

Chapter Seventeen

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“All rise.”

Philadelphia. Tuesday morning, 10 o'clock. Judge Henry Banks Still entered Courtroom C, Superior Court Building, wearing a world-weary expression like the precincts he presided over and showing almost as many signs of age. Greying throughout, slightly stooped body topped by a heavily lined, impassive face, his demeanor as he crossed the floor between the rear entrance and the bench suggested he would check on exactly what case he was hearing once he got seated. Since I was sure this was hardly the situation, I took it as a sign that his own personal convictions on the question before him had been left behind in chambers.

One of the nice things about Courtroom C, I had been told, was the fact that it had windows. On a sunny day like this one, in the dying moments of June, the light that shone through the ornately-edged panes high on the wall gave a glow to all the room's wood surfaces, helping to soften the grime of time: the rich wall panels, the judge's elevated bench, the desks of the advocates and court personnel, the banks of spectator seating—a forest of grained and knotted oak and mahogany. Unlike some of the more modern halls of justice with their sterile synthetic decor, this ancient chamber possessed a glow of life. On that morning it crossed my mind that this was a fitting observation to be made, for what was about to be argued here was the origin of that life, not only the life of trees, but of the creatures who grew them, cut them down and fashioned them into rooms like this.

The spectator seats were all but full. Shauna and I sat in the second row, directly behind the table allotted to those who represented the challenge to the State of Pennsylvania. Shauna was trimly and smartly dressed in a way I had rarely seen her, one which cast my own less inspired garb into shadow. Whether it was the new city she had rarely visited, the presence of the media, or perhaps the significance of the issue under judgment, she had treated the event as an occasion, almost from the moment we had arrived the evening before.

As it turned out, I had not heard from her until Monday morning. She apologized and blamed the lateness of the hour and a general tiredness upon her return Sunday night. Our trip down by train that afternoon was uneventful: a few anecdotes about her visit home, but no more than necessary, it seemed to me. In fact, our conversation so far had been non-committal, almost guarded. There was an air of deliberate neutrality about her, as though feelings and issues cooking on the stove between us had been moved for the moment to the back burner; as though she too were aware of the import of the occasion and the demands the next few days could make on me. There they simmered, and the faint bubble was like a background noise constantly impinging on my consciousness. Our room at the hotel, modest but comfortable, had a double bed, but under its covers the night before we had held each other without making love.

Two hours before that, we had met David and Phyllis along with two other members of the Foundation, in a corner of the hotel bar; the place was bustling for a Monday night. Perhaps the crowd was in town for the hearing, though none of the conversation around us seemed to be about the age of the earth—or Burton Patterson. Phyllis and Shauna hit it off well, and I was envious of the extra sparkle that came to Shuana's eye during their

conversation. David seemed to notice nothing amiss as he talked about last minute particulars concerning the court case. Perhaps he was blinded by the sparkle in his own eye.

There had been no further word from Nelson Chown, and the Ascended Masters might have receded to a dim memory except that James Franklin had told David early that morning that Jeffrey, the young man I had talked to at the schoolhouse, had left for Philadelphia the previous Saturday. He had been accompanied by another member of the Campus Crusade and apparently part of the group at the schoolhouse, someone by the name of Lindon. How Franklin, who seemed to be David's private sleuth, had discovered this information I was not told.

As for me, I carried my little notebook in the pocket of jacket, and its cryptic clues generated a different background simmer, this one against my chest, where they seemed to tingle the skin. Shauna and I had occupied some of the time on the train reading over the clues several times and speculating on their significance. But as to why the Masters wished to call our attention to Revelation's pronouncements on those who would look upon the pierced Christ, or those who called the stones to fall upon them and hide them from God's face, or on the spectacle of the angel who poured out his bowl of fire on the unrepentant, remained as enigmatic as ever.

If there was any angel in attendance in Courtroom C, she was not beating her wings, for the place lacked air-conditioning, and with streams of sunlight angling in through the south windows, the place held promise of becoming stuffy and warm. For the moment it was comfortable. There were glasses and pitchers of water set out on the attorneys' tables. Two fans located in the room's corners to either side of the judge's bench stood for the moment idle.

About fifteen feet in front of Shauna and I, beyond the first row of seats and the low balustrade separating the gallery from the business side of things, loomed the well-tailored back of Burton Patterson. He was flanked by a young but professional-looking woman I assumed was an assistant attorney. Prior to the entrance of Judge Still, Patterson had conveyed the air of one confident and prepared. Rather than bury his head in a last minute review of paperwork, as the woman beside him was doing, he had spent the few minutes since our own entrance relaxing in his chair and occasionally craning around to look out over the gallery. On one of those forays he had spotted Shauna and I, and a broad smile came to his face. I felt no allusion that this had been directed at me, and while I nodded in businesslike fashion, Shauna gave him a nod of her own with the slightest of enigmatic smiles.

I had not dared to ask her if Patterson had contacted her again about his 'social occasion' which was to follow the presumed success of the hearing. David had spoken the night before about a reception planned for Thursday evening. Judge Still had announced that he would limit testimony to two days and deliver his judgment on the third day. I hoped that David was correct in labelling this the work of no-nonsense arbitrator rather than one who had already made up his mind—unless, of course, that mind was in our favor. On the way to the courthouse I had made a passing reference to the planned reception but Shauna had volunteered nothing further about any overtures by Patterson.

In the front row ahead of us but off to the side of the room sat David and Phyllis. Phyllis, I could see, finally had her notebook in hand. Whether she hoped for the fireworks of the famous Scopes 'Monkey Trial' repeating themselves today, with Patterson in the role of a

reincarnated Clarence Darrow, I didn't know, but she seemed full of anticipation. Legal challenges like this one against various state attempts to introduce creationism into the classroom had been sprinkled over the last decade and a half in various courtrooms across the U.S. But none of them had featured a star figure like Burton Patterson, though this was a star which had been in eclipse for some time. Cameras were barred from the courtroom, but a half dozen seats, three on each side, had been placed before the railing separating court from gallery and these, for most of the hearing, would be filled by reporters officially assigned to cover the event. Their attention, and no doubt the majority of the words they scribbled in front of them, were directed at the returning civil rights litigator.

At one point Phyllis had asked something of David, who promptly craned his neck out over the gallery. He signalled me and mouthed a question which I could see involved the name Cherkasian. My own sweep of the audience did not reveal the presence of the man I had talked to at the schoolhouse.

I had, however, spied the second gardener from that day, the one Cherkasian had called Steven. The young man was sitting in the back near the opposite corner. Even from this distance I could see that he wore a nervous and intense look. I wondered just what he expected to hear today and how he had prepared himself for hearing it.

Steven. Was he from Philadelphia before taking up residence at the schoolhouse? Jeffrey was a student at the University back home. It was he, presumably, who had sent the e-mails to the Foundation from the Campus Crusade's computer, although at least one other university student, according to Franklin, was on the scene as well. Clues 1 and 3. The opening message and Clue No. 2 had come from Philadelphia. Had Steven anything to do with sending those? That opening message had a peremptory ring which suggested Cherkasian himself.

David and I should have urged Chown, or even the local police, to have them all hauled in for questioning. Were apocalyptic quotations from Revelation sufficient probable cause? Why not? Taken out of context, perhaps a judge could be persuaded that they had a threatening air to them.

A few moments after that cheery thought, the spectators' gallery was all but filled, and Judge Henry Banks Still had entered the courtroom. It was solely he who would decide the issue in these proceedings. No jury of average Americans had been permitted to be involved.

Shauna whispered, "What are Burton Patterson's witnesses going to swear on?"

"Good question. A copy of Darwin, maybe?"

The formalities took a quarter of an hour. A court clerk detailed the challenge by the Age of Reason Foundation, acting under the sponsorship of the ACLU, to the Senate of the State of Pennsylvania, for its instructions to the state Board of Education to insert into the science curriculum at the High School level an outline of the theory that the universe had been created through deliberate design by a Deity. This theory was to be given equal time beside any and all theories that stars, planets and life itself had evolved through natural, undirected processes. The Senate's resolution had been carefully phrased to avoid any reference to the Christian religion as such, although there did appear the words "as presented in cultural records reflecting traditional opinions and beliefs, such as the Bible." This was closely followed by the phrase, "and backed by modern scientific principles of investigation." Perhaps the groan at this point from David's direction was only my imagination.

The grounds for the challenge lay, as always, in the contention that creationism was derived solely from religious belief as embodied in religious writings, and as a so-called theory could demonstrate no adherence to scientific principles. The State of Pennsylvania was required, before Superior Court justice, to demonstrate that there were grounds to allow School Boards to act upon their instructions, ground which did not violate the constitutional separation of Church and State.

At precisely 10:20, from his seat at opposing counsel's table on the other side of the room, Mr. Chester Wylie stood up. He was a heavy-set man in his fifties, greying hair discreetly colored and coiffed, with an open, almost cheery face that would have led no one to accuse him of narrowmindedness or intolerance.

He greeted the court affably, then got down to business.

"The issue at this hearing, Your Honor, is not a religious one, despite what opposing counsel would like to maintain. And, by the way, I welcome Mr. Patterson back to the old haunts he left—quite some time ago now, it seems. However, I will not be calling upon him as a witness to the earlier stages of the world's development."

Several snickers and a guffaw arose from the gallery, and even Judge Still cracked a faint smile. Patterson half rose in his chair to acknowledge the introduction. In a soft voice, which carried into the corners of the room, he said, "Mr. Wylie must not be eager for news about his own family tree."

This raised a different set of snickers and a smattering of applause. Even Shauna beside me gave a little involuntary clap of her hands. From the direction of the sounds, I realized that supporters of each side had ranged themselves behind the respective attorney's table. That it would be a partisan and probably demonstrative audience seemed clear.

Judge Still evidently realized this as well and moved to establish control of his courtroom. "I understand the emotional nature of the issue being heard today," he said in a hard-edged, gravelly voice. "But I will tolerate no outbursts. And I admonish both counsels to keep their provocative comments to a minimum."

Chester Wylie nodded graciously. "Provocation is not in my repertoire, Your Honor. Nor is the State of Pennsylvania wishing to be provocative in its insistence that equal time be given to the scientific theory of creationism. As I said, this is not a religious issue at base. The issue is whether we ought to expose our children to all facets of contemporary thinking. And in the science classroom, this includes all theories which follow lines of scientific argument. We must further ask on the other side of the coin: shall we leave the education field only to those theories which are flawed and questionable, and which many in our society find objectionable or even ludicrous? To teach our children that the only option open to viewing their family tree—not just my own—is that their ancestors swung from it, is to shortchange them on the views of life and the universe which are available to us. We all know to what level of godhead modern secular elements in our society have raised the discipline known as 'science', and the hallowed status they have given to everything preached under this banner. The State of Pennsylvania believes that science can and should include theories which the secular community does not find itself disposed to entertain."

Chester Wylie had a relaxed mode of delivery, at least when arguing before a judge's bench as opposed to a jury box. He had come out from behind the table but stood close by it, moving little, occasionally resting a hand upon its surface. So far he had spoken without notes.

“Nor should we set a criterion for theories to be included in a science class that they have to be proven as correct. I would like to call the court’s attention—a kind of hindsight example, if you wish—to the fact that medieval science courses included the theory that the sun went around the earth. We now know this to have been incorrect, as Copernicus and Kepler demonstrated. But it was based on the accepted scientific tradition of the time, going back to good scientific observations by Ptolemy and others in the ancient world. Would the court say that science classes should not have taught the Ptolemaic system?”

As Wylie spoke these words, I thought to detect a subtle increase in tension throughout the room, for he was treading tender ground here. By implication, he was admitting the possibility that the theory of creationism could be wrong. And yet the tactic was shrewd. His point was that science could encompass theories which were not infallible. Perhaps he was heading for the position that it was how one approached a theory rather than its demonstrable accuracy which justified its inclusion under the scientific umbrella. We would see.

Perhaps sensing the undesirable implications in his argument, Wylie switched to another example, one which those on his side of the room undoubtedly found more palatable.

“Should we have taught the earlier version of the theory of evolution, one could ask? It described a gradual progression from one species to the next. This version proved unsupportable by the evidence, and so a different theory, the one now called ‘punctuated equilibrium’ has been offered. Who knows how long before this one is chucked in the wastebasket and yet another offered in its place? The point is, Your Honor, science cannot limit itself to those topics which an intellectual elite hold to be acceptable, relegating those of us less prejudiced in our uses of scientific principles to the wilderness. Nor must we banish our children to the wilderness and deny them the richness of what all our cultural philosophies and investigations have to offer.”

The man was clever, there was no doubt about it. Not only was he managing to push a lot of emotional buttons, he was by implication aligning creationism with the principles associated with science and all things good in present society. I wondered what Burton Patterson was thinking at this moment about the quality of the opposition and the challenges he would face in winning the Foundation’s case.

That first morning’s ‘testimony’ by the State of Pennsylvania centered on a selection of standard arguments in favor of creationism. These were things to do with the geological record, the nature of life and the fossil evidence, laws of chemistry and physics, all, of course, interpreted in unusual ways. I could tell from David’s expression that there was nothing new here. A few of these points Chester Wylie delivered himself; others were made through witnesses. Of these, most held degrees in science from what I knew were evangelical colleges, one or two from more mainstream universities. After each statement of principle, Burton Patterson was allowed to make a rebuttal statement or cross-examine the witness, or to call a rebuttal witness of his own. The latter occurred three times, and always involved the same individual. This was an evolutionary biologist from a Boston university. The man was clearly adept and experienced at rebutting creationist argument; his answers seemed prepared and he looked as though he had made a second career out of offering such a service. Though high profile cases like this one were a relative rarity, evolution vs. creation was an issue which was being fought out at a lot of local levels: in universities, school boards and community organizations.

It seemed from Chester Wylie's manner and tone that he was not overly concerned with convincing anyone of the validity of the case for creationism. Many points he delivered in cursory fashion, as though slipping them by as unworthy of objection. And indeed, Patterson let some of them pass as not requiring rebuttal. Wylie was clearly presenting these features of the creationist case as expressions of science and scientific investigation, creating the impression that creationism had a body of material and a method of handling it which could rank with any scientific discipline. For that reason, he seemed anxious to squeeze in as many points as possible, failing to argue most of them in any great depth. At the same time, Wylie rarely chose to try to counter the Foundation counsel's rebuttals.

Judge Still called a halt to the morning's proceedings at three minutes before noon. The courtroom emptied rapidly.

In the corridor outside, the Foundation's members and supporters congregated, with Patterson and David the focal point of the circle. Shauna and I were on its edge, but I noticed that the attorney was aware of our presence and more than once glanced in Shauna's direction. Shauna herself maintained an impassive expression, though she, like all of us, seemed to be listening intently.

"I don't want to get bogged down in trying to rebut all the details of the creationist case," Patterson was explaining to David, though he spoke for the benefit of everyone listening. "Sometimes too much rebuttal can backfire on you because it creates a bully image, and to the non-scientific mind some of their arguments can have a veneer of respectability. Rebutting them often requires very technical discussion which doesn't always convince, because people don't understand it and it sounds elitist."

David nodded, though his expression suggested he was still worried. That, I reflected, was the man's natural proclivity. "Are we going to be in a position to discredit them? The way the hearing is structured, it seems to give them all the serves. We have to respond to what they give us."

Patterson was reassuring. "They're answering our challenge. Don't worry. It can work to our advantage. The more we let them open their mouths, the more something damaging is going to come out. I think Wylie realizes that, which is why he seems more interested in creating an impression than in offering substance. He's laying the groundwork for something, and I have the feeling he won't get to whatever it is until tomorrow. I prefer to save my best ammunition for the crack troops, when they finally attack. In the meantime, we sit tight and try not to let them get away with too much."

Phyllis, standing beside David, asked, "Isn't there a danger in not rebutting their case as thoroughly as possible? The more the judge is convinced they have one, the more he may think students have the right to hear it."

Patterson was unperturbed. "Dear lady, as you yourself should know, it is not always the substance of something which is the most important, it is how it is delivered. Mr. Wylie implied that principle himself in his opening remarks. He is really aiming at the question of *how* creationism would be offered in the classroom. That has to be the central issue, and he knows it."

The smile he had given Phyllis with this answer suddenly gave way to a more thoughtful expression. "That battle has not yet been engaged. It will be where the truest feelings come out."

He threw his glance around the circle and I thought it rested momentarily on myself and Shauna. Then he caught sight of someone behind us and signalled. To David he said, "I need a word with Kaminsky. Have some lunch and relax. See you back here at two." He pushed his way out of the circle and went off down the hall with his rebuttal expert.

Shauna and I found ourselves with David and Phyllis as the rest of the circle melted away in its own directions. After a brief discussion of the merits of lunch and where to indulge in it, we agreed to Phyllis' recommendation of a small Italian place she knew of, a block down from the courthouse.

As we left the building and descended the stone stairs to the street, we approached a familiar figure standing at the base of the steps, looking up intently at the weathered courthouse facade as though finding it a place of evil or uncertain menace. As I passed the young man named Steven, he noticed me and our eyes locked, each one's following the other's as I moved by only a few feet away. His expression was unfathomable.

"Who was that?" David asked, as we made our way down the street.

"That, my friend, was one of our Ascended Masters. His name is Steven. He works on gardens and who knows what else. He apparently subscribes to the notion, if he listens to Mr. Cherkasian, that God can be prodded into bringing the world to an end and setting up a new Jerusalem."

"I assume we wouldn't be a part of it," remarked Phyllis.

"No, I have no doubt we're all citizens of the evil Babylon. The avenging angels are going to have a field day with us. Somebody has to suffer all that fire, hail and scorpions they've got stored up in heaven's arsenal for the day of judgment."

"But no sign of Cherkasian himself so far?" David once more had adopted a worried tone.

"Not a whisker. It's curious he wouldn't want to be here, but it seems he's let his charges out on their own this time, unchaperoned. Although, I haven't seen Jeffrey. I thought Franklin said he was supposed to be in Philadelphia—with someone else from the University?"

"So I was told. But I wouldn't recognize him, either. Maybe Agent Chown will have something to tell us when he gets here this evening. He has my room number at the hotel. Hopefully I'll hear from him tonight."

We set the hearing aside for an hour and enjoyed a meal heavy on pasta. Though she frequently responded to remarks all round, Shauna seemed self-absorbed. When our eyes met a few times there was a note of reflection in them, of distant sadness, as though life, despite one's best efforts, had a habit of following its own impenetrable course and one had to go along with it. For the first time since our relationship had begun, it struck me that its permanence was not guaranteed, and that I could actually lose her.

2

By the time we returned to the courtroom at 1:55, the heat buildup had become marked. The corner fans were working, creating a little, somnolent whirring sound and a sensation on the skin as the musty air of the place was pushed into a sluggish circulation. Dust motes floated within the golden shafts which fell at a rakish slant from the high moresque windows.

As I peered back over the crowd, now filling the room to capacity, I noticed at least one new face. Jeffrey was now here. Perhaps the young man beside him was Lindon, the other Campus Crusader. At the moment, both were looking about. I spied Steven off on the far side. Were there other Masters spread about the room, whom I was not familiar with? I scanned the rest of the two hundred-odd spectators. Cherkasian was still not present.

Why would he not have attended? Chown thought Philadelphia was his 'home away from home.' There should have been no impediment to him being here, especially as so many of the cult members had come. I was beginning to feel that his absence was somehow more threatening than if he had been sitting beside me. At least in an adjacent seat I could have kept my eye on him. Now I felt him as a menacing presence, a spirit force visible only through his minions, junior demons whose adolescent behavior might prove unpredictable. Their pitchforks pricked at my nervous back.

Patterson, waiting at his table for the entrance of Judge Still, was in conversation with the young woman attorney who had fed him papers throughout the morning and directed the movements of the expert from Boston; this man sat at the end of the first row, just beyond David and Phyllis. The chief counsel's back showed no sign of twitching from the barbs of the demon striplings present.

"All rise."

For the two hour afternoon session, Chester Wylie switched to the other side of the creationist position: an attack on the fundamental tenets of evolution. He did his best to exploit all the vulnerable elements of the Darwinian theory. Patterson, with a battery of sources and his trusty Bostonian evolutionist did his best to parry and counter.

Some of the defensive manoeuvres were easy. Wylie must have regretted having one of his 'creation scientists' bring up the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

"All things tend to become more disordered, less complex," said Mr. Ellington. "In all reactions some energy is lost as heat, hence the total available energy is reduced; things break down, they shrink; order is gradually replaced by disorder. The theory of evolution would contravene this law, since it requires that things become more developed, more complex."

When Patterson left his seat and approached the witness box, he scratched behind his ear and looked a bit perplexed.

"Mr. Ellington, how old are you?"

Wylie looked as though he was about to object, thinking that the question was meant to compromise or denigrate the witness in some way. Since this effect was not immediately clear, he restrained himself for the moment.

"Uh, forty-six."

"And how tall are you?"

"Five foot ten."

"I see." Patterson switched to scratching behind the other ear. "That must have been very hard on your mother."

Now Wylie could not restrain himself, feeling that some sort of denigration was indeed being expressed here.

"Your Honor! I'm not sure what Mr. Patterson has in mind, but I find this questioning bordering on the distasteful."

"Yes, Mr. Patterson," Judge Still responded. "What are you getting at?"

“I was only remarking, Your Honor, that Mrs. Ellington must have had a difficult time with the birth of a son who was over five foot ten. I can only assume that if the Second Law of Thermodynamics applies, the state in which we presently see him is more disordered and shrunken since the point at which he came into the world.”

Wylie, having stood up from his chair, sat down abruptly and shook his head. Laughs and a smattering of applause erupted from the right side of the room, abruptly cut off as Judge Still glared out over the gallery. Patterson muttered into the silence, “I suppose we should also congratulate Mr. Ellington on having been an intelligent child.”

Before Judge Still could switch his glare to counsel for the Foundation, Patterson swung toward one of the windows and pointed. “What is that, Mr. Ellington?”

Mr. Ellington looked blank. “You mean the window?”

“No, sir. I mean what’s coming in the window.”

Ellington said slowly, “You mean, sunlight?”

“Yes, sir, I mean sunlight. No doubt you are aware that this is not manna from heaven, but represents heat and energy given off by the sun. Creation science does recognize the existence of the sun, does it not?”

“Of course it does.”

“Oh yes, I forgot. God was good enough to stop it in its revolution around the earth, so that Joshua could conquer a few more Canaanites.” Wylie had adopted a disgusted expression, no doubt self-directed for having allowed Patterson such a devastating opening.

“Are you aware,” Patterson continued, “that the law of thermodynamics operates in a closed system? The earth is not a closed system. We are bathed in energy from the sun, as you can see through these windows. This is the force that powers evolution. It is what powered your growth from an infant to a five foot ten adult and surely made your mother proud.”

He retreated to his table. “I don’t think I need anything further from this witness.”

From that point on, Chester Wylie seemed to tread more gingerly. When he brought up a series of creationist claims that many of the standard dating techniques which evolutionists relied on to gauge the age of geological strata could be faulty, since no allowance had been made for the possibility that such things as the rate of radioactive decay could have altered over time, Patterson took the opportunity to put forward a related example which had not been brought up.

By now, I could see the reasoning and strategy lying behind Patterson’s approach. Helium retention and the breakdown of Uranium 238 was gibberish to most people. But point out that creation theory also required that the speed of light had dramatically decreased over the last few centuries, and the absurdity of the idea was apparent to even the scientific semi-literate.

“Today’s 186,000 miles a second is a snail’s pace compared to the clip it was really travelling at to get from the known edges of the universe to the earth in the 6,000 years since creation.” He made a gesture of invitation in Chester Wylie’s direction. “Of course, I leave the floor open to opposing counsel should he wish to argue that light from all those distant galaxies was created at a nearby point in space and launched from there.”

Wylie demurred, as a further snickering arose from the gallery. The spectators were clearly more stimulated this afternoon than they had been during the morning session. The nonchalance Patterson had displayed at the lunch break had perhaps been eroded by David’s

expression of concern. Had he realized that he might have been allowing the opposition to score too many points? On this side of the room, the change was a welcome one—as well as notably more entertaining. Shauna was chuckling audibly to herself, and her eyes were animated as she looked out over the scene beyond the balustrade. Patterson cut a figure which could at times be mesmerizing. But I had already known that.

Patterson's more aggressive approach seemed to induce a change of direction in Wylie's own strategy. He abruptly dropped the attacks on evolution as a theory and switched to a reading of excerpts from evolution's own champions, words ostensibly indicating the breakdown of their own theories. All taken out of context, of course.

I was aware that this practice was a common one among the advocates of creation science. Exploit the questioning and honest examination given to their own field by evolutionists, the admission of limitations and incomplete information. Take the fundamental feature of scientific inquiry—the ability to question current theory in the face of new evidence, to alter and even scrap past conclusions which were no longer tenable—and use it to imply that secular scientists were a bewildered lot, unable to support the prejudiced assumptions they had foolishly come up with.

No new phylae had entered the fossil record since the Cambrian explosion, Stephen Jay Gould had admitted. The failure to locate any widespread fossil evidence for 'intermediary' forms of life was an observation going back a century. The challenges in understanding how complex chemical reactions could have occurred in the primordial soup were regularly remarked on by evolutionary biologists and physicists. Of course, all these admissions had been accompanied or followed by suggested explanations, revised theories, new discoveries. None of these, however, ever showed up in the creationists' quotations.

Patterson contented himself with a statement of principle, that the process illustrated the vitality and productive fluidity of scientific thought in its pursuit of understanding. "Science prefers to let the universe reveal its truth to us, no matter how long it takes, rather than allow us to impose our own truths upon the universe." In response to the old chestnut that Darwin himself had expressed bafflement at how evolution could have given rise to the wonder of the human eye, Patterson read from a new book by Richard Dawkins which offered a theory to explain just that.

The afternoon session seemed to dribble to a close. Perhaps Patterson had been right. Wylie during the last half hour seemed to be marking time, awaiting the bell of the current round so that he could regroup and introduce a fresh set of moves when the next bell sounded in the morning. Judge Still struck his gavel at 3:55.

As the courtroom began to empty, I watched the three Ascended Masters. For several minutes they each remained seated, watching Patterson as he gathered himself up at the counsel table. None of their gazes seemed friendly. More than once during the course of the day my imagination had run away with me, and I had taken comfort in the fact that the ever-present metal detector at the entrance to most American courtrooms these days had been functioning for this hearing.

Unlike the end of the morning session, Patterson as we left the courtroom was approached by several media people, including a female TV reporter accompanied by a cameraman. From the tenor of her questions it was clear she had not attended the hearing and was interested in Patterson as the celebrity flavor of the week. Patterson showed less objection to this than I felt he should have, and sensing for the first time that I ought to be

doing something to fill my role as publicist for the Age of Reason Foundation, I stepped in at an opportune moment to plug the Foundation and point out its sponsorship of the challenge to the State of Pennsylvania. I invited them all to the reception scheduled for Thursday evening at the hotel. "I'm sure Mr. Patterson would be pleased at that time to accommodate your enquiries."

Patterson looked at me curiously, while David smiled broadly. This was easier than I thought, I reflected. I rather liked the sensation. And hopefully, under a press of reporters and interviewers, Patterson would be kept busy throughout his 'social occasion'.

Thus far, the hearing had not turned into the media circus some had expected. Or hoped, depending on how one looked at it. I was almost tempted to bring up the Ascended Masters and produce their clues under the very eye of the TV camera. Wisdom prevailed, however. Besides, there was plenty of time for recourse to desperate measures. The best was no doubt yet to come, and I had faith that Patterson had his own plot and methods to draw attention to himself.

3

Adjacent to the reception room, the hotel boasted a first-class restaurant, and at 6 PM eight of us were gathered to enjoy a quality meal at Patterson's expense. The attorney was accompanied by his courtroom assistant. Her name was Helen Walters, but although they were cordial toward one another, there seemed no suggestion of a romantic relationship. She was probably a good 25 years his junior, I noted.

I found it curious that Patterson seemed to have no female companionship on this trip to Philadelphia. Perhaps he felt that the work was too important to let romantic distractions get in the way. Yet somehow, the role of the celibate prizefighter before the great match did not suit him.

Over cocktails our talk fell to the day's proceedings. Patterson once again expressed the opinion that Chester Wylie was not too concerned about making a flawless case in favor of creationism. "I suspect he thinks we both came out on a more or less equal footing today. He expects the balance to tip in his favor tomorrow. He wouldn't have taken on the case if he didn't think he had a chance of persuading the judge. If he can convey the impression that creation science has some substance, and at the same time exploit the so-called deficiencies on the evolution side, he may even carry it."

He winked at David. "Of course, then we get it overturned on appeal."

David looked as though he didn't know whether to take Patterson seriously. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

Phyllis prodded, "So you think there's a possibility that you'll lose the case?"

"I never expect such a thing."

Certainly, Patterson's relaxed demeanor as the meal proceeded suggested he had no worries about the ultimate outcome. And yet he had lost the edge to the bravado I had come to associate with the man. Tonight his conversation was, for the most part, thoughtful and responsive to those around him. There was a point at which he almost struck me as a lonely man, seeking to fill a life that had become too diffuse, too shallow of purpose to satisfy the drives that had carried him so far. Perhaps in the waning of middle age, he was seeking his own final spurt of evolution.

Between Patterson and myself, the sense of friction still lingered, and I caught him more than once looking at me in a contemplative fashion, as though some kind of evaluation were going on in his mind. Occasionally, that glance took in Shauna beside me. At those moments, the sense of a pull in her direction was palpable, nor did I think it was my imagination. But today, amid the languishing state of my relationship with Shauna, for which I was taking all the blame, that evident attraction did not invoke the same feelings of hostility. Instead, it brought to my awareness the potency and fragility of human feelings, the power of that sea of emotions and needs which carried us all on its churning, unpredictable waves. Perhaps it was the natural tendency of molecules, whether of myth or human relationships, to break up and reform. Not even Jesus could go on forever, and that loss the world would one day have to face, perhaps soon. My own sense of loss was beginning to impinge on me, for Shauna and I were drifting apart, and I was not sure how to cast the life-saving line. I realized that the whole question required a degree of self-examination I had been reluctant or unable to face.

Finally, as the main course was delivered all round by a pair of obsequious waiters, Patterson ventured to Shauna, "And what about you, Miss Rosen? I suppose you think that today was a lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

It was the first word they had spoken to each other, though I had thought to sense a subtle undercurrent between them from the evening's beginning, something I had in this case put down to my imagination. Actually, Patterson's question had been penetrating, for it reflected Shauna's genuine attitude toward such issues, she who believed that life should be lived at the center of present reality.

Shauna had spoken very little through the meal thus far. Now she looked directly at Patterson and said, "I haven't made up my mind yet. I suppose it's good to have causes and all that, but we shouldn't lose sight of the things which are really important, the things that nourish us. Too much energy gets misdirected, I think. It's always been that way."

"Suppose one could strike a balance? Then you could have the best of both worlds."

Shauna said, with surprising candor it seemed to me: "I enjoyed your performance today. It was entertaining. And I suppose these things are necessary until we establish some kind of common sense, something we can live by and teach our children."

"We all get a little impatient waiting for things we'd like to see happen."

"As I said, I haven't made up my mind yet."

This rather curious exchange was interrupted by Phyllis, who proposed to Patterson that he pick up a certain line of argument in tomorrow's session. My appetite was turning out to be sluggish and I finished the rest of my meal with little gusto. Everyone, in fact, seemed caught in some uncertain limbo, unsure of the course of events that lay ahead. We had placed so much stock in this hearing; in a way, the Foundation had almost sidetracked itself by putting all its eggs in the Patterson basket. If he fell, would they all be broken? Perhaps our Age of Reason would evaporate on the cold stone of Philadelphia's courthouse steps, and the regressive forces which the Foundation had sprung to life to oppose would carry the day and the next millennium.

Surprisingly, it was David who lifted our spirits by proposing a toast with the after dinner wine.

"To the victory of reason and enlightenment. We've ridden a rocky road trying to reach it, but no struggle has been more important and more promising. And to our good friend

Burton Patterson, who will shortly be putting one more nail in the coffin of irrationality and bringing us a little further along that road.”

There was a hearty round of Hear! Hear! Even Shauna raised her glass and joined in the expression of fervent hope and celebration.

As it turned out, our uplifted mood was shortly to be compromised. Around nine, Shauna and I ended up with David and Phyllis in their hotel room, and five minutes later Nelson Chown called from the lobby. He was invited to join us.

“At 11 o’clock this morning, Robert Cherkasian was sighted at the schoolhouse,” Chown reported. “I think we can assume he has no intention of attending the hearing. I suppose he could arrive late, but if he had anything cooking, I would think he’d be here from the beginning.”

David looked relieved. “So he’s probably not even planning some play to the media, trying to make us look silly over his e-mails.”

But something about the situation bothered me. “It’s odd, though. Here he zeroes in on us precisely on the subject of the hearing. He called Patterson a ‘hotshot lawyer’. What reason would he have for staying away? And I don’t know whether you’re aware of it or not, but at least three of the Masters are here, two from the schoolhouse. None I’ve seen looked overly friendly. Cherkasian has to have an interest in what’s going on, or else he wouldn’t have sent the kids. Why not come himself?”

“Maybe he’s just giving them exposure to this sort of thing,” David suggested. “Maybe it’s meant to be a learning experience.”

“Yes,” Phyllis added. “Get them all stirred up against the godless evolutionists.”

Chown mused, “He gives them free rein by not accompanying them, but he’s counting on the hearing to solidify the indoctrination. He’s probably got them pegged perfectly.”

I moved over to the window and looked down twelve stories on a bustling Philadelphia street in advancing twilight. “It still doesn’t feel right. Cherkasian has no control over what Patterson says, and he risks having what he does say do some damage to the boys’ faith, to his own indoctrination. I should think it would be better to accompany them.”

Chown shrugged. “I don’t think we can presume to know Cherkasian’s motives. Maybe he got them so worked up, they just came on their own. Maybe they’re here expecting to witness some kind of divine wrath. But if you like, I can keep an eye on them.”

David said hastily, “Just don’t let Mr. Patterson know you’re around. I don’t want anything putting him off tomorrow. We’ve got a case to win and it’s not in the bag yet.”

Shauna spoke up. “Did it ever occur to you all that Mr. Cherkasian sent these boys to do some harm to Mr. Patterson?”

Chown looked at her and frowned. “That doesn’t seem feasible. It would be suicide for him. If he gave them instructions like that, there’s no way it wouldn’t come out. He doesn’t strike me as the sort who wants to preach the end of the world to convicts at Levinworth.” He snapped his fingers. “However—”

Phyllis beat him to it. “He could have sent them to make a demonstration.”

David looked alarmed. “In the courtroom? If they were able to disrupt the proceedings sufficiently, the whole hearing might be jeopardized!”

Chown scoffed. “I doubt it. There’s no reason why they wouldn’t be subdued fairly quickly. The hearing would simply resume after a short delay.”

The FBI agent drew himself up to his full stocky height. “It’s pointless to speculate like this. For all we know, Cherkasian will show up tomorrow.” He turned to me. “Meet me at the door of the courtroom a few minutes before the session starts—ten, is it?—and point these characters out to me, if you can. I’ll try to keep an eye on them.”

Once more David was looking thoroughly miserable. “Try not to let Burton see you,” he said to me bleakly.

At 11 o’clock, Shauna and I retired to our own room down the hall. We had been together the whole day, but since leaving the hotel early in the morning we had somehow managed to say very little to each other, and of that virtually all of it was superficial. Now we both felt awkward. We knew there were problems that needed addressing, and yet a hotel room in Philadelphia hardly seemed the right place, especially when a demanding day lay ahead of us and preoccupations, some disturbing, pressed from all sides. We got ready for bed, making small talk about the day’s events.

Something about Shauna’s conversation with Patterson over supper had been nagging away at me, but I knew that this was the last thing I should bring up now. Expressions of jealousy, especially when I was blaming myself for the problems we faced, would have been petty and entirely inappropriate.

Instead, I should have told her that I had been thinking a great deal about our relationship, and that I realized things die unless they are kept invigorated. I should have told her that my periodic withdrawal into a world of my own, retreating into the past to avoid a commitment to the present, was inhibiting the deeper bond we could be developing. I should have told her that I loved her.

What I should not have done was tell myself that we could not spend the night in a weighty, emotional discussion. That it could wait one or two more days.

Shauna emerged from the bathroom in her nightgown. I turned down the bed clothes. To fill the silence created by that procrastination, I began to talk about the other subject that was weighing heavily on my mind.

“I suppose we ought to trust Chown’s instincts that we don’t have anything to worry about from the Masters, except maybe a little courtroom disruption. But I keep going back to those clues. Somebody, no doubt Cherkasian, went to a lot of trouble to pick out passages from Revelation to send to us. And each one of them is altered in some way. Now he’s not even attending the hearing. Were these clues not supposed to have any particular application?”

Shauna plumped the pillows up against the headboard of the bed, slid her legs under the cover and sat upright. She folded her hands in her lap. “Clues. What are clues usually used for?”

I walked over to the window, the tie of my own nightgown knotted about my waist. I looked out over the neon-lit street below. “As a hidden meaning. A warning, perhaps?”

Shauna then came up with one of her sudden insights, the product of that sharp mind which could make life with her endlessly fascinating. “What if the idea of the ‘clue’ isn’t directed at you—at the Foundation? Maybe the clues have some meaning for Cherkasian himself.”

I looked around at her thoughtfully. It was a clever idea. I went over and sat on the edge of the bed, near the outline of her feet under the light blanket.

“You mean, that Cherkasian could see the clues as some pointer for himself or the Masters. He actually had a rather subtle way of looking at scripture. He felt that the prophecies were expressed in such a way as to have an open-ended applicability. They could refer to any number of future times, and it was up to God to decide when to let them be fulfilled.”

“The scriptures provide the mold and God pours in the molten metal.”

I winced. “That image is a little too close to Revelation’s own horrors. But you’re right. And there was another element to Cherkasian’s view, something even more original. He said that when you know God’s will—whatever he meant by that—he has to act. He believed it was possible to convince God that now was the time to fulfill all those prophecies. He thinks he can force God’s hand.”

“Maybe the clues were for God,” Shauna said in a facetious tone.

“Maybe.”

I got up and started to pace. “But suppose we follow your suggestion and consider that Cherkasian and the Masters *read* them as clues: for their own enlightenment. He told me that events were already unfolding as foretold. Are these things happening? Do the passages he sent us refer to some current events he thinks are pointed to in Revelation?”

“Isn’t that what all the fundamentalists are doing? Pointing to the fulfillment of prophecy in our time?”

“Yes, they are.” I scratched my head. “Maybe Cherkasian isn’t as inventive as I thought. He didn’t even come to the hearing. But, you know, why does something about that bother me more than if he were actually here?”

“Maybe putting in an appearance was beneath him.”

I shook my head in frustration. “As Chown says, he may show up tomorrow, or the third day. If he’s planning some limelight-grabbing stunt, he may not want to dilute the effect by showing himself ahead of time.”

“So he sends his charges to scout the place. To prepare for his arrival.”

“Like Jesus on Palm Sunday entering Jerusalem.” My voice was heavy with sarcasm. “Maybe he’s waiting at the schoolhouse for some angelic chariot to carry him onto the scene. It’s impossible to know what minds like his are capable of believing. What they are capable of doing is driving minds like mine crazy.”

“Perhaps you should come to bed.”

The silence of the darkened hotel room was filled by anxieties and unspoken thoughts, and not just on the subject of Ascended Masters. As I lay with my arm across her shoulder, both my own brain and Shauna’s, I was sure, were resonating with words that wanted to be said, feelings needing expressing. But except for that undercurrent of cerebral vibration, the quiet of the room lay unbroken. Distant noises from the world below drifted up the twelve stories. Eventually I fell into a fitful sleep.

When I awoke, it was still dark, though the world was quieter. The faintly glowing numerals of my watch said 4:22. My mind must have been in problem-solving mode while I slept, for I was now struck by a configuration I had not seen before. The Ascended Masters had sent us three clues. As far as we knew, three of them had come to Philadelphia.

Was this a coincidence? Perhaps the brooding hour combined with a state of anxiety could make even the insignificant details of a problem look portentous.

Two clues from the University. Two Masters from there were in attendance at the hearing. One clue from the house in Philadelphia. The third Master, before moving to the schoolhouse, had been resident at the Philadelphia headquarters, if that's what it was.

I got quietly out of bed, retrieved my notebook from my jacket pocket and went into the bathroom.

The light seared my eyes. So did the look of myself in the mirror. Rational Man was decidedly haggard, haunted. I was almost willing to concede that I looked my age. Was that the price of trying to change the world? And salvage one's own personal life at the same time?

So far I was not doing an exceptionally laudable job of either.

I sat on the closed toilet seat and opened my notebook.

'*Clue number one.*' It had been sent from the University. Jeffrey and Lindon were members of the Campus Crusade for Christ, recently enlisted in the Ascended Masters.

'This is the revelation given by God to Jesus Christ. The hour of fulfillment is near. Behold, every eye shall see him pierced, and all the peoples of the world shall lament in remorse. So it shall be. Amen.'

The phrase about the piercing had been shortened from the one in Revelation: 'Every eye shall see him, and among them those who pierced him.' A simple abbreviation?

Christ crucified. We shall all lament. A clue sent by God to the Masters—to Cherkasian himself? Were such events already unfolding?

'*Clue number two.*' Sent from the house in Philadelphia. Steven's old haunt.

'Those who think themselves great men, and the rich and the strong, shall call to the stones: Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath none can stand before.'

The original passage called on 'the mountains and the rocks'. The great men, the rich and the strong, were probably seen as a reference to the Foundation. Patterson and the rest of us shall call upon the stones to fall upon us to hide us from God's wrath.

I couldn't remember doing anything like that lately.

'*Clue number three.*' Back to the University.

'And the fourth poured his bowl on those sons; and it was allowed to burn them with its flames. But they only cursed the name of God, and refused to repent.'

A significant change from the original here. The fourth angel had poured his bowl on the *sun*. The clue had altered this to '*sons*'. Obviously, we were the sons, and I liked Franklin's suggestion that the term may have referred to the Sons of Darkness of Qumran conception, a link which Cherkasian may have made in his own mind. I doubted that he saw us as the Sons of Light.

I had recently been accused of refusing to repent. But no angel had poured bowls of fire on me, or anything else. At least, none Cherkasian would have known about.

A scare tactic? Three appeals for repentance and remorse? They all had that element in common.

Had each of the Ascended Masters who were now in attendance at the hearing been assigned to deliver one? Get them involved in converting the world, was that Cherkasian's strategy? And how were such appeals to induce God to bring about the fulfillment of his prophecies?

Could a rational mind make any sense of an irrational one?

When I crept back into bed, I could only hope I would manage another couple of hours' sleep. I had a disquieting feeling that I was going to need a good supply of energy to cope with the approaching day.

4

By 9:40, Courtroom C of the Superior Court Building in downtown Philadelphia was rapidly filling. David had arrived earlier and taken the precaution of claiming several seats at the end of the first row. Shauna and I sat down beyond David and Phyllis, with a seat remaining at the side aisle. Whether Agent Chown would need one, or whether he would consider this a good location, I didn't know.

In ten minutes I would have to retreat to the corridor to meet Chown as arranged. I twisted in my seat to look out over the gallery floor behind me. The faces gazing at the still empty counsel tables and judge's bench were full of anticipation. It was clearly a factional crowd. David had said that news features on television the night before, and in the morning papers, had created a bit of a stir. Apparently, the issue could still seize the public imagination—and its partisanship.

The first familiar face came into view at 9:45. Jeffrey took a seat along the far aisle. He seemed to be alone. If the young man I had seen seated beside him the day before had been Lindon, the two were not together today. I strove to recall what he had looked like, but I could not spot anyone who reminded me of his face.

At 9:50 I got up and made my way back toward the corridor. As I did so I saw another familiar figure entering from the center door and moving down to a row near the back. Steven. He too was alone. I tried to decide whether he or his fellow Master along the far wall looked as though they were prepared to meet Armageddon today.

Chown was waiting just outside the doorway, beyond the metal detector arch.

"I hope you slept better last night than I did," I muttered.

People were pushing past us. I had thought to fill him in on some of the fevered rumination Shauna and I had indulged in the night before on the subject of Ascended Masters and their cryptic clues, but in the light of day and with the press and noise around us, it seemed ill-conceived. Behind us stood a TV crew and the same woman reporter of the day before. They were obviously intent on waiting out the morning session here, since the cameras were barred from entering the courtroom. Somebody's celebrity status had shot up overnight. I was sure it wasn't the Foundation's.

"We have a seat for you in front, if you like," I said to Chown.

Chown shook his head. "That's hardly an advantageous position. Don't worry about me. Have you seen anyone so far I should know about?"

"Not Cherkasian. I'm really beginning to think he's not going to show. But two of the fellows from the schoolhouse are here. Maybe more, but I don't know them well enough."

We stepped into the gallery and stood against the wall at the back row. I suddenly noted that Patterson and his assistant had entered the courtroom from the attorneys' entrance and were standing by the counsel table. Patterson had turned outward, making a gesture to David. I shrank, hoping he would not glance further and notice me lurking at the back of the room beside someone who, to my mind, had every appearance of a law enforcement officer.

The moment passed and Patterson turned away to the front. I breathed easier and pointed out to Chown, as surreptitiously as possible, the two young men, Jeffrey and Steven, whom I had met at the schoolhouse. Today they conveyed no sense of tillers of the earth. Their clues called for repentance under threat of divine mayhem, so perhaps they envisioned themselves as grim reapers, separating the wheat from the chaff at the great accounting which Revelation promised.

Chown nodded and melted back into the corridor. I retraced my steps down the aisle and settled back into my place between Shauna and Phyllis. From the seat beyond, David sent me a questioning look. I nodded reassuringly. All was going to be well—or so I hoped. Then I whispered, for a hush had fallen over the courtroom as the bailiff stood up. “Chown doesn’t need the seat.”

“All rise.”

The sun, as was its wont, had risen again on this second day of the hearing, and it was making its presence felt in the angling sunbeams through which Judge Henry Banks Still passed as he made his way once more to the elevated bench. Glancing at the clock, which registered three minutes after ten, Judge Still wasted no time and nodded to chief counsel for the State of Pennsylvania. “You may proceed, Mr. Wylie.” The gallery rustled in anticipation, but spoke no sound.

Chester Wylie rose to his feet and strode to the open space before the bench. Again, he adopted an air of easy geniality. He had clearly dismissed any bumps on yesterday’s road as inconsequential.

“Your Honor, the arguments we presented on Tuesday are important to the issue to be decided by this court, but they were also in the nature of preliminary and even provisional material.”

Well, here comes the other shoe, I thought. Patterson behind his counsel table seemed relaxed but alert. I only wished I could see the expression on his face.

“Your Honor, as I intimated yesterday, the issue here is not whether certain arguments for or against one point of view or the other are true or false, or whether they can be made to seem true or false. Let us leave aside for the moment the question of creationism vs. evolution and ask ourselves what is the nature of a scientific theory. How is it arrived at? So-called scientific truths do not drop from Heaven—indeed, such a thought might constitute a logical contradiction to most of my opponents here today.”

Chester Wylie, in his leisurely swing between the two counsel tables, here bestowed an affable grin upon Burton Patterson. I thought: the man exudes the confidence of a tiger who thinks he has his prey in sight and knows there is no way it can flee.

“Some might claim that scientific truths are attained through ironclad experiment or indisputable evidence. Shoot a few molecules through an atom smasher, get a spoonful of protons and electrons out the other end, and presto! a group of eminent scientists makes a clear statement about the immutable nature of the universe. Perhaps so, but not all scientific truths are so easily attained. And of those that are, many have passed through earlier stages of less precise experiment and even conjecture, based on no more than educated guesses. Nor is it the case that experiment always precedes the theory. Often the theory is a result of simple observation, observation that cries out, to the scientist’s mind, for explanation. Experiment may only follow this step and go on for many years, undergoing alteration and shifts in focus as more is learned.”

Wylie swung about to grant the opposing counsel table an amicable gesture. “I think my learned adversary would agree with me thus far.”

Patterson, his elbows on the table, hands covering his face to the base of his nose, made a nod of generous acquiescence. Wylie went on.

“Take, for example, the scientific theory of Continental Drift. How was this ‘indisputable truth’ first proposed? Had Dr. Wegener spent a few years underground measuring the movement of the earth’s crust over his head? Perhaps he had found the remains of a left-handed glove lying on the beach in Florida and those of a matching right-hander stuck in a sandbar off Morocco.”

There were a few loud guffaws from the spectators. Even Judge Still reacted with no more than a light-hearted glare toward the seats.

“Well, of course not. Nothing so ironclad as that. In fact, it would seem that the idea first occurred to Dr. Wegener while sitting in his study looking at a map. Perhaps he was indulging in an after-dinner brandy at the time. He happened to notice that the bulge of Africa would fit neatly into the Caribbean basin, that the Canadian Maritimes would plug up the English Channel very nicely. Of course, he followed up these initial observations with some investigation of the geological formations that would have lain side by side and he did indeed find some similarities, even similar animal fossils to suggest some former avenue of contact between the two areas that were now widely separated by ocean. Yet for many years, his theory was hotly contested by other eminent scientists in the field, and that dispute has continued even to this day. There are scientists who still claim that there is no force within the earth that could serve as an engine to drive such movements of the planet’s crust; that mountain building, one of the supposed side effects of continental drift and one of its principal supporting arguments, is rather a result of the shrinkage of the earth as a whole, forcing the crust to buckle upward—a little like the skin of a dieter will go into wrinkles as the underlying bulk disappears.” More chuckles from the spectators. Wylie had them with him and he was ready now to get to his point. “The question is, when did the theory of continental drift find its way into our nation’s school textbooks? Those being used in science courses, that is,” he added with a smile in Patterson’s direction, and his eye fairly twinkled.

Patterson’s hand made a gesture toward the advocate. The point is all yours, it said.

“Well, I believe it was some time in the 1930s. It was offered with the proviso that the theory was still tentative. But it was offered. Today the theory has attained more secure stature, yet it is still strongly disputed in some scientific circles.”

I suspected that Wylie was overstating this last point, but having now laid the groundwork, I sensed that the attorney for the State of Pennsylvania was about to shift gears. Apparently Patterson sensed the same thing, for I thought to detect a subtle change in the poise of his back.

After a brief pause, Chester Wylie said: “I would now like to ask Mr. Frank Wickens to take the stand.”

Frank Wickens turned out to be the Vice-Principal of Fennimore High School in Great Bend, Pennsylvania. There was no doubt in my mind that he had been carefully chosen, and little doubt that he would verge on the status of a ‘liberal’, or as near to this as a member of the Coalition could get. He was probably willing to bend during cross-examination. Rigid views always snapped under pressure and Wylie’s preliminary remarks had led me to believe

that the creationists were prepared for the first time to adopt a more flexible stance, though it must have galled the more fundamentalist circles among them. How far might Mr. Frank Wickens bend and did he have a breaking point? Patterson would try to glean that from Wylie's questioning. One could be sure that the man had been thoroughly primed, both for his testimony and for cross-examination. Another Scopes fiasco would be the last thing the Coalition wanted.

"Now, Mr. Wickens," Wylie began, after the witness's identification and background were out of the way, "I am going to offer you a definition of a scientific theory and see if you agree with it. Let's call it this: an honest and responsible interpretation offered to explain certain observed phenomena. Just as Dr. Wegener in 1912 came up with the theory of continental drift to explain his cartological and geological observations. Would you agree with this definition?"

"Yes sir, I would."

Frank Wickens exuded an air of self-confidence, not so much as to convey arrogance, but sufficient to appear to be his own man rather than a parrot of someone else's arguments. He was somewhere in middle age, with a premature advance of grey across a distinguished head of hair. His gaze was direct, perhaps a little complacent, and he had a healthy, tanned complexion. I had no doubt that he was indeed a responsible individual with responsible convictions and Patterson would have to handle him as such.

"Now, would you say that creationism as you understand it would fit into such a definition?"

"I most certainly would."

"And as you would espouse it to be taught at Fennimore High—or any other American school for that matter?"

"Yes."

"Well, let's see just how you would apply creationism to our definition. As you yourself might teach it."

I had to doff my hat to Chester Wylie, or whomever had come up with this approach. Not only did Frank Wickens come across as a responsible citizen of Middle America, but as a responsible educator as well he would be able to convey the idea that creation science could indeed be taught in an objective and unthreatening manner. Wylie and company were playing not only to Judge Still but to the American people.

"First, what would you say are the 'certain observed phenomena'? Briefly, and not too technically, please. There is no reason why any subject cannot be made understandable to the average layman and woman."

That was a dig, ranging the exponents of evolution and other intellectual elitists against Wylie's 'average layperson'. I realized it would probably force Patterson to keep his cross-examination to a similar direct simplicity.

"Well, sir, I would say the existence of the universe, which suggests a need to explain that existence; the fact that life has arisen on this planet, and especially intelligent, self-aware life, which strikes me as a very remarkable phenomenon indeed. Then, there are so many of the world's physical characteristics, such as the development of the right components to create a stable atmosphere for life, the cycle of the seasons, the behavior of the weather, the general balance of nature, all being conducive to the thing we call progress and the development of civilization. Things like that."

Very good, I thought. All scientific-sounding points, steering clear of any reference to morality or the supernatural. And the tone: no hint of uptight fanaticism here. Wickens was being a bit woolly, and there were fallacies implied in some of it, but I wondered if Patterson would consider it wise to bother digging them out.

“Yes,” said Chester Wylie, “I would certainly call these things phenomena that would cry out for explanation. And if you happened to be sitting in your study, sipping an after-dinner brandy perhaps, trying to come up with an honest and responsible interpretation of these phenomena, what might present itself for your consideration?”

“I would say that I would certainly want to investigate the possibility that a Creator had deliberately caused all of these phenomena.” Investigate, caused, possibility. All the proper terminology.

“And once this possibility—let’s call it a theory—had occurred to you, would you want to investigate further to see whether more observation and experiment could add support to this theory? Just as responsible scientists have done to test the validity of other scientific theories.”

“Naturally.”

“Could you expand on that? What sort of investigation might you conduct?”

Frank Wickens paused as though considering his answer to the question, conveying the impression that, even if he had thought about these ideas before, he was nevertheless answering off the cuff now. “Well, of course I am neither a geologist nor a biologist, but I would want to examine the fossil record and the geological record to see whether they might conform to the idea of a Creator; and from what I know, for example, of the fossil record, there is nothing in it that would disprove the notion that a Creator had created all these species at some time in the past, and that some of them have died out at different times.” The Vice-Principal of Fennimore High smiled condescendingly. “I know that there are some who still subscribe to Bishop Ussher’s calculation, but for the purposes of creation science, there is no need to maintain that the earth is only 6000 years old.”

A faint murmur rippled across the courtroom. Mr. Frank Wickens was indeed of a ‘liberal’ persuasion. The creationists had apparently decided that flexibility was the better part of discretion, though I wondered if Chester Wylie’s personal influence had produced this remarkable new stance. Perhaps even overnight, for no sign of such a liberal position had been in evidence the day before.

“In fact, Mr. Wickens, would you agree with me that such a belief as that of Bishop Ussher would more suitably fall into the area of religious opinion, and that such opinion could be kept separate from the principles of creation science and not included in its teachings?” Remarkable indeed.

“I most certainly would.”

“In other words, Mr. Wickens, would it be fair to say that your religious convictions, whatever they might be, could be kept separate from your scientific ones in a classroom situation? That what we are discussing here in our desire to have a creation theory presented as an alternative in America’s schools is an honest and responsible attempt to explain one possible origin of the world to our young people? And that this theory has a validity of its own which does not proceed out of purely religious beliefs? Would you agree with me on all those points, Mr. Wickens?”

“Yes, I would.”

David turned his head and looking past Phyllis, raised his eyebrows at me. He was clearly thinking as I had done. Never before had the creationists been willing to retreat from any of their basic fundamentalist positions, or to phrase their case in such broadminded terms. Indeed, they almost seemed to be allowing for the possibility that they could be wrong.

Chester Wylie strolled away from the witness box.

“Before I turn my witness over to Mr. Patterson, I would like to draw what I believe to be a pertinent analogy here, Your Honor. Around 585 BC a Greek philosopher named Thales was the first to offer a scientific explanation for the origin of the physical world: he declared that all materials proceeded from a single element, namely water. The fact that he was not altogether accurate is beside the point. But if men who believed he was wrong—such as some of those here today—had been in a position to deny Thales the right to disseminate his idea, that would have been a big mistake, and an injustice. And it might have stifled the development of further ideas which have proceeded from Thales, ideas which led to many of the scientific principles we hold today. Your Honor, no honest, responsible idea—which we maintain creation science is—should be denied a voice simply because others in positions of power disagree with it. Who knows what further development might thereby be stifled—”

With a shake of his head, Burton Patterson raised himself part way from his chair.

“Your Honor, I must object. Is Mr. Wylie intending to deliver a final summation at this time without allowing me to cross-examine Mr. Wickens?”

Judge Still’s stoic face permitted itself a faint scowl. “Yes, Mr. Wylie, I agree that you are going beyond the scope of your witness’s testimony. I’m sure you would not want to break Mr. Patterson’s train of thought for cross-examination.”

“Of course not, Your Honor,” Wylie demurred, and withdrew to his seat, granting the floor to his opponent.

Shauna leaned over to my ear and whispered, “That was a masterful display of smoke and mirrors.”

I nodded, but did not turn in her direction, for I, along with everyone else in the room, was watching the counsel for the Foundation getting to his feet. It was a slow, almost nonchalant rising, but nonetheless riveting. After a moment, during which he paused and cast a glance over a sheet of notes resting in front of him, Burton Patterson moved around the end of the table. His height, just over six feet, and the full, unruly head of light brown hair, gave him a conspicuous presence. As I had noticed yesterday, he seemed to adopt the slight suggestion of a stoop, as though he felt that on the courtroom scene, especially one under the glare of media attention, it was important not to convey the image of a predator. The stance may also have been intended to disarm the witness.

Now as he approached Mr. Frank Wickens, there was dead silence around him. In that moment I discreetly turned my head to scan the audience of rapt faces. Steven and Jeffrey were still in their places. I tried to let whole areas of the room imprint on my vision at once, but nothing corresponding to the face of Robert Cherkasian impinged on my awareness. He would evidently not be here today.

Of Chown I could see no sign. The doors of the courtroom were all closed. I did notice that just inside the center one stood the TV interviewer. Even though she could not bring the camera in with her, she herself was not going to miss the occasion.

I turned back to the scene before me. The Vice-Principal of Fennimore High School in Great Bend, Pennsylvania, though obviously a man intent on maintaining his composure, betrayed in his eyes a mix of apprehension and hostility. Without a doubt he had been sitting among the spectators during the previous day's testimony to accustom himself to Patterson's style of cross-examination. Some of what he had witnessed yesterday could not have been encouraging.

Patterson stopped before the box and gave the witness a reassuring smile.

"Now, Mr. Wickens, I want you to know that I too agree with Mr. Wylie's definition of a scientific theory. What was it? 'An honest and responsible interpretation of certain observed phenomena.' Even I indulge in an after-dinner brandy and contemplate questions like these."

Patterson's voice was soft, relaxed and good-natured, and it carried to every corner of the courtroom, but he stopped short of rendering it a drawl. Here he must have drawn the line, for it would have seemed too affectatious—indeed, together with the stoop, just a bit too folksy. I had no doubt that some of the things he was going to say were definitely not going to appeal to ordinary folks.

I glanced toward the opposing counsel table. Chester Wylie was leaning back in his chair, hands folded over an ample midsection, round face revealing only a hint of tension in a slight narrowing of the eyes.

Patterson went on. "It seems to me, Mr. Wickens, that the key words here are 'honest' and 'responsible'. Honest, in that it should represent a genuine concern on the part of the person proposing the theory to arrive at the truth of the matter—or as near to the truth as possible—without closing his or her mind to whatever that might be. Responsible, in that—well, the word speaks for itself."

Beside me I heard Shauna give a soft chuckle. I realized exactly what she was thinking. Patterson had not had a chance to work out a suitable enlargement on the second word. Not only did he manage to cover this up, he had conveyed a very strong impression in the cover-up phrase itself.

"The famous Dr. Wegener," continued Patterson, "who came up with the theory of continental drift did not, I am sure, close his mind to any plausible explanation for his observations, each of which, I am sure, he weighed carefully, making his choice free from prejudice one way or another. Would you agree with me there?"

"Yes, yes I would. Always keeping in mind that the making of a choice is determined by a lot of things, and who can say what constitutes prejudice?"

"I'll grant you that." The answer, besides being surprisingly subtle, showed that Frank Wickens was definitely a man who could speak for himself. There was an almost audible sigh of relief from the direction of the opposing counsel table.

"Let us say, Mr. Wickens, that it might be a valid proposition that a Creator was responsible for this world and everything in it. I think everyone here, regardless of personal convictions, would say that the idea makes a certain amount of sense. Provided, of course, that they do not close their minds to it."

Wickens gave an emphatic nod of agreement. He had, I noted, a particularly mobile expression.

"And if this phenomenon of the world's existence would indeed suggest a Creator, what else might it suggest about him?"

Wickens looked puzzled. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"For example, would it tell you which God it was that created the world? Many gods throughout history have been attributed with this feat. Does your theory include his identification?"

Wickens looked like a man who had stepped unexpectedly into a patch of quicksand. "Well, I suppose we assume that—"

"But surely assumptions, Mr. Wickens, when they relate to scientific theory, must be based on some degree of evidence, some particular observation or experiment?"

"Uh, yes, I suppose so."

"Is there anything relating to your scientific theory of creationism which would warrant you proposing that the God who created the world is to be identified with the Jewish and Christian God, rather than with any other God—such as the Muslim Allah, for example?"

There was a stir of tension throughout the courtroom. Wickens realized the danger he was in and saw that there was only one way out. Somewhat to my surprise, he took it.

"Offhand, though I would like to be able to consider the question more fully, I would probably have to say no."

Patterson drove his point home. "So that if you as a teacher of creation science in one of our nation's schools were approached by one of your students, let's say a black pupil whose parents followed the Muslim faith, and that student asked you who the Creator was, you would say that your scientific theory did not include this information?"

"I suppose I would."

Patterson smiled. "Mr. Wickens, I am not trying to trick you. But you did tell Mr. Wylie that you could keep separate your religious opinions from the principles of creation science and I am just trying to discover if this is indeed the case."

But Patterson was not yet ready to let the witness off this particular hook. "So. Just to clarify: I realize that you have your own religious opinions to which you are entitled, as are all of us, but as far as a teacher of creation science is concerned, you would be prepared not to rule out the possibility that the Creator responsible for the existence of the world was Allah?"

"As a teacher of creation science, and as far as my pupils were concerned, I would not rule it out."

"I am sure that would reassure those American parents who follow non-Christian faiths. I also assume that given the nature of the evidence you would not rule out the possibility that the Creator who created the world has since died, since there is nothing to indicate one way or the other."

This was a concept that had obviously never occurred to Frank Wickens.

"I—I'm not sure. Perhaps there is some evidence to be found that the Creator still has a hand in maintaining the existence of the world. I would have to think about it."

"But if the evidence could not be found, you would be prepared to admit the possibility that the Creator no longer exists."

Wickens said glumly, "Possibly."

"For that matter, it's even possible that the Creator does indeed still exist, but that he has gone mad, or that he was mad to begin with. Considering the nature of the world with all its evils and natural disasters, to say nothing of the evil inherent in its most intelligent life form—"

A murmur from the gallery broke over the court like a distant, rising surf. I could see that the witness was not prepared to admit this possibility into his theory. In fact, in sudden anger Wickens opened his mouth and got out two words: “Man’s evil—” before Chester Wylie jumped to his feet.

“Your Honor, I object! Counsel for the Foundation is harassing the witness with pointless conjectures, and I daresay he could eventually propose one so outlandish as to provoke the reaction he is seeking. I think Mr. Wickens has sufficiently demonstrated the integrity of his position.”

“Objection sustained,” said Judge Still. “Mr. Patterson, you have made your point and I suggest you suspend this particular line of questioning.”

“Certainly, Your Honor. I only wish the court to indeed be satisfied as to the integrity of the creationist claim that they can keep science separate from religion. To that end, I will pursue a different question.”

As Patterson turned back to Frank Wickens, I noticed that he gave a glance to the clock on the wall. It read 11:05. I felt certain that Patterson was calculating how much time he would have to discredit this witness. He would have to do it before the lunch recess, before Wickens, in consultation with Wylie, could shore up his defences. Wylie’s objection had interrupted the attack, but Wickens’ near outburst showed that he did indeed have a breaking point.

I recalled that in yesterday’s morning session, lunch had been called at a few minutes before noon. But I had also noticed that Judge Still had begun to appear restless shortly after 11:30. Patterson would have to do his work quickly, to knock down the witness which Chester Wylie had obviously gambled his entire case upon.

Fortunately, I could follow the race without turning my head. The clock lay high on the wall in roughly the same sight line as the witness box. It hung near the top of the room’s oak panelling where the wood met the rough stones of the building’s aged architecture, a product of a more trusting and believing era of a century ago.

Patterson resumed his questioning, as he swung momentarily outward, glancing over the spellbound gallery.

“Mr. Wickens, you and Mr. Wylie spoke earlier about observation and experiment in regard to the creation science theory, and I would like, with your help, to compare the nature of the evidence in both theories. The things an evolutionist will look at to seek support for his theory are tangible: things that are present in the world which all may examine, namely the fossil record, the geological record, the nature and behavior of certain species of life, plant and animal. Indeed, these are the things which would and did lead the evolutionists to come up with their theory in the first place. What sort of evidence would you rank beside this to apply to creation science?”

Frank Wickens had regained a measure of both composure and confidence. “Well, for one, I would say that the same evidence—given a different interpretation, of course—could serve the needs of creation science.”

Patterson smiled and bent his head to scratch behind his ear. “Yes, but—as we saw yesterday, standard science tends to make rather short shrift of that kind of interpretation. Besides, according to yesterday’s testimony, which I assume you heard, creation theory spends most of its time on those particular topics in trying to discredit them as evidence for evolution. It tries to show that the standard scientific interpretation of these things is false or

misleading. In regard to the fossil record, for example, I have often heard it stated that these creatures might never have lived but were placed in the ground as fossils by the Creator, for what purpose I know not. Or that they represent a kind of divine experiment with different forms of each species, which would explain why fossils exist that bear close resemblances to each other.”

“I think you are distorting our argument,” Wickens protested.

It seemed to me that Wickens’ protest was to some extent valid, at least in terms of the previous day’s testimony, for I recalled that such things as fossil and geological evidence had been presented by the creationists as a more positive support for their own position than Patterson was making out. And no one had actually claimed that God had placed fossils in the ground, though I knew that such an idea had been floated elsewhere—which was the way Patterson had been careful to phrase it. Wylie seemed on the verge of making an objection, but it would have been a subtle one, and he hesitated just long enough for Patterson to carry things further and dilute the opportunity. The Foundation’s advocate had gotten away with his sleight of hand, and I was pretty sure I could see where he was headed.

“The point I am getting at is this, Mr. Wickens. We might liken these tangible supports for evolution as the voice of the earth speaking on behalf of itself, on behalf of the theory that life and the world came into being through their own natural processes. What then would you say is the equivalent primary evidence for creationism? Where is the voice of the Creator speaking on behalf of himself and the creationist theory?”

There was no doubt that Wickens had been led to the edge of a chasm. Yet for the witness to retreat would have meant equal defeat, and he must have decided to push ahead while protecting himself as best he could. I could see that Chester Wylie sat with leg muscles tensed, ready to launch his objection if the witness blundered into Patterson’s trap.

“I think it is legitimate,” said Wickens carefully, “to say that in principle, writings like the Bible”—he placed a firm emphasis on the word ‘like’—“would represent such a voice and could be weighed as evidence. Most...cultures have such writings, and taken together they represent a kind of universal tendency which supports a creationist theory.”

I had to admire Wickens’ articulation under pressure, his meticulous maintainance of impartiality. Wylie was led to hesitate a little longer about making an objection, though the danger was clear.

“Do you believe in the infallibility of the Bible, Mr. Wickens?”

This time Chester Wylie did more than tense his leg muscles. “Your Honor, I object! Mr. Patterson is pursuing an irrelevant line of questioning! Whatever Mr. Wickens’ religious views are, he has stated that he can keep these separate from his scientific ones. I think opposing counsel is trying to confuse and mislead the court!”

Judge Still turned a quizzical eye back to Burton Patterson, inviting rebuttal.

“Not at all, Your Honor. I am trying to point out that such a statement may be invalid simply because creationism’s so-called line between religion and science is seriously blurred. Indeed, it has already been crossed by Mr. Wickens who has brought religious writings into the picture, no matter with what air of impartiality. I am trying to establish if indeed such a line can exist, if there is a distinction between religious and scientific views in creation science.”

Judge Still nodded. “Objection overruled. You may proceed, Mr. Patterson.”

Chester Wylie sat down heavily.

“Perhaps,” Patterson resumed, “the question of the infallibility of the Bible is a religious one, so I will set it aside at this time. Let’s approach my point this way. We could say that Charles Darwin was first induced to think of his theory by the prodding of certain observations about animal characteristics and behavior. That is, it was these things which first put the idea into his mind. Would you say, Mr. Wickens, that what first put the idea of a Creator into your mind was a reading of the Bible, or the education you received from those who had themselves read the Bible?”

Chester Wylie was again on his feet, shouting in a tone of desperation. “Your Honor, he is leading the witness!”

Judge Still struck his gavel once in the first show of anger I had yet witnessed from him. It seemed to jangle the nerves of everyone in the chamber. “Mr. Wylie—this is cross-examination! Don’t force me to suspect you of trying to obstruct these proceedings. And if the witness doesn’t want to be led, he can simply say no. Proceed, Mr. Patterson.”

“Thank-you, Your Honor.” Patterson strolled over to the counsel table, checked some notes. I had the feeling he was allowing a few moments for the commotion to settle. Perhaps he believed that in an atmosphere of too much agitation, a witness could be rendered useless, rather than placed in the more desirable state of vulnerability. This would be especially critical in a case like this one, in which counsel was attempting to develop an intricate intellectual argument.

The late morning sun streamed through the windows. Was there a people on the face of the earth, I wondered, who still worshipped the sun as a god? The old building’s fine dust, hanging softly in the air, made the sunbeams tangible. Perhaps the spirit of some god did stand there, contemplating the embittered scene with—what emotion? Well, I decided, let him come forward and clarify the issue. Let his voice ring from the rafters and the stones.

The stones.

The rich and the strong shall call to the stones: fall on us and hide us from the face of God and his wrath.

My body gave a twitch, which Shauna noticed. I shook my head as though to clear it. The idea that had just crossed my mind was too outlandish. It was ridiculously impossible. A bomb in the Superior Court Building? I swung my head. Jeffrey and Steven were still in their seats. Cherkasian would hardly sacrifice them in some human-designed destruction of the godless courtroom. Anyway, the scene was a joint one. Just as many members of the creationist side were present.

Unless Cherkasian felt antagonism toward them as well. Or didn’t care.

No. My stimulated and addled brain had crashed a circuit. I wrenched my attention back to the scene in front of me. Patterson had turned from the table to make his way back to the witness box.

Besides, what about the two other clues? And if clue number two, the one about the falling stones, belonged to Steven, he was still here, intent on the same scene I was.

Unless this was not the moment.

Steven, from the house in Philadelphia. Had the FBI investigation gone deep enough to know whether anyone there had anything to do with explosives?

“Now, Mr. Wickens...”

Would Chown think I was crazy if I broached the subject to him during the lunch break? A bomb wrapped in a quotation from Revelation?

“Would it be fair to say that the original source of your theory—the thing that made you think of it in the first place—was the Bible, or other similar writings?”

Wickens looked forlornly toward the Coalition counsel table, but there was no help to be had from that direction.

“Mr. Wickens?”

“Uh, yes, originally—”

Before the witness could add a qualifier, Patterson pressed on. “Well, then, if your so-called scientific theory proceeds from a religious writing, how can you claim to keep science separate from religion?”

Realizing he was on his own, Frank Wickens made a valiant attempt to rescue the situation. He drew himself up and looked the advocate squarely in the eye. “The nature of the theory of creationism cannot help but be somewhat religious, Mr. Patterson. Creationism is about a Creator. And a belief in a Creator, no matter what it is based on, has always been labelled ‘religion’. Rather than involving a rigid separation, I would characterize creationism as a composite of religion and science.”

Frank Wickens had definitely struck out in his own direction. In the spectator gallery there was a tentatively satisfied sigh from the creationist supporters, who perceived that the witness had stepped back onto firmer and sensible ground. But in his haste to cover himself, Wickens added, “But creationism can still claim to be included in the science category if it conforms to scientific principles, and taught according to them, as we have been trying to demonstrate.”

The man was resourceful. I glanced at the clock. 11:20. Patterson would have to go for the jugular, I realized, and quickly.

But half my mind was preoccupied in other directions, directions which seemed a little less outlandish by the minute. Cherkasian had said that events were already unfolding. Were the intimations contained in the clues those ‘events’? And since obviously no such things *had* happened yet, what was already unfolding? How was Cherkasian forcing God’s hand?

Patterson asked, “Are you familiar with scientific principles, Mr. Wickens? Specifically, the principles of scientific investigation?”

“Yes, I would say so.”

“You and Mr. Wylie offered a definition earlier of a scientific theory. Now I want to offer a definition of my own. Science is a discipline that proceeds by a constantly repeating chain of events: theory and investigation, theory and investigation. That is, a scientist comes up with a theory, and then he subjects it to investigation. This in turn leads to a revision of the previous theory, or to a completely new one if necessary. Then, new theory in hand, he conducts further investigation which may in turn lead to yet further changes to the theory, all in the interests of arriving at the ultimate truth. Now, Mr. Wickens, if at any stage of this chain, the scientist stands with his theory in one hand and the results of his latest investigation in the other, and the two are incompatible, the two do not agree, which one does he discard?”

The witness looked at the advocate without speaking. He apparently sensed that Patterson intended to answer his own question.

“Being a man of science, Mr. Wickens, you know that he discards the theory. Correct?”
Frank Wickens could do none other than agree.

“It seems to me, then, that the claim of the creationists to offer an alternative science to our schools is determined to a great extent by their willingness to follow such scientific principles. In the case of evolution, the original theory put forward by Darwin has undergone considerable revision. For example, as we all noted yesterday, thirty years ago it was taught that evolution proceeded by slow and gradual changes in a given species until those changes most suited for survival eventually become predominant. But continuing investigation of the fossil record seemed to cast doubt that this theory was entirely accurate and now evolutionists are suggesting that the process involved some sudden and dramatic mutations which occurred periodically, perhaps due to bursts of radiation from outer space. In between, most life forms remained much the same for long periods. Through investigation, a previous theory is giving way to a new one. Let’s see if the same scientific principles could apply in creation science.”

11:30. No sign yet that Judge Still was feeling restless. Unfortunately, I could not say the same for myself. The bowl of fire. Poured out by the fourth angel. Jeffrey’s clue. He was seated not too far behind me. Ridiculous. Was he to set fire to the courtroom? Charge in with a flame-thrower? On the other hand, should I automatically assume that the courtroom, or even the courthouse, was the venue for this forcing of God’s hand?

Great. Chown would think I had gone completely haywire. Bombs and infernos.

“Now, Mr. Wickens, I would allow that writings like the Bible should legitimately be considered as primary sources of evidence for creationist theory. After all, where else does one get information about a Creator if not from writings and traditions which have something to say about him? They can hardly be ignored. Would you agree?”

Hesitantly, Wickens answered, “Certainly.”

“So if the question of sources of evidence were to come up in a creation science course, naturally the Bible would be included among them.”

“I think that’s only fair,” said Wickens somewhat defensively.

“Yes, it is. Now, Mr. Wickens, I am going to return to the question I set aside earlier, but you may take a few moments and phrase your answer in any way wish: do you believe the Bible to be infallible?”

The moment of silence following that question resounded throughout the room. I suspected that Patterson was hoping his proviso, which I was sure really meant nothing, would lull Chester Wylie into hesitating over another objection.

There was no reaction from the State’s lawyer. The witness answered carefully: “Whether I do or not is a purely religious conviction. In a creation science course the question would be left open.”

An uncertain stir rippled across the courtroom. It probably seemed to the creationist partisans that Frank Wickens had scored another point, but there was a growing uneasiness over the increasing amount of ground that was being given up in order to do so.

“I see. So then, if in considering the Bible’s statement that the world was created in six days, one of your students pointed out the conclusive scientific evidence which shows that in fact billions of years separate the formation of the earth—or let’s say its creation—from the creation of the first life, you would say that the Bible was erroneous on this point?”

“No, sir, not erroneous,” Wickens retorted with more vigor. “It might simply be our interpretation of the word ‘day’ which was erroneous. The basic creation timetable could still be the same.” The man was undeniably professing a ‘liberal’ view for a creationist.

“Granted, although we are forced to stretch meanings of words and give whole passages a significance which is not obviously there. Well, then, how about the passage in Genesis which says that God gave man dominion over all the animals? If a pupil pointed out that this was not entirely correct because some species of animals had lived and died out before the first appearance of man, you would say that the Bible was wrong on this question?”

“Well, not necessarily. The Bible could not be expected to cover every single point. It would be up to us to fit those details into the broad picture which Genesis presents.”

“It sounds to me, Mr. Wickens, that under no circumstances could you bring yourself to admit in a creation science course that the Bible was anything but infallible.”

Getting wearily to his feet, Chester Wylie adopted his most unaggressive tone: “Your Honor, I would respectfully suggest that counsel for the Foundation is being somewhat argumentative.”

“Your Honor,” Patterson inserted hastily, “I am simply trying to establish whether the witness would in principle be willing to revise or discard any element of his theory in the face of evidence to the contrary. After all, he has agreed that a willingness to do so is a fundamental principle of scientific investigation. Mr. Wylie has based his case on the claim that creation science conforms to such principles.”

Judge Still, with a glance at the clock, said, “Overruled.”

Forcing God’s hand. How? By making these things happen? ‘If you know his will he has to act.’ In ancient magical thinking, calling on a god’s name of power brought the god’s force into play; the god had no say in the matter. Did Cherkasian regard an act which fitted God’s prophecy as forcing his hand? God had been awaiting the time when he would fulfill the open-ended prophecies. Did Cherkasian think he could trip the prophecy-fulfillment mechanism in a way even God could not resist?

Could I know in what fevered world Cherkasian’s mind moved?

Patterson had turned back to the witness box. “Well, Mr. Wickens? Is it not the case that you would never admit that the Bible could be wrong?”

It mattered not which way the witness went, Patterson would have him in the end.

Wickens rubbed the base of his palm across his forehead. “That’s not necessarily true,” he stammered. “But you would have to give me an example of where the Bible was unmistakably wrong.”

From one corner of the gallery there came a little groan, as though Frank Wickens had finally been pushed to the point of uttering a heresy.

“Well, Mr. Wickens, when I stated that there is scientific evidence that the world and mankind have been around for a lot longer than the period stated in the Bible, you explained this by saying that the Bible’s term ‘day’ would have to be reinterpreted. But surely you would have to admit that the genealogy from Adam to Noah as set out in Genesis could not possibly be correct, since there are simply not enough generations given to fill the hundreds of thousands of years and more that men and women have walked the earth. And I think that no one would allow you to explain this by saying that the term ‘year’ also means something different, and that these men really lived for many millennia.”

Wickens had been backed into a corner and knew it. If he once again defended the essential accuracy of the Bible he would be confirming Patterson’s accusation. He looked thoroughly miserable as he said in a small voice, “I suppose it could be said that the Bible left something out.”

“So that would mean that the Bible is wrong.”

Wickens’ lower lip trembled perceptibly. “If you wanted to press the point, I suppose you could call this an inaccuracy.”

“An inaccuracy,” Patterson repeated. The audience held its breath.

The clock read 11:43.

What clue would be the trigger? All of them? Could Cherkasian count on all three? All three of the boys to fill that kind of an order? Or would only one suffice?

But what was clue number one? How would Christ’s crucifixion be reenacted?

Once again I shook my head. Shauna beside me, I could tell, was starting to think that there was something wrong with me. I told myself that a good stiff drink over lunch would clear my head of these outrageous fantasies.

I was looking at Judge Still, who seemed at last to be showing signs of restlessness. I caught Patterson’s glance in the direction of the bench. Perhaps for that reason he pushed on hurriedly.

“Well, Mr. Wickens, it is reassuring to know that you could, after all, bring yourself to advise your students that the Bible, as a source of information about the creation theory, is like any other source of evidence: it could be partly right and partly wrong. I daresay, following scientific principles, that if a student pointed out to you that the fossil record reveals several different branches of the human species going back millions of years, you would have to admit that this evidence would tend to indicate that Genesis was wrong in other respects: that there never was an Adam and Eve, there never was a Garden of Eden, no forbidden fruit, no original sin—”

Wearing a dire expression, Mr. Frank Wickens stood up in the witness box. His fists were clenched, and small veins stood out in both temples as he flared at the advocate: “No, Mr. Patterson, I would never admit that! Never! If there were no Adam and Eve and no forbidden fruit then there would have been no Fall! And if there were no Fall, we wouldn’t have needed Jesus to come to earth to redeem us! If there is no original sin, what is the source of man’s evil? You are one of the embodiments of that evil, Mr. Patterson, and I am here in this courtroom to try to counter it! And creation science *must* be taught in our nation’s schools in order to destroy evil like yours—”

At the beginning of Wickens’ tirade, Patterson had dropped his head to gaze at the floor in an attitude of submission. No doubt he had seen, as we all did, Chester Wylie rise halfway to his feet. But no sound accompanied the motion, for nothing could legitimately be done to halt the outburst.

The Vice-Principal of Fennimore High stopped abruptly. A thunderous silence followed during which Chester Wylie sank back into his chair, while the witness slowly closed his mouth and stared bleakly out over the courtroom. Patterson in his stoop finally raised his head. His voice was eerily quiet, but he made sure it carried to the limits of the chamber.

“I think Mr. Wickens has demonstrated to the court what are the motivations behind so-called creation science and those who promote it. When honest and responsible interpretation of evidence is sacrificed to rigidly-held doctrine, this constitutes nothing of true science. I have no further questions for this witness, Your Honor.”

The clock read 11:48.

Judge Still pounded his gavel and said, “This court is adjourned until two o’clock this afternoon.” He rose from his chair and was out the door.

In a moment the entire room was abuzz and on its feet. Most of the spectators simply milled about, not leaving. Some seemed in a state of agitation, others wore triumphant expressions. I caught a glimpse of Steven standing near his seat, a grim face with clenched teeth. Jeffrey I could not spy through the crowd. Of Lindon there had been no sign all morning.

David was elated, and he passed through the gap in the balustrade to the counsel table. There he shook Patterson's hand. Beyond them I saw Frank Wickens leave the witness box and move toward the far table, sunk in his own dejection. Wylie was gathering himself up, obviously disheartened by the turn of events.

Beside me Shauna breathed, "That was the most incredible piece of theater I've ever seen."

I had to agree with her. "The man is a master, there's no doubt about that."

She and I and Phyllis followed David into the open area. David was saying, "If Wylie recovers from this to even attempt any further argument, I'll be amazed."

Patterson nodded, surprisingly sedate. I might even have said humble. Perhaps he did not really relish the shredding of a man's integrity before the public eye. "Wylie will probably proceed directly to closing statements. I don't intend to call any witnesses now." He smiled at David. "But then, I always went on the assumption that they would torpedo themselves."

Phyllis declared breezily, "That's not where the torpedo came from, not from my angle."

Some of the print reporters who had filled the chairs at the front of the gallery were milling about, as though thinking of approaching Patterson, even though the hearing was not yet over. As they hesitated, a voice from behind piped up.

"Mr. Patterson!"

It was the TV interviewer, standing in the gap of the balustrade. She had witnessed the proceedings standing just inside the door at the back of the gallery.

"Mr. Patterson, could you give me a moment? I have a camera crew outside, and I'd love to give you a spot on the 6 o'clock news. If we wait until later, I won't be able to make it in time."

Patterson looked up and gave her a polite smile. He glanced at David and made an easy shrug, the corners of his mouth turned up in an amused expression which said 'Why not?' Aloud, he announced, "That's one of the things we're here for. I'll be sure to plug the Foundation."

He turned back to Helen Walters, his assistant. "Maybe you could grab my papers and briefcase, Helen, and meet me outside."

His eyes swept the animated faces of the people around him. Patterson had to have known that he had just shown the world he was still a master of the courtroom. He looked content, but the arrogance I might have expected was not in evidence. When his glance fell on Shauna, it lingered there for a moment. Then he turned and followed the interviewer up the aisle.

David expressed his elation by giving Phyllis a kiss on the cheek. "Maybe we should reschedule our press reception for tonight."

Phyllis looked at him in amused wonder. "My dear, the judge has not rendered his verdict yet. All Mr. Patterson has done is discredit one of the witnesses. The hearing isn't over."

David looked startled, then sheepish. “Well, yes, of course. But their case is in tatters, that’s clear. But you’re right, we can’t jump the gun.”

The crowd around us, its centerpiece removed, was thinning out. Helen Walters had gathered up everything and started up the aisle. Someone said, “I guess we should see about lunch.”

Shauna took my arm without moving. “What were you twitching about back there? You seemed like you were so nervous you couldn’t sit still.”

I shrugged it off, though her question brought back some of the unease. “Oh, just some leftover demons from last night. The clues and things. I was seeing Cherkasian behind every pillar—or stone.”

Shauna narrowed her eyes just slightly. “Why, did you think of something else?”

“I was just thinking about those three boys. Cherkasian evidently exercises some control over them. Maybe he’s even been indulging in some kind of indoctrination. They each get a clue to send—”

“You didn’t mention that last night.”

“Uh, no. Actually, that only came to me in the middle of the night. I didn’t wake you.”

David and Phyllis had started to move off toward the center aisle of the gallery. It was still thick with people.

Shauna asked, “What do you mean, they each got a clue?”

“Well—” My brain was picking up its deliberations, like a train lurching out of a foggy tunnel, resuming where it had left off. Coherent thought had been difficult while the dramatic courtroom scene was going on in front of me.

“It occurred to me that each of these warnings was given to one of the boys to send. Was Cherkasian trying to plant some idea in their minds? Some kind of suggestion? Or—” I found I was tapping on my forehead, as though trying to induce my cerebral processes to work a little faster. “With all this talk about God’s will and persuading God to act, who knows what effect those passages were designed to have on them?”

I looked around me, without knowing what I was expecting to see. “That way, he could cover himself. It wasn’t a direct order. Maybe he didn’t expect all three of them to respond.”

The increasing urgency, the apprehension in my voice made Shauna react. She asked in some alarm, “All what? An order to do what?”

I was speaking in some agitation. David had stopped part way up the aisle and looked back, curious. Phyllis turned as well.

“I don’t know. To bomb the place maybe. To set fire to it. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s what the clues talk about. At least two of them. Fire and the falling stones, Jeffrey and Steven. The other one talks about Christ crucified. Seeing him pierced.”

“Seeing who pierced?”

Shauna had almost shouted. David, nonplussed, was coming back.

“Seeing—”

How could I have been so blind? Shauna asking the question like that made it seem absurdly clear. The passage had been changed to eliminate the past sense of the piercing. Every eye shall see him pierced. A future prediction. A suggestion. Who? Who else but Burton Patterson himself?

David was in front of me, anxious. “What’s the matter, Kevin?”

That would have been the simplest of the clues to carry out. For Lindon? About him I knew nothing. Yesterday I had laid eyes on him briefly. Today he was nowhere in sight.

A knife could not have been brought into the courtroom. It would never have gotten past the metal detectors.

I looked past David, beyond an equally perplexed Phyllis.

“Where’s Patterson?”

David looked bewildered. “Why—out in the corridor. Talking to the TV woman.”

For one long moment, one part of my brain sent me the message to stop, calm down, and then consider whether I should be sounding so alarmist. I had surely created a phantom nightmare in my own mind. The universe we lived and loved in would not be that crazy.

The next moment, the message was superfluous. And horribly wrong.

A cacophony of voices, marked by several screams, suddenly erupted from the corridor beyond the gallery door. I rushed past the others and forced my way up the aisle. Beyond the doorway, past the protective arch of the metal detector, I was stopped by a milling press of people, all wearing panicked or horrified expressions. One or two were crying. In a moment, I felt David pushing behind me.

Ahead, in the midst of the press, a camera bobbed and jerked. It was pointed toward the floor. I heard a voice shouting from the same direction. Agent Chown was bellowing to someone: “Hold him!” There were calls for an ambulance. Courthouse security people were swirling in the mix, pushing their way, pushing others aside. I caught sight of the TV reporter. There was blood on the front of her blouse. She wore a stunned look and she was still clutching her microphone.

With David’s added pressure at my back, I found myself penetrating the eddying clump of braying humanity and arrived at its core, where Nelson Chown was crouched over a supine figure wet with blood. Burton Patterson was on his side, legs askew, head and upper body twisted skyward. His eyes stared in pain, and blood was escaping from an open mouth which seemed to be expressing a silent astonishment. Chown was trying to get him fully over on his back. The TV woman hovered above them, a mix of horror and professional self-possession on her face; beside her the camera was rolling.

A few feet away was a knot of three figures on the floor. A man in a trench coat together with a court security guard were grappling with another, arms twisted, head held brutally against the floor. Beneath one leg lay a red-stained knife.

“Oh God! Burton!” David pushed past me and knelt beside Chown, his knee in a spreading pallet of blood. “Oh God, how did this happen?” His voice was breaking with anguish.

Chown, as he worked Patterson over, was pressing some kind of cloth against the attorney’s chest, trying to staunch the flow of scarlet.

“I was too far away,” Chown grunted. “I saw the bastard go by—he looked like he was just passing them, uninterested. Then he whipped out the damn knife. I was too far away.” Chown raised his head and hollered. “Is that ambulance on its way?”

The voices, the commotion, the sound of Patterson’s rasping breath, were strange and disembodied to me, like a distant dream. Into that dream came Shauna, clutching fiercely at my arm. “Oh, no. No, no. Burton!” She let go of me and approached the fallen man, trying to make her way around the kneeling David. Someone was in the way. She stepped in blood.

In my dream, she was stepping out of my life. I could see that. I did not understand fully at that moment, but I knew that some link existed now between my former lover and Burton Patterson, who lay on the hard floor with his life seeping out of him.

From my daze, I heard and felt Phyllis crying angrily beside me.

There was a voice shouting. "Clear the way!" Some medical personnel pushed us aside. Shauna's hand had gone down to the felled attorney. She had touched his arm and then was forced to withdraw. David slithered sideways, on his knees, to let the medics through.

My feet retreated awkwardly, a numbness seizing my body. Shauna took a couple of steps, randomly, as though not knowing what to do. Then she turned and stared at me, eyes streaming. Anguish, guilt, stubbornness etched her face. She moved hesitantly toward me.

"I—I was with him last weekend. Here, in Philadelphia. At the hotel. He promised not to let on." The syllables came individually to me, pressed like ground chunks through the continuing commotion and the voices. My brain struggled to piece them back together in coherent meanings, shocking images. She came closer and put a hand on my forearm.

"I only spent a day at my parents'. He had asked me to come. I said yes, because—you—"

I shook my head, my lips pursed. Perhaps they trembled. My eyes told her she didn't have to explain.

"I needed to find out—if—how I felt about everything—" Her own eyes were hollow, red pools of distress and uncertainty. She swung back to look at the knot of furiously working people around Patterson.

She seemed caught on a line pulled in both directions. Suddenly she sagged and just stood there, weeping like the flow of a collapsed reservoir. For another moment I could not move, and Phyllis, having witnessed the exchange between us, stepped into the gap and went up to Shauna, embracing her. Their tears mixed, as I regained control of my body. Like everything else, too late.

Bits of phrases emerged from the group on the floor. "Give him a bit more....It's less than a quarter of an inch away....Stand back, please. Let the stretcher through!"

In a moment, they were lifting Patterson gingerly, laying him on a wheeled bed. His face looked bloodless. The wheels were slippery.

David was standing with soaked pants, looking as distraught as I'd ever seen a man look. As the medics were attaching the straps, he took Patterson's hand and spoke to him, though the attorney seemed hardly conscious. "Hold on, you stubborn son of a gun. We're going to ask for a rematch and you'd better be there." Patterson showed no sign he had heard.

Shauna and Phyllis, still holding each other, were watching along with everyone else as the intravenous life support bottle was hurriedly attached to Patterson's arm. David asked the medic, "Is he going to make it?"

The man glanced at him fleetingly. "Say your prayers."

David's reaction was bitter, as they started to wheel the stretcher away. "I think the God you want me to pray to was busy attending to someone else's crazy appeals."

By this time, more police were arriving, and the stretcher bearing Patterson disappeared through a mass of blue uniforms. I noticed that the would-be assassin had been lifted to his feet, handcuffed and brought to a bench outside the courtroom door, where he was unceremoniously forced into a sitting position. His face was familiar. The young man, his features composed and somber, was undoubtedly Lindon.

Over the next few minutes there were hurried consultations all round, between the various law enforcement people, between myself and Chown, who wanted me to scan the crowd to see if any of the other Ascended Masters were in sight, perhaps even Cherkasian himself. I could see no sign of anyone. I noted the absence, too, of Chester Wylie and Frank Wickens. They had taken the attorneys' door out of the courtroom, and I presumed they had missed the whole affair. They were in for a shock when they returned for the afternoon session. I wondered what the fate of the hearing would be, but at that moment I felt drained of all caring. Let the creationists teach their science. It was a drop in the bucket of the world's insanity.

After a further consultation with the local police commander, Chown informed me, "We're setting up an immediate raid on the Masters' hangout here in the city. It'll take a couple of hours to get in touch with the bureau and organize one against the schoolhouse. Wherever Cherkasian is, we'll have him here by suppertime. Can you make yourself available later? You seem to be the one who knows the most about these characters."

I said bitterly, "Yes, I had the clues, all right. But I didn't interpret them properly until it was too late."

Chown looked quizzical, but evidently decided to leave the matter until later. He went off to make his arrangements.

David, meanwhile, had enquired as to where Patterson had been taken. Between the four of us, we decided to return to the hotel, where David could change out of his bloodied pants and the rest of us would freshen up, then grab a bite of food and go off to the hospital. We let Chown know where we were going before we left the saddened courthouse. Its brooding stones had indeed fallen on us all.

In the back seat of David's rented car, I put my hand on a subdued and tear-stained Shauna. "I understand," I said softly. "Let's just concentrate on getting through this day. If there are things that need settling between us, we can do it another time." She stole a glance at me and nodded.

Later that evening, she informed me that she would stay in Philadelphia for the rest of the week. Patterson had undergone an emergency operation and was unconscious, but for now was holding his own, and the doctors said there was still a chance he could pull through. He had no immediate family, and Shauna wanted to wait in case he woke up. David would also stay for a few days.

Earlier in the evening Chown had commandeered me and brought me to a diner near the hospital. There he picked my brain on the Ascended Masters. The raid on the schoolhouse had missed Cherkasian "by inches," he said. Somehow he had known. Jeffrey and Steven had been apprehended when they returned to the house in the city, and the next day they would be subjected to intense questioning. Chown doubted he would have anything to hold them on, but they might provide information which would allow the FBI to track down Cherkasian.

"What I don't understand is what his motives were," Chown fretted over a third cup of coffee. "What the hell did he think he was going to accomplish?"

It was my third cup as well, which was two over my limit. I told myself it didn't matter, since I was not likely to do much sleeping that night in any event.

"If I gave you the answer to that, you'd think he was crazy—or I was. The religious mind, especially when you immerse it in the more fevered parts of scripture, is a hothouse.

All sorts of strange and hybrid ideas can take root there. Let's just say Cherkasian felt he could tap into forces that would bring about some changes in the world. When you crave desperately for the things you think God has been promising for so long, frustration may drive you to create your own straws to grasp at."

"In other words, the man is insane?"

"By unofficial standards like yours and mine, probably. Legally, I don't know. But I think you're going to be wasting your time. He's covered himself nicely. He'll claim he gave the boys no such instructions. They just got carried away—or at least Lindon did—and took the prophecy passages too seriously. He'll say he picked them as warnings to the Foundation, strictly religious of course, and let each boy deliver one. No doubt he surrounded it with a lot of suggestive indoctrination, but I doubt anyone could prove homicidal intentions or deliberate conspiracy."

Chown tapped the edge of his coffee cup with his spoon. It was like the thudding of a judge's gavel. "Don't be too certain about that. I'm sure going to have the department give it a try. Besides, if he was so confident he was in the clear, why did he run?"

"I don't know. Maybe he panicked."

"Well, we'll get him sooner or later."

To avoid an awkward situation, when I learned that Shauna intended to stay the week, I decided to take the midnight train home and leave her with the hotel room. The hearing had been suspended, and there was no reason for me to stay. David promised to call me each day and keep me informed of Patterson's condition. Shauna said she would call me when she returned home.

Our parting, in the waiting room outside the ward where Patterson was resting, was resigned if a little tearful. What the future held was impossible to say, and neither one of us was in the mood for prophecy. Before this disastrous day and its revelations, I had felt on the threshold of a new and exciting phase of my life. If that was still to be my destiny, I would probably be entering upon it without her.

The ride home was long and melancholy. The clatter of the wheels on the rails, instead of its usual soothing, hypnotic effect, was disturbing, almost nerve-wracking. In the darkened railway car, with sudden pinpoints of light sliding past in the black countryside like demented, chaotic spirits, some part of me wanted desperately to find a clear reason for this catastrophic day, to hold some one person or agency responsible. Instead, it was like the collision of a rash of vehicles, in a complex intersection during a storm. Some of the drivers were reckless, others distracted. A few had been craning at the sky.

It was like the junction of our times. The world was careering down the road toward the next millennium. That upcoming juncture of the eras was literally driving some people mad. For others it was inspiring. The stretch of highway they had just travelled had carried them through a wind of change and enlightenment. Some, against that new speed and freedom of the road, were setting up detours, laying byways back to a wilderness left behind. The collision of these forces was inevitable.

What new world would emerge from the impact was anyone's guess.

Epilogue

1

In the end, the Age of Reason Foundation got its publicity, almost more than it could handle, but none of us would willingly have paid the cost. Patterson made a slow but steady recovery, and some of it was due to Shauna's ministrations. Though we talked several times during the weeks following the aborted court hearing, and even met on one occasion, I did not try to plumb her motivations. Why she had been drawn to Patterson was her affair, and as I had always known her to be an honest and warm-hearted person, I knew the choice had not been made frivolously. Evidently my own evaluation of the man had been biased and ungenerous.

As for her dissatisfaction with our past relationship, we were both aware of the reasons for that. We spent little time discussing the issue. She managed to let me know that my longstanding reluctance to make a wholehearted investment in the business of living—and loving—had sapped some of her own commitment, leading to a fateful weekend in Philadelphia. We parted on good terms, but it was a parting that was to inaugurate in me an intense period of soul-searching.

Three weeks following the hearing, David and I got together at his office to review the situation. Tactfully, and mercifully, he made no mention of Shauna. Patterson by then had been taken off the critical list, but it was clear he would not be returning to the courtroom anytime soon. The ACLU, David informed me, had taken back the reins and was working to reschedule the hearing under their own auspices later in the summer.

"In time, hopefully, to prevent the State of Pennsylvania from carrying through its intentions and introducing creationism into the school curriculum next year."

"Who's going to argue the thing?" I asked.

"Don't know. It's out of our hands now. We've had our moment of glory. A rather bloody one, wasn't it? Chown tells me that Cherkasian has disappeared into a black hole. But he claims he'll be dug out eventually. Long arm of the Bureau and all that."

"What about the boys?"

"So far there's no evidence of any collusion between the three. Lindon was working on his own, certainly under Cherkasian's influence. But whether they could prove that in a court of law is less certain, if I can read through Chown's bluster."

"Perhaps Lindon will plead insanity."

David's eyes lit up in a mix of anger and perversity. "You know, I'd love to see that. This should be a high profile trial across the country. Let's have a good defence lawyer present a case for fundamentalist belief constituting a form of insanity—or inducing that state in the believer."

I had to chuckle. "Maybe if the case is delayed long enough, Patterson will have recovered in time to take on Lindon's defence. Wouldn't that be a supreme piece of irony?"

David started to laugh with me, and then abruptly sobered. He put his tongue only a little way into his cheek. "You know, Kevin, that is not as outrageous an idea as you think. I may bring it up with Patterson the next time I visit him. It might give him an extra incentive for recovery. Chown actually sounded as though it might take some time for the case to come to trial, what with Cherkasian missing and all."

“No, David, the idea is *totally* outrageous. Which might be why Patterson would actually give it some consideration. Imagine the media attention that would draw!”

“There’d probably be some legal impediment to it. Conflict of interest or something.” Yet his eyes looked almost wistful, starry with visions of the potential that such a situation would involve. “The Foundation would be in the public eye for months.”

We both shook our heads as if to clear them of assorted outrageous fantasies.

“Speaking of publicity...”

David lifted a pile of newspaper sheets from behind the desk and plopped them in front of me. We perused pages, mostly front ones, from publications around the country, taken from the days immediately following the attempted murder. Some of the headlines tried to be clever. “Darwin’s Fittest May Not Survive” and “Ghost of Bryan Haunts Modern Darrow”. Almost all the articles made some mention of the Age of Reason Foundation. Time Magazine, in the previous week’s issue, had included a substantial feature on the Foundation and the issues surrounding it, focusing on the creationism dispute. As David pointed out, we had paid a high price for the windfall publicity.

“Which is why we can’t pass up the opportunity to take advantage of it. For now, the Foundation is attracting new members at ten times the previous rate. I’m just on the verge of losing personal control over the whole thing. You know the best part of it all—for me, anyway? Half the board of the International Skeptics, the ones I originally proposed the thing to and who essentially told me to go off and pull on my own tail, they want in on the Foundation now. Well, they’ll have to wait in line.”

I asked hesitantly, “What about me? Do you think I can still handle the ‘resident publicist’ duties?” I actually found myself a little apprehensive at the thought that the organization was evolving to a new, expanded stage, and that I might be left behind. I had noted, without comment, that I had not been brought in to help with the Time interview.

David was solicitous. “Absolutely. We might even have to give you an assistant. I left you alone for a bit—I guess I left everyone alone—in the wake of Patterson’s stabbing, and I’ve been running back and forth between here and Philadelphia. By the way, he’s starting to ask about people and things at the Foundation, which I take as a good sign. But I want us to get back on track as of today.” The old twinkle came back into the eye. “How about I give you two days—OK, three—to put together a rough game plan. Something covering everything from now to our Symposium on Rationality in the year 2000.”

The trouble was, he was half serious. I nodded slowly. “OK, three days—no problem. Maybe I’ll throw my novel together during the other two.”

We both laughed. “You can do that on the weekends. Anyway, I’m not entirely averse to making some use of the idea of a non-existent Jesus. You almost convinced me of it the other day. But we’ll have to handle that one carefully. Let’s see if the world is ready to give it a hearing. Which reminds me—”

He reached into a desk drawer and fished out a recent copy of the Atlantic Monthly. He had tagged a page. “Listen to what one of today’s leading scholars has to say about the latest conclusions in New Testament research. He’s quoted in an article about Q: ‘Because Q contains no passion narrative, Mack believes that no one really knows how Jesus died and that the Gospel stories of his passion, like most of the Gospel stories, are pure fiction. ‘It’s over,’ Mack said. ‘We’ve had enough apocalypses. We’ve had enough martyrs. Christianity has had a two-thousand-year run, and it’s over.’ ’ ’ ”

David looked up at me quizzically. “What do you think of that?”

I hesitated. “It’s—unheard of. Burton Mack is certainly on the cutting edge; he used to belong to the Jesus Seminar. But I don’t think even he would have dared express such finality as little as five years ago. I guess the snowball is really gaining momentum. We’ve already arrived at a thoroughly human Jesus. The conclusions I’ve come to may lie just over the next hill.”

David tossed the magazine onto the pile of papers. “Who knows? Still, I have a feeling the Frank Wickenses of this world are not going to meekly come on board overnight, either on yours or Burton Mack’s ship. Christianity is facing some rough seas ahead. Perhaps religion as a whole. That’s why I want to be out there. I want to offer a port in the storm. Help me fashion that harbor, Kevin. We have to offer a viable alternative. The world has been moving toward a secular outlook, we both know that. It’s groping for a new rationality we can all embrace. I know we can’t just abandon overnight all the emotional needs we’ve had, the things we’ve invested in mysticism and gods and the supernatural for so long. The irony is, our precious evolution has probably selected for that kind of investment, just to keep us going.”

I tried to put a better cast on things. “Maybe we don’t need to abandon them, David. We just need to find them a better home. That old saying about putting away the things of the child never struck me as quite right. You never lose those things, or put them away. You simply translate them into more adult expressions. That’s what we need to do. We’re on the verge of adulthood—at long last—and we need to find a new setting for our childhood needs and emotions. Just don’t ask people to cast them aside, much less denigrate them. We just have to let ourselves see them for what they are.”

As David nodded in acknowledgment, I moved to the office window and looked out over the campus quadrangle, a place of green and sunlight amid the concrete, man-made artifacts. Nature had witnessed our long, painful growth. Was she patient or impatient? Caring or unconcerned? Did she have the capacity for either? Yes, for we had that capacity and we were part of nature, that part which had evolved the ability to think, to feel, to be aware. In us, the mind of the universe was growing up. Adulthood was inevitable. No organism could stay a child forever. The path of evolution travelled only in one direction. Those who sought to hold us, or return us to the past, could not, in the long run, succeed.

I took comfort, and inspiration, from that thought.

2

Ruminations about childhood had led my thoughts in another direction, for childhood was also a time of innocence and vulnerability. And what the child experienced, almost invariably beyond its own control, would determine so much of what the adult became. I wondered what type of rationality we as a species would achieve in our adulthood, having passed through formative years so beset with bizarre fantasies, cruel inflictions, and a parade of wretched demons.

But as I left David’s office, declining his offer to walk me to my car, my thoughts were less on our collective fate than on that of one particular individual. I found myself tracing my steps down the corridor in a different direction, to another office I had visited once before. Through the frosted glass window I could see none but the natural light of late

afternoon and no movement, and my light knock drew no response. Sylvia was not on the premises. Perhaps she had no courses to teach during the summer session, or perhaps they were over for the day.

In the flurry of preparation for the trip to Philadelphia, I had neglected to try again to reach her. Upon my return, and for the last three weeks, the weight of those mad events I had been living through forestalled any renewed efforts at contact, though I realized she had never been completely out of my mind. But it was also true that Sylvia herself had apparently made no attempt to contact me, despite the assurance I had given her that I wanted to help and to be kept informed. I still had no idea if she had followed my urging to seek therapy for those devastating childhood experiences.

But had I done the right thing, leaving the initiative for that contact up to her? Through the evening, one increasingly heavy with a July humidity under incoming clouds, the question worried away at me.

The house was quiet and somber, as it had been, it seemed, since my return from Philadelphia. Half-hearted attempts to draft ideas for a novel had filled some of that melancholy time, but I was still not convinced that I had come up with the right approach. What I needed was a format, a setting, which could somehow take into account the modern effects of the fall of a 2000-year-old Jesus from his celestial firmament, not to mention his very evaporation into thin air almost as soon as he hit the ground. I suddenly realized that my novel would have to move between both worlds, the world of the first century when vital new ideas were seizing people's minds, when new movements were being launched into a radically different future, and the world of the late 20th century, when the great momentum of that ancient myth was finally running out of steam, to be swept away in new currents still only partially discernible.

I would need motifs to link the two eras, to point up comparison and contrast. For conflict, there would be no shortage of devices. As for the subtlest and most demanding of any novel's features, its characters: what would they be, and could they bridge the two-millennial gap? Might I be able to have them communicate on some level, interact to share feelings, hopes and convictions across the great gulf of time and knowledge and human sophistication? Or had evolution carried us so far in the last 2000 years that minds like Paul's could share nothing with minds like Patterson's?

And yet we were all part of that mysterious stream of life and progress flowing in directions unclear, for purposes unknown. Adulthood was surely reached when we could finally cast our investigation of ourselves and our world in the light of such a momentous and demanding realization. Who was to say that voices from the past could not still contribute to the vast ongoing project? It would be interesting to see.

But not tonight.

As the long and listless evening progressed, I felt increasingly concerned, even anxious, at the continuing silence which the image of Sylvia presented to me. Had I been wrong in blithely assuming that she would take the initiative, that she would have the courage to reach out to my proffered hand? I had, after all, rejected her advances. Her state of mind as a cruel past made yet another overwhelming invasion back into her life would hardly be conducive to reasonable behavior. I should have asked David that afternoon if he had had any contact with Sylvia and how she seemed to be doing, even if that might risk betraying a confidence.

No, what I should have done was take the initiative myself. She had suffered before from people who had abandoned her and let her down; it was no surprise that she would fear putting herself in the same situation once again. And my own silence had only confirmed it.

My ancient heirloom of a grandfather clock struck eleven. Something in me, some unconscious perceptor, began to vibrate. Whether rationally or not, I suddenly felt that to wait one more day, perhaps even one more hour, would somehow be disastrous.

I rummaged in the desk drawer where I remembered putting the paper with Sylvia's telephone number, now long weeks ago. After a moment of near panic, I uncovered it and brought it with the phone to my reading chair in the living room. It crossed my mind that if Paul had had a telephone, to harangue the Corinthians over the long distance wires, we would have had no letters—and no way of understanding what early Christianity had really been about. Tonight, however, I cared more that the evolution of the telephone had provided a lifeline no letter could equal.

The old phone rested in my lap as I dialled the number. Eight rings went by, but I was reluctant to break the connection and restore the ongoing silence. Outside, the dark night seemed to sigh in sad resignation, when almost imperceptibly the receiver at the other end was lifted. After a momentary pause which seemed like an eternity of stillness, a small female voice said, "Hello."

My own voice came out hushed and unsteady. "Sylvia? I know it's late. But I've been thinking about you. And—and a little worried. Did I wake you? It's a muggy night, isn't it? Are you feeling OK? It's Kevin—"

Good grief, let the woman speak, I admonished myself.

"Kevin?" The voice at the other end was still small, almost disoriented. "I—I'm surprised to hear from you. Are you still in Philadelphia?" The question made no sense.

"Oh, no. I'm at home. No, I was only there for a few days." I had never discussed the impending hearing with her, though no doubt she had learned about it from David or someone else in the Foundation. "How are you? Are you well?"

She seemed disconcerted by the question. "I—I've not been feeling all that well. Perhaps some things are...just meant to be."

There was a listless quality to her tone I found unsettling, a disjointedness.

"Have you—did you contact anyone, as I recommended?"

She hesitated. "Umm...I spoke to my doctor about it. I guess it was a week ago." Had she waited that long? It was not a good sign. "He hasn't called me back yet, I don't think." Another hesitation. "I'm not sure it would do much good to talk to anyone."

"It always helps to talk to someone, Sylvia."

There was a long pause. "Perhaps there are other ways."

If anything, her voice was getting smaller, with a hint of tearfulness. I suddenly felt alarmed.

"You know, it's so muggy tonight," I said, keeping my own voice calm and friendly. "I'm sure there'll be trouble sleeping. It occurred to me that if you're not too tired yourself, I could go over and we could chat some. A lot of pretty dramatic things happened in Philadelphia, as I'm sure you've heard. It would be nice to talk to someone about them. Those kinds of things weigh heavily on the mind, you know."

An agitation came across the line. "I don't—I don't think I want you to come here, Kevin. It's, well—the place is not too tidy, actually."

I had the feeling this was not the real reason. Perhaps her own apartment would hold the wrong associations for her now, in view of my last visit.

But I was determined not to leave her to her own demons. “Then will you let me send a cab for you? You could come and visit me here.” I decided to be more direct. “I have the feeling you shouldn’t be alone, Sylvia. The truth is, I’m feeling alone about now, too, and I think we could both benefit from each other’s company. What do you say?”

I could sense a complex of emotions in her voice. “I wouldn’t be interfering with anything?”

“No, you wouldn’t. I can promise you that.”

There was a noticeable sigh. “All right. You’ll have to give me an hour. And I can call my own cab.”

“If you’re not here in an hour and five minutes, I’ll come and get you myself.”

As it turned out, she had three minutes to spare. Though it was a warm, humid night, she arrived at my door wrapped in a heavy shawl-like affair. She looked drawn and haunted, and the whole effect of her appearance was like nothing so much as a lost waif. I did not believe that David could have seen her recently, or else he would have remarked about her to me. I gave her a little hug as I drew her inside.

July may not have been the usual month for even a late night hot chocolate, but I sensed that Sylvia’s insides needed warming for other reasons than the weather, and she made no objection when I proposed the hot milk drink. Coffee would have been too unsettling of the nerves.

We made hesitant small talk as I prepared it in the kitchen, and I could feel a touch of wariness in her. Occasionally she would glance around, as if she half expected Shauna might suddenly appear. I felt awkward about bringing up the subject of my late lamented relationship, and so I let it lie for the moment.

With steaming cups in hand, we went into the living room to my worn, comfortable sofa. We sat side by side, near enough that I could show I had no aversion to being close to her, yet giving her room to feel unpressured. The awkwardness of her movements was back in evidence, I noted, though she had lost weight and now seemed almost slim. Her clothing tonight was subdued and dark colored, yet I felt she had tried to give herself a touch of grace.

After a sip of the warm liquid I said, “I want to apologize for not getting in touch with you sooner than I did, Sylvia. A lot of things were happening, but I did think of you often.”

Her eyes went wide over the rim of her cup. “Oh, you don’t have to apologize, Kevin. That wasn’t your responsibility. As I recall, I was the one who promised to do the telephoning.”

“Yes, but that was no reason for me not doing it.” I pivoted a little toward her. “Tonight before I called, I had the strongest sensation. I don’t believe in psychic phenomena, but I did feel that if I didn’t call you right away, something...something would have happened. And I didn’t like the sound of your voice when we spoke.”

She cast her eyes down to her cup, now resting in her lap.

“Yes, I was thinking about it,” she said softly. “Maybe—maybe more than thinking.” The large bright eyes were moist. “I don’t know that I can face dredging it all up. What if whoever I tell it to rejects me, too?”

“That won’t happen, Sylvia. That’s your childhood fears and experiences talking.” After a pause, I said, “And I didn’t reject you. There were just things in the way.”

She hastened to place a hand on mine. “Oh, no, I didn’t mean you. I understood. Anyway, I was hardly behaving decorously. I don’t know what you must have thought of me.”

“I thought a lot of things. Most of them good.”

She returned to her sad pensiveness, though she left her hand lightly on mine. “Perhaps these things are just fated to be. Perhaps we have to accept them. Besides, I’m probably too old to be helped. It was so long ago, now.”

I looked at her directly, and there was an intensity in my voice which surprised me.

“But it doesn’t feel like that, does it? It feels like only yesterday. Because we store these things just below the surface where we can get at them at a moment’s notice, even though we think we’ve buried them out of sight, out of reach. We keep them handy because part of us knows that they have to be dealt with. At the first available opportunity, and we’d better not have misplaced them.”

Sylvia searched my face, my eyes, for understanding. Perhaps it was time to bring my own demons out into the light.

“I didn’t go through the sort of things you went through, Sylvia. No one violated my body. But things can be done to the mind and the spirit that are almost as harmful. It’s ironic—it’s really the great Fraud, actually—that while religions vaunt their principles of love and respect, they’ve always implemented them through fear and coercion. They show love and compassion to their fellow man by forcing him to believe as they do, or else relegate him to outer darkness—or worse. They build up human pride and self-respect by preaching guilt, that humanity is inherently evil, the body sinful, and none of us are worth anything when measured beside the perfection of God. Priests spend far more time talking about hell than about heaven—or at least they used to. These days it’s not always so fashionable. They build character through indoctrination, by making you fear even to doubt or question. They develop the ability to reason by imposing dogmas, even when those dogmas are left in laughable shreds by modern science and rationality. They build their ethical systems on the whims of a deity, or at least of those who would interpret such a thing for us. Religion demands that we commit intellectual suicide, and it alienates us from our own human needs and the world we live in.

“I grew up in a family and a community which swallowed the whole warped philosophy, and I saw what it did to those around me. I saw what it was doing to myself before I finally broke free—if I’ll ever accomplish that completely. A lot of people are still breaking free, but there must be a deeply felt need for the old slavery, because the kind of religion that’s flourishing today, and wants to drag us back into the past, is the mindless fundamentalism that almost cost Burton Patterson his life, the kind that’s doing its damndest to bring back a repressive patriarchal system and turn our children into Bible-enslaved eunuchs. Who would have thought that the medieval era would be hailed as a place of refuge as we approach the third millenium?

“But we can’t let that happen. It’s been long enough. Some scholar recently said, ‘It’s over,’ and he’s right. The bottom line is that religion, not just Christianity, doesn’t work and it never has. Any of the good things about it can be just as effective, if not moreso, in a different context—a humanistic one. It’s time to turn to something else.”

Sylvia's usually mobile face was looking a little stunned by the bursting of my own dam. "I had no idea you held such emotional views on things, Kevin. I guess we all have more in common than we realize."

I felt suddenly apologetic. "Forgive me for running on like that. I'm still trying to resolve some of the pains and constrictions of my own youth." I adopted a more solicitous tone. "But I didn't ask you over here to talk about my past, Sylvia. It's yours that needs dealing with—and it's much more urgent. I meant what I said, that I would like to be there for you."

Her eyes softened and seemed once again to search my own for things unspoken. They were as yet unsaid because I was still investigating them within myself. I had lost Shauna—or perhaps had never had her—because of things unresolved, because of my search for understanding in the past. But then, we lived in an unresolved world. No one insisted that we had to suspend our lives and our commitments while seeking that resolution.

I looked at the sweet face, the forlorn but still vital figure before me, with its mind so keen and sharing so many interests with my own. It was finally dawning on me that Sylvia and I might both benefit from a loving relationship while we struggled to cast off our respective demons, and I was beginning to suspect that I could indeed love this woman. She, in turn, could find strength for the struggles ahead in an understanding partner, one who, in his own way, had been there as well.

But all these thoughts lay still unvoiced, and so Sylvia could only ask tentatively, "What about your lady friend?"

I smiled in my own tentative measure, for the ghost of Shauna might linger for a while. "She's not in the picture any more. These past few weeks have been an upheaval in more ways than one. But she's out of my life, and she won't be coming back."

Instead of relying entirely on words, such lame and often embarrassing little devices, I set our two cups down on the end table beside me and took her hand in both of mine. In her eyes there was a swirl of anticipation and apprehension, and I knew that if I was going to offer myself to this woman I had better be ready to deliver. There had been enough betrayal, enough self-flagellation in her life.

I stroked her hand as I said, "I don't want you to go home tonight, Sylvia. We can take things at whatever pace you feel comfortable with. We're all on the road to recovery in one way or another, but you more than most. Tomorrow we'll light a fire under that doctor of yours. But I want you to be able to feel confident about me. Let me into your life and I'll let you into mine, and we can both give to each other. And we'll try to concentrate more on the future than on the past. I happen to think there's a pretty exciting future in the works, and we can both be a part of it. David and the Foundation can use all the help we can give them. What do you say?"

The glow on her face, the avid light in her eyes, told me all I needed to know. They probably matched my own. Such things were worth dying for—or better still, living for.

She said in the softest of voices, "I will try, Kevin."

In the darkest hour of the night, just before dawn, we made love. Perhaps the demons of the past would always prowl nearby, watching and waiting, but if Sylvia could learn to receive love as freely as she yearned to give it, those demons would forever flounder impotently in the distance, denied their former seat, like Nielsen's snare drum in the music Patterson had described to us at the end of Philosophers' Walk.

Afterwards, she cried, long and deeply.

I simply waited—and comforted. Yes, I had left out one item in my earlier diatribe against the religious system, perhaps the most damning of them all. When the stakes were on the scale of eternity, when bliss or damnation hung in the balance, an immense power was placed in the hands of those who directed the tales from men's mythical imaginations. The fact that so often not even they, as representatives of such truths, could resist the abuse of power, should have been enough to discredit the basis of the messages they offered. Instead, like all things flourishing under the sun, we were all of us, minister and devotee alike, groping our way out of the natural evils inherent in the richness and terror of undirected life.

An image came to me, one of those vivid scenes with which Vardis Fisher had filled the novels of his Testament of Man. This one came at the climax of the final, shattering book of the series, *My Holy Satan*. The novel's main theme was of the tyranny that people had always tried to exercise over one another, and the greatest of these was the tyranny over the mind.

In the previous novel, *Peace Like a River*, Fisher had marvelled bleakly at the tyranny over the body which early Christian ascetics in the desert had willingly imposed upon themselves, in their pathological fear of the allurements of the world and the evils of the flesh. But when he came to examine the medieval Church's Office of the Holy Inquisition, he had to present a picture of the most highly institutionalized suppression of thought and liberty in human history, the greatest exercise of tyranny over the mind of a pliant, fearful society, purposely held in ignorance, in material and spiritual servitude. That it was all conducted with the best of intentions, to save men's and women's souls for the next world, was only the most chilling of its aspects. For the latter part of the book, the reader was forced to descend with Fisher into the inquisitors' dungeon, with its tortures and brutal degradations, where all hope and initiative, human feeling and compassion were to be rooted out in the quest to purify the soul from the paramount evil of incorrect belief, before its saving execution.

What madness had led society to turn over such power to its ministers of eternal life and death, to allow for such an obscene deprivation of human rights? Why could religion by its very nature never be divorced from the obsessive need to suppress the thirst for knowledge, the quest for human betterment, the upholding of the dignity of the individual and the freedom of his or her mind—and body?

No religion had ever in the course of history shown itself to be free of this defect, exempt from the great Fraud. And were Fisher to write a follow-up novel to portray the spirit of religious fundamentalism today, Christian and non-Christian alike, he would no doubt point to more of the same.

He would see it in the Vatican's denial of human choice in procreation, of the need to control the population and depletion of resources on a finite, fragile planet; in its voice added to that of the other established and evangelical churches in their universal denial of women's rights to reproductive control of their bodies. He would see it in the Religious Right's ambitions for political power, their attempts to steer the nation's legislation in the direction of so-called Judaeo-Christian values, even to the institutionalization of biblical law. In this they already had a modern precedent in the achievements of fundamentalist Islamic societies.

Fisher would see it in the already successful undermining of science and human knowledge in the schools, in the suppression of evolution and the attempt to propagate myth and superstition. And he would see it in the horrifying scandals of physical and sexual abuse of children, those innocents whom society had trustingly placed in ministerial hands, scandals which were now erupting like blighted sores on a long concealed skin, as the cloak of sanctity and privilege was at last being pulled away.

And Jesus? He was an institution in itself, still going strong, the figurehead for so much of the nonsense and bitter folly the world had visited upon itself for the past two millennia. Could he witness the deeds enacted and the ideas imposed in his name, I had no doubt he would willingly opt for non-existence himself, to vanish into the lonely mists Fisher had cast for him, so that none would remember.

Today, the solution was the same as it had always been, and it lay at the heart of *My Holy Satan*, where Fisher had drawn his vast survey of the history of human intelligence and ideas to a close—on a somber if hopeful note. The “holiness” was in courageous, independent thought and free inquiry, which in the twisted logic of the medieval ecclesiastical mind lay with the Church’s great opponent, Satan himself. In the hands of the Prince of Darkness had the “wisdom of the world”, as opposed to those who knew the mind of God, always lain, and for today’s fundamentalists it lay with Satan still. Perhaps for Fisher, in putting a seal on his Testament just before 1960, not much had changed in principle between the claims of religious authority in medieval times and the claims of the same authority in his own time—just the ferocity of their application. And yet his work, though it faced squarely humanity’s ignorance, cruelty and immaturity, nevertheless affirmed its great potential and the glory of human strivings.

The unprecedented swing toward secularism coincided with the final decade of Fisher’s life, as he and his books languished in censure and obscurity, one of the last to fall victim to the sacred and privileged position which established religion still clung to amid its crumbling walls. Perhaps it was time to bring this unique and audacious champion of questing humanity back into the literary light. Could I bring my own novel to life, I would feel privileged to keep such company.

But the year 2000 lay on the near horizon. And although it was an entirely arbitrary division in the ongoing human saga, and—in the light of my own conclusions—a meaningless one at that, perhaps the world would have the courage to seize the moment, and the opportunity. There could surely be no turning back.

With Sylvia resting in an undisturbed sleep beside me, Patterson recovering in hospital with Shauna’s help, David and our Foundation of reason easing promising tentacles into the consciousness of a nation, I myself was filled with hope for a rewarding future, a future luminous and proud.

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