

Karma

By

Robert Zitella

© 2008 BluewaterPress, LLC
Jacksonville, FL

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

International Standard Book Number 13: 978-1-60452-012-5

International Standard Book Number 10: 1-60452-012-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008921698

BluewaterPress LLC
2220 CR 210 W Ste 108 #132
Jacksonville, FL 32559
<http://bluewaterpress.com>

This book may be purchased online at <http://bluewaterpress.com/karma>

1

The days really were wonderful. They felt how they were supposed to feel, full of life, energy and exhilarating work, and full of love. But now it was night. Anne slept next to him. His children, Jake and Amanda, slept down the hall in big rooms full of teddy bears, posters of Michael Jordan and big trucks. This house was a home. Last year, he'd even put up a small white picket fence.

When Brad Jenkins was a child, he never imagined he'd get to live the All-American dream.

As he now lived it. For him, finally, life was perfect - as long as he didn't sleep.

It wasn't always this way; the dreams had started a few months ago. First once a week, now the dreams made every night a time he dreaded.

Yes, if it weren't for the nights, the days would be wonderful. That's what Brad again thought as he settled in now for another night of sleep, of dreams - of nightmares. By now, Brad, the new mayor of Elburn, expected them. He knew the pattern. He tried to think of other things, and though he feared it, feared the journey, falling asleep was always easy. Since he woke early, he usually went to bed around 10 p.m. He'd lie down, kiss his wife goodnight, and then fall into what always at first felt teasingly like the most restful sleep on Earth. He was welcomed each night like a king into a feathery world, only to find that just as he settled easily in, a door slammed shut behind him and he endured hours of...what?

His last waking thoughts became lost in the buzz of impending sleep.

Fire!

Fire?

But...Anne shook him and cried out, "What's wrong?"

He recognized his wife's voice. It was as though it was coming from a million miles away and yet she was touching him, shaking him.

Fire!

"Brad, what's wrong?"

Brad shivered as he heard her voice again. Yes, definitely Anne. What the hell was going on?

Fire?

For a moment, he honestly didn't know what was wrong, though subconsciously, he understood. There had been a fire, a horrible fire, and as he fought the cobweb barrier between sleep and wakefulness, he knew that it wasn't real. But good God, it had seemed so real, as though it had actually happened. Didn't it?

"What's wrong?" Anne asked again, her voice shaking with obvious concern.

"Nothing honey," he croaked. "Go on back to sleep. It's just a bad dream, that's all."

"But look at you," she said, as she wiped the sweat from his face. "You're soaked."

It was true. Brad was covered in sweat and he was shaking, slight tremors that he couldn't control.

"Geez," said Anne. "Did you see a ghost?"

He blinked, rubbed his eyes and looked around. He felt the firmness of the mattress beneath his body. His hands grasped at his pillow. It was okay. He was home, right where he belonged. He was safe.

"I'm okay," he said. He felt his tremors begin to settle. He reached to her and held her and felt comforted by her warmth. He was safe in her arms, and he held on tight. Yet there was something else inside of him - some kind of invisible pulse, and way deep down he felt fear. Brad clung to Anne and ignored it with all his might. Yes.

When Anne finally went back to sleep, he lay breathing softly - trying to recall, and trying not to recall the nightmare - another nightmare, sometimes he remembered all the details and others, like now just the horrible feelings of having gone through hell. He felt a shiver run through his body and then leave as quickly as it had come. He took a breath and looked at the clock. In what seemed like seconds, three hours had passed.

Fire? What was that about? And then like a flash of an image on a screen, Brad recalled the oddest thing, the fire was at his house, his childhood house. He couldn't figure why he saw that. He couldn't imagine why he would think of that now. The house really had burned down, but Brad had moved out of the house more than five years before the fire. He never saw it burn.

The nightmare had seemed real, as though he were remembering an actual event.

And as he sat there on the bed, trying to separate reality from the nightmare world he felt an anger building, like pressure pushing at his insides.

Suddenly he smelled something burning. He sat up, listening to the silence

of the house, breathing in the sick, acidic smell of burning. Right now, he smelled it; it surrounded him, teasing his gag reflex, churning his stomach.

He was about to get out of bed, to track the smell from room to room until he placed it among his furnishings, but with his next breath, the stench was gone. He breathed deeply, searching for even the faintest whiff of smoke, but he smelled only the wood polish that Anne used on the furniture and the fabric softener in his clothes. This was crazy! What was happening to him? The burning smell was unlike anything he had ever smelled before; not like burning wood, but something more distinct for which he was at a complete loss.

He quietly slipped out of bed and went downstairs to the kitchen for some water. Never before had the substance of a nightmare materialized after it was over. What did it mean? What the hell was happening? Didn't people who were about to have a stroke smell non-existent burning?

Get a hold of yourself, he thought, you aren't having a stroke, it just came from a nightmare, you're still half asleep.

He looked at his refrigerator, which was decorated with drawings by Jake and Amanda. Jake's was of a baseball player holding a bat. Amanda drew a house with a tree and picket fence. Brad stared at those drawings with the awe and appreciation of a proud parent. He had a lot of things going in his life, but those kids and his wife were, by far, the best parts.

Brad stood for a long time, staring at those pictures, the primitive, dream-filled drawings of his young children. And as he contemplated his life as it was now, and the wonder of the beautiful humans that were his family, thoughts of his nightmares quickly fled his mind. A sense of bliss washed over him.

And then it shifted again. He thought of responsibilities, of an upcoming Board of Trustees meeting. He looked at the clock. He needed sleep.

As he returned to his bedroom, he was suddenly overcome by memories - this time not of nightmares, but of an actual experience. He remembered the mole he'd discovered two years ago, the one Anne had made him check out at the doctor's office. They had insisted upon removing it for a biopsy, and after it had been cut out of his flesh, the doctor had cauterized the entire area.

The stench that had filled his nostrils after waking had been the same smell he'd experienced when the doctor cauterized his mole - the smell of burning flesh.

* * *

4 a.m.

Aaaargh!

That's all he could think as the noise penetrated his eardrum.

Aaaargh! Oh, where is it? Damn thing! The noise shattered his peace. Where is it?

Smack!

The faint traces of a dream receding like a morning fog.

When he found the alarm clock, he was lucid enough to stay away from the snooze button. He lay curled in the fetal position, warm, feeling the cold air outside his cocoon. Not today, he thought. This is a workday. He rubbed his eyes, sat up and as he climbed from the comfort of his bed, he looked at his wife, who was sleeping and beautiful as always. He smiled. He quickly dressed and slipped out of the room.

Brad headed downstairs to the kitchen where a coffeepot, set on a timer, had already started brewing his morning cup. He walked downstairs in the conscious but mostly unawake state of an alarm clock victim. But as he took his first sip of coffee, the taste stimulated his body to react as it has since he first discovered the wonder of caffeine, which was now his last remaining drug of choice.

He began to notice the nagging ache in his left knee; he was 36 years old but sometimes felt double that. His six foot frame didn't hold much extra weight, though to his displeasure he had recently moved up to 34-inch waist jeans. But his knee was cranky now every morning for periods of time that seemed longer and longer.

Just getting old, he thought. His heart started to pump a little extra blood. The taste of coffee signaled his body that caffeine was coming, and his nervous system, like some finely tuned version of Pavlov's dog, reacted to the caffeine before the drug even entered his bloodstream. But as this magical/mechanical evolution took place in his waking body, his taste buds experienced a much different reaction.

As Brad took another sip of coffee, his senses were once again overwhelmed by the smell of burning flesh. He gagged and pitched himself toward the kitchen sink, retching up his latest gulp of coffee.

He breathed in tentatively over the sink, his fingers white-knuckling the counter, and after several deep breaths, the smell was gone again.

The caffeine really hadn't taken effect yet. He was only half-awake; could he be experiencing remnants of the nightmare?

Without warning, a new wave of the smell assaulted his senses, which erased that thought quickly from his mind. He groaned out loud, and gagged once again, the heave much more powerful this time.

He was afraid to take another breath, to allow the smell to invade his nostrils, thereby entering his body, but when he was forced to breathe in again, it was gone. He smelled only clean air, which was of course impossible, but he could no longer detect the smell of burning flesh.

Brad was afraid to take his hands off the counter, was afraid to move, so he stood over the sink, taking small breaths, waiting for the smell to return. The nauseating stench that had been so powerful seconds ago was now non-existent. He stood there for a few minutes, trying to recreate the smell, concentrating on the slippery, fragmented memories of his nightmare, but to no avail.

He set the cup of coffee in the sink reached for a fresh glass. He stood there, breathing in deeply, drinking small gulps of water that he'd drawn from the tap. Only the dry, cold air of his kitchen greeted his lungs, which was more welcome than that of burning flesh, but perplexing nonetheless. He knew that the smell had emanated from his nightmare, and that it was now invading his waking life.

I need to see a Doctor he thought, enough is enough.

There was nothing he could do about it at four o'clock in the morning, however, and he needed to get on with his day. There were things to do other than worrying about nightmares, and he felt helpless just standing there with no way to fix it. After a few minutes and many tentative short breaths, Brad left the security of leaning on the counter.

Brad did what he'd been doing for a decade now - he went down another set of stairs to his basement and then he turned into a door that led under the stairs. This was designed to be a closet under the stairs- it was four feet by six feet, with the underneath of stairs for a roof. Brad used it as his meditation room.

Meditation has been a refuge for Brad, a means to slow down and clear his mind, to just breathe and exist.

The routine was to do it for 30 minutes in this tiny room while the rest of the house slept. He couldn't explain it to anyone; no one in Elburn besides his wife even knew that he meditated. Not even his close friends.

Meditation didn't play well in Elburn - a little too freaky-hippie for the locals - so he kept it to himself.

A doctor had taught him to meditate years ago, in an effort to relieve stress; not only did it calm him, but it also helped create a strong, stable base for his daily activities.

Other than the doctor who had taught him, he didn't think anyone in his or the surrounding counties meditated, or even knew what it really was. It was his little secret, a secret that made him a better husband and father, and hopefully now a better mayor. All he only knew was that when he went for long periods, days and weeks without meditating, he became increasingly agitated, more like the man he used to be, the man he didn't ever want to be again.

He set the timer for thirty minutes and began to concentrate on his breathing. Though still weary of the horrid smell that was following him he tried his best to concentrate.

He followed his breath, not forcing it, just letting nature take its course, in and out, in and out. He found a slow rhythm.

In, out.

Thoughts flew into his mind. One was about the upcoming Board of Trustees meeting. But this was his time, meditation time, and so he banished that thought with an exhalation. Gone.

After ten minutes, peace settled over him like a warm blanket. For the next 20, he simply breathed and existed. It was wonderful, a deep sense of nothingness and yet he felt completely connected to everything. He breathed.

And then the timer went off; his 30 minutes were up. He stood, stretched, blinked, and even smiled. Ah, life. Often, after his morning session, he resolved to mediate longer the next day, wake up earlier, but sleep was a tempting mistress that often won that internal battle. But still he was relaxed and focused, the expected and desired result of his basement secret.

He headed up the stairs again to begin his day. His thirty-minute meditation had reoriented Brad to his day and to the promise of coffee; he wanted more caffeine and then he would head out on a four-mile run. Health was important to Brad, and the meditation and daily run were all part of the big picture.

As he headed up the stairs, still luxuriating in the peace and calm that overwhelmed him while meditating, his thoughts were completely focused on the upcoming run when again, the smell hit him.

If anything, it was even more powerful this time. It stopped him dead in his tracks, sending waves of nausea coursing through his body, causing him to gag.

And again, it disappeared just as fast. The only difference was that this time, the smell lingered in the air around him. The taste of it nestled far in the back of his throat, not quite discernible but definitely there, back by his nasal passages.

What the hell was going on? He had been experiencing these nightmares for quite some time – nightmares that woke him in pure terror, but their memories had never bled into his waking day.

Certainly, he had never experienced tastes and smells relating to his dreams after waking.

He stood, thinking, waiting for another round, but the smell was gone, and even the taste. Just the memory remained.

I've got to go for a run, he thought.

* * *

The smell returned just after breakfast, as he set to shave in the bathroom, the tortured smell of burning flesh. This time it came with a flash of an image, a flash too brief to fully recognize. But Brad saw something, just enough to blur on the edge of his consciousness. A blink, like a frame from a strobe light, it was intense, but too fast to discern, and then it vanished; all that was left was the knowledge that something horrible had flickered across his peripheral vision.

The smell disappeared just as fast, leaving that same lingering but not quite noticeable taste that wasn't there.

Of course he couldn't mention it to anyone. Not the smell, the taste, the dream – nothing. The one time he mentioned the contents of a nightmare before...oh, gosh. He didn't want to go through the twenty questions he couldn't answer and endure his wife's pained expression. No, he thought; best to keep these things to himself. If it didn't stop today, he would go see a doctor.

It occurred to Brad that the entire situation might be psychological. He

couldn't bear the thought that his strange experiences had been entirely of his own creation, some tumor or psychotic disorder scrambling his brains and inducing inexplicable episodes. He had heard of mental patients who underwent fugue states at random, smelling, tasting and seeing things that weren't truly there. What if he was slowly going insane?

It was just the stress of the day playing tricks on him he thought, which calmed him slightly. But even as his shoulders were relieved of their tension, another image flashed into his mind: an image from his nightmare, yet it seemed so real, like he was recalling a distinct memory. It was more than just the way the mind remembers a dream, but rather it was like a remembering something that actually happened, with the physical senses, palatable.

Even more powerful were the associated emotions.

It was hate that he felt. Burning, seething, undiminished hate. It was pure as the color black, an emotion undaunted. Hate was in the specific memory. Hate was in the nightmare. There was pain also. It came back, another flash, and, yes, that was it.

It was his childhood home that burned. And in it was his Uncle Joe, the man who raised him.

Look at him, disheveled, needs a shave, hair, or what's left of it, going in every direction.

Uncle Joe begging flashed across his mind's eye.

Yes, that was where the hate came from: Uncle Joe. Not good, thought Brad. Not good at all.

Meditation and years of hard work had eliminated most of the hate and anger from Brad's waking life. But at night, those undesirable emotions were able to take over. Brad gripped the edges of the sink, his eyes and jaw clenched closed.

It was all coming back to him now. Another flash, so powerful his body became rigid – an image of his Uncle inside the burning house, begging for Brad's help.

It didn't really happen that way. His uncle did die in a house fire, too drunk or too stupid to get out, but Brad wasn't there. The real fire at his childhood home occurred years after Brad had left, years after he'd run away.

Yet here was a memory – a memory of a nightmare that was as clear as any recollection he could have of actual events. Hate? Whew! By day, Brad lived his life on the straight-and-narrow and went out of his way to do the right thing. But here in this memory, Brad saw himself do nothing as his Uncle Joe begged him to help. And dream Brad just laughed. He could remember it so clearly, like an embarrassing behavior. He wanted to take it back even if it was only a dream. He was ashamed of himself, he winced just thinking about it. What kind of psycho dreams this way?

He saw his dream self standing over his uncle.

His uncle begged.

"Burn, motherfucker!" dream Brad screamed.

* * *

When Brad finished his shower, the smell was gone but the memory of that flash of anger lingered. It wasn't real, because Brad knew that he wasn't there when his uncle burned to death. But the memory seemed clear as any other he had. It wasn't a long memory of the event, just a clear snapshot of the boiling anger emanating from his body as his Uncle Joe screamed for help.

He took a deep breath and calmed himself. He pushed the memory, or whatever it was, aside. Brad was a man of action, and this, despite the distractions from the night, was a new day. The mental checklist he went through while he dressed matched the list on paper that he'd written out last night and left on his big wooden bureau.

He glanced over the list, familiarizing himself with its contents. Lots to do today, including preparation for that meeting. He thought of the file on his desk. He thought of the arguments and counter-arguments that were coming – arguments about a proposed school addition. The cost was \$500,000. Money causes lots of arguments, he thought, even though it was pretty much a done deal his opponents could stretch out the process for an uncomfortable amount of time, but he'd get people to see things his way. Even the old-school board of trustees had to see the need for a school addition. The town's population was getting younger, with young professionals moving in. Heck, let's face it; those are the voters that elected him mayor of Elburn.

And those people wanted a school addition.

No nightmare was going to de-rail that.

Brad was thinking of the upcoming meeting when he heard Anne start to rustle in the bed. It was 6:30 am. She was waking up.

She stretched, smiled at Brad. Immediately, she remembered his nightmare last night, how he was covered with sweat and seeming to be scared, or anxious or... or something.

"Good morning," she said sleepily. She didn't mention the nightmare. Why would she? It was daytime now and everything was perfect in Elburn, Illinois.

2

When Tim Darsch's silver Cadillac pulled into the parking lot at City Hall, Brad was there to greet him. Brad had decided to greet all the board members at this, his first meeting.

Brad viewed himself as a mover and a shaker – and a peacemaker.

He believed he could get good things done and even though he represented one of two opposing points of view in Elburn, Brad figured that he was persuasive enough to continue the work of his friend, the outgoing mayor, Tim Matthews. Plus he thought his new voice in the

meeting could bring clear perspective to the discussion. He certainly felt he understood everything – and could explain it to anyone. It wasn't like the board could do anything to stop the school expansion; it had been voted on in a referendum and passed. They could slow it down though; slow it down to the point where his grandchildren would be the first to benefit from it.

Brad allowed himself to be confident. I know these characters, he said to himself. They're smart enough. They'll listen to reason. I am the most reasonable person in the world.

He smiled as he thought this, recognizing his own hubris. Ah yes, full of self-compliments. And why not? After all, a mayor is an important person.

"Hey Tim," Brad said jovially. "We're going to have a productive meeting today, right?"

"With you in charge?" asked Darsch, one of the many board members who opposed Brad's point of view. "I doubt it."

"Oh come on, Tim. Can't we all just get along?"

"No," came the stony reply.

Brad searched for signs of laughter in Tim's face, but found none.

"You don't see Dunlop doing this type of crap." Tim continued.

Dunlop was a sleepy town next to them and Brad had plans that involved them also.

Brad thought it best to walk away, no reason to start the off on the wrong foot, even though it felt like they may already had.

The meeting began at 6:30 p.m. Brad was right on time because he hadn't left City Hall all day. Brad found that long hours of work left him feeling empowered, and if it was always as rewarding as it had been these last few days, he was in for a wonderful run as the mayor of Elburn.

Now it was time for some nuts and bolts of government, And Brad had discovered that there was no better way to get one's feet wet in politics, especially local politics – than to dive into a heated meeting involving money and schools. Brad knew the minefield that lay ahead, and he planned to walk through it with dexterity and to emerge with all of his limbs intact. He would accomplish his goals, and he would accomplish them peacefully, using logic and sound reasoning.

During the reading of the minutes of the previous meeting, Brad was focused, calm, and ready with a nimble mind to deal with all situations. He'd never felt more in control.

And then the arguments rolled down their predictable paths. Brad listened, and it got heated.

"You people are idiots," said Tim Darsch, already beginning his assault. He pointed a thick finger at Brad. There were three members of the board of trustees absolutely opposed to Brad and his plans to grow the town. Darsch, like the other two – Mary Cratlet and Paul Verden – had been on the board of trustees for decades. He didn't like that Brad and other younger people were taking over the city. And he intended to fight and call names.

Brad remained calm. This was an important fight but not one that should be waged with emotion or anger. Brad knew a better way. He took a deep breath as he continued to receive verbal punches.

"Idiots!" continued Darsch. His considerable girth shook as he spat the word. "What the hell are you thinking? This city doesn't need a new school. The old one is just fine. If people don't like what we have they shouldn't move here. It's the one I went to and look how I turned out!"

Even the diminutive Paul Verden chuckled at that. Verden, a shy, secretive man despite decades in local politics, usually said nothing, but almost always voted with Darsch and Mary Cratlet. And Mary. Oh, Mary. Wearing the same blue housedress ever since Brad had known her, she was as open to a new opinion as she would be to a fashionable wardrobe.

Darsch glared at Verden, who quickly stopped laughing. Then Darsch turned to the town manager, Lou Chapman. Chapman was responsible for the machinations of making the middle school into a reality. He was the one looking for banks to fund the \$500,000 municipal bond.

"And you," said Darsch. "You're just a fool. You go to some bank we've never heard of, you go out of town, you don't even get a good rate, and we still don't have any paperwork. Are you some kind of crook, or what?"

"Now that's not fair," said Brad, finally hearing enough. "Lou's worked for this city for a long time and he knows what he's doing. Lou's going to get us a good deal."

Chapman smiled at the compliment. He'd been taking a beating lately and he was happy to have Brad on his side. Brad didn't know the half of it and neither did anyone else. Chapman kept his secrets to himself. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. His bald crown had a noticeable bump at its peak, and he rubbed it nervously.

"I've done my due diligence," said Chapman.

"That's funny, Lou," said Darsch. "Due diligence? You've helped rip this town off. You call that due diligence?"

"I haven't ripped anyone off, Tim!" shouted Chapman. "I'm helping this city build a middle school addition. I've worked my ass off on this project. And you don't even want it!"

"Truer words have never been spoken," countered Darsch. "I don't want it because it makes no sense. And the way you're going about it is wrong."

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

"It's just...oh!" Darsch spit out the word as though it tasted bitter. "You people are ruining our town. And if you think I'm going to make it easy for you, you're just crazy."

At that, Mary Cratlet cleared her throat, as she always did when she was about to talk in a meeting. "Look, the school addition is going to be built. We all agree on that, even if we disagree that it should be done. But the vote was taken and we have to accept."

"No we don't!" yelled Darsch. "We can sue, you know. We can still sue."

Mary cleared her throat again. "Tim, we're not going to sue. But we can

delay this for a long time until these young people here get an understanding of the value of money. You're just throwing around our money – our money! - on something unnecessary. You should be ashamed of yourselves!"

At that, Brad glanced at his best friend on the council, John Williams. Williams had replaced Brad as sheriff when Brad took over as mayor from Tim Matthews. And now the two of them, linked by a local chain of events as well as years of friendship, shared a wink at the absurdity of what they were hearing. Still, this was their reality and they had to get their way through it, one insult at a time.

Brad listened quietly but he still remained confident that he could change their minds. After all, he wasn't Lou Chapman – gosh, look at Chapman sweat. His armpits were soaked; he had to keep wiping his brow. Brad looked at him and wondered how the others could believe him as the proponent of any point of view. No, Brad was not Lou Chapman. Brad was a fresh voice – and he wasn't Tim Matthews, which was also helpful. Tim had his many battles with this trio – the "Grouchy Three," as Brad called them. And though Tim had managed to win most of his battles, the communication between the previous mayor and the "Grouchy Three" had deteriorated into personal attacks that made for funny newspaper reading. Now it was Brad's turn. And Brad was convinced he had more eloquence, more logic, more charm, more of an ability to gently convince people than his friend, the former mayor, did. Tim Matthews, through three terms as mayor had grown into an abrupt personality, a my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy.

Brad ran, with Tim's blessing, as a fresh voice that could reduce the rancor. And when he won, the town was still split but even those on the other side agreed that Brad ran a civilized campaign. He was sure he would continue that as mayor. He watched the proceedings, thinking of this – thinking of how to grow this charming town while still maintaining its charm.

Through the argument, for just a minute, his mind wandered. He lost his focus. His mind wandered into the future, a possible future that seemed to be Elburn's destiny. He could see it all, a vision in his mind of the best place in America, combining the old and the new in a perfect mix. Yes, that's the kind of mayor he wanted to be. The meeting had gotten to the point where Lou was laying out the specifics of how the money was to be borrowed and how it would be paid off, every detail was mocked by Tim. Lou's plan seemed sound but Tim took the opportunity to insult every facet of it; it went on and on.

And that's when he smelled it.

It was overwhelming again, this time the most powerful of all, this burnt flesh taste of a memory, only this time he didn't gag. He felt a power rise in him as his blood pumped. His muscles twitched. Brad didn't so much recognize the change; he simply became part of it – a pure, biological metamorphous. A power, an anger rolling through him, his thoughts raced, he felt the anger build in him, it got worst as he looked upon the stupid faces of his constituency. He watched them arguing back and forth almost in slow motion; the scene built his internal battle to a crescendo.

Something snapped. Everyone has a point of no return, some line in the sand. Here was Brad's moment of truth occurring in this rectangular room fronted by a people-in-charge long table and the snake of black wires leading to silver microphones – for the cable access coverage. There it was, the small city politics of stupidity jumping in his face while that smell – oh, that horrid smell – built in him a sort of hatred for this level of idiocy.

The local access cable cameras captured it all.

But he was consumed by the smell. Oh, it was horrible, like the flash of lights a migraine sufferer sees in the moments just before the agony sets in. That's what it was. The smell taunted him.

With it came a sort of knowledge, a dark certainty. Acid burned in his stomach, as the taste seemed literally in his blood. His breathing accelerated.

He felt clarity. He could see the incompetence of these people, and worse. He slammed his fist on the long table.

"I've had enough!" he declared. It was a roar, this voice that seemed almost unrecognizable. Letting it out, giving into the internal pressure was almost orgasmic, Brad became part of this chemical reaction.

Paul Verden clutched both his hands between his knees.

Brad pushed his chest out, his chin up; he raised his arm and jutted his finger out menacingly at Tim.

"You will listen to me! Do you understand?" It was almost like he was scolding them, as a mother does or child, or...something else.

It was time for Elburn to have some glory. That's what this was about. Wasn't it?

Tim Darsch said, "But..."

At that, Brad exploded. "Don't interrupt me, you fucking jackass!"

Later, in some circles, folks in Elburn would say that if Brad had stopped right there, he would have been a hero to many. After all, even those who saw the rest agreed that Darsch deserved that. Many believed he really was a fucking jackass. Brad almost felt like he was a spectator to his own outburst, his normal way of acting was shoved into a hidden recess of his mind.

"You're the biggest idiot in this town," continued Brad. "Most people think you're retarded and those that don't know that you are a corrupt loser in the back pocket of all the old farts in this town. Why don't you just go die, because we are going to build this middle school exactly the way it was described earlier tonight. And if you don't like it..."

"I don't like it," said Darsch. Then his voice rose. "I don't like it at all!"

"You moron!" shouted Brad immediately. "You will like it! All of you!"

Brad gritted his teeth. His fists tightened. His breathing was audible to everyone in the room, and the microphones certainly caught the deep fast rhythms of his inhales and exhales. Evil breathing. That's what people in Elburn would later call it.

"You...will...listen!" The pauses between each screamed word were filled with menace.

The voice caused Paul Verden to fall from his chair – again caught on cable access TV.

"There's no time for stupid old shits like you. The community is behind me and we don't have to listen to your kind any more. You fucking old people ruin everything! You're so goddamn dumb. This is not a town for old people. We need this school addition. Don't you get it?"

He glared at John Williams, who crossed his arms and leaned back. Then John looked away.

"Of course you don't like it!" shouted Brad, who turned back to Darsch. "That's because you're the past. But you'll do it our way anyway. And you'll do it now! If you don't vote with me, I swear I'm coming across the table."

The room fell silent. The audience stared; more mouths were wide open then closed. To Brad it felt exactly like they were looking at him with awe. A hatred for almost everyone in the room coursed through him, they were like a group of ill-advised sheep that needed his guidance.

"Vote!" Brad paused and stared at each board member for a beat of a few distinct seconds. "Now! I want you to vote right now! All those in favor?" He said it as if it wasn't so much a question as an order to shoot.

At that, John Williams tried to catch Brad's eye when he said, "You know, maybe we should..."

"We're voting now John! All those in favor of the financing plan?"

Hands went up, but not Darsch's.

"I said, all those in favor?"

All hands stayed up, but Darsch's hand stayed down. Brad stepped down towards Darsch.

"All those in favor?" Brad's stared into the defiant eyes of Tim, who sat with his arm crossed in front of his body. Brad didn't need his vote, but he wanted Tim's humiliation, he wanted to feed on it.

He bore his burning eyes into Tim's eyes; Brad projected all his hatred for this man through his stare. Tim met his glare with a similar intensity for a moment, but then Brad saw the flame in Tim's eyes waver, and the older man looked away. It seemed Tim was doing the math in his head, would this nut job actually jump across the table and hurt him, he actually looked terrified. Tim looked around at everyone in the room, saw that the rest of the board members were staring at him and with a grunt, half raised his hand. His face burned a bright red as he looked down at his lap, not quite knowing what just happened.

"That settles it," said Brad. "It's unanimous." He breathed in, smelled it again, only it didn't surprise him this time. He enjoyed the smell; it satisfied his palate like the sweet smell of candy. He abruptly started to walk out of the room

As he passed Mary, she opened her mouth, as though to bring up the fact there were other items on the docket, but she was silenced by one look at Brad. She murmured something about needing to make phone calls, and quickly looked away.

Brad was consumed by the unnatural power and hatred that pulsed through his body, a force that was beginning to dissipate with each step he took out of the city council room.

Brad collapsed in his chair in his office.

The smell was gone.

He was shaking and sweaty, absolutely drained. He felt emotionless. Devoid of himself.

What on earth had happened inside that conference room, and who was it that had said all those horrible things?

He felt as though he had watched himself in a movie, playing the part of a villain or antagonist. He couldn't believe he had behaved in such a manner, that he was capable of such atrocity toward other human beings.

But what bothered him the most was the feeling that had overtaken him, the all-powerful sensations that were certainly not part of a dream, but were rooted in reality. A part of him already missed the rush, but the memory of how he'd behaved served to blunt whatever positive aspects might have existed.

"Brad?"

Someone had been knocking, and eventually they walked in. Someone?

John Williams.

"Brad?" he asked again.

Brad looked up, startled. He started to say something about being busy with important work, but he hadn't been busy at all. He didn't know how long he'd been sitting in his desk chair, staring off into space and contemplating the circumstances surrounding his irrational behavior.

"John," he managed to croak.

"Hey man, you okay?"

Brad scratched his head and pondered. Well, yeah, he was okay. Now, he was okay. Deep breath. Yeah, now, he was okay. Wasn't he?

"Yeah, just sick of it, I guess." Brad replied, hardly recognizing the monotone voice that issued from his throat.

He could tell that his old friend wanted to say more, probably much more, but he silently slipped away.

* * *

Brad forgot he'd been on video, on Cable TV. The new mayor forgot about his uncharacteristic yelling and swearing. He just aimed his Volvo towards home.

Home. That was all he really wanted: the white picket fence, the drawings on the refrigerator, the comforts of familiar surroundings. He ached for it.

Brad knew Anne was going to take the kids to dinner and the latest Disney movie, he hoped they weren't home yet, because he didn't want to answer questions. He didn't feel capable of effectively analyzing his own behavior, and more than anything, he hated to disappoint Anne.

He pulled the Volvo into his three-car garage and walked mechanically from the vehicle to the door leading into his home. He set his briefcase on the counter, headed for the refrigerator, and found a note from Anne: Went to a movie with the kiddos. Wish you were here. Pasta's in the fridge if you want to heat it up. See you around 8:30.

It was a quarter after eight, and although Brad ached for the comfort that his wife could provide, he wanted to avoid questions at all costs. He jotted a note, telling Anne that he'd gone to bed early, and headed for the stairs.

He hadn't forgotten about his actions. He remembered the feeling too, the undeniable sensation of power. It had surged in him while he was screaming, and his voice felt big inside of him. He remembered the looks in the eyes of the board members as they watched him escalate from tranquility into blind rage. They hadn't been in awe; they'd been afraid.

Now all of it spun around inside his gut. And he was drained.

Sleep. He needed sleep. He marched into his bedroom, not taking the time to undress, and when he fell to his pillow, thoughts of nightmares fled his mind. He didn't even consider the possibility because it seemed as though the daytime had already provided one.

And so again he was welcomed like a king into a feathery world of sleep. He fell and fell. Softly.

The first noises he heard were from a distance, but they were unmistakable. Explosions.

And tanks. He saw tanks, soldiers. Kaboom!

But then he drifted back and was aware of his real body, his sleeping body. He saw faces. Faces he didn't know. They wore uniforms. Kaboom!

Sometime during this, he heard his wife crawl into bed next to him. He was riding the barrier between consciousness and unconsciousness. His sleeping, dreaming took a break as her lovely, familiar smell of lotions settled in next to him, and then he rejoined the dream already in progress.

He was cold. And when he looked up, he saw a box-shaped imposing building, surrounded by spires. The building was old, it was...well, it was a castle. A real castle. He wasn't in Kansas anymore. And he sure wasn't in Elburn. The landscape was green and mountainous. He saw wild flowers move in the wind. Oh, it was beautiful.

As Brad stared at the castle, he felt inexplicably drawn to it. He didn't want to see it in a tourist kind of way. No, it was much more familiar than that. He felt he needed to get in there, that somehow he belonged there or perhaps - it felt silly even thinking it - it felt like something, or someone, was in there waiting for him. He started to step towards the castle and that was when rose back to the conscious/unconscious moment. Sleeping, dreaming. He reached for Anne.

He found mud. He opened his eyes and he was staring at mud. This wasn't a bed but a yard. He couldn't make sense of it.

He looked up and saw the front porch of a house. It was still dark, but the sun was throwing a faint light at the horizon.

He slowly stood up, covered in mud, still wearing the clothes from his day at work, and he had the sudden urge to run home, though he had no way of knowing which direction home was in.

A shiver ran through him. What was going on? Brad looked at the porch again - a wraparound farmer's porch with a bench swing and the

biggest gas grill he'd ever seen – and he squinted as realization hit hard like a hammer.

You've got to be kidding, he thought. He knew whose house this was. This was Tim Darsch's house.

At least now he knew which direction was home. It was about a mile away. Two roads away. He had to have come here deliberately, somehow, in his sleep. But why?

Brad ran home, his feet stinging with every slap of the pavement, but the pain seemed otherworldly, and he didn't care.

As he ran, his cold feet became numb, and he began to shiver. He noticed that half of his body was covered in mud; he also felt it drying on the right side of his face. He hoped Anne would not be awake. Would she know he was gone? How long had he been gone?

He approached the house warily, watching for any sign of movement, listening for any unfamiliar noises, but it was silent. He removed his muddy socks. He saw the clock in the kitchen; it was around the time he would be waking up: 4:30 am.

He went into the laundry room, flipped on the light, and used dirty towels from the hamper to clean off the mud as best he could. When he began to clean his right hand, he realized that it was not only mud that had caked into the crevices of his skin, but blood as well.

That's crazy, he thought. Could it be paint?

Brad turned on the utility sink and began to rinse his hand, watching numbly as the dried red residue on his hands swished down the drain, creating bright rivers of crimson liquid. It definitely was blood, and although it was not an enormous amount, it was still alarming.

He rinsed the mud off of other parts of his body, searching for a wound that might be the origin of the blood, but finding nothing. He found himself sufficiently clean to make his way to the shower without creating suspicion if his wife suddenly awoke, but his clothes were caked in mud. Brad found some dirty clothes in the hamper and put them on, taking the muddy clothes he was wearing and hiding them behind the washer; he would dispose of them later. He tried to remember walking to Tim's, anything... he remembered a pained yelp of a dog, something....

"What are you doing?"

Brad jumped. He saw his bleary-eyed wife blinking rapidly in the shadows, trying to adjust her eyes to the light.

Brad didn't know how to answer. To say that he had awoken in Tim Darsch's front yard would make him sound like some kind of psychopath. Wouldn't it?

"Trying to find some clothes." He answered.

"You feel ok? You were out cold when we got home; I couldn't wake you."

"Yeah, rough day." Brad replied.

"I heard that from Jane, she caught you cursing out Tim Darsch on cable access. She said you were screaming at him. Jane said you lost it."

"Yeah I did." Brad answered, trying to ease out of the laundry room light, because he was sure that he had some mud left on him and he did not want Anne to notice. He brushed past her into the nearly dark kitchen.

"That's not like you. He must have said something pretty bad to get you going." Anne offered.

"Yeah, I think I need to apologize to him." Brad said. He just wanted to get into a shower and wrap his mind around what happened.

"What have you been doing for the past 2 hours?" Anne asked.

"Huh?" Brad asked.

"I noticed you were out of bed at 3 am." Anne said.

"You know, the usual, meditated, ran, woke up and couldn't go back to sleep." Brad said, starting to walk up the stairs towards their bedroom.

"You want eggs?" Anne called up.

"Sure." He answered, looking forward to the hot water of his shower and thankful his wife wasn't aware of his sleepwalking.

3

Brad shuffled papers on his desk, but he couldn't concentrate. His jaw muscles ached, especially on the left side. He had been grinding his teeth, and he knew it. Couldn't stop, though. Now it was 8 a.m. and he was already in his new office even though City Hall didn't open until 9. He needed to be here, to get comfortable.

Comfortable? That's funny. That's absurd. He needed to explain himself.

Man, he was losing it. How was he going to explain last night? Plus, he didn't even meditate this morning. Didn't exercise, either. He had come in early to get his mind off his behavior last night, to get back to some normalcy, but instead of being productive; he sat bouncing his legs nervously, thinking about himself.

He felt sorry for himself, that was certain, and worried about the future. As he sat there thinking about his apology to Tim, explaining to the others he was struck by a shocking insight; he was a little happy about his outburst, how he got things done.

It felt good, the outburst but at the same time embarrassed him. He was wallowing in the humility of a bad moment in life captured on camera when, again, out of nowhere, the smell hit him, the nightmare smell of burnt flesh. He gagged, but that wasn't all.

Brad jumped from his chair and his whole body shivered with a confused rage. The blood in his body flowed differently. Brad wasn't Brad. He had feelings, such raw feelings of hate and anger, burning anger. His mind had no thoughts; he was like a conduit of aggression that pulsed through his body. And then his body felt drained and he dropped back into his chair, exhausted. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth. Almost like someone who was punched in the face unexpectedly his thoughts slowly came back after the shock.

What was happening to him? Words like brain tumor and insanity crossed his mind. He sat there breathing heavily, like a madman. He needed help, options ran through his brain.

Brad picked up the phone, and pushed line one.

He wasn't sure what time his doctor's office opened, but at least he could leave a message. He found the number in his rolodex and dialed.

His hot coffee stirred the acid in his stomach. Scenes of last night flashed in his head. It was hard to imagine that last night even happened.

The Doctor's answering service picked up on the third ring, but they were able to schedule his visit. He made the appointment for 11 a.m., and the all-business female receptionist asked, "And what are you coming in for?"

He hesitated, pulled the phone away from his face. He stood up, took a deep breath.

He was the mayor. People knew him. Yet, everyone saw his performance on TV last night.

So he brought the phone back to his face and answered firmly, "Stress."

* * *

By the time his secretary walked in a half-hour later, Brad had replayed the previous night in his head 107 times. Over and over. What was I doing at Tim Darsch's house? He had split-second memories of Tim's house in the night, he could almost remember something, but it slipped away too quickly.

His secretary, Judy, was a pretty brunette in her mid-30s. She'd been hired by the previous mayor, Brad's friend, Tim Matthews, who had a knack for finding smart, pretty women to help him. Now, as the new mayor, Brad was the beneficiary of Tim's job search. Judy smiled at him.

"Thanks for making the coffee," she said.

"No problem," replied Brad. "Got here early anyway."

"You look like you were deep in thought."

"Yeah, well."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" she asked. Before he could answer, she added, "So you can figure out what you are going to say to people."

"What do you mean?"

"You know," she said. "Last night."

Oh yeah. Last night, the meeting. She didn't know the half of it. The memory of his waking on Tim Darsch's lawn sent a quick shiver through him, but Judy didn't notice.

"I don't know what happened, Judy," he said.

She paused, sipped her coffee, and shifted her feet. "You're new here," she said. "You'll get the hang of diplomacy after a while. Besides, Tim Darsch..." she let the words trail away. "Just don't let him get to you."

"Thanks Judy," replied Brad. "I'll try not to." He felt grateful to her, for the small kindness of her words. Her benevolence crawled inside him next to the worry and his fear was tempered just a bit. He took a meditative breath, trying to keep calm. "I've got some stuff to do now, okay."

"Sure thing," she said. She carried her coffee out the door, and closed it behind her.

There was a lot to do, but all that Brad could do was think. And as he spun his mind in circles, trying to explain what happened last night, he could find no rational explanation. And though the sleep walking, or perhaps alien abduction, to Tim Darsch's house bothered him the most, his behavior in the meeting, when he was fully conscious, was even more perplexing.

Alien abduction - that's funny, thought Brad. But how else could he explain it? And the meeting? What about that didn't feel like he was possessed?

God...

There was freedom in the outburst. That's it. It was like he'd spent his life in the confines of a wheelchair, and suddenly he was able to jump up and run like the wind. There was no need for social etiquette. All barriers had broken down. When he was in the middle of that outburst, he had power and it didn't feel like he was crossing any lines. He was right; absolutely, unequivocally right. But now, further and further away from the outburst, he could recognize how foreign that feeling was to him.

Brad sipped his coffee. He felt like he was splitting in two. But it wasn't even that. The power that he felt was his own. It wasn't foreign. It wasn't non-Brad. He wasn't possessed. He was himself. And then he remembered feeling the same in his recent dreams. The feeling of power.

Were the dreams connected to the outburst?

There was no way of saying. Now, he recalled another part of his dreams, specifically the dream from last night. A castle. He remembered a castle, and he recalled it with great clarity; he could see the big gray stones of the building, the beautiful wild flowers. Brad recalled staring at the castle and feeling a profound sense of peace. Something about being there felt like he had come full circle. He remembered one more thing: a crest. It was a large wooden crest on the door of the castle, just above the giant arched entry.

The crest was of three dragons in a circle, swallowing each other's tails. Under the dragons were two swords and a shield. He recalled it vividly, like somehow, he'd seen it before the dream. Maybe in a movie, or something.

He took another sip of coffee and realized it wasn't helping. He was exhausted. He didn't exactly have a restful night sleep. And besides that, he'd skipped his meditation and morning run. In his life, this was a recipe for a nap. And just as he thought that, his door opened.

Lou Chapman walked in, closed the door behind him. "How's it going, chief?" asked Lou. There was a hint of concern in his voice.

"I don't know, Lou," Brad answered honestly. He exhaled loudly.

"Hey tough night, boss. Don't worry about it. It was your first meeting. You'll get better."

"I've been the sheriff, Lou. I've been in meetings before."

Lou stood back. He appeared stunned by Brad's blunt appraisal of himself. His eyes squinted, almost like he was trying to recognize something. But his feet shuffled nervously. He paused.

"So what are you going to do?" he finally asked.

"I'm all right, Lou. It's just last night, well, I wasn't myself."

"Hey man." Lou offered the words because they were all he could find.

"Anyway, I'm okay," said Brad, channeling back his calm, businesslike demeanor. "I'm going to see a doctor later this morning. And I'm going to take a quick nap first. I'm exhausted, feeling kind of sick. But I've got a couple minutes. Did you want something important?"

"Just want to make sure we're in agreement on the plan forward. You know, after last night."

"What do you mean, after last night? That didn't change anything. I just acted stupid." Brad looked Lou in the eyes. Lou had bags under his eyes, heavy luggage. He stared right back at Brad.

"Look," said Lou, "you just seemed like, I don't know, like you wanted to be so much in charge. I thought maybe you wanted to take over the project too."

Brad laughed.

"All right, all right. Now I'm being an idiot. Sorry, chief."

"Listen Lou. I lost it last night, but it's all going to go forward as planned."

"So I'll bring the building corporation papers for you to sign at the end of the week, right?"

The "corporation" was the Elburn School Building Corporation, or ESBC. The ESBC was created at the previous night's meeting by the board of trustees, and was implemented for liability reasons. The idea was for the ESBC to get the money from the town and then, through Lou's management, contractors would be paid from the corporation. It was set up so that all checks would require signatures by both Lou and Brad. The contractor had already been picked by a bid system. The bank had been chosen.

Now it was just a matter of scheduling and paperwork.

"The papers should all be ready Friday," Lou said.

When Lou walked out, Brad summoned Judy in and asked her to keep away all visitors and calls until the afternoon. "I'm not feeling well," he said.

"But you'll be getting calls after last night. Don't you think?"

"I'm pretty sure of it," he said. "Still, I don't feel well. I have a doctor's appointment set up for eleven o'clock. I'm going to rest in here. Could you ring me at 10:30?"

"No visitors? No other calls?"

"Please."

She walked out saying, like a parrot, "The mayor is busy, can he call you back? The mayor is busy, can he call you back?"

"Very funny," he laughed.

She left him alone.

* * *

Brad had never even sat on the yellow couch in his office before. Not once. Now, he was lying down – exhausted beyond endurance. Drained. Now, he fell into his feathery world faster than ever.

And as his consciousness drifted into a dream, some part of him felt like he was going home. This new place to which he was drifting gave him that tingly feeling from childhood, a wondrous comfort.

And in a REM breath, without a hint of stage fright, he was standing in front of thousands of people

All eyes were on him.

It was night, dark and cold, but the crowd held candles in this huge town square. He stood on steps in front of them. He couldn't make out his own words, but he spoke with great energy and the crowd responded with a roar. They were an adoring mob.

Thousands were under his control. He was the snake charmer, and they were the charmed. He had so much to say, so many important things to impart, and they felt like divinely inspired words issuing from his mouth.

But he couldn't make out what he was saying. Not a word of it. It was like he was speaking a foreign language.

But he was using the words with such force. Brad had never been all that charismatic in nature, but he'd been to his share of rock concerts and keynote speakers, and he'd certainly seen the power of that vague human quality: Charisma. Here he was in front of thousands of people, and charisma felt like it glowed from his soul. He knew what the people wanted, and he knew how to deliver.

He wasn't Brad. He could do anything.

But who was he? And what was with these clothes? Wool, green, itchy. It was a uniform. He was somewhere between Brad and not Brad, but he was Brad enough to recognize the oddity of wearing a military uniform. Everything was off-kilter.

The dream ended with the burst of a bell. The phone.

Right near the end, he had been hovering above this body that was speaking. He was in it, was of it, yet he was above it and looking down. How to explain?

The phone. Ring. Ring.

Brad jumped. "Hello."

Judy's voice: "Sir, its 10:30. You told me to wake you. And I know you don't want to be disturbed, but John Williams is here."

"Oh, send John in."

Brad was still groggy, coming out of his dream, when John walked in. John was a tall man with a buzz cut of brown hair and a strong chin. As soon as he saw Brad, his jaw dropped. "Brad, what have you been doing?"

"Oh, man," said Brad, rubbing his eyes, "sleeping."

"Man, you look horrible. Look at you, you're soaked with sweat."

Brad wiped his forehead. "Hey, I, just," Brad was struggling for words. "You know."

"Hey, you okay?" asked John.

"Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I've got a doctor's appointment in a half an hour."

"You okay to drive?"

"I..."

"Let me drive you."

Brad agreed. "Listen, before we leave, let me call Anne real quick. I'll be right out, okay?"

When John walked out of the room with Brad behind the door all alone, John turned to Judy. They didn't know each other very well, but she knew that John was Brad's best friend. "I've never seen him like this," said John.

"Did you see him last night?"

"See him? I was a target."

* * *

As he was dialing Anne, Brad felt his stomach growl. When she answered her familiar, "Hi," knowing it was him from caller ID, he was gagging for air.

"Hello, Brad."

"Hi. Hi honey. Sorry, I was just having a little stomach problem, I set up a doctor's appointment."

"It sounds like you're getting sick. What, with the nightmares and all."

"I know, I know," he said. "I'm leaving for the doctor now."

"Good, good," she said. "Drive safe."

"John's here. He's going to drive me."

"Well call me as soon as you get out of your appointment. I'm worried about you, Brad." She paused. "Do you think maybe you should go see Debbie, too?"

Ah, Debbie. Doctor Debbie Reed was Brad's old psychiatrist. He hadn't needed her in a long time. He thought he'd solved most of his issues. But then again, his recent behavior...

"I don't know, Anne," he said. "To tell you the truth, I just can't wait to get home to see you and the kids. That's what I need."

* * *

As John pulled his Mercury Marquis into the parking lot, he turned to Brad, who was staring straight ahead, thinking over all the things that he needed to tell the doctor. No matter how crazy, Brad decided, it's time to fess up to everything. Time, Brad, said, to get to the bottom of this.

"Hey, man, listen. I've got to tell you something."

Brad turned and looked at John in the eyes. They'd played on the same Little League Team together, 30 years ago. Familiar. "John, you don't have to. I know, I'm an idiot. That's why I'm going to the doctor."

"Not just an idiot, Brad. Mean. Mean spirited. Last night, man. You scared people. You physically threatened people."

Brad ran his hand through his short hair. "Phew." He said it softly.

"Brad, you're going to lose people before you even get the seat in the office warm. You're the mayor of Elburn, not the dictator."

Brad sighed again. Louder.

"Look, I just had to say something," said John. "All right?"

Brad sat silently.

As the moment became uncomfortable, John tried to end on a lighter note. "I've got to say, though, when you called Tim Darsch a fucking jackass," John laughed. "That was priceless."

Brad smiled.

"Hey, you want to hear something really weird, speaking of Tim Darsch?"

Brad didn't say anything.

John didn't skip a beat. He just continued. "We got a call at the station this morning. Someone murdered his dog."

"What?!" Brad sat straight up.

"Yeah, he's pretty freaked," said John.

"He saw someone murder his dog?" Brad asked. His mind was racing.

"No, he found his dog this morning in the yard. Its head was bashed in." John laughed. "I might be launching an investigation."

Brad felt his heart jump.

"Hey look man, the time," said John. His voice had a rushed urgency. "You've got to get in there."

"What?"

"Your appointment?" John looked at him quizzically.

Brad got out of the car and gave John a half wave good bye as he walked away, his stomach was in acidic turmoil; his bloody hand, the memory of a dog yelp. Did he in some sort of sleepwalking vendetta snuff out Tim's dog? What else has he done in his sleep? Thank God he was going to the doctor.

4

Doctor Bob Morgan shuffled out of the room when he finished examining Brad, and he promised to be right back.

Brad dressed quickly, and while he was buttoning his white Oxford shirt, he considered that he probably sounded crazy. This had been the longest doctor's appointment – other than visits to his shrink – that Brad had ever had. It had already been almost an hour. An hour with a physician!

He'd known Dr. Morgan for years. Dr. Bob, he called him. Dr. Bob was a balding man, a little thick in the middle – the very picture of the stereotype of a middle-aged white man. Brad had known Dr. Bob for a long time. And through the years while the doctor's physical appearance faded into a stereotype, he developed a kindly persona epitomized by the big blue and white sign hung prominently on his office wall, in between his diplomas, that offered, "WE'RE HERE TO HELP". Brad had asked for help. He told Dr. Bob everything as best as he could remember. The smells. The nightmares. Brad talked about all of it, except for the mention of Tim Darsch's yard.

The doctor listened and scribbled notes. The look on his kind, fleshy face never changed. And now, Brad figured the doctor most likely had him pegged as a mental case. They had a history, Dr. Bob and Brad. Besides being his doctor for longer than he could remember, he was also the person who had pointed him in the right direction when his years of alcohol abuse caught up to him.

Now Dr. Bob walked back in the room and he invited Brad to come to his office, to sit and talk. Brad followed obediently.

The office was an impressive room with lots of dark wood highlighted by the doctor's large mahogany desk. The physician settled into his leather, high-backed chair behind the desk. Brad sat on the front edge of one of two gray chairs lined up in front of the desk.

"Well, Brad," started Dr. Bob, "I've got to be honest. It's kind of a head-scratcher. The only thing that I can find unusual at all is your elevated blood pressure. Now if this was an ongoing problem, I could prescribe some blood pressure medication for you. But..."

The doctor just paused. He bit his lip. "Listen Brad, we both know what you went through a long time ago. Can I ask, is everything okay? You under any stress?"

"Well, yeah," Brad replied. "You know, I've got the new job and there's some stress there, but I like being mayor."

"And your home life?" "It's great. I love my wife. I love my kids. We get along wonderfully."

"So you're not under any more stress than normal?"

"No," said Brad.

"Drinking? Drugs?" Doctor Bob sat forward in his chair.

As Brad began to explain that he hadn't done either in many years, a sudden pulse shot through him. Brad was talking about going to AA meetings and even how the psychiatrist, Dr. Debbie Reed, had helped him to get out of the grip of addiction when a rush of energy literally tightened his muscles. It was a familiar feeling but something was missing. He stared at the doctor thinking, "this guy is a moron. Why is he asking me this?"

Brad's jaw tightened. This feeling was so familiar. The anger, pure hatred, again - raw and burning. Eating him. But this time something was different. Something was missing. His temper was building, just like before but somehow he was aware of it. He tried desperately to calm himself. Brad's brain was screaming at Doctor Bob: STOP BEING A POMPOUS ASS!!!!

He breathed in, let the doctor talk. He breathed out. Calm, he told himself. Calm. He breathed in again, and just then he noticed what was missing. He didn't smell anything. The feeling was the same, the unexplained rise of hatred that he had been feeling since the dream of the burning house, what was missing was the smell, that horrible smell.

Breath, Brad told himself. Just breathe.

"I can see you've made tremendous progress, Brad. For the most part,

at least from a physical standpoint, the only thing I'm worried about is your blood pressure. I just..." and the doctor's words trailed away for an instant while the anger roared into Brad like a tidal surge and then it receded. All in less than a few words. "...and there can be a lot of causes of high blood pressure," continued Dr. Bob. You know, stress is a major factor. Diet, too. It wouldn't hurt to lose a few pounds, you know."

Brad controlled the anger. He felt that to be something of a victory as he sat staring at the doctor, half hearing the words about a recommended diet.

God Dammit, what was happening to him? He went from a normal person, to a man who could throttle his doctor, back to a normal person in mere seconds. He thought about telling the doctor this, but was too embarrassed. How could he tell a guy, "It just happened right now, I almost just punched you in the face"?

And although it was true, he didn't explode, and he recognized the feeling as if he were on the outside, looking in. He felt as though he weren't completely controlling his body.

Beads of sweat popped up on his forehead. A shiver crawled over his skin. The blood in his body seemed, for lack of a better word, cold. Sweat droplets began trails down his face so that he had to reach with the arm of his white oxford shirt and wipe away the moisture from his eyes.

"Brad, you know. You can talk to me," said Dr. Bob, thinking that maybe there was something more Brad could contribute. He offered him a paper towel from the wall. "Look, I don't really know what's going on but I think to be on the safe side, I'm going to order a CAT scan. You know, just to check and make sure there is nothing abnormal. These incidents you describe worry me."

"They worry me too, Doctor," Brad finally managed to say. "That's why I'm here. You know, it's just..." Brad let the sentence trail off.

"Stress?" guessed Dr. Bob.

"Maybe. Good an explanation as any, huh?" asked Brad.

"Actually, it is a somewhat logical explanation." The doctor leaned forward. "Look Brad, I think you are under a lot of stress. Considering your new position. So I'm going to prescribe an anti-anxiety pill, just for a short time, until you get your bearings. Meanwhile, we'll go forward with the CAT scan and see how things go."

Dr. Bob had one more suggestion for Brad, who by now just wanted to get out of the office. Coming here had seemed like such a good idea, but this whole visit was more stressful than anything he'd been through recently - at least when he'd been in his right mind. The other displays were stressful, but he didn't know how he felt until after they were over.

Brad didn't want to listen to any more suggestions. In fact, his mind hurt.

"I honestly think this may have some seeds in your background. I mean, there's no other explanation. Look, it's not my area of expertise, Brad. You know that. But you told me that this Dr. Reed helped you before. I think maybe you should go to her again."

* * *

Tears came to his eyes. Big, salty tears welled up. As the breeze hit him, he felt the great levitating feeling of escaping questions – like the feeling a criminal gets when he walks away from a cop. The relief wasn't all that surprising. The tears were.

"Xanax," he said, half out loud. "So it's come to that." He laughed. He cracked a smile. "Well, so be it." Now the voice in his head stayed in his head. "Xanax it is." He imagined the headline; "Crazy Mayor needs Xanax."

At that, he decided he would get the prescription filled at the Target store in Greenville, two towns over.

Brad wiped his eyes. And after he took a few halting steps, he gained energy only to be consumed by a new urge, primal and real. Brad was hungry. He hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday. Oh yeah, "The Crazy Man Diet" was a book he was destined to write.

He laughed to himself, and walked towards the Elburn Café, which was a built-in-the-1940s diner.

At the long counter was a set of eight bolted-down backless tall stools, and plenty of pictures of Elvis, painted in various forms of 50s cool. The paint in the pictures was peeling more than it was intact. The Elburn Café was Brad's favorite place for lunch. And it was lunchtime, wasn't it?

He checked his watch. Yes. He opened the door and walked in, surveying a sweep of faces, some familiar, some not – all turning to stare at Brad – the mayor who was soon to be on Xanax. A panic attack started but Brad managed to put it off quickly with a few calm breaths. He took in the scene, said hello to his friend Ray, who he knew from his drinking days. Ray smiled at him.

When Brad looked at the others, he noticed a considerable number of curious faces. Brad was aware of the ability of a small town to spread gossip quickly. Unfortunately for Brad, Elburn even excelled past the norm, with its recent close and bitter campaign. Nothing prepared him for the looks in the restaurant; it was like everyone knew about last night. There was a look-at-the-freak atmosphere, or maybe it was look just look-at-the-mayor. One man in a green John Deer hat held his cheeseburger two inches from his mouth, which was wide open, staring at Brad. Brad wasn't used to such silent attention. He smiled, looked down at his shoes, and then plopped his body onto a stool.

"Hi Mister Mayor," said the woman seated to his right. She was a big woman in tight blue polyester pants and a gray sweatshirt decorated with the Disney character Goofy. "I can't believe you came here today," said the woman, who had a gruff, nicotine voice.

"Oh I'm so glad you did. You know we're proud of you here in Elburn. What you did last night...that was just wonderful. Wonderful! It's time that somebody put those people in their place," said the woman. Her hand was on Brad's wrist.

He quickly lifted his hand and scratched his ear.

"My name is Fran," said the woman.

"Brad."

"Oh, I know, Mayor Brad Jenkins. You are already, in one day, the best mayor this town has ever had. I cannot tell you how proud I am to have voted for a man of integrity such as yourself. What I saw last night, oh, it was sooo powerful" she said.

Fran began to blush.

"I didn't think it was possible anymore," she said. "Not, you know, in our society. But you, Mister Mayor, I just want to say..."

"Can I take your order?" A weary-faced waitress in the Café's blue checkered uniform shirt suddenly appeared.

Brad knew her name was something like Elma or Thelma. She always gave him a hard time - come to think of it, she gave everyone a hard time.

"Bacon, eggs and home fries. Sunny side eggs, three of them. And wheat toast, butter, no jelly." Brad smiled at the waitress, as he felt his arteries begin strategic plans to harden.

A run tomorrow will be a good idea, he thought.

"That's it?" she asked. "No threats?"

"No threats," smiled Brad.

"That's disappointing. I want to be on TV."

Brad laughed. "Just get me my eggs."

"Right up, sir."

As the waitress walked away, Fran grabbed Brad's wrist again. "Sometimes people need to be threatened," she said.

Brad pulled his arm away.

"You know, like kids. Kids need to be threatened, don't they?" she asked. "It's the same thing here." Fran's nicotine singsong voice was rising. "You were fantastic last night, Mister Mayor." Fran paid her bill, with a three-percent tip, and then she left.

As Brad looked around the diner and began counting heads, he was amazed by the obvious split in the clientele. Even over there, at that table by the corner, half the group looked at Brad with what could only be called admiration.

And what did the other half of the people in the diner have in their eyes? For those who looked, the twisted mouths and glaring eyes showed disgust.

The waitress brought Brad's breakfast on a white plate. Brad didn't acknowledge her. He figured he would have some questions about his performance the previous night, but it seemed every person in the county had seen it or heard about it. Maybe he was over analyzing these people, the situation. Maybe that was why he needed to be medicated. He hunkered down for his meal.

Brad folded his wheat toast and dipped it into the juicy yellow of his eggs. And then he put his head down and ate. The bizarre thoughts of the past few days cycled through his head. The realization that he'd had dried blood on his hand the previous night made his stomach produce more acid than it needed, causing instant indigestion.

Tim's dog was dead, and he'd woken up in Tim's yard and with blood on his hands. What had he done while sleepwalking? He went over the night, every detail, trying to remember anything, but all he could remember was waking up cold and the frantic run home.

When he was a teenager, he had been an occasional sleepwalker, but he hadn't experienced any episodes since boyhood.

No wait, he thought. Once, when he was in his twenties and living by himself, he'd woken up in the backyard. He remembered because that was the night his Uncle had died in the fire. It was a Friday night, and he hadn't done his usual bar slumming that night; he'd felt sick and had gone to bed early.

Next thing he remembered, he'd woken up cold in his backyard. A few days later, he'd read in a local newspaper about the fire that had killed Uncle Joe. He'd already missed the funeral - though he wouldn't have attended, anyway. He doubted anyone had shown up to mourn the loss of that sadistic bastard.

At that point, he hadn't seen his Uncle in eight or nine years; he had run away when he was sixteen, having endured one beating too many. But how did any of that tie in with recent experiences? Brad sat in the diner, sipping his coffee, trying to figure things out. He was glad he went to the doctor, he needed the help

* * *

When Brad walked back into his office, the room was empty. Judy was still at lunch.

On his desk, in a little metal basket, were a handful of message sheets. Brad counted 9 of them. Five were from Anne. Brad pulled out his cell phone to check his call log, to see if she had tried that number, but he noticed the battery was dead. He pressed TALK. Nothing.

Brad sat down and dialed the numbers to his house.

"Hi, leave a message."

The voice mail. "Hey hon." began Brad. "I went to the doctor; he said my blood pressure was up. He's worried about my stress. Get this, he put me on Xanax, just need to calm down. Oh, and I'm going to go see Dr. Debbie. Okay honey. We'll get to the bottom of this. I promise. I love you."

Brad hung up and then stood. Dealing with things rather than avoiding them has always been good for his soul. He definitely felt better. Yes, time for more reality.

Brad began looking through the construction papers when Judy walked in. "How are you feeling?" she asked. "Any better?"

"Oh, yeah," said Brad. "A lot better. The doctor says my blood pressure is elevated. I'm going to go on a prescription," said Brad. In his pocket, he fingered the piece of paper for the prescription of Xanax.

"Well, as long as he got to the bottom of your problems. You really do look much better."

"Thanks. Say, have you seen Lou?"

Judy sat in her chair. "Yeah, he was here earlier. He said he was going out to the site, and then he had to do some bank business. He said he'd be back here by four o'clock."

"Oh, I thought we were supposed to meet out at the site. Well, maybe he's still there."

"Maybe."

"Well, I'm going to head over there. If you see him, tell him I'm looking for him."

* * *

Brad pulled into the middle school parking lot and expected to see Lou's car. But it wasn't there.

As he got out of his car and stared down at the little school, he looked to the area where the addition was planned. He noticed that the land hadn't even been staked out yet. Odd. He'd thought that was done already, out of the existing town budget. Another thing about which to ask Lou.

As Brad tried to maintain his business mind, he couldn't help but be overcome by the fresh air. He had visions for this city, his hometown, this beautiful Elburn.

More construction, well placed, would really help, and he felt he was the one to bring the city into a new era. A nice mall with high-end shopping would make this a place people would want to be, right off the highway and poised on the frontier of urban sprawl. Ah, business; ah, sales tax. Sweet.

He breathed in again, and looked out over the land. He surged with optimism. He noticed his face muscles turning into a smile and even his eyes felt like they could dance. It was like he was at the top of the biggest hill of a roller coaster. Memories of bad dreams, council meetings and Xanax faded away.

* * *

Twelve miles away, Lou Chapman was also surveying some land and he, too, felt on top of the world.

His horse was in first place coming around the final turn.

Lou stood in the stands at Arlington Racetrack urging his horse, astonishingly named "Last Chance", on to victory.

"Come on, baby! Come on!" Lou was jumping.

Last Chance was flying on the inside.

The horse really was something of a last chance and that's why Lou placed \$8,000 of tapped out credit card money on him. He had a feeling.

When this horse wins, just a short ways to go, the payout is 6-1. That's some sweet money, thought Lou, as he was simultaneously cheering while mentally paying off a debt to a big man named Frank. Sweet dreams were made of this.

But dreams became nightmares at racetracks all the time and it was a big gray stallion named "Bobbie's Dream" that had ruined Lou's day.

It was a photo finish and Lou actually thought he'd won \$48,000 for a

minute. He held a clump of tickets in his pocket and he couldn't control his smile muscles. But then the announcer brought the news: "It was Bobbie's Dream by a nose."

At that, Lou walked out of the racetrack with his head down. Spots started to flicker in his line of vision, his stomach burned, and he found it hard to catch his breath. He felt surrounded, as all of this was happening he let his tickets scatter to the floor. This really was his last chance.

5

As Lou closed the door to his eight-year-old silver Camry, he felt that he couldn't breathe. His chest tightened. His skin itched. Furious shivers ran through him and his mind wandered into specific suicidal thoughts involving Drano, and even more specific thoughts of betrayal. Plus, the worst detail of all was the one he feared the most - Frank.

Frank was Lou's bookie. Lou hyperventilated. Faster and faster, he breathed.

Big Frank was a nice guy, of course, at least when Lou had first met him. Frank, who pretended to come across as a big dumb Polish guy, was actually pretty smart and he was at first happy to have a customer like Lou. What bookie wouldn't be? Yeah, Frank was a nice guy all right, especially when Lou kept showing up and making bets, even when Lou was winning, Frank was nice. But that was before the losing streak.

Now, Lou owed Frank \$46,000. And Lou feared, with reason that Frank wasn't going to be so happy. For more than a year, the losing streak continued and it culminated in his bet on the horse, Last Chance.

"Loser!" He slammed his hands on the steering wheel. Another shiver ran through him, an uncontrollable twitch. "Aaaaargh!"

Every credit card he owned was maxed out. Owing Frank \$46,000 was bad but it grew by \$1,000 a week on juice alone. Frank wouldn't let him bet anymore. Frank just wanted money, and he wanted it, well, last Friday. Frank wanted a payment of \$10,000. Lou has been avoiding Frank since then.

That was why Last Chance needed to come in. Lou shook his head. Last Chance. What a stupid name. What a stupid idea. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Now he was beyond his last chance. He needed a miracle.

Lou knew what he needed to do. Although he hoped he could sell his few remaining assets - in other words, sell his eight-year-old silver Camry and get enough money to appease Frank for a bit, he didn't think it was quite realistic. But as he sat in his car in the huge gravel parking lot of Arlington Racetrack, he didn't think any of this had any basis in reality. Not the reality of normal people, anyway.

Lou had lost his bearings. Not to mention, he'd lost a lot of money. He turned the key and then guided the Camry out of the parking lot and into the greater world that existed beyond the world of gambling. He was leaving it all behind.

We hope that you have enjoyed the preview to *Karma*.
To order a copy of the book you have just started reading, please
go to our order page for *Karma* within the pages of our
catalog. Merely click on this hyperlink:

[*Karma* by Robert Zitella](#)