

A family moves from the city to rural Pennsylvania and discovers the broken, divisive heart of America. This is a story about crumbling civilization, an alienated artist, relinquished love. It asks if any future could possibly exist.

Powerless to be Born

By Rodney Robert Brown

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POWERLESS TO BE BORN



RODNEY ROBERT BROWN

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PART I:
TRANSITION

Chapter 1:

The Diner

During the age of rampant self-indulgence with its explosive, elevated egos and volatile individualism, and in the days of the armchair protesters, who spit a steady stream of divisive declarations without the coherency of centralized concepts, and who fervently forward unexamined material of malcontent over social networking platforms, all of which are transpired amidst the chaos of a crumbling civilization where human existence is drearly dispensed in droplets of impoverished survival, like copper coinage discarded in wishing wells, sat Hemsley Nicholson sipping coffee. Hemsley noticed that the light brown mug had a chip of glaze broken from its rim. The coffee that he sipped was not the finer Arabica blends to which he had been accustomed in the shops and coffee houses of the city. It was the ordinary commercial grade, whose tins line the shelves of every supermarket and those few remaining Mom and Pop stores which once dominated the American scene. Nestling the mug in both hands, Hemsley allowed the steam to rise toward his face. He took another sip. The coffee was strong and raunchy, leaving a bitter aftertaste rather than a smooth lingering finish upon the palate. Its dismal taste was as bleak as the drab November landscape into which he gazed through the diner window. Across the cracked, pot-holed parking lot and beyond the two-lane highway lay the vestige of one of last summer's cornfields. Crows flocked to the field, scrounging among the rows of cut, dried stalks for remnants of ochre-colored nourishment, like hungry miners panning for gold in a depleted stream. Along the far end of the field ran a strip of bare, grey-hued trees, beyond which rose those low undulating mountains particular to this part of central Pennsylvania. If one were to travel a bit northward or go west, the mountains would rise to a more rugged aspect, but here

their range of ridges are older, lower, weatherworn, and more rounded. To the left of this cornfield, a stretch of woods followed the highway for a considerable distance. If Hemsley would have leaned across the table of the diner booth and looked to the field's right side, he would have seen a dirt lane at whose end stood one of those two-story, clapboard farmhouses in need of paint and so common to the area. Behind it stood a barn, having dark, vertical slits where pieces of the boards had deteriorated and fallen from its colorless walls. There were several outbuildings and a few bare trees near the house, which completed this scene of a little, struggling agricultural establishment that appeared stranded among the stark, barren fields, like a remote desert island on a motionless sea.

This common, ordinary landscape did boast of one peculiar and dominant feature. Rising above the cornfield on four sturdy, cylindrical legs, similar to strong telephone poles, stood a large billboard. It sat forty feet from the edge of the highway. Looking at this billboard, one stared down the barrel of a rifle with the crosshairs of the scope situated above it. Behind the firearm could be seen the man who was holding it. With stern look, he wore a military camouflage shirt and matching helmet of olive and various neutral greens and tans. To his right and lower upon the billboard stood a smaller-scaled, full-figured black silhouette of another soldier in profile. He was pointing a rifle. From its barrel, a sharp, straight line was projected and ended at a silhouette of another man, who was falling backward with legs apart and arms spread. At the juncture of this man's chest and the projectile line from the gun barrel, there were radiating, bright red droplets, representing blood. Written diagonally above the ammunition projection line with large letters in the style of wide, sweeping paintbrush strokes were two words: "Play Paintball." Under this projectile line in bold, black, block lettering and preceded by red bullets, there were listed the benefits of participation:

“Real Life Military Combat,” “Experience the Kill,” “Enhance your Fighting Skills,” and “Family Fun Day Every Sunday Afternoon.” Below those rewards were directions to turn right three miles further ahead at such and such a place and so forth and so forth.

Hemsley took another sip of coffee. He continued to observe the rural scene. He wondered about the life of these people with their endless toil that produced physical deprivation and mindless existence. He again pondered the billboard, questioning what state of human mentality could accept and embrace the activities represented upon its surface. Appearing strong and tall, the billboard itself seemed to stand as a sentinel guarding, overseeing, and protecting its domain. It watched and scrutinized the inhabitants of the farmhouse. Was this billboard actually a protector, or was it an oppressor of the countryside? Did the ideas behind its message repetitiously penetrate into the soul of all who subjected themselves to its gaze, as if they were looking upon Medusa? What about the farmer who leased the space for it in his field? Did he endorse the billboard’s message? Or was it simply some rental income, a few more pennies to meet his bank mortgage? To such questions Hemsley might not know the answers, but his mind travelled in the spheres of always questioning and forever analyzing all that he observed. As with the philosopher, he found exploring questions without answers a frustrating delight.

The continued cawing of the crows brought his abstracted attention back to the scene before him. He again noticed the billboard. His observation grasped vines crawling up its sturdy, supporting legs. Their tendrils encircled the posts, like a python choking its prey. Clinging to the rough splintery wood, its brownish leaves and tiny roots were already inflicting minutely observable destruction with their penetrating moisture. Thicker and more progressed on the furthest supports, the vine’s fingers had reached the base of the board itself, where it had begun crawling horizontally. If the billboard was a

sentinel presiding over the countryside with its message permeating the minds of human beings, the vines themselves took no note. Neither tree nor cornstalk nor sky heeded its meaningless message. To the crows it was merely an inanimate object upon which to perch and unwittingly relieve themselves of their excrement over the structure. Only over humans could it hold influence. Nature, on the other hand, would always prevail over mankind's folly.

"You seem deep in thought," said Kathryn, his wife, who was sitting across the table from him.

"Hmm... Yes. Maybe," responded Hemsley, still somewhat lost in his thoughts.

"Sometimes you think too much, Hemmy," she commented, as she placed her palm gently over his hand, which rested upon the table.

"I know. Perhaps," he said, looking at her tenderly. He glanced out the window again and thoughtfully added, "Too many people think too little."

"You carry too much of the weight of the world on your shoulders. You shouldn't, you know, Hemmy. It's not good for you."

He returned his glance toward her. Observing her hand on his, he smiled. She reciprocated his smile with her own, as he softly replied, "One would think that it is me who has come here for a ... For a rest."

"Dad, what's paintball?"

Hemsley looked at his thirteen-year-old daughter sitting beside Kathryn. Her name was *Jéanne*, an anglicized spelling of the French "Jay-ahn." The Nicholsons, father, mother, and daughter, always employed the French pronunciation and insisted upon its usage by others. In the city where they had lived, people were without qualms about foreign names and often found them charming. It was certainly the case with *Jéanne*.

"Well," said the girl's father, "it's a game. It's a game people play around here."

“What do you mean? What kind of game?”

“I’ve never played it. I have only heard and read about it.”

“What do they do? How does it work?” quizzically asked his daughter.

“The best which I can conjecture is that people, mostly men, but some women too, go to these game places in the woods. They dress up in military combat uniforms. They have rifles and whatever other weapons, who knows. Instead of real bullets, they fire some sort of special ammunition which have wet paint inside them. When these bullets hit something, they burst, splattering paint on whatever they strike. When you hit a person with one, I suppose that it indicates that you’ve killed him.”

“I guess that means that you win,” replied J anne. “Do they choose sides and make teams? Like two armies fighting?”

“Probably. Maybe. I really don’t know. They might play as individuals. I don’t know. Coming from our circle of friends and colleagues within the city, we’ve never known anyone with that interest,” said Hemsley.

“Do they keep score?”

“I don’t know.”

“How is your sandwich, J anne?” interjected Kathryn.

“Good,” replied her daughter. Returning to her father, she asked, “When someone gets hit with paint, do they stay dead? Are they out of the game, or do they get up and pretend that they are another soldier? Like when the neighborhood boys play cops and robbers or soldiers or something with their friends in the park at home.”

“I have no idea,” replied her father.

Twisting her mouth as in disgust and rolling her eyes as young teenagers may do, J anne said, “Well, it all sounds so childish to me.” After a short silence, she continued, “Why do they do it?”

Hemsley considered for a moment, and then rejoined, “Maybe they see it as an extension of their love for hunting. They call killing animals ‘sport,’ you know. Not food gathering, but ‘sport.’ Perhaps if they find excitement in the kill of an animal, they might imagine that killing a higher mammal, a man for example, could be a bigger thrill or accomplishment, like international big game hunters are always seeking more dangerous prey. Who knows? Maybe it’s a primitive, innate thirst for blood. For violence. I don’t know. I’m not a psychiatrist. It greatly disturbs me.”

“Well, it makes me sick,” was Jeanne’s response.

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart,” consoled her mother. “You’ll find that most people here are good and kind.” There was a pause. Kathryn put her arm around her daughter’s shoulder and gave her a light hug, saying, “Mom grew up here. It was a pretty good childhood. Our neighbors and friends were nice people. They were good people. You’ll like them and make friends here. It will be alright.”

Jeanne gave a quick jerk of her head and shoulders, and her mother withdrew her arm. “I want my old friends,” smarted Jeanne sternly.

None of them noticed the waitress approach, until she interrupted, “You guys want some dessert?”

“I don’t,” said Kathryn. “What about you, honey? Would you like a dessert?”

“No,” was Jeanne’s sharp reply.

“Ya want s’more coffee?” said the waitress. She was a haggard-looking woman around fifty and wore a white shirt, blue jeans, and discolored white sneakers.

“I think that will be all. If we could have our check, please,” requested Hemsley.

The waitress pulled a pencil from where it was stuck in her hair bun, and with her other hand took the order pad from the pocket of her short apron. After leafing through the pages, she found their check,

completed some figures, tore it off the pad, and slapped it upon the table, saying as she walked away, “You guys come back again, okay.”

The family rose and walked down the diner aisle with its booths and windows on one side and a lunch counter with stools on the other. At the end of the counter was the cash register. Kathryn and Jeanne went around the counter and through a doorway marked, “Restrooms,” while Hemsley removed his wallet from one of his pockets in order to pay the bill. He handed his credit card to the short, baldheaded cashier, who was a man in his sixties with rough skin, a box mustache, and sharp, steely eyes.

“Credit or debit?” curtly said the man.

“Credit.”

The man took the card, swiped it in the machine, entered some figures, and gave Hemsley a pen and a slip of paper to sign. Adding a tip, the customer signed the paper and returned it to the cashier. Laying the pen on the counter, Hemsley observed the man’s alternating glances between his signatures on the paper and on the back of his credit card. Next, those cold, steely eyes scrutinizingly stared at Hemsley, then returned to the card’s signature, then to Hemsley again, and then once more to the card, as if a signature could be verified in a patron’s physical countenance. Finally, the man handed Hemsley his credit card with the receipt, but he said nothing.

“Thank you,” stoutly declared Hemsley, as he replaced the card in his wallet and tersely departed.

Outside, Hemsley felt a brisk iciness in the light wind. It was very damp and penetrated through one’s clothing. The sky was overcast. Next to a side door near the rear of the diner, stood their waitress. She was bundled in an army jacket and had its collar turned upward to protect her neck from the chill. One arm was wrapped tightly across her waist to hold the unfastened jacket closed, while the other hand held a cigarette to her mouth. She seemed to be shivering.

When Kathryn and Jéanne had exited the eating establishment, they quickly crossed the parking lot and got into their car. It was a used, four-year-old compact car, which had been purchased two months earlier expressly for the purpose of living in rural, central Pennsylvania. In New York City, they did not need a car. Public transportation was ample, giving one freedom from the burdens of driving and from unexpected repairs, parking, and other costs. Sitting comfortably in the driver's seat, Hemsley closed the door and started the engine. Slowly he entered the roadway, and they progressed along the woods in the direction toward the land of paintball, leaving the cornfield to the crows and the diner to the owners of the monster pickup trucks which crowded its front.

Chapter 2: The Ride

The trip from the diner to the family's new home would not exceed forty-five minutes. After advancing a few miles, the sign indicating the turn to paintball was approached. If they noticed it at all, no one made any comment. Each one was absorbed in private worlds of internal reveries.

On the back seat, Jéanne leaned into the corner, her head resting on a small pillow propped against the window. She was trapped between the trepidation of finding a new life and the anxiety of losing a familiar one. Gently stroking a comforting plush rabbit, occasionally rubbing its soft furry hairs between her thumb and fingers, she wondered if she would be able to make new friends, while sorely missing her old ones.

Occupying the front passenger seat with her head turned downward, Kathryn looked out the side window and watched the loose stones on the highway shoulder pass in monotonous, unfocused linear rhythm. She had her own cluster of mental ramblings. She was returning home, that place which holds fond memories of childhood, in which time and distance embellish its luminous moments while shadowing its torments. Occasionally Kathryn raised her head, yet she hardly saw the trees, fields, and fence lines swiftly passing. She wondered about reacquainting herself with former familiarities. Could she readjust to a simpler, rural life without the variety of activities which she had experienced in over a quarter of a century of travel and urban life? Would she find the people whom she had known long ago changed? Moreover, she worried about how she might be perceived. Would they find her changed? Seasoned with what they called "worldly experience," Kathryn was troubled that she may not be accepted now. To fortify herself against negative thoughts, she

concentrated on the idea that she must make them like her as they had done during her youth. She must show them that she has always remained what was in essence “the good little girl next door.” She believed that they had to remember her as smiling little Kathryn Myerhorn, who would walk down the street on a warm summer day in a pretty, plaid, cotton print dress with her best girlfriend, eating ice cream cones and saying “hello” to everyone. “Hi, Mrs. Hoffer.” “Nice day today, isn’t it, Mr. Brock?” “Hello, Miss Friedman.” “How are you, Mrs. Kershner?”

They had to remember her as the girl who joyfully played the clarinet in the high school marching band, and as the good but average student who was never showy, yet voted “most helpful” by teachers and everyone. If some boys had happened to call her a “teachers’ pet” or had made other fun of her, it had never really mattered. Within her circle of girlfriends, the boys had been mocked quietly in turn, while each young maiden had secretly yearned that one of them, Tom or Luther or Georgie or some other appealing young fellow, might eventually take notice. After all, she was not and never could be one of the twenty-five percent of the girls in her class who had become pregnant before graduation. Certainly, everyone would recall that she had always been the first to raise her hand in Sunday School class, that she had the most gold stars for Bible verse memorization as a child, and that in her teens she had belonged to various evangelical youth organizations. Certainly, they had to remember all of that in Canaan Corners. Kathryn simply knew that she would be liked again in the same old way. She resolved not to expose any acquired knowledge and interests that may contradict their beliefs and values. She would reserve these pleasures for the privacy of her home, like a fat lady might hide an addiction to chocolates.

Such thoughts passed through Kathryn’s mind with the rapidity of an unstoppable freight train running at breakneck speed. Her mind

jumped from subject to subject, from thought to thought, without coordinated sequence nor lingering concentration. While these notions merged into rambling chaos, one thought was not allowed entrance into her mind. Kathryn refused to think about the disruption and upheaval to the lives and aspirations of each individual member of her immediate family, that is to her husband and to her daughter. She did not think about the sudden derailment of all that they had planned and labored to build for themselves. This abrupt alteration to their very existence had left the three of them travelling down a new road without purpose, void of direction, and lacking confidence in any future.

Kathryn herself was the explanation for this exodus. The development of every facet of America into mass corporations had directly assaulted her. She had been working as the coordinator of exhibitions in the art gallery of a large university, where she had assisted in all aspects of choosing, organizing, and presenting exhibits. She had enjoyed her liaison with exhibitors and the staffs of loaning institutions. She had loved her job and thought that she had provided a service to a society in need of pleasurable, creative enlightenment.

Then the foundations of academia at her university were shaken. Unbridled corporate capitalism, which had brought economic recession, environmental attack, and inequitable monetary distribution in its wake, came to roost at all levels of education and in every institution of learning. It had begun to personally affect Kathryn at her university three years ago, but the process had actually started earlier, gradually, and unnoticed with ever increasing corporate funding. It had turned scientific learning, experiment, and discovery of pure knowledge into the concentration of research for new products, solely for the purpose of multiplying corporate profits. As corporate money and power materialized on campus, top personnel were terminated with monetary severances of silence. The pillars of academia, who had worked their way upward to positions of leadership for the

continuance and advancement of learning, were replaced by Chief Executive Officers from the bastions of America's multinational business conglomerations. Without experience in educational development nor interest in nurturing critical thinking, they were placed to transform the university into a smoothly run, profitable, corporate entity in the service of stock market enterprises. Practical science replaced pure science. Budgets for the liberal arts and humanities were decreased, and their studies became degraded as useless. Courses and degrees in business administration burgeoned. Studies which were once the domain of technical and trade schools became legitimized by university degrees. Within the various academic disciplines, the philosophy of education, of epistemology itself, was rewritten to suit the world of the regimented, global, corporate state of the future. Professors of conscience with social concerns were placed in fear of their livelihoods or quietly released.

This crushing annihilation ensued down the employment chain. If employees thought differently or were unwilling to work longer hours for less pay, they were replaced by workers willing to serve the new order. Sometimes positions were simply eliminated as cost cutting decisions. Often dismissals were done subtly by attrition over a period of time, so as not to attract public attention. Years earlier, these practices had initially begun throughout the land in all areas of employment and economic activity. They had been done to lone individuals and separate groups without notice or concern by those who were not directly affected. Finally, the lean, mechanical automation of procedures and the reduced status of people as human beings in the workplace had reached everywhere, including universities and colleges, with the new knowledge that all individuals and all of society had become diminished, dehumanized, and dishonored.

It came to Kathryn in a not uncommon procedure. To corporate America, the university art gallery in which she worked was superfluous. It made no profit. It did not merit any effort to find a means in which to generate some small financial return. It was simply superfluous. It was to remain only in a skeletal form as a symbol to be used for positive image marketing. Massive cuts were to be made to collection purchases, exhibitions, facilities, and staff. Some artwork was to be sold, while others were to be summarily appropriated for the personal, private pleasures of the new executives. Instead of clearing gallery staff with layoffs, where workers might receive government assistance while seeking other employment, the new corporate management preferred coercible voluntary departure, followed by a declaration of redundancy of the former positions. Where applicable, encouragement for early retirement was the cleanest method.

Like many in Kathryn's situation, resignations were pressured by harassment. It began by increasing workloads. It was supplemented by various restrictions, accompanied with painstaking observations of each employee's work habits, moments of arrival and departure, and the precise length of time taken during one's designated breaks. The slightest infringement was reprimanded. Workload was further increased until the most disciplined person failed at its completion. Working in fear of job loss, the employee toiled at relentless speed, taking shortcuts, neglecting verifications, and abandoning standard procedures. Mistakes began multiplying. More work was added. Inflated reprimands increased. False accusations flowed. Exaggerated job reviews were written with detrimental misrepresentation. From closed door meetings of harassment, men emerged angry and shaken, while women fled in tears.

Kathryn recalled one of these meetings in which her supervisor suggested, "You can always work more hours."

"Are you authorizing overtime?" asked Kathryn.

“No. Working extra hours would be your decision. It would be your decision alone.”

“Are you asking me to work more hours without pay?”

“Overtime is no longer in the budget.” Then the supervisor continued in a much slower and more deliberate tone, “It would have to be your decision. Yours alone. Do you understand?”

“Isn’t it against the law?”

“No, because I am not asking you to work overtime,” cautiously replied the supervisor. “I’m just asking you to get your work done. On time.”

Kathryn sat motionless, as her supervisor reached into her desk drawer and took out a manila folder. Handing it to Kathryn, she said, “This is a report which I need done right away.”

“But... But... But first I have to finish...” was Kathryn’s broken reply.

Interrupting, the supervisor insisted, “I want it before noon tomorrow. Along with your other work.”

“But...”

“That will be all.”

Silently Kathryn rose and moved toward the door. Her supervisor beckoned, “Before you go, I have one more thought.” Kathryn turned and watched her supervisor lean comfortably back in her chair. With a mockingly cruel smile of satisfaction, she firmly added, “You know, you have to do what you have to do to keep your job.”

Kathryn quickly opened the door and flew to the ladies’ restroom. She wept. To keep her job was of the utmost importance. On the other hand, she knew that working without pay on this report tonight would not preserve her job. She had seen how others had been handled before her. To surrender to free labor would show submissive fear, gleefully giving license to management for a further increase of demands for more work, until the victim broke with a decision of job resignation.

The harassment procedure against employees is designed to emotionally destroy them. It is an excessively cruel process, designed to reduce staff without honoring entitled benefits like unemployment insurance. It breaks one's will. It is a form of torture. It is torture. Torture has become a sport in which America has come to excel. Why do they do it? Do they enjoy it? Is it the power? Is there a unique sadistic nature that constitutes part of the American psyche? Look at Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq. What about reports and rumors of other prisons on land and sea maintained or guided by Americans? Was it not Americans who wrote manuals on modern torture techniques, misleadingly called "enhanced interrogation?" Look at Guantanamo. Look at the brutal detention prisons for migrants and helpless seekers of asylum within the national borders. Look into the very heart of America.

Pondering the pros and cons of working unpaid overtime, Kathryn thought about principles of right and wrong. In addition to the obvious, pragmatic choices to be made concerning her personal position, she was burdened with questions of moral integrity. An action is determined as morally correct or inappropriate by one's conscience, guided by reason, often with examples of good deeds previously recorded or remembered. Emotionally upset, Kathryn dried her eyes, left the restroom, and began walking toward her desk with a decision to make. As she approached, she found her supervisor standing outside her office door and surrounded by Kathryn's co-workers. Kathryn joined the group.

"Now that we are all here," remarked the supervisor firmly, "I have a small reminder to pass on to everyone. It is the departmental policy that lunch and the two ten-minute breaks are the only times designated for bathroom visits." Staring very deliberately at Kathryn, she added, "Don't make me have to remind anyone of this in my office." She wheeled around, entered her office, and closed the door.

Everyone returned to work without speaking. Harassment in the workplace creates fear of management among the employees, as well as individual tensions between co-workers. It deteriorates family relations at home. If these workers felt like peons under their supervisor, this overseer was herself merely a minion of her own manager, and he in turn of higher management until the upper echelons are reached. It is among these higher regions where the “one percent,” as termed by the “Occupy” movement, or rather the top five percent or so reside. This situation represents the anxious and competitive class structure of current society.

Half an hour prior to quitting time, the supervisor left her office for home. All of Kathryn’s co-workers remained until the designated departure time, except two who stayed longer without pay. Kathryn left with the others.

A week later, Kathryn was sitting at her desk feeling tremendous pressure to complete another project. She was very tense. She paused. Suddenly her mind became blank. She stared into space. She became numb. Her arms and her limbs felt very heavy, and she could not move or lift them, as if in a state of paralysis. She began whimpering, then crying. She simply sat crying without movement. A co-worker noticed. Hemsley was called, arrived, and took Kathryn home. The next day she saw her doctor, who referred her to a psychiatrist. She was tested and told that she had had a minor breakdown. Seeing the psychiatrist and a psychologist, she was off work until her long-term disability expired eighteen weeks later.

During this time, a lawyer specializing in labor relations was consulted. Hemsley and Kathryn were informed that situations similar to their own were growing common. “In the end, you cannot win,” said the attorney. “Even should you initially win, they will appeal and appeal the case until you finally run out of money. They will money

you to death, until you're broke and have to quit. You will lose everything you own, so that in the end, they always win."

Defeated, but recovered with the aid of her disability absence, Kathryn decided to return to the job which she loved. At first, she was treated civilly and was not harassed. After two months, it began again. Both the psychiatrist and the psychologist had warned her that she should quit her job and find another one, because the harassment would start again, and the next breakdown could be complete, leaving her dysfunctional to some degree for life. This time her deterioration was quicker. She would come home crying, then screaming and threatening suicide. Hemsley was at his wits' end. After nearly three years, starting at the beginning of this harassment process and continuing through the almost four months following Kathryn's eighteen-week disability leave, the couple were arguing often, and their long, close, special relationship was showing cracks.

One day Kathryn tore her eyes wide open and shouted at her husband in a rage, "I'm going to walk off. I'm going to quit. Then, you'll see. I'm going to run away. Then, see what you do."

Frightened, Hemsley strove to console her. She calmed. It was Hemsley who was now in a panic. What was he to do? Something had to be done quickly to avoid another breakdown, perhaps a permanent one. He knew that his wife had to leave the university. Being self-employed in the arts, Hemsley's income was small and sporadic. Under those circumstances, they could not afford to remain in the city or its environs with their high rental costs. A rural area would be cheaper. By a speedy process of elimination, Hemsley reluctantly decided to relocate to Kathryn's birthplace in central Pennsylvania. It would be less expensive, and they would have the presence of relatives while they worked to reestablish their lives. In that rural locale, their small savings would be sufficient for a down payment on a little house.

Leaving J anne with friends, Hemsley and Kathryn embarked on a five-day trip to Canaan Corners, where they found a suitable house. Now, two months later, the Nicholsons were in transit for their final settlement in a new home.

Five minutes after leaving the diner, a light rain began falling. Hemsley turned on the windshield wipers intermittently, which added to the dreary monotony. Unlike the anxious but hopeful thoughts of his travelling companions, Hemsley was plagued by an intuitive sensation of heavy foreboding. It bore down upon him. It was not a feeling of melancholy, which can sometimes have a sweet sense, but was a shadowy oppression of deep apprehension. It had first occurred during the second viewing of the house, when a strong voice within him kept repeating, "Don't do this, Hemsley. Do not do this. You will lose everything." It was so clear and came so naturally and strongly that it had made Hemsley tremble. This thought, this feeling of foreboding, had come upon him every time in which he had entered the house between that first premonition and the present moment. It had haunted him when he was there alone for two weeks making final preparations and repairs prior to their moving date. It accompanied him now. Watching the rhythm of the wipers upon the windshield, he tried to change his thoughts. His mind carried him to reminiscences of happier times.

Hemsley recalled an especial episode when he had been in a full state of dreamy ecstasy. He saw himself slowly strolling along a garden pathway. The late afternoon sun was approaching the evening hours. The air seemed filled with mystical intoxication, as if he had partaken of Isolde's potion. He was in the Boboli Gardens. Between the deep, shadowy, verdant green trees, a wide clearance opened upon a vista both spectacular and serene. Before him lay Florence, the cradle of the Renaissance. Below him in the foreground flowed the gentle Arno River, whose occasional spring rages could throw tumult within

this pearl of civilization and threaten in a single sweep that which centuries have built. Stretching over the river at Hemsley's left was the Ponte Vecchio with its sandy, raw sienna-toned shops, which seemed to be balanced in a delicate suspension along its sides. It was a conglomeration of asymmetrical chaos turned into an unusually unique unity. The Ponte Vecchio is the last remaining bridge of its kind over the Arno. The others had been intentionally destroyed by the Nazis during the last World War. How frail is the grace of ardent beauty when it can be dispatched instantaneously by clamorous destruction?

On the opposite bank of the Arno and at Hemsley's right stretched the galleries of the Uffizi. In the center of this vista, surrounded by a field of rust-colored, burnt sienna tile roofs, there rose in the glistening of the slanting sunrays of the waning day Santa Maria del Fiore. She was crowned by Brunelleschi's marvelous dome and accompanied by the gleaming marble of Giotto's slender bell tower. Standing at his position along the garden wall on the high promontory which was occupied by the Palazzo Pitti, Hemsley detected the Church of San Lorenzo with its Medici Chapel, where Michelangelo's exquisite sculptures stirred souls through the ages. He observed the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio and other significant landmarks of this little city, which has seen little change or size variation during the last two centuries. In the distance spread the Tuscan Hills. They were canopied under the clear, cloudless, Italian blue sky, that covered, what was for Hemsley, a living museum. Through its narrow streets had walked Michelangelo, Botticelli, Dante, and Amerigo Vespucci. Here had worked Alberti, Leonardo, Vasari, and Pico della Mirandola. It had been home to the Medici, the Plato Academy, Marsilio Ficino, and Vittoria Colonna. Ghibellines and Guelphs had plotted and fought. While musicians played, Savonarola had raged with demonic visions

and deeds of despoliation. In the midst of adamant beauty and creative activity, there always lurk the seeds of madness and destruction.

Although aware of the existence of these unceasingly competing forces, Hemsley had now become bathed in the exaltation of the hundreds of creative individuals who had once miraculously appeared within this small urban cradle. Refreshed by the scene which stood before his gaze, he noticed the figure of a woman intrude upon his peripheral vision. She stood to his right and slightly forward, not more than a dozen paces away. Like one seeks the first daffodils of spring, Hemsley's attention could not resist watching her form. He felt helplessly light, yet invigoratingly excited. She was crowned with a straw-colored hat, having a wide, floppy brim and a gauzy, robin's-egg blue band that trailed down her back and caught ever so slightly the delicate breeze which wispied across the Florentine elevation. Under it cascaded waving, curling locks of light brown tresses of hair with reddish overtones, that were highlighted golden by the rays of the declining sun. Hemsley's knees weakened with a melting sensation. Under her delicate summer sundress, the woman possessed a solid, sturdy form within good Grecian proportions. Her sandaled feet inched nearer to him. After she had approached within three feet of Hemsley, she stopped. He felt his heart quicken its pace. She seemed to calmly explore the distant landscape before them in the same manner which had occupied Hemsley before her arrival. He could not withdraw his sideward glance from her. She took a deep breath of the Tuscan air and slowly, deliberately exhaled. Hemsley felt momentary relief caused by that breath, as Prometheus may have experienced upon becoming unchained.

With her back to him, she mysteriously remarked, "It's a wonderful view." Hemsley was stunned with silence and internal quavering. Slowly turning toward him, she added, "Don't you think so?"

Her oval face with its rounded, slightly sloping forehead was of fair complexion. She had a straight but delicately formed nose and perfectly shaped full lips. The cheekbones, jaw line, and chin revealed firmness and confidence of character. Praxiteles could have carved none better. Her kind, smiling eyes observed him. They were predominately green, and as Hemsley looked into them, he would have sworn that they were the brightest of gleaming crystal gems.

“Yes...,” fumbled Hemsley. “Yes, it is a wonderful view.”

After a pause that seemed an eternity to each, she turned to observe the scene once more. Recovering his composure, Hemsley elaborated, “It’s especially wonderful at this time of day.” Awkwardly continuing, he added, “I mean with the raking sunlight of early evening.”

“Yes, it’s such a soft light.” Turning toward him again, she continued, “I read that DaVinci made comment of the effect.”

“I’ve read it. He talked about the glow, that glorious glow of evening.”

Both returned their glance to the view of Florence. After a few moments, she turned and looked into his face with curiosity and cautiously exclaimed, “Actually, I saw you in the Palatine Gallery a little while ago. You were looking at paintings so closely. I watched you studying Raphael’s *La donna Velata*.”

“Yes, it’s a lovely painting. I was paying particular attention to the drapery in it, the complex folds, the lines, their subtle shading. But overall,” he added, “it was his *Madonna of the Chair* which really captivated me.”

“I liked that one too,” she said. “I liked the way he fit his composition into the circular format of the frame.”

“Yes, the curvature of the upper torso, the bend of the forearm locking the composition in place.”

“The balance of the child completing the circle,” she enthusiastically added.

“The twist of the head looking over the shoulder.”

“With that expression!”

“As if the viewer were intruding.”

“And the coloring,” interjected the woman.

“The brushwork,” said Hemsley.

“The complimentary stripes...”

“Around the sleeve.”

“Yes.”

“How did he do it?”

“Yes. Marvelous.”

“Exhilarating.”

“Oh...” She stopped. They stared at each other. Their excitement quelled. The punctuated pizzicato of their dialogue ceased. They looked at one another and began to laugh. It was the laugh of serene jollity, of complete surrender to the pure happiness of the moment, uninhibited by any intrusion. It was unadulterated joy at its zenith, like the bliss of souls in Elysium or like the gods on Olympus during a fête.

Their laughing subsided. Their eyes inquisitively looked into those of the other, their hearts beat with admiration, and a sense of serenity flowed through their veins. They were oblivious to all around them. Art had brought them together, as if preordained by the Muses.

Then suddenly, Hemsley’s thoughts returned to the present moment. He looked at Kathryn sitting sadly silent in the car. He reached across and gently placed his hand upon her knee. She looked at him lovingly, but neither spoke. The rain had stopped. Getting nearer and nearer to Canaan Corners, each of them returned to their own thoughts.

Hemsley continued thinking of that memorable day at the Pitti Palace, and especially of the girl whom he had met in its Boboli Gardens. He recalled that moment of exhilaration after their laughing

had calmed. He remembered the conversation resuming with her question, "Have you been to Urbino yet?"

"No, I haven't," replied Hemsley. "Eventually I would like to."

"It's quite wonderful," she remarked. "To walk through the palace where the young Raphael first trained to be a painter touched me. It's so...so...so overwhelming. One can just imagine the sparkling court life there." After a pause, she asked, "Have you ever read Castiglione?"

"*The Courtier*? Yes, of course," said Hemsley. "What an ideal world of refinement and searching for knowledge which he presents. What if one could create such a world now? A little enclave of security and beauty."

"A place of well-being," agreed his companion. "A place where one could live and study uninterrupted by the outside world."

"Isolated from ugliness."

"Surrounded by beauty," she added. "By art, by literature, by music, by grace and courtesy."

Hemsley reflected. Then he spoke thoughtfully, "One might have such yearnings, but I fear that there might be a selfishness in it. There would remain outside a world denied, dreary, and dangerous. It would always threaten one's tranquility."

"But if one could share it. If one could bring the beauty of one's created world to others, one might change the world."

"Change it through art?" was Hemsley's comment.

"Yes," she replied.

"Certainly it's the artistic ideal. To replace ugliness with beauty. To exchange ignorance for truth."

"To make a better world."

"To create a small world like Castiglioni's, but spread it, modernize it, throughout all of society," said Hemsley with rising enthusiasm. "However," he objectively added, "it's something they

did not do, did not attempt at Urbino. They did not make an effort to spread it outward.”

“But their times constrained them to a life in an isolated aristocratic world of expected privilege,” explained the young woman. “Ours is a world of democratic ideals, where such goodness can and should be shared. It should be expanded to all. It had been the ideal of Jefferson, the third president, and...”

Youth is always filled with grand and good intentions, all appearing to lie within the realm of possibility and of certain successful reality. For a little longer, their conversation continued with similar matters in the light of that glorious glow of the ebbing evening sun in the enchanting Boboli Gardens. They, themselves, were completely bewitched by the evening, the place, and each other’s company.

Again, they paused to gaze upon the romantic view of the Renaissance cradle, when Hemsley suggested, “Would you like to go somewhere for a drink and further conversation?”

Suddenly startled to her senses, she abruptly replied, like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, “Oh. Oh, I’m going to be late. I have to run. I’m meeting someone for dinner. Good-bye. I’m sorry. I really enjoyed talking with you. Good-bye. I have to run.”

Stunned, Hemsley watched her reel around and run toward the palace to seek an exit. As she departed, she turned and shouted, “It was really nice meeting you,” and then she quickly fled.

Unable to move, Hemsley stood alone. He looked at the gardens, the view of the city, and the palace. Then he began to walk. Oblivious of his direction, he walked for hours through the narrow streets of Florence, not remembering where he had been and unaware of where he was going. All that Hemsley could remember was the girl, her hair in the evening sunlight, her face, her eyes, her smile, her voice. All that he could think was a delirium of unanswered questions. “Who was

she? Was she real? Did it actually happen?” He did not know her name nor she his. He did not know from where she came. He did not know where she was staying. Worst of all, he did not know who she was meeting. Was it a lover? A husband? A boyfriend? These thoughts gripped him with anguish. He tore through the dark streets, clinging to shadows whenever he entered any piazza. He began to doubt the reality of her existence. Was madness overtaking his rationality? Was he becoming delusional? Hours later, full of fear, he aimlessly arrived at the pension where he was staying. He mindlessly climbed the stairs, entered his room, and threw himself upon the bed without undressing. He was as dysfunctional and uncoordinated as one in the final clutches of a drunken stupor before collapse. Exhausted, he fell into a distressful and tormented sleep. In the morning, he would awake, but in what condition would the bright sunlight find him?

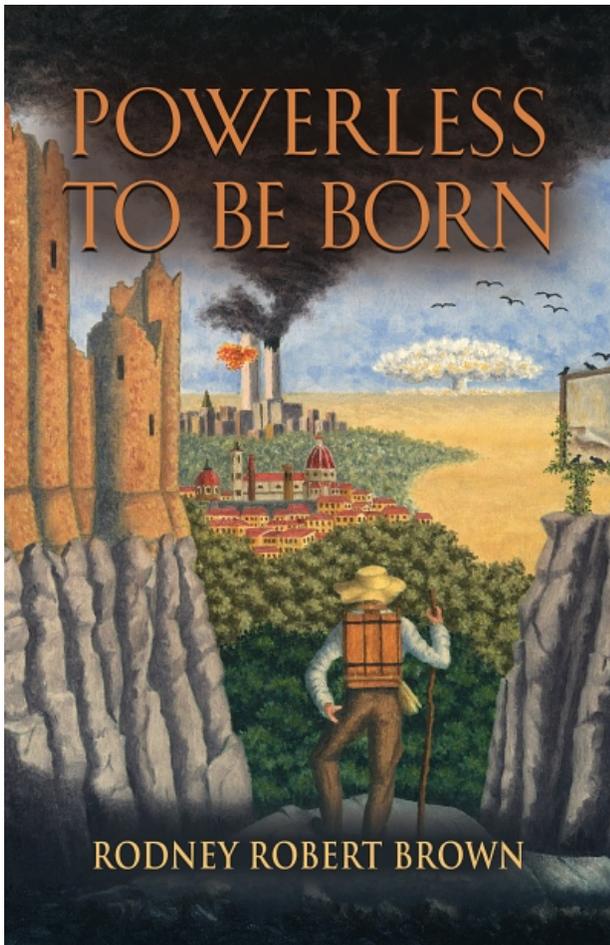
Now arriving in Canaan Corners, Hemsley’s thoughts were jolted into a return to his current circumstance. He drove their automobile onto the driveway of their new house. He turned off the engine and got out of the car. Unlocking and pulling the garage door upward, he was conscious of the empty, quiet street. He watched Kathryn and Jeanne exit the vehicle.

Jeanne asked her mother, “Can I go around to the backyard?”

Feeling the safety of her wholesome hometown, the mother replied, “Yes.”

Kathryn entered the garage, where Hemsley was waiting for her to cross with him through the connecting breezeway and over the threshold of their new home. She paused before him. Without speaking a word, Hemsley took her in one of his arms. Drawing her close, two of his fingers gently stroked her across the forehead, down the side of her cheek, and around her mouth. He looked lovingly into her eyes. She responded by grasping him tightly. Laying her head upon his shoulder, she softly spoke, “It will be alright, Hemmy. You’ll see.”

At that moment, J anne came running around the house and into the garage. Breathless and excited, she exclaimed, “Dad, Dad, there’s a man in the backyard. He’s looking in the windows.”



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