

**READ A CHAPTER**

**THE NURSING HOME  
FUGITIVE  
BY GEORGIANN BALDINO**

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**A SMINK WORKS BOOK**

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## **Chapter 1**

### **So Spake the Prophet**

*What is this place?  
Have I been here before?  
Doesn't look familiar.  
Strawberry fields to the left, recently  
plowed ground to the right.  
Out in the middle of nowhere.  
Smells good though, this rich, black soil.  
What is this place?  
Have I been here before?  
Nice looking, but not where I want to be.  
How far have I gone?  
What would Sam say? He'd tell me, 'Do  
some reconnoitering'.*

Clive Parisi consulted his journal, but the entries didn't tell him what he wanted to know.

*What is this place? How far have I managed to go?*

He closed the book.

*Where does this road lead other than around that bend? God, I hate this, not being able to remember from one moment to the next. Up there is a road sign. That will tell me where I am.*

*This is no time to feel sorry for yourself;  
go over and look.*

He grabbed the Paper Mate pen out of his shirt pocket and shambled over to the sign. Then he opened the journal again to the page with the paper clip. The clip marked the entries for today, but he scanned the words as if seeing them for the first time.

*Got up at 5:23 am. Had breakfast at the Starlight Motel and Café. Westbound on County 14.*

Writing it all down anchored him; otherwise he drifted off. He peeled back his cuff for a peek at his watch and copied down the time and place.

*Millstone, New Jersey. Pop. 573. 2:30pm.*

The top line reminded him today was March 22nd.

He grabbed an energy bar from his backpack.

*Can't even rely on my stomach anymore. Haven't had lunch yet; no record of it in my journal.*

He wrote down the time of his snack. Without a written record it could be any time, anywhere. His book also kept him focused on the ultimate goal. He recorded

all the details of daily life he could no longer hold in his head.

Clive also used it to catalog the people he met, writing down a person's name the moment he learned it, followed by one of his quick-code symbols. He had to get a person's identity down within seconds or lose it. The symbols later told him his first impression and whether someone represented friend or foe. A star meant the person was a good guy. A minus sign told Clive the person was up to no good. On rare occasions he drew a circle after a name. The circle meant indecision. He never worried about being fair. He knew his judgments were totally subjective and of no value to anyone but him. But as soon as he decided about a person, Clive filled in the circle, using one of the other symbols in his code. Many times a first impression had turned into a lifesaver. The stroke he had suffered hadn't robbed him of all his gifts. Clive still knew instinctively how much trust he should place. Circumstances had broken his memory but, by god, not instinct.

*So far today I haven't met anyone; that's unusual.*

Again he consulted his watch. Only two minutes had passed. It was now 2:32 in the afternoon. His feet ached like it had to be much later. Too bad the road was so deserted. He could have used a ride, but just as soon as the feelings of fatigue and loneliness claimed him, they were lost.

Clive's eyes ran up the hill in a way his legs couldn't. Not much of a hill really, but the old pegs weren't what they used to be. The sun warmed the back of his neck and for a while he just stood there, letting the radiance ease away a few kinks. While he soaked up the warmth, a strange figure ambled over the hilltop. Clive balanced his journal on his left forearm, getting ready to write.

*Who's that ahead? Looks like a monk. Funny fellow, using an old bicycle pump as a staff. He's struggling hard to get up the incline. Is he a monk, or not?*

*He wears a coarse robe. The hood completely shades his head. His shoulders stoop like years of devotion has bent his bones into a permanent posture of prayer.*

*But what's that on his feet? Battered tennis shoes with florescent green swashes peak out from the hem. Is he a monk, or isn't he?*

Clive decided to close the distance and smiled, eager to acquire a companion.

*The guy's worse off than I am. Why is he traveling this godforsaken road? That robe of his belongs in the Middle Ages, but actually it's a great getup for traveling. The hood and long sleeves provide good protection from the sun.*

He took off his cap to see what he was wearing.

*This old Sabers cap ... Why am I looking at my hat?*

*Who is that up ahead?*

The traveler's lurching gait drew Clive close.

*He needs help.*

The man stumbled and almost fell. Clive ran forward to catch him, but the man whirled, as though ready to attack.

Behind the tangled thicket of his mustache and beard, a voice erupted.

"Beware."

“I mean you no harm.”

“Harm is inherent, my Son.”

Then just as quickly as he had gotten angry, his booming voice softened and he laid a hand on Clive's shoulder. “When will you learn?”

“Guess I’m way past learning.”

“I hear not the rebuke of others.”

*What does that mean? Best keep still.*

The stranger thrust the hand holding a bicycle pump forward.

Clive jumped away, because it seemed the guy would hit him with it.

“My name's Elijah.”

He passed the pump to the opposite hand and held out the empty one.

*Oh, he wants to shake. Can't take the time.  
Hurry. Scribble Elijah's name, then a  
circle.*

Elijah threw back his hood and peered over the edge of the book. While neither of them was speaking Elijah hummed, his voice idling like a diesel truck badly in need of repair. "Rr-rr-hhtt-rrr." It seemed the man kept his throat running so he could slip it into gear at a second's notice. Chunky sound but better to keep it running, diesels and old men's voices don't overheat no matter how long they idle.

Elijah peered into Clive's journal, jiggling the book like a child demanding attention. When Clive met his eyes, Elijah smiled broadly. His two front teeth were chipped, creating a V-shaped opening. His hair was greasy yet somehow managed to stick out wildly in a dozen directions. Its gray tangles held burrs and small twigs, as if Elijah had slept headfirst in a hedgerow.

*An uncommon face; handsome in his own  
grizzled way. Too bad about his eyes  
though, glaring and wildly animated.*

Elijah's smile cooled, and he began to study something hovering above Clive's head.

"What do you see?"

"Too bad." Elijah folded his hands in prayer.

Clive added three stars behind Elijah's name and a note that the man focused on concerns not of this world.

"Your aura. The whole is no longer whole, no longer of a piece. The spiritual being begins its split from the corporeal." Elijah laid a hand on Clive's shoulder, shook his head sadly and then wandered off, resuming his trek, voice box churning a tempo for his legs to follow.

Clive marched alongside but apparently too close.

Elijah came to a halt. "Stand clear."

"Sorry."

"I do not fix my gaze on others."

“I just wanted to walk with you a way. Is that okay?”

Elijah's volume rose. “Heathen, think not that I don't see.”

“See what? I'm looking for some company is all.”

Elijah took offense at this and the longer he pondered the thought of company, the stiffer his body became. “I walk a lonely path. My miracles are the genuine ones. All others are empty appearance.”

“Sorry to be a bother.”

“Bother? Brother, what bother? Not a bother. People crank their car windows closed rather than listen to my Word. Others beat a path in the opposite direction. A few cast stones.” His eyes drifted heavenward. “Father, I can handle deflation, humiliation and even the Dark Night of the Soul.”

Clive got more confused than ever, but thought that he, not Elijah, had lost the thread of conversation.

*If I just keep still a while longer, Elijah will tell me. Most people carry the conversation when I let them. This guy seems to know what he's talking about.*  
Clive didn't have to wait long.

The answer exploded not only from Elijah's mouth but also from the center of his being. "I cannot take up your burden too."

"My burden?" That's the last thing Clive wanted to talk about. "You don't have to. How about I take up part of yours?"

Instantaneous transformation cooled Elijah's face. "Do as you must."

"Good. I'll walk with you awhile."

More than Elijah's face had changed. Having a companion must be all right now, because this time when Elijah started out, he pulled Clive along.

"Why do you write in your book? And what is that you draw beside the names? Are they holy signs?"

"Things I can't remember."

Elijah withdrew his hand. "Like what?"

"I can't remember."

"What's wrong with you that you can't remember?"

"I can't remember."

"Can't remember what's wrong?"

"Can't remember anything."

"But what's wrong with you?"

Clive paused, trying to devise an answer, but lost his place in his thoughts. So he said nothing. During these last blurry days and weeks silence had always proven best. Self-proclaimed prophets were really no different from everybody else. Everyone he met took silence as submission. Clive saved countless hassles by just keeping his mouth shut.

Elijah let go of the conversation and replaced it with nothing except the steady hum of his internal combustion engine.

The two of them resumed their journey. When they came to a fork in the road, Elijah headed west.

“Good choice,” Clive said. “Just the direction I would have picked.

After a while, they walked to the cadence set by the countryside, a rhythm Clive could appreciate, slow and steady, glad for human companionship and the fellowship of nature. Then suddenly a car bore down on them. Clive turned to meet it. “Shall I try to hitch us a ride?”

“Never touch the stuff.”

“Where're you headed?”

“The rose garden of philosophers.”

Elijah thrust his bicycle pump out in front of him and took a long stride, acting more like a knight preparing for the joust than a derelict stumbling through life. He menaced the car with his pump. Rust had fused the handle fully extended and Elijah wielded it like a lance. “And I must enter by the left-hand path, only the left-hand.”

The car closed the distance.

Clive blinked. "Shouldn't you step back?"

Instead Elijah charged the street. "The secrets are not published."

The radio blared. Clive could hear heavy metal through the closed windows. The closer and louder the music got, the more agitated Elijah became. Clive ran forward hoping to pull Elijah back, but he dug in his heels. Clive made the sign of the cross and prepared for the worst.

At the last moment, the car swerved and sped past them, so close it tore the bicycle pump out of Elijah's hand. Nobody in the car turned to look to see if he was all right. Instead the driver floored the accelerator, forcing the whining car into overdrive.

Clive watched it disappear around a curve. When he turned back, some strange monk knelt on the blacktop. Clive nudged his backpack, shifting the weight of his worldly goods to a new, less weary spot.

*Who is this man? Why is he praying in the middle of the street? Best not interrupt. Where's his stuff?*

The fellow carried no bedroll, no grip. No worldly goods of any kind.

The monk finished his prayers then staggered to his feet and over to an old rusted bicycle pump some ten yards away. Using the pump as a crutch, tip to the ground, he charged after the car, speeding away from them. Unsteady on his feet yet firm in his convictions, he shook his fist and adopted a pulpit voice. "Heathens, hear me well. I am the ritual. I am an act of worship. I am the food to be offered. I am the sacred herbs. I am the chant, the melted butter. I am fire. I am the outpouring!"

Clive consulted his journal and found out they'd met. Even under these confused circumstances, he knew better than to interrupt the prophet now.

Elijah carried on this way for about ten more verses. "I am the heavenly host. I am ... " When he had exhausted all of his states of being, Elijah turned to Clive, waved his

bicycle pump in a figure eight then wiggled the tip in Clive's face like a magic wand. "And what are you, My Son?"

Clive had only one vocation. "I am the artist." He peeked at his journal and saw that the man meant no harm.

Elijah's frown disappeared. He nodded knowingly, as though nothing could be more natural, meeting an artist on the road. "You shall help me."

"How?"

"Let us sit."

Elijah didn't wait for agreement, didn't look down to see where he was. He plunked himself down in the gravel at the side of the road.

"Don't you think you should back up a bit?" Clive moved further off the road and settled down on the grass.

"You must give me a sign."

"What kind of sign?"

“You must paint me a sign.”

“Oh, paint. I can do that.” Clive turned to a new page so he could record Elijah's instructions, but got distracted when he saw the note reminding him to take his medication.

*Oh no. Did I forget, or did I take it and forget to write it down? Where's that bottle?*

Elijah had closed his eyes. “Sit, my Son.”

“I am sitting.”

“A good obedient son ... rrrrrrr.”

The last thing Clive wanted to be was the man's spiritual son. He could admire him for following the strength of his convictions. He just didn't need any new beliefs. He liked the old ones just fine thank you. Clive guessed he was older than Elijah. Hard to tell, but he might be as much as twenty years older. Rather than say something rude, Clive stared at his journal, where he saw an important

reminder. He rummaged through his backpack.

“I have to find my medication.”

“The only obligation you have ... your *only* duty... ” Elijah raised his voice and spake like the prophets. “Is to save your dream. Never waste yourself in idle pursuits or in sacrifice to the wrong cause.”

“It's got to be here.”

Elijah outstretched his hands, as if blessing a multitude of followers. “I have spoken.” Then he clamped his mouth shut over chipped teeth. The pressure forced his overgrown mustache to stick out like pikes planted in the ground, guarding the approach to the castle. His throat grumbled, “Grr-rrr-rrrrrrrrr.”

“The pills will prevent another stroke. I got to find them.”

“My Son, you are exalted above all temporal change. The present means no more or less than any year in the one-hundredth century before Christ.”

Clive jumped to his feet. "I have to go back. I must've dropped them."

Elijah jumped up and blocked his path. "You have to cut ties, disengage from the roles you have learned to play."

Clive stood in one spot trying to puzzle things out.

Elijah ripped the journal, tearing away the entry reminding Clive about his medicine.

Clive lunged for the stolen bit of paper, but the notebook fell from his hand. More important than any one page, Clive lurched to retrieve his journal. He couldn't let anyone take the book.

Elijah wadded the paper and stuffed it in his mouth. When Clive stood back up, they eyed each other. Elijah chewed. Clive's face twisted into confusion. *Something to remember. Something is not right. What, I'm not sure.*

With difficulty Elijah swallowed. Then his words tumbled out.

“As a chosen one, you have rights others do not. You overcome obstacles. You have to capture the exertions of your soul. The world will understand.”

Elijah's hands reached out to encircle the Earth.

*Why does he make me so nervous?*

“Say again....”

“You must capture the exertions of your soul. And only that.”

Clive dusted off his journal.

*Why is it dirty? What happened?*

He flipped through the pages. The book opened to a page that listed four paintings he had done along the way and sold to eager buyers who happened to cross his path. He had accumulated a tidy sum passing through New York and New Jersey. *Was it always so? Did I have to struggle as a beginner?*

No matter how long he had worked to hone his craft, painting wasn't the exertion of his soul. Painting wasn't exertion at all; it felt like therapy. Elijah twirled around; arms

up like a whirligig. Not the right time to correct the prophet.

Elijah's voice rolled like thunder. "You must assert yourself. Surpass each past work of art. In only that way will you obtain the new."

Clive let go of each work before the paint dried. He never remembered the composition or colors. With artwork, as with all other details of his life, Clive had to consult the list recorded in his journal to remember what subjects he wanted to explore and which he had finished. Inspiration came from the journal, not from the world around him. All his subjects were autobiographical. Once he completed a painting, he wrote that down too, so he could remember which he'd done and which he had left.

Elijah filled the silence with vocalizations. Clive took a couple steps back, but it didn't matter if anyone listened. It didn't even matter if Elijah had something to say. He made noise, growling, rolling up and down his vocal range, consonant-vowel-consonant, a string of vowels, any sound at

all. The tempo of creation vibrated in his larynx. “Gr-rrrrowwwwouuuph.” Eventually the sounds struck a coherent tract, stuck to one another and became words. “I am the fire of the altar and the oblation sacrificed. I am the lamb.” The muscles around his eyes writhed and contorted, living a full, expressive life of their own, independent of Elijah’s control. “And you will paint my sign.”

Clive scribbled a note about what Elijah asked for and then stopped, waiting for the prophet to tell him what kind of sign he wanted. When Clive wasn’t painting, his abilities were limited to a narrow range. He struggled to pay attention to Elijah but failed. Clive’s mind drifted back to his routine. Each morning, he picked a road. He never consulted travel guides or looked for tourist attractions. A destination caught his interest because it had an unusual name. Millstone sounded like the right kind of place for Clive and his recent troubles. Just like Puzzletown and Perspective had sounded good last week and the week before. He headed for small towns along the road, seeking out hamlets and backwater locales that promised faces

without frowns. He didn't have much time left. He would rather not spend it looking at frowns. He didn't care if people didn't smile to welcome him, just so long as they didn't frown. Or make too many demands. The goal was to travel in a westerly direction, always toward the town with the most picturesque name of all and the one locale that held the promise of forgiveness. Clive wondered why he hadn't made this journey before. But in his heart he realized that years ago a journey like this wouldn't have worked nearly so well. He was striking out cloaked in an old body and addled mind; foolishness was easier to excuse. He could walk away from Elijah right now just as he had walked away from everything else. He had learned to think of himself as a free man. No more obligations to anyone; as free as a man can get.

His back and legs often ached, but what was that? Nothing unmanageable. He hitched rides or when he couldn't go any further, holed up. People were kind. They took him along. Clive wasn't foolish enough to think he could walk across country, not in the time remaining. He didn't need to cultivate an engaging smile. He already had

one. Conversations scared him, of course, but no matter what the difficulty, people dismissed his lapses. A confused face and silence worked like a charm. If nothing else, Clive had learned how to cope.

He stayed put, for now, because he wanted to know more about this prophet. His interest in people hadn't evaporated. In fact, people mattered more than ever. Struggling to understand others kept Clive lucid. Elijah's florid speech tested the limit of his ability.

"Mark well," Elijah said. "Art of this world conceals nothing except the secrets of the artist. A visionary can never reveal himself to the sundry. Were that to happen, the man would be accursed. The wrath of God would descend."

"Wrath?"

"All error in art arises, theretofore, because men do not begin with the ritual of purification."

Clive wrote it down. *Begin with the ritual of purification.*

Swaying side to side, groaning a fair imitation of a Gregorian chant — monodic, complex and hypnotic — Elijah subsumed his humanity. His conscious self disappeared from the roadside. He hid beneath the melody his soul sang and seemed to go to a place where he could envision all that an artist can do; all God's glories in heaven and all mankind's follies on earth.

Clive waited. He looked down at his page where he had recorded the promise to paint a sign for Elijah. He waited and waited. In the meantime he broke off a long, straight branch from a tree then tore away as many of the small twigs as he could to make Elijah a proper staff. Then he waited some more.

When the prophet came back to his mortal body, he rejected the hastily constructed staff, preferring instead his multipurpose bicycle pump/lance/wand. Leaning on his trusty staff, Elijah now had the answer. "The two of us, together, will achieve bliss."

*Bliss? Oh, shit. What's this new look in his eyes?*

“There are many things, in heaven and in earth, of which a man may not speak and must use signs. Such matters must be transmitted in mystical terms, like poetry employing fables, wrapped in a parable.”

Clive closed his journal and scrambled to his feet fast as he could.

“Stay!” Elijah commanded.

“I have to get going.” Clive took the branch staff and hurried off.

Elijah jumped up. “You will stay. We must create.”

“No, I'm going.”

Elijah sprang onto Clive's back and clung like a leech.

*God, the man smelled. More like a stale mackerel than a person.*

Clive squirmed but couldn't get the sucker off.

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