

## Traverse

“What comes next?” he wondered aloud, his words rolling into each other.

A disheveled looking man of averages with wavy dark brown hair flecked with grey, William Cameron MacCreary swayed gently back and forth as he stood barefoot and staring out his sliding patio door. Behind him, a half-empty bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin and a completely empty prescription vial of something with a part chemistry, part marketing name sat on a black lacquered wooden coffee table. The books on the matching bookshelf – historical novels, contemporary thrillers, non-fiction tomes on western philosophy, religions, history – and a few bland impressionist prints on two of the walls broke the chromatic monotony of the room’s furniture and gray carpet.

He let the tumbler he’d just emptied fall from his hand, slid open the door, and stepped out onto the deck. The cold evening breeze swirled about his pale face and sent a shiver through his torso. Stumbling towards the railing, he gazed out at the ridge of hills on the far side of Traverse Bay and then at the countless stars firing up for their nightly run. It had always been his dream to have a home overlooking the bay. But with the loneliness and mounting disappointment he struggled with day in and day out, the house could have been in the middle of the bleakest desert or endless prairie for all it mattered now.

He tried to cut through the thickening fog in his mind with a shake of his head, but time was against him now. “How many people lose hope?” he asked the stars. “How many decide that life is so difficult...and disappointing that death becomes a release...for them...a place where they can finally find peace?” His words and thoughts were slowing down, and his limbs were growing heavy. “Wasn’t there something...something else I was...supposed to do with my life?” He tried to steady himself and took a step towards the railing of the deck, but his legs buckled and he fell

to his knees. “Wasn’t I destined...to be something more? Wasn’t there a reason...a purpose for me being here?”

Mozart’s Requiem Mass in D minor was playing through its final movement on the CD player in the living room as he crawled over to the railing and tried to pull himself up. But, it was no use. Staring out through the bars at the black, quiet water of the bay, he wondered, “Would death...be black and quiet? Will the end...be painful? Will I...even know...when it comes?” A tear ran down his cheek as he laid back onto the deck, arms outstretched. “I guess...no one has a choice...who...or what...they are.” His breathing slowed, and a sense of peace began to envelope him. He closed his eyes knowing it would soon be over...no more pain, no more disappointment, no more losing...

An explosion of light tore through his mind, and swirling flashes of color danced around him. He felt as if he were being lifted off the deck and something akin to a rush of adrenaline coursed through his body. At once the night became day. Billowy clouds filled the sky and weeping willows, pines, and elms materialized around him, swaying in the yards of turn-of-the-century houses. He knew at once where he was – two hundred miles away from his deck in Traverse...and nearly forty years in the past. He was watching his childhood self playing outside the house of Mrs. Lee with her son, Robbie, who would become a lifelong friend. Not yet seven years old, little Mac, his nickname for as long as he could remember, was laughing and running about without a care in the world, while Mrs. Lee sat on the front porch steps rocking a baby carriage back and forth.

Adult Mac slowly turned around. Three other small, two-story houses crowded around the gravel cul-de-sac of the dead-end street, including his childhood home, already the worse for wear. It sat in the middle of a larger block of similar houses, which, in turn, was part of the working-

class neighborhood north of the railroad tracks in Downers Grove, Illinois. Then, he turned to look down the lonely street to where it ended at a busy intersection. That's where it happened...where it would happen again...soon.

"Mac! Mac! Where are you?" his four-year-old brother Clark called from the next street over.

"I'm at Robbie's!" little Mac yelled back. Clark didn't answer and soon, lost in play, Mac forgot all about him.

"No!" adult Mac shouted. "Go get him!" but, his six-year-old self didn't hear. These were but shadows of things that had been, and the events written in the book of time would once again play themselves out.

A siren began echoing through the neighborhood, urgently growing louder, and soon flashing lights appeared at the end of the street. Mrs. Lee herded the boys together and headed off with the carriage to join a knot of onlookers. Little Mac and Robbie aimlessly rode their bikes to and fro in the street, unsure of what to make of the commotion and too young to be scared.

Then, Mrs. Lee gasped and raised her hand to her mouth. "It's Clark!" she cried.

Little Mac looked over at her and then turned to see what she was staring at. There, in the middle of the intersection sat a car...and under it lay his brother. Without a word, little Mac swung his bike around and peddled as fast as he could back to his house.

A moment later, adult Mac was standing in the kitchen of his childhood home.

"Mom!" little Mac screamed as he burst through the back door. His mother met him in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. "Clark got hit by a car!" he cried. Without a word, she put her arms around him. Mac watched his young self wrap his arms around his mother in turn, but noticed something curious, something he hadn't noticed back then.

She didn't cry or ask how and where. She didn't say anything at all, she just held her child – who would recall the last few minutes nearly every day for the rest of his life – and stared straight ahead, her face so emotionless it was as if something had broken inside her.

In the living room came the voice of Dan Rather on the TV, “President Ronald Reagan was shot today as he was leaving the Washington Hilton hotel...”

The kitchen faded away and a stream of vignettes from his school days played out around him, one quickly morphing into the next. Many were of a small, quiet boy observing others, trying to be invisible, afraid of being wrong or laughed at. Others were of schoolmates and playgrounds, Sunday school and classrooms. Then, there were those of his parents – his father drinking his scotch in an arm chair in front of the TV after dinner, his mother scolding him again and again for not doing something the way she wanted it done, and one of him brimming with pride and hope as he showed her his report card filled with A's yet again. Knowing what came next, adult Mac's heart sank. His mother took the card out of his hand, gave it a once over, and without a word handed it to his father. Taking it from her hand, he tossed it in the wastepaper basket without so much as a glance on his way to the cupboard where he kept the scotch.

Mac never showed them a report card again.

A moment later, he found himself standing in a cemetery on a sunny summer's day. Beside him was his 17-year-old self staring down at Clark's gravestone. Engraved on it were the words, 'He wanted to see God.' In young Mac's mind, a mix of emotions swirled about – sadness, frustration, anger, guilt. A four-year-old wouldn't want to see God. He wouldn't have wanted to die. It was *his* fault Clark was killed. He should have gone to get him when he called, he could have kept Clark from running out into the street.

Again, the kitchen of his childhood home formed around him. He heard the sound of a car

door slamming, footsteps on the back stairs, the screen door opening, and in walked young Mac. He spied a letter addressed to him on the yellow Formica table and yelled, “Mom?” as he picked up the envelope. He looked at the return address. It was from the University of Michigan. His eyes lit up and he tore it open, pulled out the folded single sheet of paper and read eagerly. By the time he finished, he was wearing a smile of pride and excitement. Sensing someone behind him, he turned to see his mother standing in the kitchen doorway, exactly where she’d held him years before when he’d told her about Clark.

“You’re on your own now,” she said and walked out.

His smile faded, and tears welled up in his eyes, but a quick shake of his head and wipe of his sleeve sent them away. By nightfall, he’d packed what little he had in a beat up ‘68 Mustang and, without saying good-bye or leaving a note, walked out of his home – and his childhood – forever.

He got into the car and turned the key. The engine roared and at once the Mustang faded away. In its place formed the front porch of his high school sweetheart’s home. Crickets chirped and fireflies floated about in the warm thick evening air. The two of them were facing each other, holding hands, and young Mac was telling her he’d be leaving for Ann Arbor in the morning.

“I’ll come home on weekends,” he promised her, wiping a tear from her cheek and trying to make his words sound heartfelt. She’d be a senior that fall. He’d be two states away and now there was no place for him to come home to.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you,” he said softly. He did love her, and he’d miss her terribly, but it had to be this way. Besides, he knew, she’d be better off without him.

He never saw her again.

The porch replaced itself with a stage and it took adult Mac a few moments to realize he was at his college graduation. It was customary for the Engineering School's honor society president to give the commencement speech and in the fall young Mac had been elected. From stage left, he peaked around the curtain to scan the audience for his parents. He'd barely spoken to them in four years, yet he'd written to tell them when and where the commencement would be. They'd not replied, nor were they there. The all-too-familiar feelings of sadness and undefined guilt welled up, but he was getting quite good at shunting away his emotions. The Dean began introducing him from the podium and the stage morphed into the sidewalk outside West Quad.

His roommates Mark and Duron had just finished helping him pack up the Mustang. Everything he owned in the world was inside it, and in his wallet was all the money he had – forty-dollars – and a nearly maxed-out credit card.

“I'll write when I find a place,” he told them as he hugged each goodbye and got into his car. Waving as he drove off, he pushed Van Halen's *1984* into the cassette player. The music rolled out of the speakers, but just as quickly faded away as the car reconstituted itself into a table and wooden chairs. The blue sky and buildings to either side of the street became the cathedral-like graduate library he'd spent many an hour studying in.

Young Mac was reading a history textbook, elbows on the table and head in hands, his knees pumping anxiously up and down. Older Mac remembered his agitation that day all too well. It wasn't the first time either that his readings made him uneasy, and it wouldn't be the last. The humanities and philosophy classes he'd taken in undergrad made him feel as though the warm, mental cocoon of his youth was being ripped open, and for the first time he was seeing the world for what it was. The calming beliefs he'd learned in primary school, at home, and in church were being challenged with every turn of the page. Had everyone – teachers, parents, minister, even

friends – purposely misled him? Had they simply chosen to believe what made them comfortable and ignored the rest? Or had they never learned the things he was learning? Whatever the answer, it seemed to him that mankind was capable of great cruelty and self-delusion, that every aspect of life could be rationally explained, that what people mistook for truth was relative, and that maybe there was no greater purpose to life, no One looking over our shoulder.

The bookshelves and arched ceiling rushed towards him and suddenly he was sitting at a tiny kitchen table in his Cambridge apartment. Young Mac and his roommates, Damon and Dwight, sat around the table, beers in hand, staring at a piece of paper. The former was enrolled in the Engineering College, and the latter was writing his political science thesis.

“What d’ya think?” Dwight asked.

Young Mac sighed. “I think I’m tired of being a student...and being broke.”

Damon, who was working on his third bachelor’s degree and had little interest in gainful employment, said with a grin and a swig of beer, “What’s wrong with being a college student?”

“Living like one,” young Mac answered with a wry smile.

Dwight picked up the letter and read through it again. “So,” he said absently, “stay in school and get your PhD, or join the real world and make some bread.”

Mac nodded thoughtfully, breathed in, and sighed again. “The real world,” and at once the table changed its shape and hue as the kitchen morphed into a coffee shop just off Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. There he’d spent many an evening and weekend afternoon sitting at a corner café table doing paperwork.

The bell above the door jingled and an attractive woman with a little girl of maybe three or four walked in. Younger Mac had seen them there many times and noticed the mother didn’t wear a wedding ring. She always ordered the same two drinks, a caramel latte and a hot chocolate.

Younger Mac had indeed become quite the observer as the years went by, and less the participant. He was the audience watching the players on stage act out their lives.

The drinks were ordered and while they waited for them to be made, the mother smiled at younger Mac. He smiled back, but quickly returned to his paperwork. Taking the drinks from the barista, she guided her daughter towards the door and turned around to push it open with her backside. She caught Mac watching her and smiled again as the bell jingled. Then they were gone. He slid his paperwork away as regret and relief fought for the high ground of his mind. How safe and small his life was getting – hardly seeing his friends anymore, no love interest to speak of, 60-hour work weeks, the idealism and passions of his younger days abandoned – and everything went black.

Mac heard the faint tinny sound of music. A bedside lamp turned on and a nearly identical looking Mac rolled over in bed and pressed the snooze on a clock radio whose glowing green digits read 5:30. Outside it was still pitch black and the windowsill was dusted with snow. A dream of his high school sweetheart faded from his mind and the dread of another day rushed in to fill the void – another lonely stretch of time watching everyone else live their lives until he could come home and crawl back into bed.

The room flooded with sunlight and a rush of noise. When his eyes adjusted, Mac realized he was standing in the carnival midway of the Cherry Festival in Traverse City. It was hot and humid, and rides and game booths stretched along the beach in both directions. Grown-ups passed by laughing and talking while children and teenagers ran this way and that. The sun was high above the bay and sailboats crisscrossed the water all the way out to Lake Michigan. The smell of popcorn, cotton candy, and elephant ears carried on the warm breeze as his younger self meandered through the fair. Ever the detached but eager observer, the world was a theater in 360 and he was



an audience of one.

Older Mac realized what was about to happen and smiled. He turned expectantly and there she was. Genevieve, talking and laughing with her friends as they tried their luck at a nearby game booth. The breeze from the bay was gently blowing her long auburn hair about her shoulders, the sky matched the blue of her eyes, and the copper sundress she wore perfectly accentuated her shapely figure.

In that fleeting moment, he could feel the essence of his life returning.

Beside him, younger Mac stood dumbly staring, until she began to move further along the midway with her friends. Instead of his usual cautious analysis and decisive inaction, he ran to the nearest fresh-squeezed lemonade stand, ordered two, and before the cups could touch the stainless-steel counter, grabbed them and ran off, leaving a 20 behind.

When he was within a few steps of her, he stopped and collected himself, trying to look as cool and casual as his racing heart would allow. He tapped her on the shoulder and when she turned around, he handed her a lemonade and said, “Hi. I’m Mac,” a bit too business-like he decided. Her smile said this sort of thing happened to her all the time, and the way she said, “I’m Genevieve,” told him he didn’t have long to prove himself. So, he started up a conversation, suggested a stroll along the midway, and they ended up talking and laughing until afternoon became evening. They found a romantic dockside bistro and afterwards took a bottle of wine and two plastic cups to the beach and watched the sun set over the bay. Scenes from the few precious years he spent with her played out until he was standing in the foyer of his condo on a rainy evening and Genevieve was walking out the door for the last time.

The latch clicked behind her and again Mac was lying on the deck. But, something was different this time. Not the past. The only aspects of the past that can change are our perception

and acceptance of it. Yet, despite all the sadness and loss, the hopelessness and disappointment, he sensed a vague feeling of...

The same brilliant, dazzling light exploded in his mind and gradually dispersed into a vibrant, swirling rainbow that gelled into still more scenes from his past. The first was of a very young Mac lying on a blanket next to Robbie in the back yard late on a spring night. Side by side they stared up into the heavens, and young Mac wondered if anyone was staring back. There had to be someone, he decided, there just had to be. If only he could find out who...

The night sky lit up and a moment later he was playing in the school yard with Clark. Butterflies flitted about, songbirds sang in the trees, and a train whistle sounded in the distance. School was out for the summer and they had the whole playground to themselves. It felt as if they had all the time in the world together...

The sky closed in around him and soon he was standing in the gym of his high school. The teacher was taking attendance on the first day of spring term. He looked around to see who else he knew. "Hey, who's that?" he said to Robbie, pointing at a cute blonde wearing a t-shirt and shorts, and talking animatedly with a clutch of friends...

The gym became a theater in the round, playing the highlights of his senior year and the time he spent with his high school sweetheart – their first date at a Baskins-Robbins, their first slow dance at homecoming, walking in the park holding hands, saying "I love you" for the first time, going to a late-night show at the theater on Main Street, learning to make love in her bedroom...

The walls and ceiling dissolved into a white mist. A cool breeze came up and carried it away to reveal Mac's not-so-much-younger self standing on a dock sipping steaming coffee from a handmade ceramic mug he'd purchased from an artsy little shop on Mackinac Island. It was early

on a clear, chilly morning, and stretching out in front of him was a small northern Michigan lake. The remnants of the white mist lazily wafted above the water and a lone seagull cried as it flew low looking for breakfast...

The trees around the lake rushed forward and became the walls of a dimly lit living room and a crackling fireplace. A Christmas tree appeared, complete with twinkling lights and presents underneath, and the scent of pine needles filled the air. The holidays were his favorite time of year – great food, visiting with friends, time off from work, carols on the radio, *Scrooge* on DVD, driving through neighborhoods of homes decorated for the season, the ball dropping in Times Square, *Auld Lange Syne* playing at midnight...

The night sky reappeared, and he was standing on a stretch of beach. The smell of burning wood from a nearby campfire came and went with the wind rising off the great lake. Waves lapped onto the beach and slowly rolled back into the black water. Several old friends of his were sitting on blankets looking up at the stars, laughing and clapping. Plastic wine glasses and open coolers sat on the sand. Shooting stars streaked overhead and the shimmering northern lights arched above the horizon...

The dome of the sky brightened and coalesced into a nearly identical looking Mac standing by the patio screen door of his condo looking out at a doe and fawn eating apples off a tree in his back yard. Beyond was the dark blue bay framed by hills colored with the many-hued trees of fall. He motioned for Genevieve to follow him and quietly slid open the door. Stepping onto the deck, he breathed in the earthy scent of burning leaves and felt Genevieve's hand slip into his...

Once more the sky darkened and he found himself alone, lying on his deck, as Mozart's Requiem finished playing. The cold wind from the bay cut through the haze of booze and pills, and he could feel remnants of the crushing loneliness and disappointment that had driven him to

the edge. Yet, he sensed they no longer held sway over him. The reds and yellows and oranges of dawn were rising from the horizon and with them came...not so much as hope, he realized, but of...of longing. Longing for the passion of mind and spirit...and he felt as though maybe, just maybe, this time he'd be alright.