

# Portal

The Incarnations of the Americas  
Volume I



# Portal

## The Incarnations of the Americas Volume I

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Dedicated to Professor Jim Hart and as always my Mom.

Once a fortnight the coal cart drives up to the door and men in leather jerkins carry the coal indoors in stout sacks smelling of tar and shoot it clanking into the coal-hole under the stairs. It is only very rarely, when I make a definite mental effort, that I connect this coal with that far-off labor in the mines. It is just "coal"- something that I have got to have; black stuff that arrives mysteriously from nowhere in particular, like manna except that you have to pay for it. You could quite easily drive a car across the north of England and never once remember that hundreds of feet below the road you are on the miners hacking at the coal.

-George Orwell. *The Road to Wigan Pier*

"The Matrix is all around you. Even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out the window, or when you turn on your television. You feel it when you go to work. When you go to church. When you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth."

"What truth?"

"That you are a slave. Like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot see or smell or touch. A prison... for your mind."

-Morpheus and Neo. "The Matrix"

**PART ONE**  
*Shadows Dancing on the Walls*

## Chapter One

Deep in the bedrock of the earth, suspended a half-mile beneath the surface, was a room. This wasn't a mere hole in the earth's crust created by the natural movement of the earth's plates, not a cave carved from the stone by a long-term flow of water now gone dry. It wasn't a nearly perfectly rectangular geological anomaly so freakish it proved the universe had a sense of humor.

No. This room was manufactured; a hole in the ground the size of a suburban living room. Only this place lacked any of the normal accouterments one would find in a modern American household. There were, for example, no custom colored beige-taupe floor rugs, hand-dyed by small children in the Third World. There were no knickknacks, Hummel figurines, Beanie Babies, Emmy Awards, or refrigerator magnets that you rearranged to make clever poetry. There were no plastic molded vases in the Etruscan style, machine painted with a thick glaze. No factory reproduced, market tested artwork hung on the walls.

Instead of these normal things, this particular room was decorated in Neo-Crackhouse style, without decoration or individuality beyond a universal sense of dinginess. There was only the smallest dollop of furniture and none of it even came close to matching.

The walls of the room were bare beige stone with dark gray and pale white veins running through them. The walls were ground as smooth as well-polished marble and remained eternally cool to the touch. There was a tremendous amount of character and intricacy to the veins cut through the rock; although it was a rare person who took the time to notice it.

This lonely, solemn room was appropriately occupied by only a single person. He was a man with time on his hands, a man who was quite cognizant of the beauty in the rock. Although he wasn't home at the moment, he spent a lot of his free time sitting cross-legged, his nose almost pressed against the wall, marveling at the subtle marbling within the marbling. He found if he stared long enough the depth conveyed by the complex shadings of color was nearly infinite. In addition to the wall's appearance he'd also grown quite fond of the scent- or at least the unique lack of scent- that can only be legitimately achieved by stone.

Unlike the walls, the carpet was a drag. It was threadbare, lacked sufficient padding to satisfy sore feet, and while it was dark enough to make the room look a tad gloomy- it was simultaneously light enough to show the stains of anything that happened to spill into its nappy hair. Still, it was better than nothing.

Technically, the imitation oak end table standing next to the couch was furniture- even if a chunk of rock knocked out of the wall was shoring up one leg. But its surface was only one foot square, and it was so covered with random items it would better be termed a small horizontal closet than a piece of furniture.

Since the end table doesn't really measure up, the only real piece of furniture in the room was a tacky lime green couch of a shade so violent- there is probably no hue in the color spectrum that wouldn't clash with it. Nailing down the exact fabric the couch was manufactured from would also be difficult; it was some weird synthetic blend of cotton and leather which was decidedly lacking in the advantages of either, while somehow managing to mix their weaknesses with remarkable egalitarianism.

The television was stationed flat against the wall in front of the couch. It was actually much more than stationed, it was entrenched. It was held prisoner, irrevocably bound. This state was achieved by several metal bands stretched across the front of the TV and bolted directly into the stone. The television's appearance gave the space a distinctly hotel room kind of vibe. It put one in the mind to begin opening drawers in search of the complimentary copy of the Bible found in all hotel rooms, the gift from Gidea- only there were no drawers to open.

Furthering the hotel room feeling was the bare 100 watt bulb hanging from a wire over the couch. The light cast a harsh pallor over everything in its immediate radius and then quickly died off, casting nasty shadows into the kitchenette where most meals were eaten. The kitchenette consisted of an electric griddle and a refrigerator- if you wanted water you used the bathroom sink. Inside the refrigerator was a miniaturized version of the People Mover™ called the Food Mover™. It dispensed meals one at a time. All waste was dropped into a Garbage Mover™.

There were two other rooms in the flat, a bathroom and a bedroom. The bathroom was as Spartan as the rest of the place, with a small sink, a toilet, and a small shower with a water tank attached to the side. There was no mirror, no medicine cabinet, and no carpeting. The sink had a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste resting off to one side.

Adjacent to the main room was a bedroom, only a few feet larger than the bath. The one thing that set the bedroom apart from the rest of the place was the elaborate carvings that covered the walls. Two of the four walls were completely covered, and the third was well on its way. There was a mandala of symbols, words, patterns, and styles that had been hewn into the rock over a period of years. At a glance, there was simply too much going on to gain any real sense of meaning. It brings to mind the old proverb, "Never judge a book by its cover," or in this case, "never judge the message of a wall by just a cursory glance." To the man who'd made them, every scratch had meaning, meanings, actually.

A simple mattress lay on the floor of the bedroom. It lacked a headboard or a box spring. But unlike many of the things in his apartment, the mattress was actually of a very high quality. It was remarkably comfortable, with air springs and more than adequate back support.

Entering back into the main room from the bedroom it is impossible not to notice the back side of the tacky green couch. It has been shredded into strips of couchy confetti by the dutiful and repetitive attention of the room's only full time resident, an orange, fat tabby cat named Jubal.

Jubal the Cat ruled over these rooms as if they were the entire universe, which, as far as the cat was concerned, they were. A supremely pampered animal, as cats tend to be (they would have it no other way), he even had his own room- a corrugated cardboard box lined with a number of folded towels and a ratty pillow.

Jubal sat on his lime green sofa and waited patiently for the man to return. The cat knew the man would be home soon because he was finished working his way through his daily routine. He'd had his morning nap, his late morning nap, his early afternoon nap, his siesta, and his mid-day nap. Once the man arrived and fed him, he would immediately begin preparations for his late afternoon nap. After which, he would

probably get something to eat again; or maybe nap. Or poop. Pooping was always nice at that time of day.

Lazily, as if the very act of doing so required more effort than it was worth, Jubal turned his gaze toward the large, blank screen of the television. He was pleased to find that his favorite television show was on; a show he simply thought of as: Black. He enjoyed the simple story line and wished all the human shows were marked with such subtle genius. Instead of the constant motion omnipresent in the shows the person watched, this show consisted of only a single color, black, held for what was a remarkably long time. The cat found the static regularity quite comforting. Jubal could drift off for a snooze, wake up an hour later, and know he hadn't missed anything important. In addition to being too busy, the people shows were also unconscionably loud. The black show was agreeably run without an audio track.

Pleased to know he'd be eating soon, the cat sat and stared meditatively into the device, seeing something only he understood. If people found the blankness of the screen boring, well that was a loss for them, and of no concern to the cat.

On the wall next to the television was the front door. Now, as you may remember, we are a half a mile underneath the earth- so it wasn't a door exactly, except in function. It was a Portal- or, as the small plaque attached to the side attested, a People-Mover™ Model 523. A mysterious device, the Portal remained in place with nobody and nothing holding it where it was. It just hung there, mocking gravity. Like Kubrick's Monolith, it was completely black on its face with the exception of two small lights in the upper right hand corner, one red, and one green.

The red light on the People Mover™ began to blink. Jubal would have cared, except the Black show was at a particularly interesting point and he didn't want to be distracted. He only half-noticed the light through heavily lidded eyes. The Portal changed color slightly, the deep black rippled out in concentric square circles.

The Portals worked by the laws of quantum mechanics; the wacky sub-molecular physics where there is no time, light is both a particle and a wave, and in order to understand what is happening your mind has to be working on a minimum of 11 dimensions simultaneously. These rules would seem, to most people, to be nonsensical and non-intuitive- which they are. Unfortunately for most people, the universe doesn't give a damn if you think it's intuitive. The bottom line, the rules work. And as carpenters say, if it works, it works. No further explanation was necessary.

The Portal's opaque surface was both a solid and a liquid. There was only one of them, yet there were thousands of them- all scattered throughout the crust of the earth in thousands of rooms very much like the one we have been exploring (and quite possibly many other places as well).

What finally drew the cat's attention was a terrible sound emitting from the empty center of the device, sounding like a platoon of fingernails on patrol in a blackboard jungle. Out of the inky blackness a sneaker splattered with enough paint to cause Jackson Pollack to blush emerged from the surface of the Portal.

From the shoe, it was obvious to Jubal his roommate Alex was finally home.

The horrendous noise finally stopped when the rest of Alex popped into existence from where he'd been before- a room identical to this one, only it was completely empty, not mostly empty like his own. He had, in his time here, seen altogether too many

identical rooms- the repetition was more mundane and unchanging than the cat's favorite television program.

Alex carried a variety of buckets, three in each hand, some filled with paint, each one with the same identical label, FLAT WHITE. The empty buckets were filled with the myriad odds and ends necessary to successfully paint rooms, which, as is probably obvious by now, was Alex's job. These items included tape, sticks, rollers, mesh brush screens (for cleaning out the brushes and rollers), and, let's not forget, drop cloths. The paint brushes alone outnumbered Alex eight to one. The number of items he was juggling should have earned him a spot in the circus.

But there were no circuses, not for Alex. He'd never even heard of the concept. He managed, with a walking style that was a combination of Frankenstein's gait and the mincing dance of a ballerina at the far end of a three-day-speed-and-Double-Latté-bender, to move across the living room without dropping anything.

Alex's blue overalls were adorned with as much paint as his shoes. He staggered across the living room and into the small bathroom sink with the fluidity of a drunken Baryshnikov. Along the way he did an instinctual leap over Jubal who had come over to say hello and of course, to get fed. Reaching the sink, he dumped the brushes, smiling as they clattered satisfactorily off of the metal surface.

The rest of the buckets and odds and ends Alex carried found this achievement so impressive they took it upon themselves to return the balance of nature by falling every which way onto the floor.

As if in slow motion, Alex watched everything tumble everywhere, two paint cans opening in the process. FLAT WHITE gushed onto the floor like a hemorrhaging alien with albino blood. Cursing aloud, Alex leaned down, picked up the least soiled of his rags and began frantically mopping up the paint that managed to escape, and it was a lot.

Alex raised his head in frustration and cursed.

Many people would curse God. Alex didn't because he didn't have any concept of religion in the traditional sense. He did have a concept that was aligned to God, but it was different. Alex's God wasn't about faith or belief. Alex's God was known as The Provider and it affected his day to day life directly. And while Western Gods are said to seek worship and love- The Provider only desired a single thing: WORK.

The Provider controlled the holes- and everything within them. It did this by controlling the Portals. Alex had no more control over where and when the Portal sent him places than you or I have control over the setting sun. As far as he knew, no one controlled the Portals- so as humans so often do- Alex's parents anthropomorphized this blind power into the concept of The Provider.

There was no assumption of love from the Provider, and not even a hint that it was all- knowing. The Provider made mistakes and miscalculations all the time. And there was no compassion either. Not even the kind a person has for a dog. It was clear to Alex the Provider only provided in order to get Alex to do its bidding.

If he resisted its will, the Provider simply stopped providing.

Alex thought of the Provider as a kind of machine. A sophisticated one, but a machine nonetheless. It had a function to fulfill and a certain number of options available to it in order to fulfill them. Alex was simply a cog in The Provider's machinations.

Understandably, Alex wasn't particularly happy about being nothing but an anonymous cog in a machine whose function he could neither understand nor control and

looking down at the spilled paint, his face warming, Alex realized his long standing frustration was turning into anger. Sure, he cursed his bad luck and The Provider and all of the myriad accidents that float into even the most normal, mundane life. But all of these things were ancillary, symptoms of what was becoming a more serious disease. Alex searched his vocabulary, trying to think of a word that meant, “beyond frustrated.”

"Perturbed?"

No.

"Constipated?"

Closer, but Alex trying to think of a term more existential than a verb ever has any hopes of being.

Pictures came to his mind, images reminiscent of an Itchy and Scratchy cartoon. First, Alex saw himself running into a wall that had spikes in it; repeatedly. Then he was forced to eat the glass by some overwhelmingly strong, and unseen hand- the pieces crunching slowly between gnashing molars, cutting into gums, the taste of blood filling his mouth. But the mere concept of stopping was impossible.

Alex was frustrated the way one becomes when trying to teach Shakespeare to polar bears, or trying to make a tree play along with you at charades. Alex wanted to figure out a way to elicit a response, to force whoever was running the show out into the open- only he didn't know how to do it.

He had no choice about doing the repetitive, mindless work of painting holes. There was no challenge, no possible way to add character or interest to his daily chores. Each room was a carbon copy of the one previous, which was a carbon copy to the one he was standing in. The only difference between those holes and his own was that his walls were bare. There was paint on the rug, on his shoes, on his clothes, forever dolloped in his thick brown hair. But there was no paint on the walls, not a single drop. The contrast between his hole and the ones that he painted was crucial for Alex; it made his hole his home- no hat was needed.

Using every available rag, Alex tried to wipe up the majority of the FLAT WHITE back into the cans. The paint was uncooperative. It seemed to prefer the freedom of the floor to the confinement of the can. Finally, with what was only a ridiculous amount of effort, Alex managed to mop of the worst of the spill, soaking several rags with paint in the process- which meant a long session of rinsing. Alex sighed- just another problem in a world that seemed to prefer entropy to order, general admission to assigned seating.

There were two main things chipping away at Alex's sanity the way a stream chips away a canyon. By themselves, either of these factors would have been difficult, but manageable to deal with. Together, they were like mental water torture. They dripped onto his psyche a little bit everyday, and finally after what was a noble struggle, he could feel the beginnings of what would surely end in stark raving nuttiness.

The first problem was his job. Alex hated painting and painted things. As his own walls attested, he didn't like painted rooms. He liked the natural rock, the subtle shading that hides in the cracks. He legitimately preferred his walls the way they were, it wasn't misplaced angst or aesthetic stubbornness driving him to leave the walls unpainted. Alex had been painting rooms for going on five years- it seemed like five hundred. Day in and day out, ten hours a day, seven days a week, Alex did the same thing over and over again. He didn't work because he had a child in Private school or

because he had an uncontrollable taste for fine clothes that could only be satisfied by a remarkable work ethic- Alex worked because it was what he had to do.

Everything in his life was based on a simple “carrot and stick” pattern. If he worked slowly, maintaining his productivity at a level well below what he knew he was capable of, he was provided with the bare minimum he needed to survive. There was food, but not a lot, and not of very good quality. The television only worked sporadically. The lights in the apartment, lacking on even his best days, faded to a point where just walking across the room could be dangerous, especially if you accidentally left paint cans in the middle of the room. If he remained under his potential for more than two days, even his mattress and ratty old green couch disappeared.

Even when Alex worked to his potential, there was very little luxury. For example, even on his best days the water which appeared in a tank next to the shower was extremely limited (although he had unlimited water from the sink- it just never got warmed than chilly. The lack of water in the shower only gave him enough time to rinse the worst of the day’s dirt off- and no more.

If Alex worked hard, pushing himself to the limits of his ability, then he was provided with certain basic luxuries. The food got better and more plentiful. There was a little extra water in the shower tank, sometimes it was even heated; the condensation apparent as it clung to the side of the tank. His cat, Jubal arrived on a day that he set a personal record for rooms painted. As long as he maintained a minimum level of four painted rooms a day, the television worked. If he did five, there might even be a six pack of beer waiting for him in the fridge.

There were no excuses and no reprieves. If he got sick, which happened once or twice through the years, there were no breaks. He worked or there was no food. Once, on a day a particularly bad fever racked his body, Alex managed to paint only a single room through the fog of mucus and freezing heat coursing through him. When he returned home, barely able to see through puffy eyes- Jubal was gone. Only the fur on the couch remained to remind Alex the cat had ever been there. Two weeks later, after his work productivity returned to normal, the cat reappeared.

Jubal was clearly furious with Alex for letting him be uprooted from his home. He wouldn’t allow himself to be petted for almost a week afterward and for a month he took to pissing on his paint rags. Alex came to realize even the cat was a furry hostage, stuck in a meaningless, isolated world, with no sufficient explanations, and no control over anything beyond his napping schedule.

This brings us to the second of Alex’s problems- he was, and had been for the past five years, utterly alone. He wasn't alone the way we all feel sometimes, separated by our thoughts or opinions from other people we interact with on a day to day basis. No, Alex was alone in the guy stranded on an island sense- in the Tom Hanks and his friend Wilson the volleyball sense. There was not another soul around to idly chat with, only the cat and the TV, neither of which ever answered in a way that any rational person would find satisfactory. Isolation was an understatement.

Each night, Alex sat in front of his television, cat fast asleep next to him or on his lap. With nothing else to do- he did his best to interact with the show. Like television in Tibet or Bangladesh, there was only a single channel to choose from, and its signal was weak. The picture was usually full of fuzz, as if a perpetual snowstorm raged just behind

the glass. This didn't bother Alex; he had never seen a clear picture in his life- so he had no idea what he was missing.

Although there was a television, one would have to be in Alex's situation to ever watch it. There was only a single show- it played from the first episode to the last in succession- over and over. The normal assortment of TV garbage was missing. Nobody was trying to sell Alex a George Foreman grills, car wax, or a get rich quick scheme. He wasn't subjected to hard hitting, corporate bought attacks on the dangers of democracy or Jerry Springer with his lesbian bartender physicist guests who cheat on their girlfriends with their Grandfathers. He didn't ever get to watch movies- he'd never seen Bogart or Pauly Shore, Deniro or Carrot Top. (Needless to say, there are hidden blessings in every curse.) Instead, there was only one show. It played from the first episode to the last in succession, over and over.

Forever.

The show Alex watched was a good one- a classic- but like the curse says, too much of even the greatest of things gets tedious after a while.

What was the show?

It was I Love Lucy- starring Lucille Ball and her husband, the famously Cuban, Ricky Ricardo.

Alex watched and watched even though he never could figure out what Cuba was- he figured it was the name of the hole Ricky grew up in. Long after he could take even a modicum of pleasure from the experience, he continued to watch Lucy run her hair-brained scams on her husband- always in a futile attempt to try to keep herself out of trouble.

After a lifetime of the show, Alex knew every episode of 'Lucy' by heart. As an amusement, Alex would invent his own dialogue to fill the empty spaces in the characters words where the audience was laughing. This exercise was one of the main tools Alex used to hold his sanity together, at least so far. Sometimes he was even able to fool himself into the illusion he was holding a conversation; indeed, when he wrote his dialogue well, the characters seemed to respond to him. If he already knew what they were going to say in response- well, what of it? Aren't married couples the same way? We shall leave Alex now, sitting on his couch, a cold can of soda on his lap, Jubal sleeping in a heap next to him, purring quietly. Alex watches as, on the TV, Lucy is drinking spoonful after spoonful of an alcohol laden cough syrup, and trying, without much success, to make a commercial.

## Chapter 2

In another room, far from where Alex was sitting, the red light on another People Mover began to blink. This room was much larger than the one that Alex calls home, and it was stocked with a great deal more furniture. In this room there was, in fact, altogether too much furniture. Identical sofas were stacked one on top of another like firewood, a massive pile that rose fifteen or twenty feet into the air. There was no cat in this room to mark the blinking on the People Mover™, only the couches, and not surprisingly, they had no comment about the blinking red light. They just sat and observed the world in the passive way that couches do, perhaps dreaming of the eventual day when asses, instead of other couches, would sit upon their cheaply upholstered cushions.

Two men walked out of the machine, emerging into the cramped and overly full room. They groaned in unison as their eyes scanned across the sheer mass of furniture stacked in front of them.

“Damn it,” Carl complained, looking at the room with disbelief. “Can you believe this shit? I sure hope we aren’t expected to move all of these things before we are allowed to knock off. This will take hours, and it seems like quitting time should have come a week ago already.”

“No use complaining about it, let’s just get a move on.” Aaron was just as annoyed by what he was seeing as Carl, but he dealt with it differently, preferring quiet suffering to vocal complaint. Glancing over his shoulder Aaron saw that the People Mover™ was already blinking green again- indicating that they were supposed to pickup a couch and get moving. They were never given any time to rest, except at lunch. Once the work began, it continued non-stop, till quitting time.

It was clear from the muscles in the men’s arms and legs that they had been moving furniture for quite a long time, and this was true, Aaron had been moving for eleven years, Carl for seven. Both men hated the job like Republican’s hate assisting the poor.

But they were resigned to it.

Aaron did his job and tried to keep the most positive possible attitude about the endless couches, tables, chairs, and beds they had to move each day. It wasn’t easy, but Carl complained plenty for both men. Carl complained enough for a small city worth of people. In an odd way, Carl’s pessimism made it easier for Aaron to keep a positive attitude.

Aaron went through most of his day in relative silence. There was no weather to discuss and no sports teams to argue over. Because they’d been working together for several years, the Lucy episodes running endlessly on the television had long since stopped being an interesting topic of conversation. It wasn’t quiet though, not by a long shot. Aaron’s lack of talking was more than made up for by Carl.

Carl loved to complain. It was his way of getting himself through the monotonous days. He bitched his way through his life like a mother-in-law with a toothache. Like Aaron, his pessimism helped Carl’s mental health in a backward kind of way. The complaining did get on Aaron’s nerves sometimes, but he had to admit, Carl was creative about it. For Carl, whinjing was a kind of art, he rarely, if ever, repeated a complaint twice in a week. And when he did repeat one, it was always in a new context. There were no animals in Aaron or Carl’s life. They had each other, and apparently, that was all the company they were going to get.

Carl walked over to the nearest couch and picked up an end, Aaron took the other and together they stepped through the People Mover™<sup>1</sup> and disappeared from the room. The room was silent for a few minutes, and then Carl and Aaron appeared again. Not even hesitating this time, they walked to another couch, picked up opposite ends, and as Carl complained that these particular couches were heavier than any they had ever had to lift before, they disappeared back the way they had come through the Portal on the wall.

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<sup>1</sup> Public Service Announcement: From now on the “TM” at the end of People Mover™ will be assumed and envisioned every time you read the words People Mover. Thank you for your cooperation. –THE MANAGEMENT

### Chapter 3

Angela winced in pain. Instinctively, she squeezed her finger, holding it up to her eyes to get a good look at the injury, hoping the needle hadn't gone too deep. It hadn't. The puncture was only bad enough to draw a small pinprick of blood. She stuck her finger into her mouth and sucked hard, tasting the light coppery flavor of the blood. She glanced at the People-Mover attached to the wall. It hung there, an emotionless, eerily non-characteristic slab on the wall of what she saw as her permanent prison cell. Angela hoped she would see the green light blinking, it meant she could send all of her stuff through the portal and be done with her work for the day.

It wasn't blinking- just as she knew in her heart that it wouldn't be. The light wouldn't blink until she'd finished with her work- and there was still a pretty big pile of cut fabric sitting next to her electric Seamstress Model 7 sewing machine. The accident happened because Angela let her mind wander- and as so often happened, the machine found a way to punish her for it. Sewing was a tricky business, and although the act of assembling the clothes took up almost none of Angela's intellectual capacity- it nevertheless required a great deal of intense concentration. After all, there was a fast moving needle involved.

Angela had a hard time holding her attention on something so straight forward and uncomplicated as sewing, and she often found herself spacing off, thinking about her situation, trying to think of ways to remedy it- to find a way to escape.

Pulling a rebel strand of her long blond hair out of her eyes, Angela sat for a moment and looked at the wall. It was blank, painted a dull shade of white. Her mind tried to categorize the specific characteristic of the paint and settled on "flat." It wasn't completely uniform though; the cheap paint was chipped in some places, revealing the dull tan of the stone that lay beneath- like meaty flesh beneath a thin skin.

She checked her finger to see if the bleeding stopped. There was still a small dot of red, but it showed no signs of growing- which meant Angela might as well get back to work. The pile wasn't going to get any smaller while she sat there with a throbbing finger and a rumbling belly. It seemed like the work day had been getting longer and longer lately. Time was stretching like the fresh taffy you can see being made in places like Pigeon Forge, Kentucky, or the Wisconsin Dells.

Sighing, Angela returned to the shirt she was sewing, pushing the activation switch of the sewing machine with the side of her knee. The machine burst back into life with the telltale snicker-snee snicker-snee that was the soundtrack of her remembered life.

Angela didn't have much memory of her existence prior to six months before. The majority of her life had shroud of haze over it- allowing her only painfully brief glimpses of her life before sewing. She had isolated memories of living with a large family, but these thoughts were like phantoms. For six months she'd been sewing, but already, it seemed like a million years.

She figured eventually she would grow used to this life, the way one grew used to the darkness when the lights were out- the darkness she could recall being scared of when she was a child. One of her clearer memories was the way her Father came in when her imagination turned against her, bringing monsters and goblins out of the inky black walls, monsters who liked nothing better than to eat little girls.

He would come and take her in his arms, rocking her gently, talking in the low, confident tone that he always used with her, a tone full of assurance and calm. He would tell her that there were no monsters, and to prove it he would turn on all of the lights, even though it caused all of the other kids in the room to complain and pull their blankets over their heads to keep out the light.

Even though it was an inconvenience, her brothers and sisters never complained too vehemently. All of them fought their battles in the darkness, and there was no one who could claim to have never lost a battle. The darkness of an underground room is the total darkness of a crypt, a fact all children understood on some deep primordial human level- not being afraid sometimes was impossible.

That was then. Now there was nobody there to comfort her, not that she imagined demons coming out of the darkness anymore. Now, the demons were loneliness and despair- creatures with fewer teeth, but who were, in their own way, much more frightening.

With a jolt, Angela pulled her knee back from the machine. It obediently reacted, cycling down again. She stared at her hand and breathed slowly in and out- reassuring herself she'd not been hurt. She'd nearly stuck her whole hand into the path of the needle. Cursing herself, she cupped her uninjured hand close to her body, assuring it was safe and sound. She knew from experience, if she injured herself there wasn't going to be any real medical help.

During her first week, she caught herself a good one from the machine. Still nearly hysterical with fear over her lack of memory, Angela was sobbing as she worked and her tears blocked her view of the small silver shoe that housed the needle. Afterward she was able to estimate the needle plunged into the meaty part of her hand almost ten times. When she yanked her hand out, bleeding and already screaming with pain, the thread was embedded in her hand and still attached to the machine. When she yanked she also dragged the shirt she was working on. Blood ran down the threads like water down a spiderweb.

As the blood continued to gush from her hand and run down her wrist, Angela thought surely someone would come around and tend to her. She sat waiting in vain for twenty minutes without any sign from the People Mover of an approaching doctor or medical technician. Finally she gave up, and went into the bathroom herself.

Angela rinsed the wound carefully, and quite painfully yanked free the string which was embroidered into her hand. She looked in the medicine cabinet and was surprised to find two bandages sitting on the shelf. They weren't there that morning when she brushed her teeth. Puzzled, but too worried about the bleeding to really care, Angela carefully applied the bandages and went back into her work area.

She assumed, since she was injured, her work day would be cut short. She looked expectantly at the People Mover waiting for it to start blinking. A minute went by. Then two, then three. By now the sharp pain had changed into a deep throb she felt all the way into her shoulder. She could feel her own heartbeat in the pain. It arced up each time her blood passed through the damaged part of her hand. And still, the light didn't blink. Finally, it became clear to Angela she could sit there until she starved to death, the light wasn't coming on. No wound, no matter how mortal, would bring her work to a premature conclusion. When the fabric was sewn into the day's clothes, then the work day was done. Nothing shy of her death would give her reprieve.

Two hours later, the bandages on her hand were soaked through with blood. Angela returned to the medicine cabinet. This time she wasn't surprised to find the old bandages were replaced with new ones. She applied them, and returned to work.

It was at that moment Angela realized the stories she'd heard about the Provider were literally true. They weren't just stories her parents told to freak her out. Until then, Angela had been able to convince herself sewing shirts was only a temporary fate- that there would be more to her life. She wanted to believe she would have children of her own someday, unlike her own Mother and Father. But those bandages, sitting innocently on the shelf in her bathroom, they killed her hope. The idea of any life beyond this prison died, taking a chunk of her soul with it. When she saw those bandages, it really came home to her. This was real. This was going to be her whole life.

Presently, Angela shook her head out of her memories and returned to the shirt. She had about twenty more to go before she was finished. Then- and only then- would she be allowed to retire for the day.

It was nearly three hours before she finished her work, the sewing machine cycling down for the day. Next to her lay a pile of shirts. She looked down at them with unhappy annoyance and then looked to the People Mover with expectation. As it always did, the machine somehow knew she was finished and the green light blinked at her expectantly. Sighing, Angela picked up the shirts and carried them to the Portal. She stepped through, and found herself instantly transported to the finishing room. The finishing room was much larger than the one Angela toiled in. The walls were painted the same Flat White, there was still no furniture, but the ceilings were higher, and the walls were at least twice as far apart. There was only one thing in the room. Shirts. Shirts piled six feet high. Angela was responsible for every one of them. Each day, she had to return to this room to be reminded of the apparent futility of her daily labors. She knew if she chose to push her way to the wall past the cottony snowdrift of neatly folded garments, she would find the first shirt she'd ever made.

Her hems weren't as straight then, her buttons not nearly as well fastened. But the shirts were there, collecting dust the same way she was, marking their own time. Letting the days go past without noticing, one day blurring into the next like the montage in a Rocky movie.

Angela dropped her day's labors onto the pile and stepped back toward the People Mover, knowing she would be back inside this room in approximately twenty four hours with another pile of shirts. The only sign she'd been there would be a slightly bigger pile of what already was an enormous pile of clothing.

If she was lucky, she supposed maybe she would get switched back onto pants; she hadn't done them in over a month. But the futility was the same. There was another room, just like this one, equally nondescript. The only difference was- in this room- there were piles of pants, stacked up like cordwood, gathering dust the same way these shirts were.

Angela stepped into the black maw of the Portal machine and wondered like she did every time she left these store rooms- what would happen when the room was filled? What was she going to do when there was no more room to store the shirts? Was there another room, just like this one, waiting, and empty? Just existing until the day came for it to be filled again with another year's worth of shirts or pants? She didn't know the answer to this question for sure- but she thought it was yes. There probably were other

rooms- rooms where they made the sewing machines, rooms where they made the parts for the sewing machines, rooms where they made the thread and the fabric. Rooms upon rooms upon rooms, never-ending. In each there would be people suffering- toiling in blind darkness the way Angela was.

The irony was- in spite of these infinite strings of connected rooms- her existence was limited to only three. It was possible that there were millions of rooms, a fat lot of good it did her either way. Angela only saw her own room and the two she brought her finished products to- one for pants, one for shirts. Everything else was pure conjecture. Maybe she was the only person- maybe she was alone- being experimented on by some mad genius. There was no way to know.

Angela could vaguely remember the large interconnected rooms she'd grown up in, but the memories were hazy. Fuzzy or not, these rooms were gone now- memories she couldn't return to, even if her recollections of them were pristine and perfect.

She might have just broke down then, broke down and cried at the existential futility of her life. But she was hungry. The robot of the body overwhelmed the fragility of the mind. She wanted food, she had earned food, and she wasn't going to wait any more to get it. Angela crossed her room, opened the refrigerator and wasn't surprised to see it stocked with enough food for an evening meal. Sitting on the shelf were two chicken breasts, some oil, some vinegar, a package of salt, a bowl of lettuce with what appeared to be carrots and a few tomatoes, four slices of bread, and three chocolate chip cookies.

She took it all out of the refrigerator and tossed it on the counter. Her body rejoiced at the sight of the food, rejoiced and was satisfied. Her mind continued to boil away, a chaotic signal interfering with her stomach's happy warblings. It was this state, this torn contradiction of body and mind that came closest to the emotion she once knew as happiness. Realizing it only reinforced the pain.

Taking down the frying pan from its hook on the wall, Angela prepared her unremarkable meal, thinking she would watch a little TV after she was through. It wasn't much- it wasn't much at all. But she felt reasonably confident it was better than nothing. So she hung on, and toughed her way through the boredom as best she could.

#### **Chapter Four**

It was several hours before Aaron and Carl entered the couch storage room for the last time that day. And, as with most oversized repetitive tasks, the end, when it came, seemed remarkable. In the process of working the end seemed like an imaginary point, an unreachable destination- the physical compatriot to the last digit in pi. The end of labor was Aaron and Carl's Valhalla, their Lost City of Gold, Atlantis, Shangri La, Tim buck 2, and BFE- all rolled into one.

Carl held back from complaining now that the work was almost done. Instead he saved his breath so he could work faster- and be done that much sooner. Once they were finished they'd split off into their separate holes and get chow and some sleep; assuming they didn't just get sent into another room full of stuff that needed to be moved, which happened a lot, but usually not on couch days, there were at least some mercies in life.

The two men hefted up the final green monstrosity in unison and waited for the People Mover to start flashing green. After a few seconds it did, and the men stepped

through. They emerged into an empty room, the smell of fresh paint still strong. Underneath this smell was the uniquely pleasant chemical smell of freshly laid carpet. It was a soft, pleasant undertone to the paint's harsh chemical smell.

They brought the couch to the middle of the room and dropped it in its customary place, in front of where the television would eventually be installed. The holes for the TV's placement had already been drilled, just as they always were. It was a position both men were familiar with from their own rooms.

"Well another day done I suppose- a particularly long one I gotta tell you." Said Carl, smiling at Aaron with the one genuine smile he felt everyday.

"Yeah, I guess I better head on home." Aaron replied. And then, as he always did, he reached out his hand to Carl, who shook it amiably.

"It's been good working with you; I'll probably see you tomorrow." Aaron said.

He said it everyday. There was a time he hadn't made a point to extend this courtesy. A time when he'd taken his continued partnership for granted. Aaron's first partner, a really good guy named Arnold was with him for four years. There wasn't a single story from childhood that the two hadn't shared. They were truly friends and Aaron had made the foolish assumption they would be allowed to remain friends until one of the two of them got too old to lift those ugly ass green couches. They parted everyday with a simple "See Ya," never taking the brief seconds to express their appreciation and love of one another's company.

Separating in this way was fine as long as the person you left showed up the next morning. One day Arnold didn't. Aaron worked alone that day. He felt like he was being punished for something; it was a sofa day. He had to drag the sofas on his own, the process exhausted him. To make matters worse he didn't hear a single word about where Arnold was- he never saw Arnold again.

So now, Aaron always took the time to express a bit of his feelings, to tell the guy he worked with that he appreciated their presence. Even though Carl complained his way through the day and drove Aaron nuts sometimes, Aaron really liked the man and he took the time because he knew if he never saw Carl again- he would miss him. Aaron never wanted the burden of appreciation unmentioned to weigh on him again.

Carl at least partially understood this, and agreed with the sentiment. He always looked old Aaron in the eye, and shook his hand a good one. For although he had spent the entire seven years of his moving career with him, he knew from the stories Aaron told him there was no guarantee, and after all the guy did put up with his endless complaining, and he almost never threatened to wring Carl's neck over it. For his part, Carl appreciated this, because in the long empty silences of the night, when he was just a guy alone in the inky darkness of his room, he thought about what it must be like to have to listen to his endless griping. He realized that Aaron was, in many ways a saint, and felt very lucky indeed for his company (He didn't use the term saint, but if he ever heard it, he surely would have).

These were the thoughts going through Carl's mind as he watched Aaron leave through the People Mover. He smiled to himself, hoping he would get the chance to see him again. And then, when the light began to flash green for his turn he stepped through the Portal himself.