to his cousin, Sama, who had a car, and begged a ride to the border.

"Have you money for gas, cousin?" Sama had asked.

"Yes, yes, but we must go now!"

"And what is so important I cannot finish my coffee first?"

“Please, Sama! I cannot tell you. You must trust me. It is very, very important I get to the border as quickly as possible.”

Sama sighed. “It is the will of Allah, it seems, that I do the bidding of others, like a dumb beast. Come cousin, I will take you to the border for your very important mystery,” and with agonizing slowness, he prepared to leave.

It was 9:30 when they reached the border, and of course, the Israeli border guards kept him waiting as long as they could. He tried to hide his impatience, so he would not look suspicious, as his heart pounded in his chest, and trickles of sweat collected in the small of his back.

Finally they let him through, and a short taxi ride later he was at the entrance of the Holiday Inn. It was four minutes to ten. Hoping against hope that the explosion was not scheduled for ten o’clock, Jamal walked as fast as he dared without drawing attention to himself, through the lobby to the front desk. “Please, could you tell me where the wedding reception is being held?”

The desk clerk looked confused. “Wedding reception?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, there is supposed to be a large wedding reception here today.”

“Here?” the desk clerk said, blinking stupidly.

A Jewish couple had walked up to the desk, and the man said to Jamal, “Your reception is probably down the road at the Samson Inn. We just came from there, but could not get a room, it is so crowded.”

Of course! thought Jamal. *Project Delilah! The Samson Inn!* He rushed out of the hotel, but his taxi had

left, and there were no others waiting, so he began to run. He no longer cared if he looked suspicious. All that mattered was getting to Abdul before he pulled that detonator cord. But it was several blocks to the Samson, and he quickly tired and had to reduce his gait to a fast walk. Alternately jogging and walking, he finally reached the Samson Inn at 10:20.

The hotel was indeed crowded. Jamal had to rudely push his way through to the reception hall, and his heart sank as he realized how difficult it was going to be to find his son in this crush of bodies. Frantically he looked, but all he saw were Jews. Loud, rich, ugly Jews! Suddenly he found himself wishing he was the one with the bomb. He would give his life gladly, knowing he would be killing these arrogant Jews. They disgusted him! Shouting and laughing loudly, dressed in rich clothes, bedecked with jewels, while his people suffered in squalor and poverty. He had never hated Jews so much in his life.

Then he recognized Abdul. He had noticed a waiter leaning against a pillar in the center of the room, but it was not the slim figure of his son. The waiter was thick, and stocky looking. But when the waiter turned his head in his direction, Jamal plainly saw the face of his beloved Abdul, and the realization came to him that it was the explosives under the waiter's jacket that made him look stocky. At that same instant, Abdul recognized his father. Their eyes locked, a momentary look of confusion and frustration crossing Abdul's face. But there was also a look of proud determination, and Jamal knew he had to get to him fast.

He began to push people out of the way in his haste. But there were too many of them. The room was too crowded. Through the mass of people, Jamal saw his son silently shaking his head at him, telling him *No! Stay*

away! but it only made Jamal more desperate. And there were too many fat, stinking Jews in his way. Without realizing it, he began to shout, "Move! Get out of my way!" and too late discovered he had attracted the attention of the security guard. The guard saw him glance at the waiter with the bulging jacket, and immediately starting moving in Abdul's direction. Unconsciously, Jamal shouted, "No!" pushing and clawing his way through the throng with renewed vigor.

By now others in the room had noticed the commotion, and were trying to move away, but the room was too crowded. There was nowhere to go. Jamal was still ten feet away from his son when he saw Abdul's hand snaking underneath his jacket, feeling for the detonation cord, and he knew all was lost. All his clever plans and schemes had failed miserably. The guard saw Abdul reaching into his jacket as well, and began to raise his gun, yelling at people to get out of the way.

Jamal reacted instinctively. In two bounds he was on top of the guard, taking him to the ground. He was aware of the loud report of the guard's gun, but did not feel the bullet tear its way through his intestines. He felt only a strange sense of lightness, of time standing still. He looked up at his son, just a few feet away, and as their eyes met, for a fraction of a second a moment of understanding passed between them, and they both smiled. As one, they shouted "Allahu Akbar!" and Abdul's arm jerked inside his jacket.

* * * * *

The next day the papers talked about the father and son suicide team. The blast had been so powerful it had brought down the ceiling of the reception hall, and 66

people had been killed instantly. Another 53 were severely injured. Within hours Israeli tanks were rolling across the border into the West Bank, destroying homes and killing dozens of rock throwing Palestinians. The world pleaded for both sides to stay calm and exercise restraint. The militant Palestinian group Hamas vowed revenge, saying they would make the streets run red with the blood of Jews. And somewhere, whether it be paradise or hell, a father and son were together for eternity.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Nanuq knew nothing of the processes of evolution. He knew nothing about fickle genes, and how they would throw a mutation into the mix every once in a while, just to see what would happen. If it didn't work, it died out and that was that. If it worked, it stayed. If it in any way increased the number of direct progeny, and therefore direct descendants, it not only stayed but spread through the species, and over generations became a dominant characteristic.

Like the practice of infanticide. Many species, including many cats, dogs, bears, rodents, insects, primates, and even Humans - practice infanticide. In the cold, cruel "survival of the fittest" logic of evolution, if you are strong and powerful enough to kill off the children of others, and protect your own, the next generation will inherit your superior strength, and the species as a whole will benefit.

It is almost always males that do the killing, and males that are killed. Adult male tigers, and bears, will kill and sometimes even eat the young of a female they come across, not only removing another's genetic material from the gene pool, but also forcing the female back into heat so they can mate with her and infuse her with their own DNA, enhancing its survival.

Nanuq, of course, knew nothing of these things. All he knew was that when he smelled the overwhelming scent of a female in heat, he would do anything to find her and mate with her. He would track a female in heat relentlessly, not eating or sleeping until he caught up to her. Then he would usually have to fight off at least one or two other males for the privilege of copulating with

her. He often mated several times a year with receptive females out on the pack ice. But the female he was following at the moment was not in heat. Females in heat emitted a completely different scent than those who were not. He also detected the smell of a young cub with her, and the smell of the cub was awakening some dark instincts within Nanuq.

He wanted to kill the cub. He didn't know why. He still had a stomach bloated with rancid whale blubber, so it certainly wasn't hunger that drove him. Still, he had an overwhelming desire to kill that cub, and the feeling was growing stronger by the minute. So he tramped forward, slowly but decisively closing the distance between them.

When he topped a small rise, and saw the cub for the first time, his feeling of aggression intensified. That cub was an enemy! He wasn't sure why, just that it had to die. With hackles rising, he quickened his pace towards them.

Just then, another male bear appeared on the other side of the mother and cub, much closer to them than Nanuq, and immediately began to charge the cub. The other male was every bit as big as Nanuq, and twice the size of the female. Still, she didn't hesitate in placing herself in front of her cub, and standing up on her hind legs to challenge him.

The male didn't even slow down. With a dreadful roar he smashed into the female, knocking her down. But she was back up in an instant, snarling with fury, teeth and claws flashing, and for a few moments the much larger and stronger male was stymied by the ferocity of a mother protecting her young. The cub was terrified, its instinct to flee battling with its instinct to stay with its mother. Then the female suddenly turned towards the

cub and emitted a horrific roar - her way of saying *run for your life!* So the cub turned and ran, as fast as its little legs could carry it.

Straight at Nanuq. By the time the cub realized its mistake, it was too late, and Nanuq had knocked it over and pinned it to the ground with one of his huge paws. The cub was a male, barely old enough to be weaned, and it screamed with fear as Nanuq loomed over it, lips curled back and jaws open, ready to deliver the killing blow.

Then Nanuq noticed something that made him hesitate. The cub had a small patch of black fur, barely discernible, on the top of his head. The sight evoked an image in Nanuq's mind. It was a memory of looking down at a female as he furiously copulated with her out on the pack ice, and seeing that same faint streak of black on top of her head - a rare sight in the world of polar bears. The memory confused the great bear. Suddenly he found he had lost the desire to kill this cub. Without knowing why, he lifted his paw, and the cub sprang up and started running again, still squealing with fear.

Nanuq heard a loud victory roar, and turned around to see the other male standing over the bloody, still form of the female, crumpled in the snow. When he saw the little cub speeding away, the other bear roared again, and began to give chase. But he would have to get past Nanuq first, and although just a few moments ago he was ready to kill the cub himself, now Nanuq felt an even stronger urge to protect it. So Nanuq stood up tall, all ten feet of him, snarled a challenge to the other bear, and prepared to do battle.

The two Goliaths crashed together like runaway freight trains, and soon the snow was littered with clumps of fur, and streaks of blood. This was no

posturing, no contest of bluffs. This was the real thing: a fight to the death. For a while it was a standoff, as the equally matched combatants exchanged blows. Then Nanuq's damaged lungs began to betray him, and he started to tire. Wheezing for air, he didn't have the strength to dodge the raking claws that took out his eye. Half blind, he desperately clung to his attacker, and when he felt the other's leg twisting underneath him, he came down on it with all his great weight, and was rewarded by the crunching snap of torn ligaments and broken bones. But the other bear hardly seemed to notice, his enormous gaping jaws closing on Nanuq's throat and clamping around it like a steel trap. Nanuq felt his trachea being mangled and crushed, but could do nothing about it. The fight was lost. He gave up and went limp.

Feeling him go limp, the other bear suddenly remembered the cub, and let go of Nanuq to take up the chase. But one of his legs didn't work. He could never catch the cub on only three legs. He was not going to be able to do much of anything with only three legs, including hunt for food. He would not survive for long. Roaring with the indignity of it all, he turned back to Nanuq, to finish him off.

But Nanuq was already finished. The blackness was closing in on him once again, and this time he would not be waking up. His last thought was of a small white head, and a faint patch of black fur. Then nothing. He was finished. But his son would survive.

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