

# The Clearing at the End of the Path

The Incarnations of the Americas

Volume III



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Dedicated to the Nurses and Doctors at the University of Chicago Hospital and to my Wife. It's coming.

"There is more to our consciousness than we can imagine."

Consider Swift's "pamphlet war" with the astrologer Partridge, in which Swift claimed Partridge had died and Partridge vehemently insisted he was still alive. Swift won hands down by pointing out that just because a man claims he's alive- it doesn't necessarily mean he isn't lying.

Now is the moment of death. The time has come for you to start out. You are going home. Oh, Nobly Born, now is the moment. Before you is mind, open and wide as space, simple, without center or circumference. Now is the moment of death. Your mind in this moment is total transparency: No color, no substance, empty, sparkling, pure and vibrant, a mass of light not stopped by any obstacle. It has neither beginning nor end. Go toward the light. Merge with it. Merge with the light. Death has happened. It happens to everyone... Don't be afraid. Merge with the light. Merge. Merge.

-Tibetan Book of the Dead

**PART ONE**  
**ANGER**

## Chapter 1

Ben Ainsley looked down at his wife Molly's dead body. Her face was peaceful- the skin thin and drawn out from her two year battle with cancer. Her face no longer held the pain he'd seen there for so long; which was a relief- but a paltry one.

His eye's bleary with tears, Ben fell down to his knees next to their marriage bed. He leaned over and kissed his wife one last time on her lips, they were already turning cold. Tears fell off of Ben's face and onto Molly's, streaking the make-up she'd insisted he apply every morning.

"I want to look my best for you when I finally go." She would say.

She died at home the way she wished, that was a consolation too.

He wiped the tears carefully away before getting up and nodding to the four technicians waiting patiently in the back of the room.

Feeling more alone than he'd ever been in his life, Ben left the room so the techs could do their work. There were two men and two women. Their white lab coats were clean and adorned with the letters RI over the lapel in bold red letters. The two men worked to unload several powerful computers, while the women worked to set up a high volume satellite dish just outside the bedroom window. Using specially designed suction cups she fastened the tennis racquet sized satellite to the wall and flipped a small switch on the side. A green light let the technician know everything was operating correctly.

"We're clear here." She told the man now sitting behind one of the computer monitors.

"Check twice." The man said.

This was protocol. Time was a factor in their procedures and it was always better to check twice and do once. As requested all the necessary checks were remade.

"We're good." The woman affirmed.

Satisfied, the techs turned their attention to the deceased body of Molly Ainsley. From a medical bag the man took out a set of electric hair clippers and a sheet to collect the hair beneath Molly's head. He slid it under her and started shaving. There wasn't much to do- the chemo kept her bald until she stopped taking it three months earlier. When he was finished, the two women techs began drawing a grid over Molly's entire skull while the other guy prepared a series of electrodes.

Working with practiced precision they placed one electrode at each intersection of the grid until Molly's head was full head of red wires, it looked like she was wearing a clown wig. Once they'd double-checked everything was satisfactory, one of the women sat down at the small bank of computers and began running the downloading process. As the electrodes sent impulses through Molly's brain, her leg would occasionally jump or her hand would flex. The techs paid no attention- such things were normal.

The entire process only took ten minutes from start to finish. Once their task was done they moved quickly, repacking their equipment and making Molly look as comfortable as possible. When they were finished, they left an envelope containing the bill and a copy of Ben's contract on the dresser. They left discreetly. Ben, who was in the kitchen making himself a very stiff drink, didn't even hear them leave.

## Chapter 2

The day Molly died seemed to leech past Ben like sand through his fingers. He vaguely remembered going through the normal motions of a day off. He ate; he sat in front of the TV, watching with his eyes, but not his mind. He was deep inside his own head. Remembering Molly. Thinking about all of the good times they'd had.

He knew he was going to see her again, that made it easier.

Still, he was having a hard time accepting the idea that she would never again wake him up in the middle of the night to make love or laugh so hard milk came out of her nose. Instead of growing old together he would only be able to visit her, like she was living in a prison or a sanitarium.

Ben had an appointment to see Molly at his local headquarters of Reincarnation Industries at 10AM the next morning. A complimentary limo was scheduled to arrive and take him to his first visit as part of the package he'd purchased. It was a nice touch. The idea of driving in congested traffic after visiting Molly for the first time wasn't particularly appealing.

He didn't sleep much, maybe a few hours. He kept thinking he could hear her voice, calling for him to get her some water or help her to the bathroom. Those were just phantom memories, they weren't real. Molly was gone.

At 10 sharp Ben was standing in front of his window, watching for the limo's arrival. It showed up on time, beeping the horn as it pulled up to the curb. Ben walked down in a haze and before he knew it the towering edifice of Reincarnation Industries was towering into the sky directly in front of him.

For the first time Ben started to get a feeling of excitement stronger than his grief. He was almost able to smile walking into the lobby, a sparsely decorated modern space of black and brushed silver with large abstract paintings on the wall in bright reds and blues. A pretty receptionist sat behind an information desk, and a stark rectangular opening tucked into the corner housed the elevators.

The driver of the limo gave him a card with "5<sup>th</sup> Floor- Room 532" written on it. Ben walked to the elevators and waited for a car to arrive. Once he was on Ben hit the button marked 5 and waited patiently for the door to close. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor he was crying again, his mind and heart filled with so many emotions at once it was almost impossible to breathe. He leaned up against the wall and tried to compose himself. He was maybe half way to calm when the elevator doors opened. Another pretty receptionist sat behind a matte-black desk with a console and keyboard built in.

Ben handed the woman his card without a word. He was struggling, with only minimal success, to maintain some semblance of composure. The woman behind the desk, her nametag said her name was Alice, seemed oblivious to his distress. He supposed the employees of Reincarnation Industries saw people in all sorts of emotional states and had grown immune.

While not particularly compassionate, Alice was polite, friendly, and professional, just like the brochures said she would be. After requiring Ben to fill out seven different forms Alice led him down a long hallway to a room marked 532. Inside was a sparsely decorated room with a desk and an elaborate headset and gloves. Other rooms had full body suits, but Ben wasn't able to afford such fancy extras. Alice showed him to the chair and helped Ben put the helmet on his head and the gloves on his hands. The wires came together into a bundle and went through the floor. There they linked to a larger network inside a massive mainframe taking up the entire 15<sup>th</sup> floor of the building.

Feeling impatient and nervous Ben waited for Virtual Reality helmet to be activated. There was a soft beep in his left ear and suddenly he was standing in a hallway with a single door. Taking a deep breath Ben knocked.

### Chapter 3

Molly Ainsley burst back into consciousness like she'd been woken from a deep sleep by an ice-cold bucket of water. All at once she was awake. She knew she was alive, but she didn't yet know who she was. The computer was still processing the memories. Her sense of inhabiting a body hadn't returned yet either. For the time being Molly was only a disembodied awareness of a massive white void that surrounded her seemingly for eternity. It was terrifying in a purely existential sense. Molly didn't experience the corresponding increase in blood pressure and heart rate, the flooding of her muscles with adrenaline to facilitate her ability to run from danger. There was only pure terror and empty white totality.

Molly let out a mouth-less scream.

The words "Don't Panic." Suddenly flashed across the entirety of what Molly now realized was her perception. The words hung in the air in front of her perception until her silent screams tapered off.

As the computer did its work, things began to come back to Molly. She remembered dying. The memory of it was hazy, like a bad dream. The only detail she could recall clearly was the moment of total panic when she realized her body wasn't going to take another breath. It was done living and it didn't care what her consciousness thought about it. The machine was kicking out the ghost once and for all. She remembered feeling foolish for thinking her mind and her body were partners, when in fact they were reluctant allies at best.

A new message appeared in the whiteness. "Your room will be ready in 5-4-3-2-1."

The room appeared all around her, wrapping her in its familiarity. Along with the perception of the room came with the perception of her body. The first thing she was aware of was the feeling of the carpet between her toes. Then the slight chill of the air and the faint omnipresent un-named smell that was associated with all hotel rooms from the fanciest suite to the Motel 6. It smelled... of multitudes.

Regardless, it was a vast improvement over the white eternity. Molly looked around with curiosity. She remembered seeing this room before. With her husband Ben. Suddenly where she was and what was happening all came back in a flood. She was inside the Reincarnation Industries computer.

She'd been reborn in cyberspace.

Along with this revelation came a second- her body had returned. But this time it would be different. Her cancer was gone and it would never be coming back. She was no longer vulnerable to the pains of the flesh. She held her hand up in front of her face, marveling at the mundane normality of it. Molly remembered watching herself decay, her fingers turning into claws with the bones and cartilage visible, like someone shrunk the skin around her hand. Now the digits were vibrant and pink- they were *alive* again. She remembered being shocked by the festering sores that rose up out of her skin during the final stages of her body's failure.

Now she was well again. She clapped her hands with joy and did a little dance, laughing and smiling at the way her cyber-body obeyed her commands in the way her real body stopped when the cancer came.

For all intensive purposes Molly found herself standing inside a virtual hotel suite of the kind you'd find in Vegas or the Poconos. The biggest feature of the room, and the reason Molly chose it, was a large window that took up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of one wall. The window had a stunning view of Necropolis, named after the Egyptian City of the Dead. Even though the place carried an ancient name, it was hyper-modern in its design. The towers making up the skyline were sleek- all black metal and chrome. It stretched out beneath her like a picture. To the left were mountains that stretched around to the right, eventually falling into a sea with shockingly blue water. The room itself was tastefully decorated with oak furniture, a queen size bed, and a fairly comfortable looking couch.

Molly wondered how long it would be before Ben came to visit. She sat down on the couch to wait for him. Sitting there, looking out the window at the bustling city below, Molly realized this would be the main facet of her strange new life- waiting for Ben to come and visit.

She looked around to see if there was anything around to keep her attention. There wasn't. No books, no magazines. She checked the night stand and was disappointed to see there were no virtual Gideons to plant a bible- she wasn't a Christian, but anything was better than nothing.

The knocking on her door startled her so badly she let out an involuntary squeak of surprise.

She wasn't aware of the near total silence she was moving in, until the knock at the door shattered it. Molly wheeled around, looking for it's source. The sound was coming from a door she was sure wasn't there the first time she glanced around. With some trepidation she went to it and put her hand on knob. The metal felt cold.

"Who's there?" She asked.

"It's me, Ben." replied his familiar voice.

"Ben?" She asked, her hand fumbling desperately with the doorknob, trying to get it open. He beat her to it. The door swung wide, revealing Ben, smiling from ear to ear.

She grabbed him and was squeezing the air out of him before he had a chance to take more than one step in the door. It didn't take more than five seconds before they were both sobbing deeply with relief and sorrow over Molly's death. They let themselves slide to the floor in a heap of arms and legs- both rocking the other and speaking with optimism through deep, gut-wrenching sobs. Finally after several minutes they'd regained enough composure to try to have a rational conversation. Ben leaned back from Molly, took her by the shoulders and gave her a long look.

"You look terrific- the way you used to before you got sick."

Yup. All you had to do to make me beautiful again was kill me off." She said in a lame attempt at humor. Ben smiled, but didn't laugh.

He reached out and held her close again. "Is this place OK? It looks pretty much the way I remember it." He said, looking over her shoulder at the large window and the city beyond.

"Yeah. It's nice. The only thing I might regret is having that big window."

"Why? It's a beautiful view."

Molly pulled away from Ben, got up and led him to the window. About half way there she stopped and took a second look at him.

“Wow, Ben, have you been working out? You look like you’re in really good shape. I’m sorry if I didn’t notice...”

Ben laughed.

“What?”

“This isn’t my body. Remember? We couldn’t afford to have my body scanned so they just stick my scanned head onto a generic body. Seems like a better deal for me- this body doesn’t have my..er.. baby fat.” He finished with a grin. “Now- you were saying about the window?”

“Yeah. It’s just you can see all the activity going on out there.”

“And you can’t be a part of it.”

“Yeah. I’m terrible aren’t I? I mean I get the privilege of life after death, and all I can do is complain.” Molly looked ashamed of herself. She stared down at her feet and marveled that although she could feel the ground- it wasn’t really there. Neither was she for that matter. This particular factoid seemed a little too incredible to really wrap her mind around- especially since her brain didn’t really exist anymore.

“It’s OK Molly. Freedom is a natural human tendency. You know the minute I am able to afford something better I’ll try to at the very least buy you a few hours in the city.”

“You’re paying plenty just keeping me alive- I don’t need any special trips.” Molly stopped, her jaws snapping shut as the true reality of what was happening to her started to settle in. “Oh my God Ben. I’m Dead. This isn’t a dream. I really died... And I’m back.”

He pushed his lips together in a look of sad resignation and said, “You died yesterday. I was there with you. You looked relieved- you had the first smile I’d seen on your face in over a year. The technicians were standing by waiting for you to pass over. They got a scan very quickly; they don’t think there was more than a .05% data loss- which is very good.” He stared at her for another long minute. “Gosh, it’s just so good to see you looking so healthy, it’s like a miracle.”

Molly looked down at herself. There were no mirrors in the room and although her hands looked better, she hadn’t seen her own reflection yet.

“What do I look like Ben?” She asked.

“You’re as beautiful as the day we met Darling. You look just like the scan they took of you when we found out you were going to start getting sick.” He looked around the room. “This whole thing is a miracle. You get cancer, you die. But you aren’t lost forever...” He stopped talking, fresh tears poured out of his eyes.

Molly put her arms around Ben. “No I’m not lost- I’m right here.”

In a flood it all came back.

#### Chapter 4

Molly didn’t want to go to the doctor when her joints started aching. She hated doctors. When Molly was 12 she went to a doctor who’d misdiagnosed a pain in her belly as a stomach ache instead of what it was- appendicitis. Her appendix ended up rupturing and she nearly died. The event soured her on the medical profession and ever

since she put off her doctor's visits as long as she could. Molly and Ben were lucky. They both had steady jobs as teachers- with health benefits. Millions of others weren't so lucky. But still, Molly never went unless she deemed a visit absolutely necessary.

She was only 33. No reason to think a little joint pain was anything but that, a little joint pain.

But it didn't go away- it got worse.

After two weeks of increasingly painful symptoms Molly found she was willing, if not eager, to go to the doctor. Ben, knowing such trips were traumatic for her, took the day off from work and went along. Molly's fear was that she was developing arthritis. Her grandmother had suffered mightily from the disease and the idea that she would've inherited it didn't seem outlandish.

Neither of them had given a thought to the possibility of the illness the doctor informed them was almost certain.

Molly had bone cancer. Bad. The doctor said he thought it was fairly advanced.

It turned out Molly had an unusually high pain threshold.

"Most people," the doctor told her, "wouldn't even be able to walk at this point."

Driving back from the doctor's office in a terribly awkward silence they heard a commercial for the new "Middle Class Package" from Reincarnation Industries. Although the company had been in operation for a few years- the highly controversial service was hitherto only available to the ultra-rich. An intelligent sounding voice told them the "deceased will find themselves returned to the flesh, while actually existing only within cyberspace. This way you never have to be without your spouse- even in death." There was a pause while soothing music played, and then came the tag line, "Together forever really means something- with Reincarnation Industries."

That night, after tearfully making love in the bed they'd shared for nearly a decade- Ben and Molly decided to call Reincarnation Industries and make an appointment. They told themselves that they weren't really deciding anything- they were just going to find out the details of what such a thing would cost. But in reality, lying there in each other's arms, they both knew they were going to sign Molly up if it was even remotely feasible to do so. There probably wasn't anything they wouldn't do to keep death from tearing them apart.

Molly and Ben's love was true. It wasn't built on infatuation and circumstance but on a mutual love- tested through hardship and celebrated by good times. Molly and Ben's love might not jump out at people as romantic- not in the traditional sense. But it was a hell of a lot more real than the figures dancing through the pages of a bodice-ripping novel.

Ben didn't want to lose her and she didn't want to go.

The next day they walked into Reincarnation Industries for their appointment. They spent nearly seven hours checking financial histories and learning the costs and benefits available to the deceased from the different packages the company offered. Their "Pre-death Option Coordinator" was a salesman named Stan who showed too many teeth when he smiled.

At the end of the day they were ushered into a plush, well-appointed office. On the table were four items- 2 virtual reality helmets, a contract, and a pen. Stan ran through a few caveats- the most important being a warning that RI reserved the right to cancel the procedure if it was shown the cancer spread into Molly's brain. Cancer cells

destroy the ability to get a clear reading on the subject's brain and therefore all forms of brain cancer or massive head trauma made one ineligible for the procedure. After these legal niceties were handled they all sat down.

"Now I know this is a very hard decision on many different levels." Stan began, warming them up. "We at RI are aware that no family wants to even conceive of the possibility that a loved one will pass into the great beyond unexpectedly or otherwise. As a testament to this difficulty we have a very important incentive that we only offer on your first visit to Reincarnation Industries. If you, Molly and Ben, sign this contract right now, I will knock 20% off of your monthly payment for the life of the contract. This is a one time deal- valid for about 30 seconds, after that, I can personally guarantee you no comparable offer will ever come your way."

Ben and Molly didn't need to talk about it. Throughout the day they'd exchanged a number of poignant looks. They were both impressed and thought they should go through with the procedure. The only time they hesitated was during the financial interview. It was clear that affording the service was going to stretch them financially to the limit and the company gave very little leeway to those who didn't pay their bills. If any bill- for any amount of money- became 90 days past due, Reincarnation Industries reserved the right to erase Molly's information from their database. This process was not reversible. Once a client was scrubbed from the mainframe- they couldn't be recovered.

Still, when Stan picked up the pen and held it out- Ben took it and signed at the X. Molly did too.

Clearly pleased, Stan said. "You made the right choice. I don't even want to talk about how many people come back the day after their initial interview begging to sign up for the 20% discount. It's always good to see people who are smart enough to grasp the ring of opportunity when it's offered. Anyway, if you both put on your Virtual Reality helmets I can lead you through the different room models available in your chosen package. Of course you can change your mind about your accommodations within the VR world at any point up to the time of passing, but any change made post-reincarnation is subject to a nominal service fee."

Relieved to put on their helmets to get away from Stan's teeth they slipped the devices over their heads and ten minutes later the deal was done. They left that night and never spoke of their decision again.

Not a single time.