

Sanctuary:

The Only True Religion

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Chapter One

Vern Shaw tapped his brakes and swerved his pick-up, avoiding the rattler side-winding across the highway. *Odd?* Usually he'd not bother and squish such vermin flat. He checked the rearview mirror to see if any traffic following would be less forgiving and splatter the snake. That's when he saw the Mex kid standing a ways back, standing on the other side of the road. Just standing and watching Vern whiz by. The snake had distracted him from seeing the kid profiled against the desert sage, or maybe it was the late afternoon glare blinding his eyes. Vern never had gotten around to the simple fix on the driver's shade visor, broken off at least five years back.

For a curiosity he could not identify, then or later, Vern slowed his truck and pulled off the asphalt onto the shoulder gravel and gave the Mex a serious stare. The boy taking the full brunt of the summer heat offered no

friendly acknowledgment but returned the eye contact. For about fifteen seconds they played their own version of a Mexican-Americanos stand-off. Vern, who had his own set of priorities, gave a grunt of annoyance and flipped a u-turn. The snake was nowhere to be seen. Most likely the reptile had crawled to sanctuary among the rocks and sand, perhaps, slithering down an abandoned gopher hole, safe in the darkness.

What probably caught Vern's attention were the kid's construction utility belt draped over a shabby tool box and a tattered backpack sluffed off at his feet. Why the Mex kid was here in the middle of nowhere, standing in the summer broil a mile or so from dried-out Groom Lake, Vern could hazard only one guess: a drifter lost.

"Hablo Englise, señor?" inquired Vern.

"B minus. English lit." The kid smiled and Vern frowned. He gave the Mex a hard appraisal, reluctantly weighing his few options.

"You know how to use those?" Vern pointed to the cracked leather belt and dented tool box on the ground.

"Some two years college, then Mech Trade School in L.A. Worked in the maintenance shops for the City of Irvine. Three years. Some pounding nails on Section 8 housing before that. How's that sound?"

"Where ya' heading?"

“Maybe your way.” Vern could not tell if the kid was given him sass attitude. Vern never liked their kind.

“Some folks doing construction work near the gas station I run. I’m getting some fall-off work. Truck repair mostly. You interested?”

“Have no plans. Surprised I went this way in the first place.”

Vern leaned over and pushed open the passenger door since it wouldn’t open from the outside. Two years since the spring latch broke. The Mex kid dropped his meager worldly baggage into the pickup bed and climbed in the truck cab, inhaling mixed odors. Stale beer and body sweat.

The Mex kid, who looked to be in his mid-twenties smiled at his new boss and said to himself, *Try it for a week, and move on.*

Vern’s verdict-without-trial judgment: *Probably stole those tools.*

That meeting on the highway was four months ago.

Vern Shaw’s gas station and ten-room motel squatted in the soul-frying Nevada desert surrounded by wandering sagebrush and scattered Joshua trees. A hole-pocked asphalt highway appeared out of shimmering mirages on both sides of the horizon passing in

front of the few buildings and bearing witness to the roadway's tread-bare history as once a thoroughfare of importance, now ignored.

Modernization did not exist here. The motel and its fuel-stop garage had seen better days, better decades, frozen in time like a black-and-white travel postcard, frayed, tattered, dated into uselessness. The gas station's two pumps were logo-marked by an oil company no longer in business. Cash was the suggested preference on a scrawled cardboard sign, as credit cards required too much paperwork. Inside the cramped office basic essentials included expired-label snacks and dusty spare parts for automobiles seen today only in car museums if not scrap heaps. The fuel holding tanks had been filled six months back and this day measured half empty. A ground sign welded on a rebar base and decorated with rusted bullet holes flapped in the hot wind, bearing an explanation that said it all: *"Rest Area: Food & Gas. Last Stop."*

Twenty feet from the gas station's small office and sole repair bay was a boxcar-sized luncheonette. A sign in the window had just been flipped from 'closed' to 'open'. Six metal tables and assorted plastic chairs wobbled on the cracked linoleum floor. The red plastic checkerboard table cloths which usually lay undisturbed had just this day been wiped with ammonia cleaner. The microwave, the most modern

utensil in the one-person kitchen, had its colorful remnants of historic bubbled and exploded foods scraped free. It mattered little. The electricity had been erratic and fritzzed and hiccupped on and off over the last three days.

Life went on in some fashion. Two of the ten motel units were occupied by the remaining three inhabitants of this forgotten way station, a place that because of location and the bare comforts offered, had always been referred to, as the sign stated: "*Last Stop.*" Once there had been consideration for a name change something denoting a rest area where the word 'green' might suggest an oasis, but nothing came of it. Truth if not fate intervened. Many years back, plans for a new highway had an off-ramp designated for this spot, but state engineers in Carson City under a higher political edict chose a more scenic, swifter route two valleys over, a sometimes seasonal 'green' place, and the traffic soon followed. As it was no easy road led to Last Stop.

Until this moment the usual view of Last Stop remained the quick blur glanced through smeared windows by those who could make their destination without a pitstop; or squinty blinks by lost travelers looking for the main highway, or those dream-gazers and venturesome off-roaders looking for rugged escapism. Travelers included occasional star-trekkers

wondering if Area 51 and the secret space alien base lurked anywhere in the neighborhood, which it did not. No one dallied long when faced with the inhuman melt-down from an unforgiving Nevada summer or being frozen stiff in the frigid nights of an arid winter. Always extremes with no medians. Those who did stop had no urge to do so, but just in case, they gulped water and topped off their gas tanks, just in case civilization was farther off than they expected.

Next to this brittle settlement supplying gas, food and sparse lodging lay a coarse sand-packed road that met the highway, not quite creating a crossroad yet marking a turn-off identified by a clank-rattling cattle guard. This unpaved road with its washboard ruts ran a straight angled up, like yellow chalk streaked across brown slate toward a drab mesa three miles away.

The mesa, not a hill and not a solitary butte, certainly not a mountain, was twenty-seven miles in circumference, rocky flat on top and dominating the arid land below. Far back, in a distant boom time, miners who passed through the territory had tested the formation's geology but found no glittering promise and moved on to the ore-proven camps of Goldfield and Searchlight. A decade back, during a very hush-hush government program, construction trucks lumbered up the road to the works situated behind

barb-wire fencing. Last Stop had their few beds filled and served meals to jammed tables. The contractors vanished when the federal funding lost its support and the project shut down, uncompleted, so they said.

Where the land-use elevation maps called this location “Mesquite Mesa,” the new owner of the land, purchasing it two years ago out of government surplus, had renamed the area “Sanctuary” but had put up no identifying signs to that effect. And any new signs posted warned as the old ones before: *Keep Out. Violators will be Prosecuted.* The property owner added an authoritative: *CTR*, whatever *CTR* meant. In his haste on the first batch of the print run the sign painter had misspelled ‘prosecuted,’ as ‘persecuted’ but since it was a rush job, those few signs were accepted and placed at the junction where the barbwire hit the steep cliffs of the mesa.

The citizens of Last Stop knew the new property name existed because strangers started stopping by asking, “*Where’s Sanctuary?*” The new property owner brought back workers to complete whatever lay up there. In silence construction crews came and went, gagged by threats of hefty financial penalties for anyone’s rambling tongue. During those few months of frenzied activity, Last Stop felt a reprieve with the welcome economic shot in the arm. The two long-time citizens of Last Stop, Vern Shaw, the owner of the land and buildings, and Josette Langley, his girl

friend help-mate, both thinking the work up at Sanctuary would continue, hired a young mechanic for machinery and odd-job repair. This was the Mex kid discovered by Vern alongside State Highway 375. Perhaps ill timed, it seemed. One month back the workers departed without any notice whatsoever. The young mechanic, who called himself “J”, not “Jay”, as he corrected anyone who asked, simply “J”, saw his employment with the Last Stop owners ending. J said he would move on; maybe hitch up into Utah.

Vern had no complaints with the young man’s automotive skills, and though it was not his style, said he would write a ‘whom it may concern’ letter, scribbling a few sentences, saying J was a good worker, knew his cars and trucks. Vern figured J kept to the small towns, not the big cities because he was an illegal. Maybe not a recent wetback jumper since he spoke adequate Anglo, even slurring out slang Vern took to be the lingo of the urban barrios.

J did not leave. When workers went their way and with no other prospects, not even anyone offering him a ride out of Last Stop, J lucked into the slacker job as the part-time fix-it watchman at the Sanctuary site. Twice a day, as required, he drove Vern’s pick-up onto the property looking for trespassers. With a lot of free time he pattered and tinkered at

whatever acted broken whether it needed it or not. Like moving one pile of sand to another pile and then back; but the job paid well.

J had likewise been sworn to secrecy about Sanctuary, but he never did obey rules, especially those sounding like cop-type laws.

To quench their curiosity, J told Vern and Josette that up at the mesa site there were dozens of mini-hills of slag rock piled up like Mayan grave mounds, enormous, enough that underneath the heaped piles might have been entombed skyscraper giants. And set back into the rock, invisible from the front gate, was the largest steel door that he had ever seen, big enough to drive a dump truck through, stuck into the face of Mesquite Mesa. Whatever went in there, whatever was behind that door, would be locked up like in a bank vault. Secure. Impenetrable. J would not be one to use that word. He just said, "No crazy way is anyone going to bust in there."

Seven days ago, the perpetual boredom in the citizens of Last Stop ceased. Vern, Josette and J, living in the middle of sand emptiness, realized the wildlife had disappeared, birds from the air, animals like coyotes and jackrabbits, all gone to ground. Soon afterwards the earth beneath began to rumble and shake in unpredictable jolting spurts. Three days ago the electricity blinked and dimmed, sputtered, stopped, started,

stopped for good. Vern and J put the station's small generator into emergency service. The next day a black SUV appeared and raced up the mesa road spitting up dirt whirlwinds. An hour later, and thereafter, thirty trucks, heavy-laden arrived punctually in two-vehicle convoys every two hours, grinding gears toward Mesquite Mesa and this place called Sanctuary. Supposedly they were off-loading their unseen cargo and leaving before the next truck tandem appeared. Last Stop picked up the spare business of bathroom stops and diesel fill-ups and bubbling radiators. No one knew anything or said very little. The drivers were in a hurry to get back home to be with their families. They rushed away with empty trucks, their minds drugged by anxiety; their mouths gritted shut while their faces spoke fear. Their entire existence, as everyone else's, had been challenged by the inconceivable.

The heavens had shifted. Three days back when the three citizens of Last Stop looked to the blue sky they saw not the sun of poet ballads or science all-knowing but two fiery orbs, one large, one small, shining down upon them and over the land with a hellish blaze. The sun had split apart.

Vern shuffled without hurry to the garage bay and stared down at the two legs sticking out from beneath his beat-up pick-up. The work shirt on J as he lay on his back had flapped apart and Vern could see the healed scar on the young Mex's stomach. A small round circle, a quarter coin mark in size, with a stitch line bisecting. Vern had seen it before when J worked shirtless but so what? It was none of his business. Kid did good work.

Vern sipped at his third beer of the day, and not yet lunch. Warm beer.

"It's hot but not any hotter than usual, I expect."

No answer.

"Fridge is barely cooling. Radio's still fuzzy, and the phone's gone from a buzz to dead humming noise."

"Solar flares." The voice spoke from underneath the truck.

"What?" Vern wiped the sweat from his forehead and sought the one-degree-less shade of the garage. J squeezed out from his repairs and tossed a wrench into the tool box. The young mechanic stretched and popped his back. Vern studied him. J had worker shoulders and a rippled stomach. Could be these abs muscles came from swinging a hammer

building houses, so too in Vern's mind could one gain such strength pressing weights in a prison exercise yard. J gulped at a water bottle. J had this face deep tanned by race, less Indian in bone structure, more Spanish mulatto. Black hair lay wet-matted and twisted so that when he flipped at it unconsciously the snarls fell back with no order. His nose once broken gave his face a slight off-centered look, his mouth tilted. When he spoke his expression shifted easily from his normal light sarcastic smile to his occasional cautionary snarl if circumstances warranted. One would just assume they would see in his full-mouth expression broken in chipped yellow teeth, not so. Vern believed the welfare dentist deserved an award. J's toothy-capped ivory smile could dazzle a senorita, as it had Josette as Vern knew by her gushing poor attempts at flirting. Most often, when not work exhausted, J fell into his relaxed persona at being numero uno, a Super Mex; a smirk grin, cocky, asking for it sometimes. Vern could see how the kid could get into trouble easy. No one liked a smart ass beaner.

“You know I've seen your five porno magazines ten times over,” J commented as he cleaned up his work site. “My mind has screwed all those *prostitutas*, every which way but the bellybutton. And so what's left? Josette hogs the TV when that worked. So what's left for me? I got me twenty years of National Geographics, piled in boxes,

neat and bundled, tied with string. And those I've read again and again.”

“That was old man Nathan’s subscription. Two owners back.”

“But damn if they’re not all 1930 through 1949. I’ve become a loco walking en-cy-clo-ped-i-a on a world that is history.”

“I could’ve brought you some magazines from the last trip to town.”

“History’s ok, don’t have to worry about your tomorrows. And no fun to read about the outside when I’m stuck here. World’s all screwed up as it is.”

Vern as reflex squinted at the two suns. J wiped his work on his over-alls. His hands stayed dirty and smelled of engine oil, a Pennzoil fragrance.

“You see—June, 1934 issue—solar flares-- the sun throws off these electrical pulses. The bigger they are, ka-bam, they hit the earth and knock out radio waves, messing with all these telephone-cell microwave towers you see today on the mountain tops? Comprende? Usually they don’t last long but now...” He too glanced towards the heavens, but turned away from the two fiery eyes staring back. “When you have the sun spit off a piece of itself, the energy thrown off must be supercharged and slamming us. I expect you’re not going to see much of anything work. All electrical inner guts zapped to mush. This is going to be big business for a good

electronics repair shop--for years to come. I could do that. I got my Tech School diploma ready to hang up somewhere down the road.”

Vern stared at his silent truck.

“Weird, just like you say. Everything here dead as roadkill, but three hours ago, I see this Lincoln Navigator zip past. It’s the only car on the road all day. I don’t get it.”

“What we need is back-up. It could get worse. Lose all power. You need to go and buy this place a larger generator. You have enough fuel to run one for a year, or until they jack back up the power grid.”

“If it’s happening all over, time we get to a store they’ll be sold out.” Vern threw his gaze up at the mesa. “Wonder if your Sanctuary friends have a spare? A lotta money spent up there.”

J smirked his reply, bitter, from past memories recalled.

“They’re not my buddies. Never seen them. And I’ve got no friends, no family left to hassle, except you two desert scorpions.”

Vern hoop shot his empty beer can into a barrel filled with discarded oil rags, and beer cans. “One trucker told me these Sanctuary folks must be a bunch of wealthy people on some sort of spiritual camping lark. Kinda like beating tom-toms and eating granola. But that’s a hell lot of truck-loads of trail mix or whatever they trucked in. You’re right. We need a spare

generator bad. The one I got is on its last leg. I bought it cheap off a KOA camper van so he could escape this place.” Vern gave off a snorting laugh. “He thought this was a vacation playground. Yeah, the fuckin’ Garden of Heatstroke.” Vern looked towards the diner. “Josette will ream me a new asshole if her TV stays busted more than a day.”

“Well, we’ll have to wait for the good folks to show up. Whatever goodies Sanctuary has up there behind Door Number One, even if it’s the Mega Jackpot, we can’t really walk in. I *no comprende* the combination. That *muy grande* steel door works on tumblers plus an electric key pad. I gave it a few shots in case they had the numbers one digit off. But for our sake, if they have a spare generator I’ll con them out of it.”

Their actual desperate reason for restoring and maintaining maximum electrical power opened the door of the luncheonette.

Josette’s hands were in rubber gloves and her hair bunned up in a scarf. Her gaunt face had the yellow pallor of a chain smoker, and a deep phlegm hacking cough to match. In her early thirties she looked older, her crinkled pre-melanoma skin spoke of hard living, outdoor toil and pleasure. Vern twisted the cap off another warm beer, and waved the bottle at her as his method of greeting. Vern liked what he saw but then Vern had never been much particular. If she wasn’t always dressed

grubby for lack of attention she could fix up pretty decent like the once a month she and Vern day tripped for supplies into Tonopah.

Josette watched the two men but her eyes lingered on J. After the TV fell into static snow Josette required new diversions. J avoided her eyes by turning over the Ford's ignition. *Nada*. Not even a grind of the starter. All three were edgy because they could not escape Last Stop even vicariously through the snowy unreliable television.

Without constant electricity, the gasping air conditioning put them to shake 'n baking, emotions steaming within. J knew for his own self-peace he had to find the way to have Josette reclining languid in her imaginary world of commercials and soap operas. A larger generator would restore a constant power source, and even if Josette could not find an outside world of network channels, there were the hours of recorded programming. His life had sunk to its lowest depths in the last year but screwing Josette just to get his jollies off was lower than a slinky lizard under a flat rock. Even J in his occasional immoral life had standards.

Josette viewed the empty roadway and gave the two men a shout.

“You think they’re coming today?”

Vern looked at the nothingness. His answer the same given to her two hours ago. "That's what the last trucker said. A bus load of them Sanctuary folks coming in from Orange County." Josette prayed it was so. She shook out her dust rag and went back to her impossible work, cleaning away years of stove and sink grime, sweeping up the husk-shelled roach fragments. Vern watched her depart.

"Refrigerator food's going bad. You'd better grab one of the sandwiches she's making up for those folks. Probably the best she's put a knife to in months."

"She's one shook-up woman." J's comment could have several interpretations so he said it as a throw-away line while closing his tool box.

"Only nowadays she gets excited when she's watchin' Jeopardy re-runs and she knows the answers," Vern observed dryly. "She's dead tired of me, more than normal. No fun with this heat in touching sweat that isn't yours or that you didn't cause in the first place. And she's going bonkers since she can't pick up her favorite soap. *Promises of Tomorrow.*"

"Where're we now?" Serious questions for serious times.

"The brain surgeon has to operate on the terrorist who killed his son."

"Poor Josette, she misses that, that'll drive her crazy, for sure."

“Yeah, and I’m gonna catch the fury of it. And I’m sure as hell not going to watch anymore of her taped reruns for the millionth time.”

“I see them coming.” J said that before he had even glanced up, so it seemed to Vern’s observation. As if the boy could sense fresh humanity approaching Last Stop. That boy is sometimes just freaky. Loneliness can do that to you. Vern’s eyes weren’t as good as the Mex’s and for a long time all he could see was a growing silver dot as it bounced towards them like a wavering star.

There were actually two vehicles in caravan, a private carrier bus with no markings and a black limousine following close behind. They pulled into Last Stop but neither vehicle stopped at the gas pumps. Doors opened and travelers stepped out.

In the curiosity that was to be expected Josette stood at the luncheonette door removing her work apron and gloves. Vern wished he had another beer. J leaned on the pick-up. They were the three designated greeters but they merely stared without howdie-do welcomes.

J gave the arrivals close inspection. He had not really been in conversational contact with people for the last several months, of his own choosing, and he was somewhat reticent to offer smiles too quickly. It was his nature to be suspicious and cautious; street living taught him wariness was a good side-kick.

There were twelve people on the bus including the driver, and J noted, they were all paired up, couples, men and women, differing ages, stretching to the long journey, gazing at the destination almost achieved, animated in smiles and small talk with each other. Odd, thought J, that the group all wore in a uniformed fashion statement, the color white, whether jeans or dress, shirts, even several with white ball caps but no insignias. He marveled: even dressed to white sox. Several of them saw the 'Restrooms' signs and moved that direction. Without words other couples entered the luncheonette. Josette retreated to grab up menus, hoping they would only order the Daily Special, the sandwiches, since that was all she had to offer.

From the limo three people exited, but not coupled as J determined by their mannerisms. The driver held the swagger of a wannabe mafia goomba, strength by steroids. Against the norm he wore a short-sleeve lime-green shirt and black pants. He did not move out of the sun but just stood there, waiting, drinking from a thermos that J guessed might not be

water. The two other limo passengers were young women, one a redhead anglo with freckles, and the shorter of the two, petite, a girl flowing black-hair down her back bearing Asian features. Again, the mandated white outfits, but these, as he could see, definitely bought with taste. Not tennis whites, more lounging, loose-fitting, light cotton, but sharp-looking.

Designer labels for sure. J classed the young women immediately as Sunset Boulevard girls, Melrose chic, upscale, not Ventura Boulevard, not his style, more out of his league. Their looks drew J's attention more so because they walked towards him.

Vern said under his breath to J the word 'generator' and walked away to talk to the bus driver. Vern saw the obvious. The driver and his wife were black, African American, piano-key colors in their apparel. That's right, Vern knew it was so, 'any Californicating club or cult had to have its *politically correct police* demanding minority quotas thrown into any mix. Vern could put up a 'good ol' boy' front if he had to. He wanted to find out who was in charge of this Tide-clean picnic. On his slow stroll to the bus he noticed that the limo door having been left open was pulled shut from the inside, one passenger smarter than the rest would stay put and enjoy the comfort of the air conditioning. Vern wished there was a way he could invite himself inside the limo to cool off, but he accepted his body odor

would not meet the Sanctuary criteria for desirables. He had decided without much thought given to the matter that these people were here only as long as potty break took, and a sandwich to consume. But why didn't they fill up for gas? He considered that. Perhaps after their day or two of chants and meditation they'd be fueling up for the return trip and there would be time enough to pry a dollar or two from their pockets.

The two girls that approached J were bubbly. Age-wise they both seem to J close to his, with the Asian girl somewhat younger, maybe a year out of high school. It was the redhead that pored out the maturity.

"And where are we?" A smile when spoken but a definite demand, no pleasing 'young man can you help us?'. J could understand that feeling. As if anything really mattered except her needs.

"Last Stop."

"Then where is this 'Sanctuary'?"

"That's up the road, against that mesa over there."

"God be praised. He has delivered us." Loud. There was a sing-song litany to her voice, not booming, more a comedic sigh of relief. She glanced to see who was near. The rest of her incantation startled him. "Damn L.A. is in fuckin' anarchy."

"Say again?"

The Asian girl spoke, her voice lighter, calm.

“What Sister Aimee means, and I apologize for her mouth, it’s been a long day of hardship, what with the sun sign from heaven and the ground shaking. Before we left in the middle of the night we heard rumors there were no tides on the ocean. Imagine that, the Pacific Ocean quiet like a glass lake. Everyone wants to flee but no one knows what to do or where to go. At least we have the path to follow.”

The girl known as Sister Aimee butted in with a rush. “Civilization is running amok. Cars causing traffic jams, the ultimate gridlock. We barely made it past mobs rioting. Stores have been picked clean from looting. I’m sure the army has been called in to restore order. It better be quiet by the time we return.” She changed moods, bouncing into agitation.

“Restrooms?”

J pointed at the long line that had formed at both entrances.

“Shit,” said Sister Aimee. J knew she spoke the word as the predicament.

“See the motel rooms over there. I just finished working on plumbing in number Nine. Door’s unlocked. Bathroom’s even cleaner than the station ones.”

“Gracias, amigo, you are my savior.” She trotted off.

J and the Asian girl stood awkward, glances exchanged. He was not shy but he could not glance at her without wanting to give a probing stare. Women in his life, at least the most recent acquaintances, best be left forgotten as unremarkable, as he did with them, with no taste lingering.

They stared at the coming and goings of the white attired flock.

“What’s this all about?” J needed no preface.

“Us, you mean?”

“Yeah, Sanctuary and you all.” Her smile brightened a weary face as if his question gave her renewal from the exhausting drive.

“We are all followers of a new religion, not yet formed, but to be the ***One True Religion***. We’ve come for a month long sabbatical retreat, really a gathering of all those that the Leader has chosen, to meditate, pray, seek enlightenment, and create what the world needs in this time of New Beginnings.”

“CTR?” The signs of trespass.

“Yes, it stands for ‘**Church of the True Religion**’. By some we are called that, CTR, others say ‘Seders’, but sometimes not in the kindest of terms. Meanings have lost substances. Everything is being boiled down to fit into initials or one sentence media sound bites. Our final name is to be chosen by the Leader, by the blessing of us all.”

J looked into her child-like face and saw a beauty that overwhelmed. Believing what she said had been pure truth J felt he could almost see a halo glow to her skin. J on the other hand had his own religion. J being the center of it and too far back he learned to speak his mind and brawl with the expected consequences.

“Girl, it sounds like someone is feeding you a lot of sugar and crap.”

Her eyes widened and before he could discover if she was going to call him names (she would not curse he knew) and slap his face, or if she would turn the other cheek, the ground began to move shaking with tremor violence.

The earthquake rippled the ground under their feet. There was no place to flee or hide, all helpless to a Nature insane. The old fifteen-foot sign announcing Last Stop swayed, and toppled, luckily, away from the buildings. Dishes were heard breaking inside the luncheonette, cans falling everywhere off the garage shelves.

The young woman fell against J and clung to him. He felt her warmth, sought to comfort her fears and he held her against the rolling land until they could stand no more and fell together, she on top of him. In moments the ground waves subsided and for seconds their faces were

inches apart, their eyes seeking, but not knowing what. Post earthquake the first voice the two of them heard was Sister Aimee's.

"I wish somebody would save me like that." The two people quickly rose from the ground, distancing themselves away from the embrace as if it had been wrong, both embarrassed. J's emotions were askew, floating.

Everyone found themselves quickly milling away from the buildings and vehicles, doing a head count, bandaging a few cuts and scrapes.

"The End is near," screamed an older woman, deep in wrinkles, who could have been a witness to most of the last century's close call endings. Her octogenarian husband echoed, "Repent and dwell in the House of the Lord Forever."

A black SUV answered by descending from the mesa road in a red cloud of dust and pulling up next to the limo. All watched as the truck's driver went to the limo where the window rolled down, and the man bent to talk to the hidden passenger. The arriving driver's features showed a pale, half bearded face, narrow to a chin point with hair long and tied back in a knot, dressed not in white but in jeans and denim workshirt. J could see they were fresh store bought. What bothered J the most is that he was suppose to be the security watchman and some how this man had gotten past him, and had been up at Sanctuary for at least half a day.

“The Creep has arrived.” Sister Aimee’s whispered description received a silent agreement by J and filed in his mind forever without having never met the man. The young woman, the Asian girl, who now stood several feet away from him, and did not look his way, sought to apologize for her ‘sister’.

“That man is the Leader’s right hand man. The CTR business manager, but he is more. He would be next in line if something happened to the Leader. But nothing will ever happen to the Leader.” She said the last with a very apparent glaze of adoration to her eyes.

“In his previous life,” explained Sister Aimee, who had now moved closer to J to take the place of her companion, “That weasel was an accountant. Now he looks over the Church’s books, but no one looks over his shoulder.”

“Sister Aimee.” She was being admonished by the younger woman, and did realize she had been talking too much, and it was not her place, especially in front of a stranger, a good-looking one at that. She sought to bring to the surface the right mixture of contriteness and humility, but not too much. There was not suppose to be a social strata in CTR but one existed in subtlety and would continue to do so until everything at this concave would be settled, and the new sub-leaders chosen, new rules put

in place. Sister Aimee had not sacrificed everything of her spoiled former existence to seek a purer self not to be outshone or left behind. She knew a part of her re-birth was to suffer and she must bear all she could. This included tolerating with cutesy smiles and hugging friendship her angel-pure fellow acolyte. Trying to think less of the 'me' side definitely for Sister Aimee was spiritual flagellation. She would graduate this program of soul boot camp, tell them she had gotten her act together, and go back to the fast-pace. CTR was her last chance, as her parents told her. She sincerely worried if her folks had made it through the earthquakes with minimal damage and as was their reaction to stress or danger had locked themselves into their Bel-Air home, and turned on the alarm. Now, for the next thirty days, she must play the game.

“Yes, Sister Kim, I spoke in words I would have used before I entered the Church. I am seeking to be better. Brother Kendall is a remarkable man and we should all be honored he is one of our leaders.” Sister Aimee huffed her shoulders and her face twitched as if she had swallowed bad medicine, and she walked away. With a head bent glance at J, Sister Kim followed.

J at least had a name. Sister Kim. Why was she with these looney tunes?

“Of all the gin joints in the world, and she had to walk into yours.”

Vern had returned with a fresh beer and an extra, both cold.

“Bus is fully stocked. I could have died and gone to heaven. Artic air. Driver, his name is Martin, keeps the engine running. I could hijack it and drive to Lake Mead and dive in the water, what’s left after the shakin’, that is. They even got better finger foods than Josette could ever manage.”

“What were you saying?” J swished the beer in his mouth as he drank, as if the coldness would soothe his whole body. The hop nectar of the gods tasted great.

“Not paying attention and watching the new scenery that’s what I’m saying. Anyway, I notice of all the people that show up, the two best looking gravitate right to you, and I mean gravitate when the ground is rockin’ and rollin’ and one I see falls right into your arms. If they all stay another ten minutes maybe you could lasso her, and take her into Number Six, with the clean sheets. You been horny so long you’d only need a minute.”

“Vern, shut it off. They’re doing their powwow at Sanctuary for a month and then they’re history. We’re not on the invitation list.”

“You’re probably right, especially since that Chink girl, would get you in trouble, and probably start hollering, ‘rape’. Seems like she is already spoken for.”

“What are you saying?”

“She and that red-haired vixen are both ‘betrothed’ to the Leader, if that’s the word from Martin the bus driver. Part of this meeting they’re having is to see which one is going to marry the head man, to carry his holy seed.”

“You gotta be shitting me.”