

BOOK ONE:
THE ORDER OF THINGS

...the order of things must be supplanted by guts or brains in the interest of survival. —Robert Pinsky, The Life of David

1

HE KNEW BY HIS MOTHER'S WALK that she had given up trying to make him happy. Now, except to assure herself that he was in tow, she would ignore him, deliberately force him to string along and be the dinghy bumping after her and her interests until, eventually, the two of them would find themselves washed up on the same shore, castaways and complicit.

This was a familiar game.

The boy slowed and searched for an excuse to pitch the mothership upon the rocks. The shop windows reflected pink, yellow, silver, green, for by that time of the afternoon the sun had begun to recede and slip over the edge of the great wall of mountains standing to the east. Simultaneously, the electrical bud of the city relaxed and opened, tentatively at first, then gaining in confidence and warmth. Although it was a city of millions, it was also a city at the beginning of the world. That's what the boy said to himself, for he'd seen the eternity of savage garden on the plane coming in. Fifty thousand miles of river in that jungle, his mother'd told him, pointing out the window, most of it still officially unexplored.

As the city of light spun around him, he imagined that he was the explorer just back from two, three years of living in a dugout. He slowed for a moment and swayed left and right. It was strange, the unmoving earth, stranger still the people so unaware of him and the dangers he'd faced. Only last week, there'd been the anaconda that swam up in the night to his lightly dipping canoe. Anchoring its tail in the muddy river bottom, it raised its massive head above the gunnels and began to pour silently aboard. When he'd awakened at first light, he was eyeball to eyeball with the monster—and the little boy who'd called the river snags was gone, swallowed headfirst, poisoned and asphyxiated, then devoured, inch by inch. He pulled his knife from the sheath at his waist and sliced open the stupefied snake from beneath its jaw to the end of the swelling. The child was there all right, but gelatinous, pupa-like, dissolving into formlessness in the reptile's powerful acids.

That's when he'd decided to return to civilization. Enough was enough. He had his maps; he had his gold and precious stones. It was a hard and thankless life and he craved a little distinction. The explorer looked around and let himself be dazzled by electricity. What a marvel after all those months and months of dense black swallowing skies. He put his hand in his pocket and fingered his gold. There'd be a decent meal tonight, and a soft bed with soft sheets.

Something wet splattered on his forehead. He wiped at it with his hand and felt the stuff in his hair as well. It happened again. He stopped, looked up. Was it raining? Was it pigeons?

An old woman, short and round with an apron tied over her belly approached him clicking her tongue and pointing at the row of dark windows above them. She laughed and jabbered as if it were all a silly mistake, then taking a large handkerchief from her pocket, she wiped at his shoulders and the collar of his jacket. He smiled vaguely and tried to get out of her way, but she continued to coo, sorry, sorry, sorry. He noticed that all the teeth on the top of her mouth were capped in gold and he wondered... But suddenly, she'd disappeared and his mother was there. It all happened so fast.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, gripping his shoulder and scanning him from head to foot. She was only an inch or two taller and he was suddenly sick of it.

"Nothing," he said, brushing her off. "I don't know. Something fell on me and that lady..."

"Check for your wallet."

He stuck his hand in his pocket and found it empty. Panicky, he patted his jacket, his shirt, his pockets, again, but he knew she'd taken it. She'd robbed him of his gold and precious jewels.

He stood for a moment, glaring at his mother, and then he began to howl.

2

THE HAG. THE COW. THE FAT WITCH. The return to the hotel blurred with rage. Ugly. Stupid. Tricked. He felt sick and polluted with the smell of the stinking rag she used to disguise her trespass. Again and again her fat troll fingers slid into his pocket, waggling and snagging the edge of his wallet by the stitching. He trembled with revulsion and the desire to grind her palm beneath his heel, feel her knuckles pop from their sockets like greasy eyeballs. He burned so with the insult that when his parents asked him to shower and dress up for fancy dinner with their friends he felt like he'd go up in flames.

At first, he only stared hard at his mother. Surely she would come to his rescue... Surely she knew how he felt... But she was reading and didn't feel his fury, although he waited, holding himself completely still, a pillar of icy fire.

"I don't want to go anywhere," he said, finally, trying to make his words cut like swords. His mother looked up.

“I don’t want to go anywhere tonight,” he repeated, his eyes burning holes through her forehead.

The father lowered his paper, pondered the boy, pondered the mother. “What’s going on here?”

“I want to stay in the room.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“That is not an answer,” said the father, snapping the newsprint and spreading it smooth. He was sitting in the flowery hotel room easy chair and had his feet in his shoes on the bed.

“I just want to stay here,” said the boy stubbornly.

“Why?”

“Because I’m tired.” He tried another tack. “Please,” he pleaded, “can’t I stay here?”

“No,” said the father.

“I’m not a baby,” the boy said, changing his tone again. “I happen to know what’s good for me.”

“Babies are egocentric,” the father answered coolly. “They strive to self-serve; precisely what you appear to be doing.”

“Pace,” said the mother, swishing between them, patting everything back into place. “It’s one of the oldest restaurants in town. It used to be a dining club for men and only began allowing women three years ago.” She held up the guidebook she’d been reading and rattled it. “It says here that each supper party has its own private room with a bar and a fireplace.”

The boy mouthed “So what?” to the mother who wasn’t looking.

“But more important than sight-seeing,” said the father, letting his voice grow large, “is the fact that we’ll be doing something together. We’re a long way from home and I’ve been busy all day and I’d like to spend the evening with my two most favorite people.” He looked at the son and the mother brightly. “You can tell me all about your adventures.”

The boy ground his teeth. At any moment he would explode. “What difference will it make if I’m there or not?” he sputtered. “You’ll just end up ignoring the baby, like always, when you’re with your friends.”

The father looked hard at his son, but there was no anger. “Do I do that? I’m sorry,” he said slowly. “And I didn’t mean to imply that you were a baby. I was only replying to your argument. On the contrary, the fact that you’re no longer a baby explains why you’re along on this trip. You’re quite old enough now to enjoy the museums, the food, to join in the conversation at dinner. At home, you know I like to hear what you have to say.”

“Well, if dragging me out makes you feel better...” the boy sneered with an impotence that made his eyes swell with tears.

“Pace,” said the mother softly.

But the boy was just getting going. “Maybe, just maybe I don’t feel like it. Maybe I don’t want to be *old enough*. I don’t even speak Spanish! How do you expect me to join in the conversation when I don’t speak the lingo? Huh? Remember, you wouldn’t let me take Spanish: you said French was the language of culture. But that doesn’t matter because what you really want to do is take me out and show me off to all your friends... like a pet... like a pet prize.” He was almost spitting. “Meet the next-in-line; so well-behaved, so charming, so bookish; going to Harvard soon, if I can get him in...”

“Pace.”

Pace was losing his balance; he was tumbling headfirst into a hot dark hole. “I’m tired of being bookish and well-behaved. I’m tired of pretending to be the way you’ve made me. I don’t want to be old enough. I don’t want to be what you want me to be...!”

“Pace.” This time the mother’s voice stopped the boy. She walked slowly between her husband and her son and held out her hands: “You see, darling,” she said to the father, “he was robbed this afternoon... Perhaps...”

“Robbed? How?” There was both concern and excitement in the father’s voice. There was also relief.

The boy was having none of it. He clenched his teeth and stared at the soles of the father’s shoes. Not now. Not now. He wanted to keep falling. He wanted to splinter into a million jagged pieces. This argument would not end with a description of his humiliation.

But the mother didn’t expect him to explain himself. She said: “An old woman, apparently, was the culprit. She pretended to help clean something off his jacket and then, behold, his wallet was missing.”

There was a pause.

“Where were you?” asked the father, looking at the mother.

“I was... He was...” The mother hesitated and the boy’s heart swelled with the murmur of her guilt. “Pace was trailing a bit,” she admitted.

The family was silent for a long moment, silent with their thoughts—the son glaring at the mother’s back, the mother watching the father, the father with a far-off look in his eyes.

“Hah!” the father suddenly laughed out loud, “Hah! Hah!” exploding and shattering the blame and resentment. “Did something fall on your head?” he shouted. “I’ll bet it did!” He roared again, slapping his knees.

The boy and the mother gaped.

“It’s old-as-the-hills that gypsy trick and it takes two connivers.” The father jumped out of his chair, the better to show them. “The one behind spits over the head of the victim, causing the distraction.” He leapt forward and pretended to send a spray of spit over the head of the mother; clearly it would have landed all over the son. “Now,” he said, “the one in front turns around, consoles, cleans up the fictitious mess and steals the wallet.” He ran around to the son, tapped at him with a pretend handkerchief, then made an elaborate grab for the boy’s pocket and held up the invisible wallet, waving it back and forth. “Hah!” he laughed again. “Hah, hah! Really, it’s something of a honor to have been robbed in that way, my boy. They’ve probably been using the same maneuver since the time of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” He sat back down, panting slightly, lifting his legs and crossing his feet. “Absolutely dazzling,” he chuckled. “Completely fantabulous.” The father half raised the paper once again.

He must have stolen one last look at his young son’s face though, seen that it was falling apart, dissolving, since he slid his feet off the bed and added gently, “I’m sorry, son. It’s okay. You can stay here tonight. It’s okay. Did you lose a lot?”

But all the boy could think to say was, “Spit?”

3

WALTER PACE CLOVER III, named after his father and his grandfather before him, stood in the shadow of the velvet curtain and observed the swirling dancers. Somewhere near the center of the pattern was the girl whose eyes, he’d told her, were sunlit forest pools where thoughts swam like golden fishes. She would be wearing white—she would always wear white—and her forehead was an ivory palace with large, white, beautiful rooms, one opening from another, out and out, forever. He had told her this too, and believed it himself. Once they’d sat together on a couch and she was so beautiful he had to kiss her. He’d told her stories all night, even the one about the frogs that left little babies under the burdock leaves, and they’d promised each other all this world and the next one too. But he’d been wrong. She was beautiful, but the beauty was all about surfaces. Behind the smiling lips and eyes there were no thoughts like goldfish, no beautifully furnished convictions. He turned away from the dance with both sadness and calm and began to undress slowly, laying each piece of clothing in order of its removal on the chair next to the bed, then inserting himself under the blankets like a knife into its sheath. Straight and cool and motionless with his head between two enormous pillows, the sounds of the room and the rooms beyond filled his senses—the air-conditioner, the fans, the water falling and

rising and rushing around corners, windows opening and doors clicking shut; one engine winding down and another grinding on as if the hotel were breathing air, pumping blood, churning guts. Pace closed his eyes and put his fingers in his ears, listening hard for the passing of his own time.

4

“DID YOU DO ANY READING LAST NIGHT?”

“No.”

“Don’t you have final exams coming up soon?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t school let out next month?”

“Yes.”

Dropped by a taxi a few blocks from the city marketplace, father and son were ambling. Whenever his father wanted a bonding experience, they went for an amble. Swagger was more like it, thought Pace, who despised the ritual.

“You would have enjoyed dinner last night.” Mister Clover spoke in a voice oozing chattiness. “We had twin waiters attending us. Identical twins. One wore a white carnation, and the other a red one. It was rather eerie.”

Pace said nothing. He didn’t feel like being friendly. He didn’t feel like being interested. The truth was, he felt a little sick, a little feverish, a little sore-throaty this morning. He wished he were home, in bed, alone, both his parents gone off to work. But, no. Here he was with this fatherly peacock, strutting down the middle of a busy sidewalk. Pace could feel the pedestrian irritation building up behind them like an angry wave.

“Are you prepared for the exams?” Unable to interest his son in the weirdly foreign, the father returned to business-as-usual. “If you want to go to Saint Alban’s next year, it can all hinge on those scores.”

“I’m as prepared as you and nine years of private instruction can make me,” Pace answered. He was having to dance around at his father’s side to avoid touching the people pushing to get around them. Pace didn’t have a wallet on him this morning, but he kept his hands jammed down inside his front pockets, just in case, and that put him off balance.

“Education is what makes us civilized,” the father recited.

“And private education makes us what, Dad?”

Walter Clover placed his hand on his son’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Pace jumped and searched his father’s face, but Mister Clover wasn’t angry, no, he was beaming at a table covered with huge glass urns of candy-colored juices.

“I’m glad we got this time together,” he said, nodding at the juices, moving on, ignoring his son’s prickly question. “Now don’t those have just the same shape as Egyptian canopic jars?” He paused to point out a display of pink and blue striped water jugs, laughing and wagging his head at the wonder of it all. “Isn’t it delightful? Not only globalization in the form of materials—they needn’t carry their water in heavy clay—but globalization of cultural values as well. Aesthetics. A thing of beauty is a thing of beauty, no matter what its original use.” He ambled on, but the lecture continued. “Why, just think of it, son, the very notion that ordinary life needn’t be filled with ordinary ugly items. Simple things of beauty are a cultural import, don’t you agree?”

Pace didn’t know if he agreed or not, but it didn’t really matter: his father had always liked to talk more than listen and the questions were just for show.

Straight ahead of them, through a vast garden of cut flowers, loomed the dome of the market entrance. His father walked toward it, pontificating, while Pace followed, listening and not listening. To pontificate means to speak like a pope, except that his dad was wearing a red cap, and that was what cardinals wore...

Something happened then.

Something tickled him, or tripped him, or maybe it was the tiniest piece of volcanic glass that fastened to the liquid in his eye and began to swim and scar, but suddenly, to Pace, his dad was comical and stupid, ridiculous, and he couldn’t help himself: he began to trot and waddle and grin like a dumb tubby monk following his bumptious master.

The temperature sank as they dropped down a flight of stairs into the market interior, vast as a cathedral and just as gloomy. Pace crossed himself, praising his good fortune, and toddled after the cardinal down the first aisle of onions and zucchinis, past great wads of carrots knotted by the hair, tomatoes and apples stacked in wide pyramids. There was an aisle for dried beans and one for chilies, and off the aisles were dozens of small chapel-like spaces displaying cooking herbs, baking spices, dark honey in wine bottles and tall spools of sugar so raw it was nearly black. At the very end of the aisle, where all of the aisles ended, there was a great light-filled nave devoted to creams, butters and other milky products. The vendors sat on high stools, chanting their concoctions of cheese wrapped in banana leaves or cheese wrapped in what looked like old socks, or gobs of cheese floating in clear liquid inside plastic bags.

Pace trailed vaguely after his father who still strutted and nodded where the harvest met with his approval. Yes, Mister Cardinal Clover pokes his finger at a baggie of cream, sniffs at the butter that isn’t yellow, but never, not once, does he bother to notice whether his monk is attentive or not.

Bored by the play-acting and feeling sick again with the smells, Pace devised another entertainment, a better one, more exciting... dangerous... He would be a spy! A spy in the Vatican of Food.

The object was to maintain visual contact with the target—Cardinal Clover—while at the same time conducting reconnaissance for an ultimate ambush. Pace stood stock-still in the middle of the aisle and willed his father to look at him—it was only right to give the old man a fair chance—and after counting to ten, he slowly sank to a crouch behind a basket. He could still see his father, leaning intently over a table of chilies, but he knew that at this point his father would only find him if all along he'd been paying attention. Even so, the boy thought, never underestimate the enemy was the first order of war.

Pace's father, unaware, turned and with his hands clasped behind his back, ambled off.

Game on.

For a time the spy was forced to merely tail his prey, waiting for him to choose one of the four aisles leading back to the center of the market. Once the prey had made his choice—the third aisle—the spy slipped quickly down the second aisle to recon the forward territory. The four major aisles led to a wide crossing with the main entrance/exit stairs on either side. The crossing, being a kind of thoroughfare, teemed with women and children and baskets and all matter of this and that—tiny mounds of peanuts, dried shrimp, little grass nests with speckled eggs, raspberries threaded through a reed and tied like a necklace, oranges the size of grapes and lemons the size of coconuts—but Pace quickly determined that the aisles on the other side of the crossing were all dedicated to fish and seafood. Darting back down the outside aisle, parallel to his dad, the boy caught an odd glimpse of the old man looking straight up into the rafters. Pace didn't stay to find out—he had more scouting to do. He returned to the crossing and headed up the right-hand stairs.

The sunlight dazzled him. And it was hot. And there was a noise like bees.

For it was bees.

Thousands, billions of bees swarming over low tables of gooey fruit and the women who sold it. On the women's arms, hair, cheeks—the bees were everywhere—on their flowery aprons, their bare brown feet. For a moment, Pace felt distress. Not that he was allergic. No. It was the surprise. No, it was the horror of the insect world so at home within the human.

Unable to take another step forward, Pace backed to the edge of the stairs, turned around, and fled inside. Straight back down the outside aisle he ran, around the corner through the cheeses, and, slowing now, up the row where he'd last seen his father.

He stood still. His heart was pounding. He wiped the sweat away from his eyes.

Where was his dad?

The crowd pushed up behind him, parted, flowed forward. It wasn't a sea of people, it was a river; a sluggish, mostly brown river of uniform surface. In other words, there was no tall man in a red cap. No Cardinal Clover. No target. No prey. No dad.

Not to worry. A momentary setback of spycraft and easily remedied. Pace cautiously but swiftly passed from shore to shore, back and forth across the aisle until he reached the crossing, crossed it, then a quick check of rows one, two, three... and there—ahah!—was the man in the red cap, the Prince of the Church among the fishes. If the master takes the high road, the squirt will take the low, and Pace chose the aisle marked Mariscos, which sounded like a good name for a girl.

But what an museum of the weird! How could anyone take this stuff home for dinner? Pink, purple, blue, blistered, hairy, pimples, puckered, gray and glistening with ooze. He stopped to watch a pretty lady speak to a vender, her voice sweeter than any of these slimy creatures deserved. The vender smiled and scooped a mess of white snotty-looking stuff into a plastic bag, giving it a quick twist and a knot. The lady paid him with more songbird notes, then turned and walked away. Out of her back, a fat baby was growing, fully formed.

Pace shook himself; he was losing his concentration, falling down on the job. Kicking up his heels, he scooted to the end of the aisle and took a sniff, left and right. No dad. He peeked down the next row, then stared in disbelief: his dad wasn't there either. How could he have gotten through the fish that fast? Pace jumped over to the next and last aisle, and, still cautious, peeked again. Still no dad. Confused and a little alarmed, he turned in a circle. What to do?

Be logical, he thought. Dad was always logical.

Pace turned and began back along the rows, not bothering to hide himself much, and when he got to the wall, he retraced, although it was obvious that his father wasn't walking in any one of them. Logically, his dad wouldn't have gone back to the vegetable and cheese side as he'd already been there, so that left only the outdoor markets, left and right. Since he'd been in the fish aisles closest to the right exit, it made sense he'd go that way.

Pace ran down through the fish and up the stairs, once again blinded by the sunlight at the top. Shading his eyes with both hands, he took stock. No bees on this side, at least, but plenty of flowers. This was the way they'd come into the market. Since the vender booths were about chest high, Pace found that it was possible to see through several layers of corridors and he ran through the maze,

jumping up whenever the mounds of blooms were too high. Finally, finally, he spotted his father, walking very slowly, still nodding his head.

Taking advantage of an alley, Pace got within one corridor of his dad and slowed his steps to match, at once realizing how fast his heart was beating, how really frightened he'd been. He was sweating all over too. And his face felt swollen. Even his eyeballs burned.

And that got him to thinking: Why hadn't his dad noticed that he wasn't around? Why did his dad care so little what happened to him?

He knew what the answer was; it was just like those questions his dad asked for show: It's not that I don't care, son, but you're old enough to handle the consequences of inattention. If you're going to play the game, then be the winner.

He was right. If Pace had wanted to look at stuff, then he should have stuck to his father's side. He'd chosen to compete and then he'd let himself get distracted. It wouldn't happen again.

That his dad hadn't seemed to notice his absence wasn't much of an incentive for an ambush, but there had to be an end to the play and bushwhack it was. Pace decided that he would appear suddenly, ahead of his father, nonchalantly leaning on a booth, maybe picking his teeth or eating a strange fruit. But the flower market wasn't a good place to hide—too wide-open, too easy. Soon enough his dad meandered into another covered marketplace and the going got tough as the vender booths were like small shops and it wasn't possible to see into the different aisles. Pace was forced back into trailing mode, stepping neatly into the spaces occupied by his father only moments before—candles, tin pots, leather sandals—the problem was, how to get around him without being seen.

And then it came to him. It was brilliantly simple. As the great Chinese master Sun Tzu said, Speed is the essence of war. All he had to do was get as close as possible to the target, wait until he was occupied in the inspection of supplies, and outflank him, fast. Then it was just a matter of waiting for the enemy to walk into the trap.

Pace moved in, hiding behind a hanging column of baskets, then a tower of buckets, then more baskets. Finally, his dad became absorbed at a counter, appeared even to be bargaining with the merchant, and Pace made his move. Flattening himself against the far stalls, he flew like a bat—flicker and flat, flicker and flat—until he reached the end of the corridor. Safe. Now, for the prop. He ran his eyes over the assortment of merchandise at hand: shoes, more baskets, painted clay pots. Nothing spoke to him. He'd have to use action, then, to display his heroism. He'd wait until his father approached the corner, then he, Pace, would walk out, practically run into him, Oops! he'd say. Hello there! What a riot.

Unwillingly to risk detection after such careful planning, Pace maintained cover and kept a lookout on the ground, waiting for approaching pant legs. There they were! He bounded out—a little too eagerly—getting himself all tangled up. “Oops,” he said, then laughed and looked up into his dad’s face.

Except that it wasn’t his dad. The man was tall and wore a red cap. He was a foreigner, but he wasn’t his dad.

5

STUNNED AND EMBARRASSED, Pace backed off the stranger, sputtering apologies which the man answered in French: It’s okay, lad. Are you all right? Pace nodded his head and at the same time dodged around the man to run blindly back the way he’d come, exploding into the flower stalls and dashing willy-nilly up and down the rows; up and down the rows until flowers gave way to vegetables, to songbirds, to firewood, the smell of hot corn and chicken soup, plastic buckets, shoes... where was he? Fruit, people, color blurring and him, running like a dumb rabbit, just running to get away and nowhere to go. His eyes were watering—no, he was crying. He had to settle down. He had to think logically. Shrinking from the flow of shoppers, he shoved his hands deep in his pockets and glued his feet to the spot. Breathe. Think.

Once, when he was little, he’d been playing under a clothing carousel at Marshall Field’s department store and fell asleep. When he woke up and crawled out of his hiding place, he was immediately and alarmingly swooped off his feet and carried to an office where his mother was sitting in a chair with a look so scared and scary that he felt sorry for himself and cried.

His mother always said, If you get lost, don’t wander around looking for me. Sit down in one place and wait for me to find you.

Okay, but where would she find him? Where should he sit? He wanted to dash off, find this ideal spot, get busy waiting, but he forced his hands back into his pockets. Think.

The best place to wait would be obvious and exposed, a place where he could both see and be seen. A place that his father must pass... where his mother would come. In a flash he knew where it was: the entrance stairs to the big sunken market. That was the place to go.

A place to go, yes, but impossible to stay. Pace found the stairs so jammed with shoppers that it was out of the question to sit or even stand still as the people jammed up behind him, waiting for him to move. Repeatedly going up

and then back down the stairs seemed like an option until he tried it a few times and it made him feel insane.

What to do? Where should he go?

He was lost.

He couldn't think or breath properly.

He didn't know how to behave, where to turn.

So he followed the woman directly in front of him.

He couldn't see her face, but she wore a green skirt; she held a basket in one hand and a child in the other. She seemed to know where she was going. Maybe she would notice him, help him, take his hand.

Down the stairs they went and into the market where she turned down the aisle of dried beans, then back up the aisle of chilies, stopping every now and again to make a purchase. He saw that she had a kind face and took good care to keep her child safe, only letting go of his hand during the exchange of money. She walked slowly, looking at the wares on both sides of the aisle, and Pace followed at a distance. But when they reached the crossing, it was harder to keep track of her in the crowd and he let himself get closer, closer, until he could almost reach out a hand and touch her.

His mother always said, If worse comes to worse, pick out a woman who looks like a good mom and ask her for help.

"Help me," he said to her. "I'm lost. Help me."

The woman looked at him curiously, smiled a little, and walked away. Pace went after her.

"Help me, please," he begged, getting under her basket arm. This time she glanced at him sideways from of the corner of her eye and tugged her child to her hip.

"Please," he tried again, in French, "please help me."

The woman whirled on him, baring her teeth, almost snarling and she said something that made the people around them turn and stare. Then, she grabbed her child and fled. Pace tried to follow, but a fat lady stuck out a ferocious lip, blocking his way. He retreated, turned, and walked the only path left open to him: up the stairs to the candy, and the bees.

The stairs were long and steep. Since the candysellers were mostly at the bottom, in the shade, Pace climbed into the sun and sat down.

Although this entry to the market wasn't as busy, it was still hectic enough to make him feel like he was in the way. He scooted over against the wall and pulled his knees to his chest.

This was where he would stay, this was where he'd be found.

And at first, Pace was watchful, anticipating his father's red cap and nodding

step, imagining the relief on his face when he saw that his son was safe. But the people passed and passed and the sun grew hotter and the legs, the skirts, the baskets swirled... black heads, brown heads, red-hatted heads circling... the warm, too warm sunshine and the sleepy, faraway drone of the bees.

• • •

Snowflakes appeared in the lamplight, the tiny crystals clinging to the fuzz of his sweater. It was getting dark and already so cold. Poor little lad, he'd tramped all day through the market but no one had bought a single one of his matches. He knew that if he went home his father would beat him and he'd be sent to the corner under the window without any supper. Poor little boy, he was so tired and so cold and so hungry that it felt his stomach gnaw at his bones with thin sharp teeth.

He curled up against the wall and took some of the matches from his pocket. They were the thick wooden kind with electric blue tips. If he lit one, maybe it would warm his hands. Yes, he struck it against the wall and it blazed like a candle. He stretched his other hand out to its warmth and bright light and suddenly, it wasn't a single light, it was two, three, four, why thirteen candles, all blazing away on the top of a sugary cake. A thirteenth birthday cake. His mother had made it for him—chocolate with caramel icing—and next to the cake was an enormous glass of creamy milk. But even as he reached for the milk, a whirl of stinging snow snapped at the candles with thin sharp teeth, eating them up, and he was alone and in the dark with a blackened matchstick between his fingers.

6

IT WAS DARK when he got up from the empty wall. The bees, the sweets, the shoppers and venders had all disappeared.

He was completely alone.

He stood where he was and listened.

Wind, distant traffic.

He walked to the top of the stairs and looked around. The booths with their pyramids of fruits and vegetables were shrouded in plastic sheets which cracked and rustled in the breeze, but Pace wasn't afraid. He wasn't afraid because it wasn't real. He wasn't awake. None of this was real. None of this was really happening. It was all a dream.

A dog came trotting around a corner, but shied off when it spotted the boy

and Pace followed, for no other reason than the dog was alive and moving and it seemed to know where it was going. Maybe it would lead him to the next thing, to a feast or a swimming pool or a beautiful girl with wings. Or maybe the dog belonged to the yeomen of the night market. He would find them playing cards in a smoky shed or tossing dice against a wall and they'd invite him to a mug of warm beer or else they'd pull out their knives and make him run for his life.

Not to chance scaring the animal, Pace held back, slowing when the dog slowed, stopping altogether when the mutt found something interesting to sniff. The dog didn't appear to notice him at all, trotting confidently through the maze of tables and booths. The princess Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of string, the trick to finding his way out of the Minotaur's monster labyrinth. Walter Pace Clover III had a dog, and they were both following his nose. Weaponless, Theseus had found the Minotaur asleep in his lair and beat him to death with his fists. Pace Clover would use his fists and his feet. He assumed a right-ready boxing position and began with some straight punches and jabs, a hook, a cross, then a quick straight kick to give him time to launch the uppercut, a spin back... but where was the dog?

He paused, knees bent, balancing on his toes, breathing lightly, letting the sounds of the market sort themselves out: wind... plastic... paper... canvas... dog. He moved silently, swiftly down the middle of the aisle until he'd almost reached the place, then crouched... and sprang! The dog leapt back, startled at first, but the surprise transforming instantly to fear and outrage. The animal's lips and snout rolled back from its teeth as its body contracted, released; the dog hurtling out, snarling and knocking Pace on his butt before running off.

Wake up, Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Wake up! This was the worst day of his life and he was playing games with a dog. Pace crawled into the animal's hiding place under a booth and tried to face facts.

Fact number one: He was lost.

Fact number two: It was dark.

Fact number three: He didn't speak Spanish.

But the really stupid awful thing, the thing he hadn't let himself think about too closely because it was too awful and too stupid, was the fact that he had no idea what his hotel was called.

He needed to think, remember.

He remembered pulling up in front of the hotel on the day they arrived: he'd been sitting in the back seat of the cab and his mother was next to him; yes, she told him to slide over and get out on her side so he wouldn't be stepping into traffic. Like he was blind. Like he was a blind baby.

Forget it. Forget about it. Concentrate.

He put his head in his hands and closed his eyes. There, he could see the front door and the doorman in dark red and black. A short awning extended over the entry and halfway to the street and that was black and red too.

Concentrate.

Written on the side of the awning was an “M”, a fancy “M”. Or, was it an “H”? But “H” could be just the first letter of “Hotel”. He dug his fists into his eyeballs. Make it appear. But the awning got mixed up with the carpet in the lobby which made him think of the office at school and the principal’s shiny shoes peeking out of the cubby under his desk like two little doggies.

Concentrate.

He put his hands on his knees, took a couple of deep breaths, tried to relax. That was when he heard them coming.

They came like a Roman phalanx, named for the fingers of the hand, warriors marching thick feet in thick sandals; one, then two by two, closely abreast, these men with long swords swinging. Pace held his breath and made himself invisible beneath the booth. He could only see them from the waist down, their heavy belted tunics, their black knotty legs, the flash of polished steel. They didn’t shuffle or speak. Only a creak of leather, the smell of oil and stable, a light dust rising off the paving stones. They passed and Pace held his breath, motionless, listening.

For there was another sound. A scuffle, a bump, something like a hiccup, then running feet. They were near him. They were... dogs? Rats? No...

They were children. He could see them clearly now. They were having some kind of argument in pantomime, shoving and pinching each other in complete silence. A taller boy smacked a little one and the others watched without a word. A man’s shout rang out on the other side of the aisle and the tall boy gave the little one a savage shove, then grabbed his arm just before he fell, dragging him away. The rest of the gang blew off like smoke. Heavy footsteps followed and gleaming lace-up boots. Pace got a glimpse of a bulbous club knocking at a man’s thigh.

7

THE ROMANS NEVER RETURNED, nor did the children, but the market guards stalked the aisles again and again, waving their torches and cracking their clubs against the lamp posts like thunder and lightning. And all night long the dogs came and went, no longer alone, but in fluid, whirling packs. Unwilling to chance the violence of clubs and swords and savage dogs, Pace held himself quiet and invisible, trying to breath easy and keep aware of the different currents

passing on either side of his hideaway. His only resource, his only tool in the night was his ability to stay alert, to listen and learn, to know the enemy before it knew him.

And then, after forever and nothing at all, he felt a shift, a tangible turn and click as the night ended and the day began. Different sounds with different weights and shapes took over the listening landscape, flooding it, erasing the edges of his hiding place. He knew for sure that it was morning when another sensation, one he hadn't used in a while, made him double over with both pain and pleasure. He smelled food cooking.

Pace flexed his arms and legs, then crawled out from under the booth. It was still night dark, but little lights at the end of the aisle showed off a row of glowing shacks and there was a murmur of morning housekeeping. With his nose held high he could distinguish the different food items on the air: sausage and chicken, hot oil and onions, sugar and bread—the coffee smelled delicious and homey. He was so hungry... He was so hungry that as he walked in the direction of the cooking smells he could feel himself becoming mean and reckless.

But wait. What about money? He had to have money, didn't he? Pace stuck his hands in his pockets. No wallet had magically reappeared, but there were some coins, a piece of paper that felt soft like a dollar.

Besides, he thought, they would have to give him some food. Even if he couldn't pay, how could they not give him, a mere boy, something to eat? He would bloody well take it if they didn't give. He'd just grab it and run and cram the warm soft stuff into his face, handfuls and handfuls, and the sweet and sour juices flushed his mouth as he tasted his desire.

In the kitchen of the nearest restaurant, he saw a woman raise her head from the lantern she was lighting and squint out into the darkness. Glimpsing him, she took a bold step forward and hissed. Pace froze. The woman hissed again and waved her hand. Did she want him to come closer? Did she want him to go away? He moved cautiously, sideways in her direction while she continued waving her hand, but he still couldn't make out what it meant. He took another step, and another, then froze for he saw that she had recognized him, or, rather, that she hadn't recognized him. She'd mistaken him for someone else. Her face hardened between menace and fear and she looked deliberately away while backing slowly out of the light.

She's afraid of me, Pace thought. She's avoiding eye contact. She's treating me like a stray.

At that moment his mouth went dry and his appetite faded. What was he thinking? He was being stupid again. As his dad would say, he needed to get his priorities straight. Food would come later; soon in fact. He'd be back before his

parents were even awake and they'd all have breakfast. He'd tell them of his night adventure between mouthfuls of egg and bacon and they'd laugh and laugh.

Pace turned and began to make his way through the booths, heading for the street. The market was now flowing with shadows and the faintest trace of color. Everywhere there were the sounds of crackle and snap as vendors removed the plastic coverings from their booths. Potatoes. Ropes of milky onions. Zucchini shaped like cudgels. Today, surely, there'd be people looking for him, people in posses with flashlights like the ones they sent in Colorado to search for lost children.

Everything looked so familiar, so different, so much the same... so different.

Wasn't that where he hid from the dogs? The flower market was over there. Wasn't it? He sat down on a low table. Tried to...

"Cchh, chhh." Like a dog, a very short woman shooed him away. He staggered off. He was losing confidence, feeling tired and overwhelmed. His legs dragged like two long sacks of wet sand and yet, sometimes he felt like he was floating, like he didn't have any legs at all.

A bright star sparkled low on the horizon and he stopped again, staring. Look! There wasn't one star, there were two, three... Pace chuckled. They weren't stars, they were beacons hung out to signal him home. Beacon, beckon. Welcome home, boy. The people turned to admire his courage, his rare resourcefulness, they stepped back to let him pass and his mother appeared beneath the lantern, her face shining with tears. His father...

"Chhh!" Pace stumbled, blinking. "Cchhhhh!" scolded a bony woman who was not his mother. Pace turned slowly to look behind him: who was she talking to? Where was he? Where was his mother? Then, he saw the star—a large naked lightbulb hanging from a hairy brown wire. He was standing in a small restaurant with grassy walls. Several men crouched over their plates, jaws working, eyes staring. One of them laughed and popping sounds came from his mouth. The bony woman cackled and slid out from behind her cooking pot, hissing and clapping her hands.

"Please," he said. "I'm an American. I'm lost. I need help." One of the men raised his head and stopped chewing. Pace took a step in his direction and pleaded, "Please, sir, help me."

The man stood up slowly from the table and faced the boy. For a long moment, they examined each other. Pace took another step nearer and then he saw it: the purple gash that bit into the man's upper lip. The flash of tooth exposed in a snarl. Yellow eyes framed in black shadows. The man was a pirate. The man was a killer. There, he was reaching for something in his belt: a gun, a knife, a rope. He would drag Pace away and tie him to the bedpost. He would carve out a little

piece of flesh every day with the tip of his knife. He would keep it dark all the time and he would never see the sun again.

Pace turned and ran straight into the bony woman. She screeched and pushed back. He felt the pirate's hand on his neck, in his hair, and something bright exploded in his head. He plunged forward, knocking the woman out of the way. Another man rose up—they were all pirates, and this one even had a scabbard in his hand—but Pace outmaneuvered him, slipped beneath the table and out the other side where he tripped over an old lady and oranges went rolling every which way, like in the movies. He scrambled along on all fours, then up and running where the crowd was thickest, dodging this way and that way until he spotted a boy-sized nook between two baskets and ducked in.

His head was completely cleared of the fog and the weariness, the hunger was gone. He pressed his back into the wall and willed his breath to slow, his mind to focus. After a few minutes, he felt the throb of blood lower to a steady rush cooling and feeding his ears, his fingertips, his thighs, his toes. He felt the burn of the scrapes on his knees and palms.

This is not, he said to himself, this is not... But he couldn't think of how to finish the thought because everything was so far out of the ordinary and expected that not only was there no ending, but there was no beginning either.

And then, all of a sudden, through the early morning gloom, he saw a familiar object: a public pay phone. He flew out of his nook, over the aisles, lifted the receiver from its perch, put it to his ear. There was no sound.

He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out the coins he'd discovered earlier, holding them close to his face to see what they were. Several showed the number 5, and a couple of others, 10, but close inspection of the phone gave no clue which coin was needed for a call. Winging it, he chose the larger 5-spot and dropped it into the slot. It fell straight through and clinked out the other end into a receptacle. He scooped it out and exchanged it for one of the pieces that said "10". The result was the same.

Pace dug further into his pocket and brought out the whole lot, letting the receiver dangle while he poked at the coins. There was one that was thicker and one that was smaller. He separated both of them, but as he did so, an awful thought came to him: Who was he kidding? Who was he going to call?

Of course, if he were in his own world, he would dial 9-1-1. Maybe that would work here too. He dropped the thick coin into the slot and heard it fall without catching. The thin coin fell through as well. Pace punched out the numbers—9-1-1—on the keypad, but there wasn't even a bleep from the dead headset.

A group of people and animals were coming toward him in the graying dark, small men and women bent double with enormous rounded loads, donkeys

buried under piles of sticks. "Please, please," he said, "can you help me?" He held the phone in his hand but no one even glanced at him. Somewhere, someone was ringing tiny bells, on and on. This is not...

He let the phone drop and walked on against the flow, following it upstream like a river, hoping it would lead to a source. There must be a policeman somewhere. There must be someone who would help him. He walked on and on without recognizing anyone or anything and then he was on a street and the street began to fill with cars, more cars than people, and the people weren't carrying loads on their backs, they were carrying baskets and shopping bags.

He was lost. He was so lost and tired and hungry. He was just a boy and he didn't know what to do, where to go, or how to ask. He let himself drift in the river of people; he let it turn him and carry him off. He swirled and floated like a leaf, until, at one of the crossings, he bumped up against a man in uniform. A policeman. He had to be a policeman. The man was directing traffic and that was what policemen did.

"Please," he said in English. "I'm lost."

The man in uniform took his eyes off the traffic for a moment, squinted at Pace, and barked something incomprehensible.

"Please," he said again, this time in French, "I'm lost."

Then, without saying anything or even looking at him again, the man reached down and grabbed Pace by the wrist.

"Please sir, help me," he begged, but the man just continued with the motions of directing traffic with his free hand. Pace tried to pull away from the man's grip. It wasn't a kindly grip, it was hard, it was like a shackle.

This is not... This is not... The man wasn't a policeman, he was an impostor! A stranger danger. A dirty child molester. He was another one going to take Pace away and tie him to a filthy iron bed and put duct tape over his eyes and mouth. He had to get away. He pulled and squirmed, but the man only screwed down his hold until it hurt. Pace knew exactly what to do. He lunged away, then whirled, and, using the enemy's strength against him, landed a blow with his foot right between the legs. The man roared and his knees doubled, his grip slipped further up Pace's arm, but amazingly, he didn't let go. No time to be polite, his mother always said. Yell and scream and kick. Tell everyone he is not your dad. So Pace began to scream and wriggle and howl and hop about and finally he came right out of his windbreaker. He left the man holding the jacket and he ran away as fast as he could, straight into the crowd, zigging and zagging and running for his life toward the bells. The bells. The bells getting closer and closer. High, piercing, shrilling bells. Watch out! A large, open truck full of man-sized silver tanks swooped by clanging and shrieking. Attached to the bumper of the truck was a

heavy chain, and strung on the chain, a collection of iron gears. The bells not bells. This is not... This is not my world.

Pace ran and ran, fighting his way back into the river of bodies flowing toward the marketplace, pushing his way faster and faster, his nerves jangling, his heart thumping. Everywhere people were touching and shoving. Everywhere there were strangers who stared at him with wolf eyes and wolf teeth. Where were the flowers? Where were the candy and the bees? Around and around he went, staying clear of big men, trying to find something familiar, a place where he could wait to be rescued. A place where he could be small, smaller, tiny, so tiny that no one could see him, no one could catch him. Someplace safe, someplace...

And then he saw the fortress of golden boulders shining in the new morning sun. It was really nothing more than a half circle of old rope nets filled with corn cobs and rags, but they looked like a haven, a home. Pace slunk toward the oasis and burrowed against the wall of bundles, dry and marvelously warm. He pulled his knees to his chest, hid his face in his hands, and cried.

8

WHERE WAS HE? WHAT WAS THAT SMELL?

Pace, his head on his arms and his arms on something lumpy, opened one cautious eye. A man was sitting not three feet away. A huge man. A giant man. There was a lizard in his hair!

Pace closed his eye and breathed slowly through his nose. Where was he? His memory was a jumble of strange pictures: a woman with a lantern... a man with a purple scar... his dad, looking up, rapturous... a telephone... a hotel room... a shining star. Slowly, the events of the last two days began to come together, one thing leading to another thing—the robbery, the market game, the night spent under the booth, the uniform, the desperate run through the crowd. Fear and panic clouded the end of the story.

But it was not the end of the story, for here he was, waking up—was he really awake?—to a new chapter. What would happen next?

Pace opened both eyes a crack. Now the lizard was perched on the back of the giant's enormous hand like an emerald and ruby ring. The giant reached for a bowl at his knee, dug a forefinger into the salad there, and extracted a red flower. The lizard ate daintily and the giant joined it, dipping his hand into the bowl again and again, sucking his fingers, smacking his lips.

Pace could see the dirt caked between his knuckles and in the creases of his

wrists. His clothes were black and wooly. He smelled like a donkey. Grandmother Clover would have called this man a tramp.

Pace pretended to sleep as the man and the reptile ate. He was pretty sure the giant knew he was awake, but there was something about the pretense of sleeping that made the boy feel safe. He could observe, calculate, plan for escape while appearing exposed and defenseless.

If the dirty old man had anything nasty in mind, Pace felt sure he'd be able to detect it.

When the lizard finished its dinner, the giant set it loose to climb back into his hair. The creature sank under the man's dense, black curls, then resurfaced, snout and red tongue flickering, just over his left ear. But the show wasn't over: after rummaging carefully inside his coat, the giant pulled out a tawny mouse. He placed the animal tenderly on one side of his foot, a great brown scaly club of a foot wrapped in foot-brown leather. Pace saw a glinting shard of eye, the mouse heart pumping beneath its skin. The giant offered it a bit of something from the bowl on the tip of his finger. The mouse's snout twitched and it reached out a miniscule golden paw, nails like ivory. The morsel vanished, and the mouse, after brandishing its fine appendage, disappeared as well.

The giant sighed and stretched his legs. He closed his eyes. Pace waited. Sure enough, he opened his eyes, smiled, and reached again inside his coat. There was a soft grunt—a sound effect, thought Pace, to show he'd found the important item at last, which he pulled out quickly, transferring it to his other hand, keeping it hidden. Rummaging again, he grunted even more obviously and straightened himself. Leaning over the bag of rags that separated him from the boy, the giant planted an immense, hairy toadstool covered in pale pink spots next to Pace's elbow. With the other hand, beneath the mushroom, he added a miniature stag.

That settled, the giant leaned back against the ragbags, closed his eyes and within moments, was snoring.

Pace's face was only a couple of feet from the little plastic scene, but he didn't move. He hardly blinked. It wasn't just caution that kept him still, it was the sheer weight of all the weirdness. It pressed him down, it locked him tight to the unmoving ground. What might happen if he raised his head or got to his feet? He didn't know; he didn't want to know. He didn't want to risk the tipping over, the flood. If he stayed here, quiet in this crevice between sleep and waking, he could wait and think and watch and maybe something would happen all by itself. Something that would make sense. Something normal and familiar.

So he watched as the toadstool's shadow swallowed the deer, then the ragbag, then a low wall of dry sticks and kept on swallowing until the whole world was eaten up. Once, it started to rain and the soft water sounds made a soothing

space in the dark. Often, during the night, the giant would snort and shift and his snoring would stop for a moment, only to begin again with a kind of Bang! Pace realized that he'd dozed off when the giant stumbled by, knocking the ragbag that pillowed his head. It was raining harder. There was a hard water sound then that went on and on, like a fountain, like water off a roof. On and on. The giant was drinking, he was pouring the drink right down his throat. Vini, vidi, vici! he croaked between swallows.

Pace crept under the table, quiet as a mouse. His mother was waiting for him at the kitchen window if only he could get past the giant and his terrifying thirst. But what about the little stag that granted wishes? Isn't that what he'd come for? His mother would be so disappointed if he didn't bring it home. He had to hurry. She'd be looking for him. She was waiting.

He poked his head up over the tabletop and there was the deer, almost within reach, and over there, against the wall, the brute with his one blue eye orbiting in the middle of his forehead, Et tu! Et tu! the giant roared, scowling, watching, watching for his little mousikins.

And then, it was so clear. Of course. All he had to do was break off a bit of the mushroom and eat it. He'd become so small; as tiny as a real mouse. The giant would never spot him. He'd be out the door and down the street and into the kitchen of his mother's house where she'd offer him a cup of cold water because he was so very, very thirsty.

Pace reached out and touched the mushroom. Its surface felt exactly like skin, and bruises appeared where his fingers pressed. Glittering beads of moisture ran into the dark indentations. Perhaps if he licked the juice, that would be enough to make him small. It would be cellar cool, slightly musty, but so good. Pace stuck out his tongue and licked. Funny, it was salty, hairy. Not at all what he expected. And it wasn't enough. He was still so thirsty. He slurped and sucked. Just a little more. Just a little more. Someone was crying. Was it his mother? Was it the stag? Was it the giant?

He opened his eyes as another sob rose up into his throat and escaped out through his lips. He'd shrunk all right. He was no bigger than the magic stag. Stupid, stupid, again so stupid. How was he going to carry it to his mother? He could never carry it now. What would his mother say? He cried and his nose began to run. Wiping his face on his sleeve, he knocked the toadstool with his elbow and it fell over. It fell over and tumbled off the edge of the ragbag, coming to a rest near the pantleg of the giant. The sleeping giant. The man from his dream who was real, not a dream. But it was all real like a dream. It was all real like a really bad dream, inside and out.