

A Candle in the Night

a novel by D. M. Cook

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To all of us. Everywhere.

There are no limits but those we place on ourselves.

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PART ONE

Memory and Dream

*This body holding me
reminds me of my own mortality
Embrace this moment, remember:*

*We are eternal—all this
pain is an illusion.*

Tool — “Parabola”

ONE

Awakening

T *he Dream was always the same...*

It had haunted her for so long now that there seemed no more meaning to be drawn from it; yet time and time again it returned to her.

The hazy scene beat painfully against Samantha's mind, a montage of imagery flickering across the vast plain of her memory. She watched the strange image unfold once more in the darkened theater of her dreams.

There was a clearing. Blades of grass stabbed bravely forward, armies of windswept green across the landscape; gargantuan trees stretched their somber arms to the heavens. From the towering sky there fell a fragile rain, almost remorseful in the silence. There was a cold crispness in the air that seemed to permeate and elevate even the smallest detail to some greater significance; even the earth hanging desolately beneath the endless sky seemed imbued with something infinitely solid, infinitely Real. A thousand points of light sparked quietly in the vast cloak of night, a collage of burning worlds long dead and distant.

In the center of the clearing rose a hulking structure nearly blurred into invisibility against the darkness of the trees. In quiet, brooding majesty, it seemed to rise above everything around it, walls rising like mountains into the black heavens.

The figure watching the strange, surreal landscape abruptly became aware

of its own existence; a speck of memory in the shape of a person appeared with a silent *whoosh* in the night, and stepped forward.

She remembered nothing. Her feet left no mark upon this scarred world; her outline at times was barely visible. Her presence here meant nothing, and could change nothing, as insignificant as the blades of grass beneath it.

Indistinct lightning skidded jaggedly off the great bowl of the sky, shimmering faintly as it left its mark. *Is this real?* the figure whispered aloud as the stars seemed to become uneasy, rattling in their celestial nests. *What is real?*

There were no answers for her in this place.

The world seemed to be falling apart around her, stars tumbling from the night and alighting without a sound upon the pained earth below. The wind increased, forcing her feet forward towards the gargantuan building; yet now each footstep she took seemed to shatter the ground beneath, blazing patterns in the earth that faded as soon as the next step was taken.

Before the building could fully resolve itself, the surface beginning to be revealed at last to her questing eyes, the glittering night swallowed up the ground beneath her, tearing the world from her feet. The wind's roaring had caused all else to shrink away; the trees behind her had unraveled into nothingness. The surreal darkness of that threatening sky surged forward, enveloping her...

...And the Dream ended as it always had, leaving her shivering and cold in the vague safety of her bed.

Samantha stirred awake, thoughts slowly coming together as she opened her

eyes to the blank emptiness of the night.

It's been like this since the first time. The clearing, the lightning, that building. It's never changed, not a single detail. And yet—

And yet how could it have gone on for this long? What could possibly be so important about it that she would *keep* seeing the same dream, nearly every single night?

Unbidden, a burst of pain slashed through her chest, painting her world a dark, violent red. A flame of sudden agony welled up in her heart; her throat tightened as the horrible pain ripped across her. Each breath turned to liquid fire, roaring in her lungs, and she strained for a time with each dull thump of her pulse. Each strike of her heartbeat went on forever, pulsating outward, as though something within her was trying to escape.

Is this it? Is this the end? she thought numbly, straining to cling to something, some memory, that would get her through it. She remembered the last time she had been outside; the last time she had seen the front door, the yard, the houses across the street. *How long has it been?* She tried to remember, each thought disintegrating in the darkness of her mind even as they formed tentative bridges across the pain. The world began to spin.

Her house was blue. Blue with a pink front door and a small deck on the southern side. She could see it for a moment in her mind, had almost time to reach out and to touch it, but the sparks flashing over her drowned out that one thin moment of clarity. Yet slowly, inch by painful inch, the aching in her chest began

to recede, as if the memory was enough to coerce them into retreat. Aftershocks still wound their way across her, bursts of lightning in the warm, quiet darkness, but the worst was over. Dizzy and gasping, she lay still for a moment that seemed to last forever.

Samantha exhaled shakily, sitting up as slowly as she could. The moonlight streaming through her window shivered luminously at her feet, and she gazed around quietly, gathering herself back together. *At this rate, I never know how much longer I've got. I guess no one does...*

Yet already the strange tiredness was beginning to seep back into her body, cradling her in that bizarre, uncomfortable warmth. The conscious control of her limbs began to fade. She could never resist it when it came back for her like this; her body seemed to betray her, ignoring her pleas for it to stay awake, to stay focused. *Why does this happen to me?* she thought, but even thought was brushed aside as if by iron fingers in her mind. She was forced under, powerless, in the current that seemed to rush past, refusing to let go. Drifting back into that quiet world, so far away, so vague and incomprehensible. Fading into a blur of deep, desperate sleep. Numb confusion.

Silence.

Across town, Joshua lay wordless, with only a quiet breathing to remind himself that he was alive at all. The few occasions he opened his eyes were scarcely for more than a few seconds; now he was somewhere thoughts and

dreams could not penetrate.

“Why can’t anyone tell me what’s *wrong* with my son?”

His mother sat quietly on the floor, gazing through a veil of tears as he lay peacefully before her. His strength, that mischievous light in his eyes—everything seemed to be falling from her memory, and she scrabbled through her daily existence trying to remember what this silent, motionless figure had once been like.

Two years had passed, barely registering in her mind as she had sat there night after night, waiting for a miracle.

“I can’t *take it* anymore!” A howl rose up from the depths of her soul, a sound that should have been impossible for a human being to make. It tore at her, reminded her of just how lost and confused she was. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You can’t do anything but wait, Rebecca. Just be patient... somehow.” The woman behind her sat down quietly, afraid to disturb the tense, emotional silence. “I just don’t know. I don’t *know* anymore. Samantha’s been... like this... for close to eighteen months. And I honestly *don’t* know how I deal with it. But I find a way—somehow, I find a way.” She paused, thinking. “I’m sorry, Becca. You have no idea how sorry I am.”

Rebecca sniffed and looked away. “It’s not your fault, Maggie. It’s not anyone’s fault. Part of me knows that, and part of me...”

They regarded each other quietly for a moment; there seemed nothing left to say. In that special way of people made friends by the sharing of a tragedy, silence could reach to somewhere words would never find.

"It's no one's fault." The haunting wind of another Massachusetts winter rattled the windowpanes, already matted with first frost. Midnight rose to its place among the hours of the night, bathing everything in a serene surrealism all its own.

"Look, no amount of worrying is going to make him better," Maggie said tentatively. "You've done *all* you can for now. Come on, how 'bout I make you some tea?"

They walked downstairs, footsteps padding softly as if afraid they might wake whoever in the world had been blessed with a restful sleep.

"Kids just don't get sick for two years at a time, Maggie. They just *don't*. I know that. I mean, as each month goes by it just gets more hopeless. Sometimes I don't even know what it is that I'm hoping for, how I can possibly believe that it'll end..."

"I know." Maggie looked tiredly over at her friend, putting the teacups down quietly on the kitchen counter. *What am I supposed to say?* "I know."

They drank their tea in silence, staring listlessly at opposite ends of the kitchen. A blanket of sudden stillness crept across the shining appliances, the rows of knives carefully arranged in wooden stands, the hollow thin hum of the refrigerator lurking in the corner. The snow continued its endless falling and the moon continued its almost-imperceptible descent towards the west; and each moment seemed to compound and magnify the tense silence until breaking it would have been nearly impossible.

Upstairs Samantha tossed fitfully, lost in strange, hollow dreams. She could make sense of none of what she was seeing, but she could not wake to dispel it. The noise and chaos rose, foaming like a violent sea in her mind; even in the dream state she could feel her eyelids twitching like dragonfly wings over her now-sightless eyes.

Out of the random, volatile fury of it all, there came a moment of lucidity. Out of the flashing, roaring, vibrating montage came one moment of order. She saw a small golden ring appear and disappear. Flashes of familiar objects whipped by her; a bathtub, a showerhead, a door... and something more.

When she was finished with her tea, Maggie turned to go. "I almost forgot about that client coming in from Chicago," she said hastily, trying to play down her eagerness to leave. "I really have a lot to do tomorrow morning. But Becca..."

"What?" Rebecca lowered the teacup to the counter with one deft, precise movement of her wrist; it *clinked* quietly on the marble and glittered there in the red light of the corner stoplight.

"You can't just let his illness dictate your life for you. You *can't*. You have things to do... you have a life to live. You can't sit in here all day just... *watching* him. I know how much you want to, how much you feel you need to, but there's so much more out there..."

"I'm his mother. This is my job."

"You're also human. You need time for *yourself*, Becca."

“From the moment he was born I’ve done nothing but take care of him, Maggie. This is who I am.”

“But don’t you see? You *can’t* take care of him now. He’s... he’s on his own. Samantha is on *her* own. Becca, no matter how much we wish for it, there’s *nothing* we can do until they wake up. Nothing.”

Rebecca gazed numbly at her hands. “I can’t just... leave him here. I can’t leave this house. What if he... what if he comes out of it when I’m gone?” A note of anxiety mixed with fear had entered her voice, a touch of paranoia Margaret knew all too well.

“You can *certainly* get out of the house for a few hours to have a life of your own,” said Margaret. “Nothing is going to happen to him. We’re talking a few hours. He hasn’t *moved* in at least six months. Look, how about we go to that museum sometime on the weekend? The one that has that new exhibition you were telling me about?”

Rebecca smiled sadly. “*Lifting the Veil*, I think it was called...” Her voice trailed off.

“Yeah, wasn’t that the Buddhist thing? I really wanted to see it; it sounded so interesting. Come on! We can have a great time out... get out and walk a little, take your mind off of all of this for a bit...”

Shards of snowflakes blazed in the moonlight as they fell like light glinting on scratched metal. The stoplight that had tinted the kitchen a quiet shade of red now flicked to green, and Rebecca looked doubtfully at the cars passing beneath it.

"It's going to be cold, Maggie. That's silly."

"Come on, it'll be fun! Look, we have to get you out of this house somehow..." Margaret laughed, a sudden, nervous chuckle.

Rebecca sighed, nodding slowly as if deep in thought. Then she looked up, her gaze clear for a moment. "OK. Let's just do that. You're right... I need to find something to take my mind off of this."

"Great!" Margaret said, visibly relieved. "I'll come over at, like, noon or so... on Saturday, alright?" She opened the door and a blast of frigid air smashed suddenly across her face. Snow flecked the black doormat, a thousand stars on the dark rubber.

"Sunday," said Rebecca, still looking doubtful; she glanced momentarily towards the staircase, and to Joshua. "Let's make it Sunday."

"Fine with me. Look, Becca, I'm only trying to help..."

"I know. Thank you." She smiled briefly. "Maggie...?"

"Yeah?" Margaret turned back towards her, the warmth of the house tempting her to stay longer.

"Just... thanks. For listening to my ranting and all. It means a lot to me."

"I'm here when you need me. Now get some rest," Maggie said, "and Sunday we'll have fun, OK?"

"Okay..." Rebecca tapped her long nails listlessly on the counter, lost in thought. "Isn't it amazing that we've become such good friends—and for *two years* now!—but our children have never even met each other? Isn't that a little odd?"

A sad smile crept across Maggie's face. "They will, Becca. They will. We just have to wait, and hope, for that day to come."

Samantha awoke abruptly, the memory of her dream already unraveling as she began to recall it. The branches of a tree knocked insistently against the windowpane, shadows like stubby fingers on the opposite wall. Tendrils of ice crawled slowly up her arms; she shivered once, twice, three times, a feeling of sudden discomfort overtaking her. *Must have left the window open again*, she thought dimly, but a quick glance told her that it was shut as tight as could be. The strange icy feeling returned. *What's going on?*

The peculiar pulsating pain in her chest began again, slowly, wrapping around inside her, tearing her apart. A serpent coiled around her heart, squeezing; almost as if it enjoyed this toying with her, enjoyed the pain it caused her.

She realized what was happening even before her mind had finished contemplating it. With a quiet, prescient certainty, she *knew*.

I'm going to die here, she thought slowly, each word separated by what seemed a lifetime of silence. *I am going to die. My life is ending.*

It seemed almost too easy, too obvious, to really be happening. Nothing she could do or say would hold open the door she could see closing before her. She saw a pool of black water loom before her, stars hanging motionless within the darkness. She could see her pale face reflected in its endless depths, but she could not stop herself from being pulled towards it, from being pulled towards the

inevitable. *Is this another dream? Am I hallucinating?*

The air in Samantha's room changed, becoming purer. Almost intoxicating. She could see the moon, pale-lit by night, peering at her. Peering into her. She felt powerless beneath its penetrating gaze, her every thought laid bare before it. Its luminous face came closer, as if to speak with her.

A noise like a thousand voices in the murky midnight rose out of everything and nothing. *You're not afraid, dammit, she told herself. You aren't afraid.*

Her heart thumped its rhythmic chant louder and louder in her ears, pounding each beat in staccato, single-note harmony. She grew dizzy, her pulse quickly accelerating beyond all possibility. The thumping became a solid, endless whirr, the beats no longer separate and distinct but now one monotonous, unending sound.

What's happening to me?

The room began to spin wildly, and the monotone of her heart abruptly cut out altogether. She could hear nothing, could feel nothing. She could no longer sense her body; could not detect even the most fragile of sensations upon it, but she could still see it hanging beneath her head in the watery blackness.

Am I dead? she thought, each word taking another eternity to crash upon her mind. She waited, hanging motionless in the void.

A voice spoke to her, then, a voice that seemed to rise out of the very framework of existence. It welled up and roared like the sea on distant tides, each syllable distinct and yet flowing together in a way that should have been confusing

but was not. It was so complex, so multifaceted, that this simple act of speaking seemed to her the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.

[You must make a choice now, little one,] it said, the sound swelling up and enveloping her, resonating across her mind. *[But you will make the right choice; of this we are certain.]*

Who are you? she thought, only half-expecting an answer. Her body began to fade before her eyes, her skin becoming pale, then a wispy white, then translucent, then invisible altogether.

[Your questions have not time enough,] the voice whispered again, in an echoing hum that seemed to begin and end with notes so low, so resonant, so pure that she could scarcely believe in their existence. The sheer presence the voice had in her mind belied any sense of scale or form; any physical embodiment of it would have been lacking, somehow incomplete. *[You must decide, very soon, where your footprints will fall next.]*

But why me? What's happening to me?

[Sometimes...] it began, slowly. A sudden swirl of forces in her mind might have constituted a ponderous sigh. *[Sometimes those who believe themselves incapable of transformation are the ones who must transform. The prophets of change are not the mightiest among us; not the Sentinels in their star-hewn nests nor the Keepers in their cosmic thrones. They are those who have been left untainted, left unspoiled by the darkness that lurks Out There.]*

The memory of what it felt like to move one's eyes came back to her; they

seemed to suddenly and instinctively glance towards the wan moon and the blue midnight.

Out There? A chill akin to awe swept her fingertips.

[The universe is vast, little one... and there are many worlds you dare not dream of. If only this choice had not been left to you...] That swirl brushed her awareness again, a sigh like the universe itself sighing; it was so full of pain and sorrow that she could not imagine ever being happy again. *[There is darkness in the uncharted, more than you will ever understand.]*

But what do you want from me? she asked quietly. *Why are you telling me this? What can I possibly do?*

[You can learn, and teach, and hope for the answers. That is the most one can hope to do with their life.]

She felt the touch of that great voice begin to leave her mind, withdrawing slowly from her consciousness as if afraid it had hurt her. *[Choose wisely, little one,]* it whispered like wind across a forest canopy, *[for you can be more than you ever imagined.]*

It was gone.

“But—” she stammered, staring blankly at her suddenly foreign surroundings. A quiet, slowly-spiraling mist seemed to cling to the floor; the edges of the room shrunk away from her until all she could see were the narrow floorboards beneath her feet. Even the familiar objects of her room seemed surreal, ominous. She felt no comfort being among them, no sense of safety or

contentment. All she felt was alone; an all-consuming loneliness that pervaded her being at every level. Moonlight poured through her translucent body in every direction, glinting off the fragile prism of her soul.

In front of her there rose two little candles, one blue and one white, their bases shrouded in swirling mist. The white candle burned slowly, its light static and almost motionless; the blue sputtered brilliantly, flickering and changing completely in every moment. The short column of white wax already almost at its end, while the blue candle showed no such sign of burning away.

There lurked within her a sense of fear and uncertainty, a sudden quiet understanding that these two flames represented opposites, mutually exclusive; she could choose only one.

She glanced first towards the white candle, at the steadiness and quiet beauty of its solid, eternal light. It seemed perfect, complete. But it was... obvious, predictable...almost boring in its perfection. She glanced quickly towards the blue candle, intending it to be for only a moment, but it held her gaze for far longer. It was captivating, in a way she could not explain. She breathed in and watched it sparkle on the floor before her.

The flame rose and fell violently upon the braided wick, each movement sudden and unpredictable. Its motion seemed to present a sense of danger, a sense of uncertainty; it was enigmatic and strange, and its strangeness was what excited her. It seemed to struggle, constantly pushed down by some invisible force, yet every few seconds it would rise up again, reaching far into the emptiness above it

like a dolphin ascending for air. She watched it carefully and it began to consume her, began to consume the walls and the floor and the bed long-forgotten behind her. Its flickering stood atop a tall, graceful blue taper that showed no sign of burning away. The room brightened as flame began to soar in spirals across it.

Samantha focused for a moment, driving back the rapidly-growing inferno of the blue candle. *All things in perspective, she thought. I have to be careful.*

She knew what the shortness of the white candle meant, as if her rapidly-dematerializing body was not example enough, but its consistency felt to her more agreeable, more normal. *There is a kind of strength in playing by the rules, she thought. Wisdom. And I have lived properly; if I die tonight, I'm satisfied with what I've done.*

She reached towards the white candle, her translucent hand barely obscuring its light. The pale outline of her fingertips wavered, as if vibrating at some impossibly high frequency, when a thought occurred to her.

In being so obvious, so clear, it loses its mystery. There is no ambiguity; there is nothing hidden. There is nothing profound in such unassuming perfection.

Once more she glanced towards the blue candle, and almost immediately the flame began to ascend. *The ones who believe themselves incapable of transformation are those who need most to be transformed, the voice had said. I'll never know what that transformation is... unless I see it for myself.*

One last look was all it took; the sputtering fire of the blue candle rose to unimaginable, unnatural height. Once again it was captivating her, drawing her

towards it...

I can't leave this chance behind. I just can't.

Reluctantly letting go of the steady light of the white candle, her fingers reached into the flame of the blue, their blurred edges grasping for reason within its quiet azure beauty.

Almost at once, the room seemed to uncurl around her. It was as though everything she had ever known was peeling away to reveal that it was only a minor detail, a trivial thread in a tapestry that defied all sense of scale.

A deep, dreamless sleep took her, a darkness beyond darkness, seemingly without end. On waking, however, she began to realize the truth: she would never—could never—be the same again.

Samantha awoke to the sunlight dancing on her windowsill, a hidden world floating slowly to the surface of her mind. A strange sensation she had never felt before shivered through her, ecstatic and wonderful, as she sat there in awe. It felt like flying...

She felt effortlessly in control, as if every movement was merely a glimmer of thought; the world seemed to glow beneath her feet. Everywhere there was new meaning, new insight to be gained from the simplest of things. She wanted to find someone to share this beauty with, someone who would understand it, but she knew no one who would. This was something extraordinary, something that had been beyond her comprehension only a night ago.

Was it only yesterday? she wondered, shivering again with the pure beauty of it all. *The blue candle... the choice I made...*

It seemed too good to be true. *I'm here. I'm awake, aware... and I'm alive. But I still don't know why. Last night should have been the end!*

But it doesn't really matter now, does it? she thought, smiling. *What matters is that I'm here now. And it's so beautiful out there...*

She gazed serenely out the window, kicking her feet over the edge of the bed. For months she had sat here, behind this sheet of glass; months of watching the seasons come and go, the cruel clouds of April pushed back by the warm breath of June and the sunlight banishing the moon from the cerulean sky, day after day and night after night. All that watching had been just a precursor, though; after two years, she felt that only now, at this very moment, did she fully understand that vast, radiant landscape beyond the window. *Two years of watching this same boring scene, and I realize now that I never really saw it at all. Funny how that works out...*

The air seemed to tingle with suddenly infinite possibility. A striking sense of déjà vu, of a precision and clockwork etched and echoing in every moment, filled her mind. The movement of people in the streets seemed choreographed, as though each step was already taken, each movement decided beforehand. She saw each movement, each rustle of snow, each flap of a coat in the wind, as though watching a memory of something that had happened long ago. The universe's metronome, that steady *tick* of time moving forward second by second and inch-

by-inch, matched the beating of her heart like the pounding of a cosmic drum.

The sound of a car approaching her driveway broke the thoughtful silence. Part of her scrambled to recall something about its sound, something that seemed so familiar...

The pieces of the life she had effectively left behind nearly two years ago began, slowly, to fall back into place. Kicking off the bed, she ran down the stairs her feet knew so well, their every grain and texture called up and recollected in an instant. Rooms she had not seen in months blurred by her as she ran to the front door, threw it open, and stood outside for the first time in nearly two years, her hair afire in the winter sunlight.

“Mom?”

The crowd at the museum was unusually thin for a Sunday afternoon; evidently the snow had dissuaded many would-be art critics from attending.

“I’m scared of her, Becca,” said Margaret, biting her lip. “I never thought I could say that. I never thought I could *feel* that. I’m just... I’m worried about her.”

“What did she say to you?” Rebecca said gently.

“She was just really energetic, really lively. She acted as if nothing had happened; as if the last eighteen months I’ve just been completely confused,” Maggie said, brushing her hair back and looking down for a moment as if focusing. “I don’t even know what to think anymore. She acts like it was all perfectly normal, that I just didn’t notice she was around or something. It’s really strange.”

They continued walking through the ornate, sweeping hall of the North Wing, stopping briefly to take in the tapestries that rose like silver ribbons up the walls. It was like stepping into another world, full of color and mystery.

"Is that all, though? Why are you *scared* of her?"

"She—" Maggie broke off abruptly, breathing deeply as if gathering the strength to continue. "*She's different* now, Becca. She... she's a complete stranger to me."

Rebecca paused in mid-step, glancing at a golden carved Buddha whose eyes seemed to suddenly and unexpectedly meet her gaze from across the room.

"How so?"

"I can't even explain it. Samantha was just never like this before... she has this... *appreciation* of everything. As if she's never seen any of it before. She was staring, just *staring* intently out the kitchen window, as if there was something there that was completely new to her. She's lived in that house her entire life! I mean, maybe she doesn't remember certain things, but..."

"But what?"

"I just don't think that's it."

Rebecca's eyes retreated from the Buddha's, roaming across the columns as they continued walking. "Maggie, just tell me what's on your mind. Please. You're leaving something out... I can tell."

"I am," she said, biting her lip again. "Becca... something's *happened* to my daughter. She's..."

“Go on,” Rebecca said lightly. “Just tell me.”

“I—I lost my ring a while ago, that little emerald one. You know the one Greg gave me before—before he died?” Her eyes brimmed with tears at the mention of her husband. “Samantha told me where it was. She *knew* where it was. When she noticed it wasn’t on my finger, she immediately went over to the bathroom and opened up the shower drain and there it was... just *there*. It must have come off in the shower sometime, but how would she know that?”

“That’s... strange.”

“She told me—” Another pause, this time far longer. “She told me that *Greg* had told her where to find it—” Her shoulders quivered noiselessly as she fell weakly into a nearby bench and covered her face with her hands. “She said Greg wanted me to remember that he was always there for me.”

“What?” said Rebecca, sitting down and putting her arm around her somewhat cautiously. “I don’t understand...”

A few faces in the crowd turned towards them, wondering what was going on, and Margaret’s voice became suddenly choked with emotion. “She told me where to find it, but her voice... it was in my head. I heard her voice in my head! She... she talked to me. And I just...I don’t know what to do. I just can’t take this, Becca!”

“Shhh, shhh, shhh,” Rebecca said soothingly. “It’s alright. It’s alright.”

“But it’s not! This is my *daughter*! I don’t believe in telepathy, or ghosts, or any of this sort of thing, but I know what happened, and it scares me because I

don't understand it. I don't know *what's happening!*"

Rebecca pursed her lips thoughtfully for a moment. When she spoke again, it was with a reassuring calm she did not know she possessed.

"This is a gift, Maggie. I don't know *why* she can do that... why you hear her voice in your head, or why she says she's talking to Greg..." She lowered her voice self-consciously, trying not to attract any more attention than Margaret's outbursts already had. "It's... of course it's frightening. It's *unknown*, it's something strange, something that shouldn't be possible—but you've experienced it firsthand! You *know* it's real. How many people do you know who can say that? It's something to be excited about, not something to be scared of."

"It's not right," Maggie said, crying and shaking her head dejectedly. "It's not... normal."

"It's something to be happy about, Maggie. Something to cherish. If Joshua came back to me, no matter how changed he was, I would *always* love him. I would always accept him. You've been given such an incredible gift—you have your daughter back! What more could you possibly want? I would give *anything* for that." Her eyes caught the Buddha's again from across the room, and a wave of undulating stillness seemed to float between them for a moment. *Lifting the Veil*, the sign above it said in garish purple letters. *The Art of Ancient Dreams*.

"I can't deal with it, Becca. I wish she would just *stop* it. I wish she would go back to the way she was before! She was such a happy girl... I remember when we used to go out on picnics in the park during the summer, and she would always

ask me about work— we would have such a great time together...”

“You talk about her as though she’s dead!” Rebecca said, rounding on her, sudden anger flashing in her eyes. “Would you rather *that* had happened? Would you prefer it if she had never woken up at all?” Just days earlier, her friend had been the hopeful one, the support, the last pillar of strength. To see her like this, despondent and degenerate before her, was more than Rebecca could stand.

Maggie turned to her, eyes glittering with thick, rolling tears. “I don’t know anymore, Becca,” she said quietly, almost a whisper. “I don’t know anymore.”

Joshua stirred awake and saw his choice in the blue-gray fog of midnight, but he did not hesitate for a moment. He barely questioned the voice as it instructed him; somehow all this time he had been expecting this decision, half-awaiting its inevitable arrival. For years he had felt that at some point, some event would come to change him, and was only relieved to find that it had finally come.

For so long he had wanted to find something more, some deeper reason behind his existence; for so long he had struggled with questions of what he was doing on the planet. Why was he here at all, if his life was to be confined to a bed forever? He had not been this awake, this alive, for months, and the simple experience of sitting up and gazing quietly around his room seemed to him the most blissful of all things.

He floated on the spark of golden light, buoyed by the bizarre, volatile currents of the dream world, until the choice was made and the chance was taken.

A flicker of blue light streaked after him, through the corridors of memory and reason, until the dawn at last came for him.

There was no turning back now.

Samantha walked to the edge of the woods, her shoes making quiet noises on paths strewn with snow and falling leaves. The things she had never stopped to admire now drew her complete attention, demanding her awareness. The simple majesty of the world brought her close to tears; the way the branches curved in the wind and the snow fell silently to the ground seemed too beautiful for her to bear alone.

Something about the word triggered a sudden and all-consuming sadness. *Alone*. A terrible feeling of distance, of separation, now hung like a gray cloud over her head.

She *was* alone, now; alone in a way that made everyone else in the world seem close by comparison. This feeling, this newfound awareness coursing through her mind and body, made her different than them. She realized that now. She saw, if only for a moment, just how far from others she was now, how isolated and removed this strange accident had made her.

She had sensed her mother's fear, her discontent, within seconds of seeing her again; all joy of being reunited had faded into a confused, dismal despair. Once again Samantha realized how difficult this would be, how painful the future might become for her. *This experience is... an anomaly, something rare, she*

thought, blinking back the first tears. It was beautiful beyond anything words could describe, because the words for such a feeling had never been invented. And *I have no one on my side now, not even those who were once closest to me; because other people have never felt this... because other people cannot feel this.*

But what does that make me? What's happened to me?

Voices seemed to rise, wraithlike, out of the air around her; images and ideas floated softly past her.

She walked on.

Joshua had returned to school, much to the joy of his mother, and seemed to be for the most part back to normal. He would never understand what had happened to him, could never explain exactly what it was that felt so different—only that something, somewhere, had changed dramatically. He did not mention it to Rebecca; such burdens, he felt, were unnecessary to lay on her. But he tried to function, tried to reintegrate himself into the world he had forgotten, and his efforts, though unsuccessful, were noble.

Yet everywhere he went, Joshua felt *different*, somehow changed beyond all recognition. He could not blend into the old traditions and societies that had once excited him; try as he might, he could no longer find meaning in them.

He felt lifeless, alone in the rush of schoolwork and social duties. It all seemed so pointless, so trivial; he felt as though those around him were ignoring something major, something tremendously important. *He felt it, like a cold, numb*

dread, as though something terrible was about to happen and he would be powerless to stop it. Everywhere he went he seemed always to be followed by a cloud of loneliness and fear, and slowly, even those who had once called themselves his friends detached themselves.

Each day dragged on with the same unending sadness; each day seemed to push him under another inch. He was happy to be alive again, happy to see and taste and feel what he had missed all those long months asleep, but at the same time he was resentful of his aimlessness, of his inability to rise above the seemingly endless tasks set before him. He was trapped behind a wall of schoolwork, unable to explain even to himself what he needed to be doing instead. He knew, deep down, that he was needed for more than this—that being another cog in the machine was not, *could not*, be the reason for his existence. Had his choice meant nothing?

He began to write, then; the thoughts welling up inside him and splattering between the orderly lines of a notebook, where they lay gasping like fish on the strange foreign shore of the paper. He began to reveal these strange, nameless emotions, first to himself and then attempting to somehow solidify them between the crisp blue rules of the page. His hand moved tirelessly, and its thick black mark was not unlike the scratchings of an earlier Man, attempting to discover meaning and substance in a world he could not yet understand.