

The bending words

“Don’t worry, nothing will happen” – Madame Blotsky

by Tom Portegys

To this day I haven’t a full grasp on things. But I have some beliefs. One of which is where this story begins. Another is that I had a hand in how it ends. I could be wrong. I’m not sure what exists anymore, including me. One thing for sure: words have power. That’s a nice platitude, isn’t it? A warm fuzzy rah-rah sort of thing which is also to say it rings as hollow as an empty oil drum. But I’m talking about actual power, as in words that conjure and bring forth, if you follow certain theologies. For I am now sure that remnants of that power have been echoing down through the ages in various forms and guises.

It was summer and just a bit more humid than these parts are accustomed to. I do remember the sky was very high that day. Traffic along the valley road a block away hummed lazily like torpid bees. The Traveler came from the direction of the road, around the corner of the take-out pizza place next door, bearing toward the few of us braving the heat under the shade of bleached green umbrellas in front of Starbucks.

I called her the Traveler because she had the look of one. Backpack, worn but sturdy shoes, brown hair pulled back from a tanned sweaty face, sun-squinty eyes surrounded by spider-web lines, road dust clinging to her. That sort of thing. Maybe a little past forty, which was unusual for the drifter life.

Humping around is more of a young person’s game. In she went and out she came with a water, unsurprisingly. If she was going to throw five dollars at something it would probably be something more substantial than a coffee concoction.

I don’t usually strike up conversations but I am easily intrigued. Most of the time we talked she remained standing while I sat. The weather must have been paid its due of small talk I suppose. Always a good icebreaker. She was friendly and fairly outgoing, although I sensed an inner pressure to unburden

that is not uncommon in folks who wander off the Yellow Brick Road. But she could also listen, which is not all that common for the unburdening type. In hindsight I should have gotten her name, but what purpose would be served by that? Then she got to her story. There's a queasy feeling when someone you don't know goes on a mind-bending conversation. After all, she's got the high ground. Hah, just caught that: mind-bending. Not funny in the least, as you will see. But you can't always curtail someone from telling their story based on a suspicion that grew with each word. Like the proverbial frog in water that slowly comes to boil, by the time you know what's going on it is too late.

She was indeed traveling, and had been doing so for a very long time. Actually, surprisingly long. Could have been decades. Mostly on foot, or bus, or hitching rides despite the present-day frowning upon the latter. For me, twisted or atonal things get staked in the cerebral cortex. And this was one of them, like when my dad scooped up a bunch of wasps in his cap and plopped it back on his head to show us how he "wasn't afraid of 'em". I do remember that well!

When she was a young teen, maybe thirteen or so, she had an arm injury playing sports and her mother took her to the doctor. It wasn't even that serious, a mildly hyperextended elbow. So she's sitting there on the examining table with her mother nearby and as the doctor is leaving the room he says something about a hole in her chest. That's it. Said it and left. Didn't even look at her when he said it. At the time, she didn't think anything of it either. Apparently it wasn't a great matter to the doctor. When she got home a quick check of course revealed no hole.

Life proceeded as it will. Days, weeks, years. Those few little words must have been drifting down and down into the dark depths where memories die. But these words didn't die. They urped up bubbles now and again into consciousness. How does a 'meh' become a concern become a worry become an obsession? For that is what transpired. But it took years to gestate.

By her later teens, the hole had become a lodestar, demanding answers, and soon putting her on a quest for them. What was this hole? What is its significance? Since no physical hole exists, is there some spiritual or supernatural meaning? Her mother was no help, having graduated from cluelessness to avoidance to futile pleadings to desist. They had moved away and she didn't remember who the doctor was nor how to find him. She saw her mother's recalcitrance as a form of betrayal, a deep cut that only a parent can inflict. And so, when she reached late teens, she began a quest to find the doctor or to discover the meaning of what he had said.

At this point I noticed that my brother Rhys had unobtrusively joined us at the table. I nodded to him as he quietly motioned us to carry on.

Early on, there were seemingly solid leads, medical offices located in likely locales, registers of physicians, people who thought they could remember someone of the doctor's general description. It didn't help that he was the essence of a bland-looking, middle-aged, gray-haired male. In time, the leads became flimsier until now they were almost whimsical. After so many years, he might now be retired and living in Arizona for all she knew. And so she would gravitate here and there around the country on no more than a few words from a well-meaning person on the other end of a cold call for information. Now in particular she was headed to the prison some miles north to pry for information.

The possible symbolism of a hole in the chest was not lost on her. Some sort of figurative stigmata? A Cain-like marking of a blighted destiny? Yet, as with the location of the doctor, nothing emerged as a result of diligent research and pursuit of expert opinion. I'm sure the gamut of her speculations could not have been accurately reflected in her recitation to my brother and me. And indeed it was a recitation, smooth and flowing and mesmerizing. Of course, that could be put down to repetition.

The story struck me as either a joke or madness. Yet here was its author, affable and both feet on the ground, standing with the sun behind her head granting her a nimbus of authority. Oddly, as I recall, for

however long she spoke, the sun appeared not to move from behind her head. Well, time does play tricks when there's a worthy story in the telling. And then she bid us goodbye and was on her way north to the prison where someone might know something about the mysterious cavity in her chest.

A day later I had just demolished Emil at our weekly bowling rendezvous. Mostly due to him being well off his game. He slumped on the plastic bench after a particularly deflating 7-10 split, eyes pensively wandering on the ceiling as I tallied up.

"So have you run across a copy of the Necronomicon yet? I'd make you a fair offer." Emil said in a musing tone.

The fabled Necronomicon is a grimoire of dark magic, and by fabled I mean pure fiction. I have a modest book restoral business. It doesn't make much money but makes up for it in life satisfaction by feeding my fascination with obscure literature.

"No but I am well-stocked with Lovecraft." I said.

"I'm only asking for the public good. Seems our fair town might be displaced as safest place to live in the state with that brutal murder at the prison. A little resurrection spell and "poof", back to zero murders since last Tuesday!"

Emil is a freelance reporter for the local newspaper.

"What did you say? Murder at the prison? Who?" I asked in a decidedly non-musing tone.

"Ha! So current events *do* interest you! A prisoner killed a woman visitor just yesterday and then broke out. He broke her neck with his bare hands right in the visiting area. Witnesses say the guy was insanely strong and fast. Actually broke down a security door right off the hinges! Of course the hinges in that old place must have been forged by 19th century blacksmiths. And once he reaches the forest outside, he

vaporizes. I'm about to wangle a side bar story that everyone has overlooked. See I happen to know that the perp was the son of Madame Blavatsky, our very own channel to the stars."

I decided to overlook the Madame Blavatsky crack. Since she died in the 19th century and all. I knew who he was really talking about and didn't even have to guess who the dead woman was.

"I'm pretty sure I talked to the victim yesterday. She's was heading to the prison to talk to an inmate"

"Oh Lawdy that is juicy! Hey are you doing anything right now? I was heading to the prison this afternoon to pump the staff, but I think I'll bump that up on the agenda."

I was so in. "Absolutely!"

We left the alley by the side door and circled around to the parking lot in back. I didn't have my car as the place was just down the hill from my apartment. We piled into Emil's ageless Miata and pulled out on to the main drag through town heading north toward the prison. I got further filled in on the way. It was the Traveler. At the edge of town he swung up Cherry Road heading east, away from the prison.

"Uh, Emil?"

"I think we need to check in with the old lady first. See how she's doing. She lives just up at the top of the hill."

That's how I met "Madame Blavatsky".

"You stop calling me that! I am not Blavatsky! Read sign idiot!" she screamed, spitting at Emil's feet through the cracked door. So much for the grieving family member. An impressive number of reddened facial wrinkles upturned at Emil, a picture of bovine bemusement. Something he's so good at.

The name on the sign by the end of the driveway said Madame Blotsky, and advertised Tarot card readings. Emil told me she's Roma, but wants to be called a Gypsy. He said that she thinks, probably

rightly so, that people think Roma is a kind of tomato, and “Nobody come to get cards read by no tomato!”

Then she turns to me. Her eyes widen in shock, then squint, peering deeply. “Where is rest of you? You leave back at house?” Not exactly an easy question to answer. So I didn’t.

The sun was a hot hazy smear above the prison. A clacking air conditioner jutted out of the warden’s second floor corner office inside the squat limestone countenance of the prison. Within, behind a modest wooden desk amid an office appointed with institutional green carpet and oak veneer paneling, the warden bid his knocking visitor to enter.

The warden locked eyes on the proffered paper cup of coffee in the hand of the advancing correctional guard. “Gimme.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hot hot! No news yet from the search. Weird how Lenny could just vanish like that. I guess we can lift the lockdown now, don’t you agree?”

The guard nodded. “Right, I guess the horse is long gone from the barn.”

The warden continued, “You still look a little out of it. Seeing that must have really been a shock.”

The guard, who had been sitting in the guest chair, got up and went to the window. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around it. Mr. Minimum security small-time grifter Lenny Blotsky actually killed someone right in the visitor area. And I had a front row seat. You and I and the cops have been over the security camera footage, but I can tell you that doesn’t do it justice!”

“But the camera does show an frumpy guy in his forties having a lovely little chat with one of his schmucks about cosmic forces, dream-time totem animals or whatever dippty-do du jour, then suddenly

going ape-shit, snapping the woman's neck, darting out like the Flash, and ramming that heavy door down like it was a flimsy screen door." added the warden.

"She said something to him just before he went off, but nobody caught what it was, right?"

"Nope, that's the shame. Must have been something powerful though."

The guard sat down again. "By the time I got outside, he was just disappearing into the trees. No one saw him get over the fence."

"I'll be glad when this dies down, I can tell you. No one like attention in the correctional industry. Bad for business. Most of the media had its blood meal yesterday, but there's still some straggler coming this afternoon from the local paper."

The guard glanced at the clock on the desk. "I better be getting back to our distinguished clientele."

"OK, thanks for the coffee. Just wanted to see if anything crystallized in that dome of yours since yesterday."

The guard popped his head back in as he was closing the door. "She's still chilling down in the morgue?"

"Yep. She is awaiting the deputy coroner to come pick her up. No ID. Signed in as 'Calpurnia Caulfield', which didn't check out with the cops."

"You know there's another thing that really weirds me out. Not just the broken neck but that crater in her chest. How did that happen?"

The phone rang. The guard lingered hoping to catch some overheard news. The warden answered and hooked a finger at him.

“The reporter is here with a couple of other people. One of them is Lenny’s mother for shit sake. I’m assigning them to you since you’re the expert. Just give them the tour and herd them out of here before five, OK?”

The guard groaned ruefully. Why did I have to hang at the door? Curiosity killed the cat.

Surprisingly, Madame Blotsky did not know about her son’s escape after the lightning-like murder of the woman, who must have fallen for one of Lenny’s scams that he could help her on her quest. The old lady insisted on coming, but when they started out became grimly quiet, and the two men did not engage her on the trip to the prison.

Some things just scream functional and I can relate. The prison for example. I’ve been by the nondescript entrance many times. Turns out the inside is also nondescript. So there we were parking the Miata and extricating a black-clad living bag of sticks from behind the seats. Then we walked inside and signed in, Emil presenting a folded up printed email as a credential, and waited in plastic chairs for our guide. I glance surreptitiously at Madame Blotsky from time to time. She continued to be understandably subdued considering the situation. Her mouth was working away mumbling something I couldn’t catch.

After a requisite period of sensory deprivation, our guide cometh. He matched the bland décor perfectly. Seemed a bit put out though. Not solicitous but kid gloves with Madame so obviously he knows who she is. Bears up with Emil’s yakking. Ignores me.

The visitor’s room where the murder happened has nothing to add, but just being there had some sort of impact I think for all of us. The broken down door was back up and welded on its hinges. The guard was adamant about the door being sound before being broken down by Lenny. It looked OK to me. Then we got to see it being busted off its hinges by a human blur on the video recording right after a winsomely smiling Lenny, who must have thought he had one on the hook, did a presto-chango into a

snarling werewolf and did the deed. I couldn't look at that part. I just strained to listen to the muted conversation over and over between Lenny and the woman with whom I had had a very nice if slightly disturbing conversation the day before. Because of a creeping things-ain't-right feeling I almost convinced myself that the video fluttered a bit as in a bad horror movie just before Lenny went bonkers, but neither I nor anyone else was sure.

Then it was time to tramp down to the prison morgue to see the body. Oh joy. Was this even legal? Emil however never wavered. *The truth is out there* and must be rooted out and put before the rabble to gorge on. A crude concrete archway led down to the morgue. I was last going down single file. I noticed Madam Blotsky pulling something out from a pocket and holding it close in front of her.

The overhead lights were on as we entered a small sparse room, the guard shutting the door behind us. I expected to see a wall of stainless-steel drawers but instead the entire room was refrigerated to the point of being able to see our breath. There was a metal table in the middle of the room with a sheet covering the body. Nobody spoke as we gathered aside the table, two to each side. I was shaking a bit, and not just from the cold. Emil's eyes had gone wide and his lips ceased moving. Madame Blotsky's lips had resumed mumbling at a louder volume, hopefully mystical abjurations at this point.

The guard slid the sheet down to the top of her breasts. Her broken neck wasn't evident at all. I'm not an expert on death, but she actually just looked asleep. But there was the hole, right below her left collarbone, a cavity about one or two inches deep, just a smooth pink flesh indentation. I felt the world slipping a little sideways when I saw it. It was actually there. Emil got close and gawked at it for about ten seconds, then he raised his head quickly and said with a hitch in his voice that there was something glowing faintly in there!

It was the guard who switched off the lights without warning us, but in any case we could not have been prepared for what came next. In our combined breath vapor there was indeed a faint beam emanating

upward from the cavity. Emil turned his head up immediately but for some reason I turned to Madame Blotsky thinking that if there was mumbo-jumbo it would be her bailiwick. The rest of me got ready to run for the door. She had also turned her face to the ceiling but now there was a blackness boiling out of her eyes, blacker than the room's darkness, that flowed down and over the body before dissipating in the air like a negative version of our breath.

Then there was a loud crash.

Suddenly the lights were back on. Emil was lying against a wall, clutching his eyes. The guard was ordering us out, dragging Emil to his feet and pushing him through the door and up the stairs. We stumbled back to the waiting room. The guard, now with a worried look on his face wanted us gone right now. Madame Blotsky and I took Emil's elbows and helped him out and into the Miata. There he sat white faced and unresponsive to my "you OKs?" After ten minutes I decided to drive back to town.

Fifteen minutes on the road and Emil bellows, "It was moving! The words were moving on the ceiling!" I almost ran off the road. I did pull over and looked over at Emil. That's when Madame Blotsky bleated from behind me, "My poor boy! My poor poor boy!"

My name is Rhys. I showed up at the coffeehouse table and listened to the tale of the traveling woman while my brother sipped his coffee and nodded patronizingly. After the transformation and escape of Lenny Blotsky, and after the events in the prison morgue, I decided that it was vital to make an effort to find Lenny. It was like a compulsion. Police searches, dogs and all, had come up empty. And despite a police watch on Lenny's mother's house, he failed thus far to show there.

My brother wanted to go with me, saying that it was dangerous to go alone into the land around the prison, which is heavily forested and potted with bogs festooned with brambles. I, however, insisted on going alone. He was looking pale and tired. The past couple of days had taken a toll on him. He gave me a ride to the point I chose to start from, about a quarter of a mile from the prison. I told him to go get

Emil and hit up the bowling alley. I looked at him squarely and told him it was important, although I wasn't sure why.

An overnight rain was steaming up in the intensifying heat of morning. Sweat was soon soaking my shirt and running in rills down the sides of my face as I headed up a steep rocky incline and plunged into the tree cover. Once in the woods, I swiftly headed off on a route that I was increasingly confident would cross Lenny's path. I could hear my brother's car driving away behind me, and was glad that he wouldn't be witnessing much less interfering with what might later take place.

Lenny's track was a black shimmering thread with a metallic aroma, likely fading after two days. I never questioned why I was able to see it. It ran along the ground in a direction that I reckoned it might. I set out following it like a bloodhound. Once I slipped and stepped on the thread, and a howling agony rang out as though a hammer were striking the anvil of my mind. The creature must be mad if this is his condition. Fear then spurred me onward faster, despite fatigue and the sharp barbs of the undergrowth.

I came upon him crouching behind a tree at the top of a ridge overlooking his mother's house. I approached cautiously, listening to him mewling softly. Shirtless, he had bitten himself repeatedly and blood in various stages of coagulation stained his torso, limbs and mouth. To distract from the deeper pain within him? Possibly, but he had also traced out odd markings on his skin in blood whose meanings I did not understand.

I paused speechlessly, quite aware that he was aware of me. I was sure he had been waiting in this very spot for two days, and that I was expected. Slyly and slowly his head swiveled to face me. It was then that I became aware of myself juxtaposed before him. I was a child in the presence of a being welling up from unfathomable depths of time. A being not whole, and horribly unstable.

His leap was mercurial and his grip on my arm was iron. He did not speak and I was sure that nothing I could say would have deterred him. We both took the slope toward the house in bounds, as I seemingly

became imbued with some of his gargantuan strength. As though we were expected, the door of the house opened as we approached, Madame Blotsky appearing in the dim light within. I could not see her face, but her arms were outstretched and trembling.

“I read your article. Those darn electrical glitches. Are you sure you are OK?”

Emil and I had made it to the seventh frame. Many beers had been imbibed. Laci, vacuous goddess of the midday shift, continued to bring bottles and take away the empties.

“I’m OK enough after tripping on a wire and hitting my head on the wall after the power went out.”

“Emil”, I said softly, “there was no power outage and no wire on the floor.”

Emil ignored that. “For all I know I might still be concussed! Do my eyes look weird?” He leaned into my face, beer breath billowing around his head, eyes goggling to cartoon proportions.

“They look like perfectly drunken eyeballs”, I said, pulling back. “Soooo, I guess that’s your go-to for freaking out.”

“Concussions are nothing to sneeze at my friend,” said Emil, applying balled fists to restore his eyes to their sockets.

“What about Madame Blotsky? She seemed pretty distraught.”

“Such a shock! Just between you and me, I do have a soft spot for the old witch. That’s why I snuck a discreet call out for her fortune-telling business into the article.”

“Of course you did. Putting a link to her web page into an article about her son becoming a murderous monster was very tactful. And the limited-time promo-code of “Lenny” was a nice touch. Did you even talk to her about that?”

“She waved her OK from her doorway when we dropped her off.”

“I think she was shaking her fist, Emil. Anyway, I’m sure Lenny would approve. At least the Dr. Jekyll version of him. He is all about banking some coin.”

I was pretty wasted, and not just on the beer. Literally wasted. It was my turn to roll, which resulted in a dreaded 7-10 split.

When the ball returned I made to grab it but my fingers just slipped right through the surface into the ball a half inch or so.

“Hey Emil, check this out.” The fingertips of both hands were invisible. The ball had become semi-solid somehow.

Emil sat there, processing. Laci made an appearance, rolled her eyes and wandered away. Seconds ticked by.

“If you can pick it up just roll with both hands. Nobody is looking.”, Emil finally offered.

That’s what I did, rolling it like a five-year-old. And miraculously picked up the split. There was nothing wrong with the ball.

I stood looking down the length of the alley as the pins reset.

“Emil, I have to tell you something. I have to go now.”

“I somehow I knew you were going to say that. Where are you going?”

“No where and no when. I seem to be fading away. But don’t worry, I’m sure Rhys will want to bowl with you. He’s more like me than you know. Especially after I’m gone.”

“I’m going to miss you Emil.”

“I won’t forget you buddy.” Emil’s eyes had begun to glitter.

“I’m sorry Emil, but you already are.”

The last thing I saw was an inebriated Emil sitting at the scoring desk, forehead knitted with concentration, fighting against it.

Sometime later, Emil noticed drops of water on the scoresheet, which now recorded a single game. Cold beers really sweat in this humidity, he thought.

“How is our sleeping beauty today?”

“Hungry!”, she said, sitting up on the table.

The guard gaped and froze. The only sounds in the room were coming from the wasp nest on the ceiling.

She pointed at the nest. “Sorry about those. I must have been dreaming. Look, no hole!”, she said as the sheet fell away while she swiveled off of the table, nearly pitching forward into the wall.

“This can’t be. It’s not happening.”, said the guard, finally unfreezing.

“Please go get my clothes and some food. I’ve got to find that old woman who was here yesterday. Look at me. OK? And don’t tell anyone.”

In response, the guard fell to his knees and raised his arms, a rapt expression on his face.

“Well that is interesting. And flattering. But no. Get up and don’t do that again. Food and clothes, quick and on the sly.”

Her clothes had been taken as police evidence, but the guard managed to find a spare uniform and shoes. Also a half dozen toaster waffles heated up in the duty room microwave while fending off the inevitable lame jokes. He even took a bite from one on the way out the door to allay suspicion.

Within twenty minutes, the fortuitously chosen guard uniform proved its worth as they left the prison via the guard entrance carrying purloined prison van keys.

The guard let her drive, providing directions to Madame Blotsky's house. He sat facing her with a mixture of fear and adoration on his face.

"What did you say to Lenny?", he asked.

"I think it was something like, 'How's the food here?'. The interview was a dead end. I wasn't about to hawk 'indestructible' food storage containers for him. And of course he had no leads to my elusive Doctor. God what was I thinking all those years?"

"I'll tell you what though. I felt something immense coiling around Lenny, something dark and sleeping. I could feel it stirring while I spoke to him. But I could not focus on it. It was like nothing and everything at the same time."

"Suddenly it *spasmed*, and Lenny went off, just like that. I don't remember much except for his face changing and a blur coming at me. The next thing I was aware of was that woman, his mother, down there in the morgue. I heard her speaking. Felt her. She's like Lenny, she has the same entity around her, but she has it better under control."

"She somehow brought me back from wherever I was. It was that black stuff she spread over me, it comes from whatever Lenny and she are hooked into. I took it up like a sponge and used it to reconstruct myself. And I'm OK now. After Lenny killed me, that hole in my chest really finally appeared, the one that people thought I was crazy about, but now it's gone. And yet whatever was in that hole is still with me. I can feel it. And so can you I guess, right?"

The guard nodded.

As they approached on a gravel road through a remote wooded area, a queasy miasma overcame the guard. He suddenly blurted out, "Let me out here! Let me out! The house is just a little way ahead."

She watched him running back down the road in the rear-view mirror as she pulled away, and missed Rhys face-planting on the windshield.

He was OK. Just had the wind knocked out of him. She helped him get to his feet. When their eyes met there was instant recognition for both of them.

Rhys spoke first. "It got too crazy back there, I had to get out! It was like everything was breaking up and rearranging, including me! And I'm not talking about an earthquake or a storm. I was getting caught up in it, losing myself. It's Lenny, he's doing it."

"She's keeping it under control somehow. She must be very strong. But I don't think for long. I tried to talk to her but she mostly brushed me off, saying how she needed you! Something about you having the 'bending words' that caused Lenny to be this way but could also help Lenny from coming apart."

"You know what I'm talking about, don't you? About the 'bending words'?", he asked.

She calmly replied. "My world has been cracking apart for most of my life and only now has that burden lifted off of me. I should be terrified to go on, but I'm not."

Rhys, eyes wide, blurted out, "You *made* me didn't you? Spoke me into being back at the coffee shop. And nobody blinked an eye, including me."

"I didn't know until now how things like that could happen around me. Somehow just from talking about random stuff. It must be like some kind of infection. I got it from a doctor when I was a kid when he made some comment to me about the hole in me. Who knows what I've done since then."

Rhys added, "Apparently not me, although I think Lenny thought I had what you have when I tracked him down. He immediately grabbed me and hauled me into the house. He must be aware that he needs someone like you."

A look of understanding came across her face.

"I think when I spoke to Lenny at the prison it was like jabbing a sword into a sleeping dragon.

Something dangerous and ancient woke up and lashed out."

"I have to go there Rhys. Right now before it's too late. Even here I can feel the chaos building."

Rhys hesitated, then hugged her tightly.

"Take the van.", she said.

He slid behind the wheel and backed into the reverse direction, away from the house. Their eyes met one more time.

"Rhys, I don't know how, but you are growing more real by the minute. You will soon be as real as me or anyone. I can see that now. Don't forget that. If I've learned anything, it's that reality isn't cast in stone, and probably never has been."

It was mere steps to the house, which waited just beyond the next bend in the road at the top of a rise.

She approached the open door and entered. There was the sound of a TV nearby. She followed the sound into the kitchen, where Lenny sat shirtless eating soup and intently watching a cartoon. His mother was bending over the stove and spoke when she entered the room without turning toward her.

"He is calm now. Just for now. You get ready. You fix Lenny. You fix now or next time, 'boom' we all go back into darkness. Then no people, no stars, no nothing. Only chaos!"

Hearing this, she slid into a chair opposite Lenny, whose eyes were locked on the TV as Wile E. Coyote sent the Road Runner off a cliff to his demise. Watching that, her lips curled into a small smile. Then she clicked off the TV and reached for his arm.

Lenny stared down into his empty bowl. Black tears were filling his eyes and dripping into the bowl.

In an instant, the Void was born again.

The floor, walls, ceiling and sky were snatched away like sheets of crumpled paper. The Traveler knew that everything everywhere had fallen into an inchoate oblivion.

Except for the Word that faced the Void.

She felt herself flung back and away, expecting to meld into nothingness, but then a tether snapped taut, and as she came tumbling around she saw that it bound her to the Word, now off in the distance. She and it were bound.

Then, like a potter grasping clay, the Word spoke into the Void, and order came forth from chaos.

The Traveler became aware of her feet crunching in the gravel on the side of the road in the glare of a hot afternoon. Memory trailed in her wake and gradually caught up when she saw a few buildings ahead that she knew were the outcroppings of a town.

Rhys was sitting there in front of the Starbucks, sipping coffee with Emil. She quickly ducked back around a corner as not to be seen.

There was no brother there, nor would there ever be one in the new world that was much like the old one, yet different. And there were a few contributions of her own.

There in the heat, with sweat running down her back, she experienced a joy that would last the rest of her life and what would come after.

“I do think it’s time to go home.”, she said aloud.

“Wherever that is.”

Some days after the surprising ‘not guilty’ verdict for his latest legal misadventure, Lenny’s eyes roamed here and there over stacks of boxes labeled “Blotskyware” situated in a modest warehouse. His cadre of sales people were out daily scouring the towns nearby, peddling Lenny’s “indestructible” food storage containers. Lenny, always the entrepreneur, has unknowingly had a small role in Genesis.

Most weeks, he makes time to have supper with Madame Blotsky, at her insistence. Before they eat, he often watches cartoons, chuckling at the myriad ways the Coyote’s plans are foiled by the Road Runner.

She talks to him about a certain family legacy while they eat, and sometimes he even listens to her.