

# I Am Infinite; I Contain Multitudes

by *Douglas Clegg*

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First off, I'll tell you, I saw both their files: Joe's and the old man's. I had to bribe a psych tech with all kinds of unpleasant favors, but I got to see their files. I want you to sit through my story, so I'll only tell you half of what I found. It was about Joe. He had murdered, sure, but more than that, he had told his psychiatrist that he only wanted to help people. He only wanted to keep them from hurting themselves. He wanted to love. Remember this.

It makes sense of everything I've been going through at Aurora.

Let me tell you something about Aurora, something that nobody seems to know but me: it is forsaken. Not just because of what you did to get there, or how haywire your brain is, but because it's built over the old Aurora. Right underneath it, where we do the farming. I heard this from Steve Parkinson, *right underneath it* is the old Aurora. I saw pictures in an album they keep in Intake. It used to be a dusty wasteland. The old Aurora was underground. Back then they believed it was better, if you were like us, to never see the light of day, to be chained like animals and have your food shoved to you in a slot at the bottom of your door. Back then, they believed that nobody in the town outside the fence wanted to know that you were there. But that's not why it's forsaken. You will know soon enough.

There was a town of Aurora once, too, but then it was bought out by Fort Salton, and 'round about 1949 they did the first tests.

I heard, from local legend, that there were fourteen men down there, just like in a bunker at the end of the war.

They did the tests out at the mountain, but some people said that those men in Aurora, underground, got worse afterwards.

I heard a story from my bunkmate that one guy got zapped and fried right in front of an old timer's eyes. Like he was locked in on the wrong side of the microwave door.

The old timer, he's still at Aurora; been there since he was nineteen, in '46. Had a problem, they said, with people after the war. He was in the Pacific, and had come back more than shell-shocked. That's all I ever knew about him, before I arrived. You can safely assume that he killed somebody or tried to kill himself or can't live without wanting to kill somebody. It's why we're all here. He's about as old as my father, but he doesn't look it. Maybe Aurora's kept him young.

He was always over there, across the Yard. He knew everything about everyone. I knew something about him, too. Actually, we all pretty much knew it.

He thought he was Father to us all. I don't mean like my father, or the guy who knocked your mother up. I mean the Father, as in God The.

In his mind, he created the very earth upon which we stood, his men, his sons. He could name each worm, each sowbug, each and every centipede that burrowed beneath the flagstone walk; the building was built of steel and concrete and had been erected upon the backs of laborers who had died within the walls of Aurora; the sky was anemic, the air dry and calm; he could glance in any direction at any given moment and know the inner workings of his men as we wandered the Yard, or know, in a heartbeat, no, the whisper of a heartbeat, where our next step would take us. There was no magic or deception to his knowledge. He was simply aware; call it, as he did, hyperawareness, from which had come his nickname, Hype. He was also criminally insane by a ruling of the courts of the state of California, as were most men in Aurora.

I watched him sometimes, standing there while we had our recreation time, or sitting upon the stoop to the infirmary, gazing across the sea of his men. His army, he called them, his infantry: they would one day spread across the land like the fires of Armageddon.

The week after Danny Boy got out was the first time he ever spoke to me.

"Hey," he said, waving his hand. "Come on over here."

I glanced around. I had only been at Aurora for four months, and I'd heard the legends of Hype. How he only called on you after watching you for years. How he could be silent for a year and then, in the span of a week, talk your head off. I couldn't believe he was speaking to me. He nodded when he saw my confusion. I went over to him.

"You're the one," he said, patting me on the back. You couldn't *not* look him in the eye, he was so magnetic, but all the guys had told me not to look him in the eye, not to stare straight at him at any point. They all warned me because they had failed at it. They had all been drawn to his presence at one time or another. He was pale white. He kept in the shade at all times. His hair was splotchy gray and white and longer than regulation. His eyes were nothing special: round and brown and maybe a little flecked with gold. ("He milks you with those eyes," Joe had told me.) There were wrinkles on his face, just like with any old man, but his were thin and straight, as if he had not ever changed his expression since he'd been young.

"I'm the one? *The one*," I said, nodding as if I understood. I had a cigarette, leftover from the previous week. I offered it to him.

He took the cigarette, thrust it between his lips, and sucked on it. I glanced around for an orderly or psych tech, but we were alone together. I didn't know how I was going to light the cigarette for him. They all called me Doer, which was short for Good-Doer, because I tended to light cigarettes when I could, shine shoes for one of the supervisors I'd ass-kiss, or sweep floors for the lady-janitors. I did the good deeds because I'd always done them, all my life. Even when I murdered, I was respectful. But since there was no staff member around, I couldn't get a light for the old man.

Hype seemed content just to suck that cigarette, speaking through the side of his mouth, "Yeah, you don't know what it means, but you're it. Danny Boy, he would've been it, but he had to pretend."

"You think?"

He drew the cigarette from his mouth, and held it in his fingertips. "He was a sociopath, you must've recognized that. He had to perform for his doctor and the board. He studied Mitch over in B-the one who cries and moans all the time. Mitch with the tattoos?"

I nodded.

"He studied him for three years before perfecting his technique. Let me tell you about Danny Boy. He was born in Barstow, which may just doom a man from the start. He began his career by murdering a classmate in second grade. It was a simple thing to do, for they played out in the desert often, and it was not unusual for children to go missing out there. He managed to get that murder blamed on a local pedophile. Later, dropping out of high school, he murdered a teacher, and then, when he killed three women in Laguna, he got caught. The boy could not cry. It was not in him to understand why anyone made a fuss at all over murder. It was as natural to him as is breathing to you." He paused, and drew something from his breast pocket. He put the cigarette between his lips. He flicked his lighter up and lit the cigarette. Although we weren't supposed to have lighters, it didn't surprise me too much that Hype had one. As an old-timer he had special privileges, and as something of a seer, he was respected by the staff as well as by his men. It's strange to think that I was suitably impressed by this, his having a lighter, but I was. It might as well have been a gold brick, or a gun.

He continued, "Danny Boy is going to move in with one of the women who works in the cafeteria. She's never had a lover, and certainly never dreamed of having one as handsome as Danny Boy. Within six weeks, he will kill her and keep her skin for a souvenir. Danny Boy would've been it, but he wasn't a genuine person. You are. You know that don't you?"

"What, I cry, so that makes me real?"

He shook his head, puffing away, trying to suppress a laugh. "No. But I know about you, kid. You shouldn't even be here, only you come from a rich family who bought the best lawyer in L.A. I assume that in Court 90, he argued for your insanity and you played along 'cause you thought it would go easier for you in Aurora or Atascadero than in Chino or Chuckawalla. Tell me I'm wrong. No? How long you been here?"

"If you're so smart, you already know."

"Sixteen weeks already. Sixteen weeks of waking up in a cold sweat with Joe leaning over your bed. Sixteen weeks of playing baseball with men who would be happy to bash in your head just for the pleasure of it. Sixteen weeks hearing the screams, knowing about Cap and Eddie, knowing about how all they want is the taste of human flesh one more time before they die. And you, in their midst," he seemed to be enjoying his own speech. "You're not a sociopath, son, you're just someone who happened to kill some people and now you wish you hadn't, and maybe you wished you were in Chino getting bludgeoned and raped at night, but at least not dealing with this zoo."

The bell rang. I saw Trish, the Rec Counselor, waving to us from over at the baseball diamond. She

was pretty, and we all wanted her and we were all protective of her, too, even down to the last sociopath.

"Looks like it's time for phys. ed.," Hype said. "She's a fine piece of work, that one. Women are good for men. Don't you think? Men can be good, too, sometimes, I guess. You'd know about that, I suppose."

"What am I 'it' for?" I asked, ignoring the implication of his comment.

He dropped the cigarette in the dust. "You're the one who's getting out."

I thought about what the old timer'd said all day.

In the late afternoon, I was sitting with Joe on the leather chairs in the t.v. room after we got shrunk by our shrinks, and said, "I don't get it. If Danny Boy wasn't it, and 'it' means you get out, why the hell am *I* it?"

Joe shrugged. "Maybe he means 'you're next.' Like you're the next one to get out. That old guy knows a shitload. He's God."

Joe had spent his life in the system. First, at Juvy, then at Boy's Camp in Chino, then Chino, and finally some judge figured out that you don't systematically kill everyone from your old neighborhood unless you're not quite right in the head. But Joe was a good egg behind the Aurora fence. He needed the system and the walls and the three hots and a cot just to stay on track. Maybe if he'd been a Jehovah's Witness or in the army, with all those rules, he never would've murdered anybody. He needed rules badly, and Aurora had plenty for him. He had always been gentle and decent with me, and was possibly my only friend at Aurora.

I nudged him with my elbow. "Why would *I* be it?"

"Maybe he's gonna break you," Joe whispered, checking the old lady at the desk to make sure she couldn't hear him. "I heard he broke another guy out ten years ago, through the underground. That old man's got a way to do it, if you go down in that rat-nest far enough. I heard," Joe grabbed my hand in his, his face inches from mine, "he knows where the way out is, and he only tells it if he thinks your destiny's aligned with the universe."

I almost laughed at Joe's seriousness. I drew back from him. "You got to be kidding."

Joe blinked. He didn't like being made fun of. "Believe what you want. All's I know is the old man thinks you're it. Can't argue with that."

And then, Joe kissed me gently, as he always did, or tried to do, when no one was looking, and I responded in kind. It was the closest thing to human warmth we had in that place. I pulled away from him, for a psych tech was trolling in with one of the shrinks. Joe pretended to be watching the t.v. When I looked up at the set, it was an ad for tampons. I laughed, nudging Joe, who found nothing funny about it.

I wanted to believe that Hype could break me out of Aurora. I spent the rest of the day and most of the evening fantasizing about getting out, about walking out on the grass and dirt beyond the fence. Of getting on a bus and going up North where my brother lived. From there I would go up to Canada, maybe Alaska, and get lost somewhere in the wilderness where they wouldn't come hunting for me. It was a dream I'd had since entering Aurora. It was a futile and useless dream, but I nurtured it day by day, hour by hour. I could close my eyes and suddenly be transported to a glassy river, surrounded by mountains of pure white, and air so fresh and cold it could stop your lungs; an eagle would scream as it dropped from the sky to grab its prey.

But my eyes opened; the dream was gone. In its place, the dull green of the walls, the smell of alcohol and urine, the sounds of Cap and Eddie screeching from their restraints two doors down, the small slit of window with the bright lights of the Yard on all night. Only Joe kept me warm at night, and the smell of his hair as he scrunched in bed, snoring lightly, beside me, kept alive any spirit which threatened to die inside me. I had never been interested in men on the Outside, but in Aurora, it had never seemed homosexual between us. It had seemed like survival. When you are in that kind of environment, you seek warmth and human affection, if you are at all sane. Even if sanity is just a frayed thread. Even the sociopaths sought human warmth; even they, it is supposed, want to be loved. I knew that Joe would one day kill me if I said the wrong thing to him, or if I wasn't generous in nature towards him. He had spent his life killing for those reasons. Still, I took the risk because he was so warm and comfortable, and sometimes, at night, that's all you need.

The next morning I sought Hype out, and plunked myself right down next to him. "Why me?"

He didn't look up from his plate. "Why *not* you?" His mood never seemed to alter. He had that stoned look of one who could see the invisible world. His smile was cocked, like a gun's trigger. "Why not Doer, the compassionate? Doer, the one who serves? Why not you?"

"No," I said. "It could be any one of these guys. Why me? I've only been here four months. We don't know each other."

"I know everybody. I'm infinite. I contain multitudes. Nothing is beyond me. Besides, I told you, you don't pretend."

"Huh?"

"You don't pretend. You face things. That's important. It won't work if you live in your own little world, like most of these boys. You've got the talent."

"Yeah, the talent," I said, finally deciding the old fart was as looney as the rest.

"I saw what you did," he said. As he spoke, I could feel my heart freeze. In the tone of his voice, the smoothness of old whiskey. "I saw how you took the gun and killed your son first. One bullet to the back of the skull, and then another to his ear, just to make sure. Then, your daughter, running through the house, trying to get away from you. She was actually the hardest, because she was screaming so much and moving so fast. You're not a good shot. It took you three bullets to bring her down."

"Just shut up," I said.

"Your wife was easy. She parked out front, and came in the side door, at the kitchen. She didn't know the kids were dead. All she knew was her husband was under a lot of pressure and she had to somehow make things right. She had groceries. She was going to cook dinner. While she was putting the wine in the fridge, you shot her and she died quickly. And then," Hype shook his head, "you took the dog out, too. Who would take care of it, right? With everybody dead, who would take care of the dog?"

I said nothing.

"Who would take care of the dog?" He repeated. "You had no choice but to take it out, too. You loved that dog. It probably was as hard for you to pull the trigger on that dog as it was to pull it on your son. Maybe harder."

I said nothing. I thought nothing. My mind was red paint across black night. His words meant nothing to me.

He patted me on the back like my father had before the trial. "It's all right. It's over. It wasn't anything anyone blames you for."

I began weeping; he rubbed his hand along my back, and whispered words of comfort to me.

"It wasn't like that," I managed to say, drying my tears. Although we had been left alone, I looked across the cafeteria and felt that all the others watched us. Watched me. But they did not; they were preoccupied with their meals. "It was..."

"Oh. How was it?"

I wiped my face with my filthy hands. I was so dirty; I just wished to be clean. I fought the urge to rise up and go find a shower. "I wanted it to be me. I wanted it to be me."

"But you wanted to live, too. You killed your family, and then suddenly--"

"Suddenly," I said.

"Suddenly, your life came back into focus. You couldn't kill yourself. You had to go through all of them before you found that out. Life's like that," he said. "The bad thing is, they're all dead. You did it. You *are* a murderer. But you're not like these others. It wasn't some genetic defect or some lack of conscience. Conscience is important. You couldn't kill yourself. That's important. I don't want to get some fellow out who's going to end up killing himself. You need to be part of something larger than yourself. You need God. Tell me, boy: how do you live with yourself?"

I couldn't look him in the eye. I was trying to think up a lie to tell him. He reached out and took my chin in his hand. He forced me to look at him.

I remembered the warning: *he milks you with those eyes.*

"I don't know how," I said, truthfully. "I wake up every morning and I think I am the worst human being in existence."

"Yes," he said. "You are. But here's the grace of Aurora. You're it. You will get out. You will live with what you did. You will not kill yourself or commit any further atrocities." He let go of my chin, and rose from the table. "Do you love your friend?"

"Joe?"

"That's right," he nodded. "Joe."

"Two guys can't love each other," I said. "It's just for now. It's surviving. It's barely even sexual."

"Ah," he nodded slowly. "That's good. It would be hell if you got out and you loved him and he was here. You must be careful around him, though. He is pretty, and he is warm. But he has the face of Judas. He will never truly love anyone. Now, you, you will love again. A man, perhaps. Or a woman. But not our friend Joe. Do you know what he did to the last man with whom he shared his bed? Has he ever told you?"

I shook my head slightly.

"Ask him," Hype said. He walked away.

From the back, he didn't seem old. He had a young way of walking. I believed in him.

"Tonight," Hype said to me during Recreational Time. "Two thirty. You must first shower. You must be clean. I will not tolerate filth. Then, wait. I will be there. If your friend makes trouble, stop him anyway you can."

Joe could be possessive, but not in the expected way. He was not jealous of other men or women. He simply wanted to own me all the time. He wanted me to shower with him, to sit with him, to go to the cafeteria with him. Our relationship seemed simple to me: we had met about the third week in, when he caught me masturbating in the bathroom. He joined in, and this led to some necking, which led to a chill for another week. Then, I got a letter from my mother in which she severed all connections with me, followed by one from my father and sister. I spent two days in bed staring at the wall. Joe came to me, and took care of me until I could eat and stand and laugh again. By that time, we were tight. I had only been at Aurora for two months when I realized that I could not disentangle myself from Joe without being murdered or tortured-it was a Joe thing. I didn't feel threatened, however, because I had grown quite fond of his occasional gropings and nightly sleep-overs. In a way, it was a little like being a child again, with a best friend, with a mother and lover and friend all rolled up into one man.

That night, when I rose from my bed at two a.m., Joe immediately woke up.

"Doer?" he asked.

"The can," I said, nodding towards the hallway. Because Joe and I weren't in the truly dangerous category, we and a few others were given free rein of our hallway at night. Knowing, of course, that the Night Shift Bitch was on duty at the end of the hall.

"I'll go, too," Joe whispered, rising. He drew his briefs up-he had the endearing habit of leaving them down around his ankles in post-coital negligence.

I tapped him on the chest, shaking my head.

"Doer," he said, "I got to go, too."

I sighed, and the two of us quietly went into the hall.

In the bathroom, he said, "I know what's going on." He leaned against the shiny tile wall. "It's Hype. Word went around. This is the night. Are you really going?"

I nodded, not wanting to lie. He had been sweet to me. I cared a great deal for him. I would be sad without him, for a time. "I'll miss you," I said.

"I could kill you for this."

"I know."

"If you leave I'll be lonely. Maybe it's love, who knows?" He laughed, as if making fun of himself. "Maybe I love you. That's a good one."

"No you don't." I knew that Joe was fairly incapable of something so morally developed as love, not because of his sexual leanings, but because of his pathology.

"Don't go," he said.

"For all I know, Hype is full of shit."

"He's not. I've seen him do this before. But don't go, Doer. Getting out's not so terrific."

"I want freedom," I said. "Plain and simple."

"I want you." Joe seemed to be getting a little testy.

"Now, come on, we're friends, you and me," I said, leaning forward to give him a friendly hug.

I didn't see the knife. All I saw was something shiny which caught the nearly-burnt-out light of the bathroom. It didn't hurt going in-that was more like a shock, like hearing an alarm clock at five a.m.

Coming out, it hurt like a motherfucker.

He pressed his hand against the wound in my chest. "You can't leave me."

"Don't kill me, Joe. I won't leave you, I promise. You can come too." This I gasped, because I was finding it difficult to breathe. I felt light-headed. The burning pain quickly turned to a frozen numbness. I coughed, and gasped, "Get help, Joe. I think you really did me."

Joe pressed his sweaty body against mine. I began to see brief tiny explosions of light and dark, as if the picture tube of life were going out. Joe kissed the wound where he'd stabbed me, as blood pulsed from it. "I love you this much," he said.

Then, he drew his briefs down, a full erection in his hand. He took his penis and inserted it in the wound, just under my armpit. As I worked to inhale, he pressed the head of his member into the widening hole of the wound.

He pushed further into my body.

I passed out, feeling wave after wave of his flesh as he ground himself against my side.

I awoke in the infirmary three days later, barely able to see through a cloud of pain-killers. My stomach ached with the antibiotics that had been pumped through me. I stared up at the ceiling until its small square acoustic tile came into focus.

When I was better, in the Yard, I sought Hype out. "I tried to make it," I said.

He said nothing. He seemed to look through me.

"You know what he did to me," I said. "Please, I want to get out. I have to get out."

After several minutes, Hype said, "Love transformed into fear. It's the human story. The last man Joe befriended was named Frank. He grew up in Compton. A good kid. He tore off another man's genitals with his bare hands and wore them around his neck. His only murder. Sweet kid. Twenty-two. Probably he was headed for release within a year or two. He had an A+ psych evaluation. A little morbid. Used to draw pictures of beheadings. Joe latched onto him, too. Took care of him. Bathed him. Serviced him. Loved him, if you will. Then, rumor went around that Frank was getting some from one of the psych techs. Totally fabricated, of course. Frank was taking a shower. Joe knocked him on the head. Strapped him to the bed, spread-eagled. Don't ask me how, but he'd gotten a hold of a drill-the old kind, you know, you turn manually and it spins. He made openings in Frank. First, in his throat to keep him from screaming. Then, the rest of him. Each opening..."

"I know," I said, remembering the pain under my arm. Then, something occurred to me. "Where did he get the knife?"

Hype made a face, like he'd chewed something sour.

"The knife," I repeated. "And the drill, too. Everything's locked up tight. You're supposed to be God or something, so you tell me."

Without changing his expression, Hype said, "Joe gets out."

The enormity of this revelation didn't completely hit me. "From here?"

Hype nodded. "It's not something I'm proud of. I can open the door for about three hours, if I use up all my energy. Joe knows it. He was the first one I took out. But he didn't want to stay out. He only wanted out to get his toys. Then, he wanted back. He's the only one who manages to get back. Why he wants to, I couldn't say." For the first time ever, I watched worry furrow the old man's brow. He placed his hand against his forehead. A small blue vein pulsed there, beneath his pale skin's surface. "I created the world, but it's not perfect."

"Joe knows how to get out?"

"I didn't say that. I can get it open. I just can't keep him from going back and forth. And then, it closes again."

I wasn't sure how to pose my next question, because there was a mystery to this place where men got out. I had figured it to be down in the old underground, where Hype would know the route of the labyrinthine tunnels. "Where does it go?"

"That," Hype sighed, "I can't tell you, having never been through it. I just know it takes you out."

Back in my own bed that night, trying to sleep, I felt his hand. Joe's hand. On my shoulder. He slipped swiftly between the covers to cradle my body against his. "Doer," he said. "I missed you."

"Get off me." I tried to shrug him away. He was burning with some fever. A few drops of his sweat touched the back of my neck.

"No," he tugged himself in closer. I could feel his warm breath on my neck. "I want you."

"Not after what you did."

He said nothing more with words. His mouth opened against my neck, and I felt his tongue heat my sore muscles. All his language came through his throat and mouth, and I let him. I hated him, but I let him.

Afterwards, I whispered, "I want out."

"No you don't."

"Yes. I don't care if you stab me again. I want out. You going to get me out?"

I waited a long time for his answer, and then fell asleep.

I was still waiting for his answer three days later.

I cornered him in the shower, placing my hands on either side of him. I could encompass his body within my arms. I stared straight into his eyes. "I want out."

He curled his upper lip; I thought he would answer, but first, he spat in my face. "I saved you. You don't even care. Out is not where you want to be. In here's the only safe place. You get fed, you got a bed." He leaned closer to me. "You have someone who loves you."

I was prepared this time. I brought my fist against his face and smashed him as hard as I could. His head lolled to the side, and I heard a sharp crack as his skull hit the mildewed tile wall. When he turned to face me again, there was blood at the corner of his lips. A smile grew from the blood.

"Okay," Joe said. "You want out. It can be arranged."

"Good. Next time, I kill you."

"Yeah," he nodded.

As I left the shower room, I glanced back at him for a second. He stood under the shower head, water streaming down-it almost looked like tears as the water streamed in rivulets across his face, taking with it the blood at his lips.

An hour later, Hype found me out by the crude baseball diamond we'd drawn in the Yard, under the shade of several oak trees which grew just beyond the high fence.

"Your lover told me we're moving up the schedule. Shouldn't do this but once every few years. You should've gotten out that night. Joe shouldn't have stopped you. Any idea why he did?"

I kicked at homeplate, which was a drawing in the dirt. Aurora was a funny place that way-because of things being considered dangerous around the inmates, even homeplate had to be just a drawing and not the real thing. The real thing here were the fences and the factory-like buildings. "No," I said. "Maybe he's in love with me and doesn't want to lose me. I don't care. He can go to hell as far as I'm concerned."

"I once tried to get out," Hype said, ignoring me. "It was back in the early fifties. I was just a kid. Me and my buddies. I tried to get out, but back then, there was only one way-a coffin. Not a happy system. I didn't know then that I'd rather be in here than out there."

"Make sense, old man," I said, frustrated. I wanted to kick him. The thought of spending another night in this place with Joe on top of me wasn't my idea of living.

"A little patience'll go a long way, Doer," he said. It felt like a commandment. He continued, "Then they started doing those tests-bombs and all kinds of things, twenty, thirty miles away. Some closer, they said. Some this side of the mountain. We lived below back then. Me and Skimp and Ralph. Others, too, but these were my tribe. We were shell-shocked and crazy and we were put in with the paranoid schizophrenics and sociopaths and alcoholics-all of us together. Some restrained to a wall, some bound up in strait-jackets. Some of us roaming free in the subterranean hallways. Skimp, he thought he was still on a submarine. He really did. But I knew where we were-in the furthest ring of hell. And then, one morning, around three a.m., I heard Skimp whimpering from his bunk. I go over there, because he had nightmares a lot. I usually woke him up and told him a story so he could fall back to sleep. Only, Skimp was barely there. His flesh had melted like cheese on a hot plate, until it was hard to tell were the sheets left off and Skimp began. He was making a noise through his nostrils. It was like someone snoring, only he was trying to scream. Others, too, crying out, and then I felt it-like my blood was spinning around. I heard since that it was like we got stuck in a microwave. The entire place seemed to shimmer, and I knew to cover my eyes. I had learned a little about these tests, and I knew that moist parts of the body were the most vulnerable. That's why insects aren't very affected by it-they've got exoskeletons. All their soft parts are on their insides. I felt drunk and happy, too, even while my mouth opened to scream, and I went to my hiding place, covering myself with blankets. I crawled as far back into my hiding place as I could go, and then I saw some broken concrete, and started scraping at it. I managed to push my way through it, further, into darkness. But I got away from the noise and the heat. Later, I heard that it was some test that had leaked out. Some underground nuclear testing. We were all exposed, those who survived. Never saw Skimp or Ralph again, and I was told they were transferred-back in those days, no one investigated anyone or anything. I knew they'd died, and I knew how they'd died. There were times, I'd wished I'd died, too. Every day. That's when I learned about my divinity. It was like Christ climbing the cross-he may or may not have been God before he climbed onto that cross, but you know for sure he was God once he was up there. I wasn't God before that day, but afterwards, I was."

Hype was a terrific storyteller, and while I was in awe of that ability, I stared at him like he was the

most insane man on the face of the earth.

"So I found a way out," he concluded.

"If that's true, how come you don't get out?"

"It's my fate. Others can go through, but I must stay. It's my duty. Trust me, you think God likes to be on earth? It's as much an asylum out there as it is in here."

I was beginning to think that all of this talk about going through and getting out was an elaborate joke for which the only punchline would be my disappointment. I decided to hell with it all: the old man could not get me out no matter how terrific his stories were. I was going to spend the rest of my life with Joe pawing me. I went to bed early, hoping to find some escape in dreams.

I awoke that night, a flashlight in my face.

Joe said, "Get up. This is what you want, right?" His voice was calm, not the usual nocturnal passionate whisper of the Joe who caressed me. He hadn't touched me at all. I was somewhat relieved.

"Huh?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"You want to get out. Let's go. You've got to take a shower first." I felt his hand tug at my wrist. "Get the hell up," he said.

The shower was cold. I spread Ivory soap across my skin, rubbing it briskly under my arms, around my healing wound, down my stomach, thighs, backs of legs, between my toes, around my crotch. Joe watched me the whole time. His expression was constant: a stone statue without emotion.

"It doesn't have to end like this," I said. "I'm going to miss you."

"Shut up," he said. "I don't like liars."

When I had toweled myself off, he led me, naked, down the dimly lit hall. The alarm was usually on at the double-doors at the end of the hall, but its light was shut off. Joe pushed the door open, drawing me along. The place seemed dead. Hearing the sound of footsteps in the next ward, he covered my mouth with his hand and drew me quickly into an inmate's room. Then, a few minutes later, we continued on to the cafeteria. He had a key to the kitchen; he unlocked its door. I followed him through the dark kitchen, careful to avoid bumping into the great metal counters and shelves. Finally, he unlocked another door at the rear of the kitchen. This led to a narrow hallway. At the end of the hallway, another door, which was open.

Hype stood there, frozen in the flashlight beam.

"Hey," I said.

Hype put a finger to his lips. He wore a bathrobe which was a shiny purple in the light.

He turned, going ahead of us, with Joe behind me. I followed the old man down the stone steps.

We were entering the old Aurora, the one that stretched for miles beneath the aboveground Aurora. We walked single file down more narrow corridors, the sound of dripping water all around. At one point, I felt something brush my feet—a large insect, perhaps, or a mouse. The place smelled of wet moss, and carried its own humidity, stronger than what existed in the upper world. For awhile it did seem that Hype had been right: this was the furthest ring of hell.

*But I'm getting out, I thought. I'll go through any sewer that man has invented to get out. To go through. To be done with all this.*

Joe rested his hand on my shoulder for a brief moment. He whispered in my ear, "You don't have to do this. I was wrong. I love you. Don't get out."

I stopped, feeling his sweet breath on my neck. Even though I had only been in Aurora a little over four months, I had begun getting used to it. If I stayed longer, I would become part of it, and the outside world would be alien and terrifying to me. I saw it in other men, including Joe. This was the only world of importance to them.

"Why the change?" I asked.

"You don't want to go through. I want you here with me."

"No thanks." I put all the venom I could into those two words. I added, "And by the way, Joe, if I had a gun I'd shoot your balls off for what you did to me."

"You don't understand," he shook his head like a hurt little boy.

Hype was already several steps ahead. I caught up with him while Joe lagged behind.

"I'm going out through that hiding place you talked about," I guessed.

"No," he said. When he got to a cell, he led me through the open doorway.

A feeble light emanated within the room—a yellowish-green light, as if glow-worms had been swiped along the walls until their phosphorescence remained. It was your basic large tank, looking as if it had been compromised by the several earthquakes of the past few years.

Joe entered behind me. "This is where Hype and his friends lived. This is where it happened." He shined the flashlight across the green light. I shivered, because for a moment I felt as if the ghosts of those



men were still here, still trapped in the old Aurora. "Tell him, Hype. Tell him."

Hype wandered the room, as if measuring the paces. "Ralph had this area. He had his papers and books-he was always a big reader. Skimp was over there," he pointed to the opposite side of the cell. "His submarine deck."

"Tell him the whole thing," Joe said.

In the green light of the room, as I glanced back at Joe, I saw that he had a revolver in his right hand. "Tell him," he repeated.

"Where the hell did you get that?" I pointed to the gun.

"You can't ever go back," Hype said. "Once you're out, you can never go back. I won't let you back. Understood?"

I nodded. As if I was ever going to want to return to Aurora.

"Tell him," Joe said to Hype. This time, he pointed the gun at Hype. Then, to me, he said, "The gun was down here. I get all my weapons here. We get all kinds of things down here. Hype is God, remember? He creates all things."

"To hell with this," I said, figuring this bad make-believe had gone too far. "You can't get me out, can you?"

Hype nodded. "Yes, I can. I am God, Joe. Those underground tests, they made me God. They were my cross. I'm the only survivor. The orderlies, the doctors, the patients, I'm the only one. That's when I became God."

"You want to get out, right?" Joe snarled at me, "Right?" He waved the gun for me to move over to the far wall.

Hype turned, dropping his robe. Beneath it, he was naked, the skin of his back like a long festering sore. The imprint of hundreds of stitches all along his spine, across the back of his ribcage. To the right of this, a fist-sized cavity just above his left thigh, on his side.

"Tell him," Joe said.

The old man began speaking, as if he couldn't confess this to my face. "Inside me is the door. The tunnel, Joe. To get through, you've got to enter me."

The most vulgar aspect of this hit me, and I groaned in revulsion.

Joe laughed. "Not what you think, Doer. Not like what you like to do to me. Or vice-versa. His skin changed after the tests. Down here, it changes again. Look-it's like a river, look!"

At first, I didn't know what he was pointing at-his finger tapped against Hype's wrinkled back.

Then, before I noticed any change, I felt something deep in my gut. A tightening. A terrible physical coiling within me, as if my body knew what was happening before my brain did.

I watched in horror as the old man's skin rippled along the spine. A slit broke open from one of the ancient wounds. It widened, gaping. Joe came closer, shining his flashlight into its crimson-spattered entry. It was like a red velvet curtain, moist, undulating. A smell like a dead animal from within. The scent, too, of fresh meat.

Joe pressed the gun against my head. "Go through."

My first instinct was to resist.

Seconds later, Joe shot a bullet into the old man's wound, and it expanded further like the mouth of a baby bird as it waits for its feedings.

Joe kissed my shoulder. "Goodbye, Doer."

He pressed the gun to my head again.

The old man's back no longer seemed to be there; now it was a doorway, a tunnel towards some green light. Green light at the end of a long red road. His body had stretched its flesh out like a skinned animal, an animal hide doorway, the skin of the world..

With the gun against my head, Joe shoved me forward, into it. I pushed my way through the slick red mass and followed the green light of atomic waste.

Once inside, the walls of crimson pushed me with a peristaltic motion further, against my will. Tiny hooks of his bones caught the edge of my flesh, tugging backwards while I was pressed into the opening.

We are all in here, all the others who got out through him. Only "out" didn't mean out of Aurora, not officially. We're out of our skins, drawn into that infested old man. When I had rein of him for an afternoon, I got him to go down and bribe the psych tech on duty. I pulled up both of their files, Joe's and Hype's.

Joe was a murderer who had a penchant for cutting wounds in people and screwing the wounds. This was no surprise to me. Joe is a sick fuck. I know it. Everyone who's ever been with him knows it.

Hype was a guy who had been exposed to large amounts of radiation in the fifties. He had a couple of problems, one physical and one mental. The physical one I am well aware of, for the little bag rests at the base of my stomach, to the side and back. Because of health problems as a result of the radiation, he'd had a colostomy about twenty years back.

The mental problems were also apparent to me, once I got out, once I got *through*. He suffered from a growing case of multiple personality disorder.

I pulled my file up, too, and it listed: *ESCAPE*.

I had a good laugh with Joe over these files. Then, God took over, and I had to go back down into the moist tissues of heaven and wait until it was my turn again.

There are prisons within prisons, and skins within skins. You can't always see who someone is just by looking in their eyes. Sometimes, others are there.

Sometimes, God is there.

*"I am infinite," the old man said, "I contain multitudes."*