

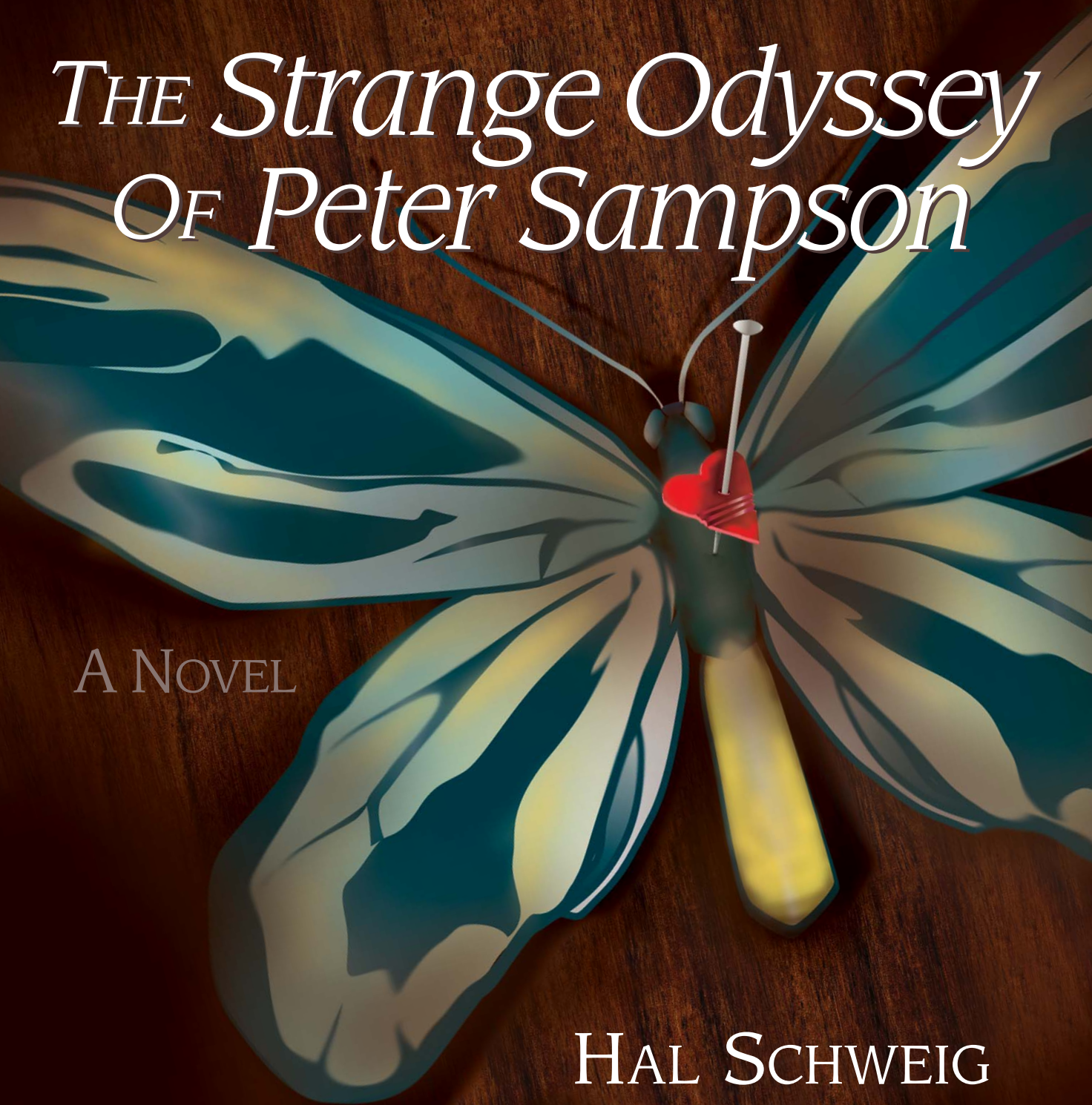
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novels in recent American fiction."*

K. Tenner, Book Review Editor, *The Digest*

THE Strange Odyssey OF Peter Sampson

A NOVEL

HAL SCHWEIG



***The Strange
Odyssey of
Peter Sampson***

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Peter Sampson*



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This novel is a work of fiction and portrays imaginary characters. Names, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

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To Norma, who never stopped believing.

The Strange Odyssey of Peter Sampson...

A failed alcoholic professor, who has lost his faith. A hauntingly beautiful and mysteriously angelic fashion model who, by her own admission, is “sexually dead inside.” Two anguished souls who meet and embark on an otherworldly odyssey that changes their lives forever and dramatically alters humanity’s understanding of life after death. They are the principal characters who drive the narrative of *The Strange Odyssey of Peter Sampson*.

Peter Sampson is a cynical professor of Greek Mythology whose boring lectures put scores of students to sleep. A widower, he is an angry atheist, who scoffs at his teenage daughter’s belief in the immortality of the soul and the certainty of life after death. However, she is desperate to believe it: wise beyond her years, she knows she is terminally ill.

Remorseful and suicidal following her death, he ventures to Greece where he seeks the courage to take his own life, drinks heavily and ends up in the gutter—literally.

Almost by accident, he stumbles upon a young fashion model, who takes him on an extraordinary journey where he learns, from unimpeachable sources, that immortality is granted to everyone, regardless of the life they have lived.

Spreading this message, Sampson rises to world fame and gains a legion of followers. At the peak of his renown, he is anointed by *The New York Times* as the “The most charismatic grass roots spiritual leader of our time.” However, his message—condemned by the major religions as “immortality without morality”—earns him the enmity of the establishment. Death threats from hate groups multiply and speculation runs high that he will be assassinated. Nevertheless, Sampson refuses to curtail his crusade.

Treating Sampson’s personal life and loves, as well as his public exploits, this epic novel encompasses an intimate story. That story chronicles Sampson’s ultimate triumph over personal despair and hopelessness, the victory of his newfound spirituality over the specter of death haunting three generations of his family.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I had always been exasperated by the maddening contradiction between the religious concept of a loving God who cares about humanity, and the reality of how cruel the natural and man-made worlds often are.

The devastating earthquakes and tsunamis and hurricanes and famines and other catastrophes that arbitrarily kill and maim millions of innocent people; man's unending inhumanity to man—how could these cruelties be carried out or be sanctioned by a God who loves us?

I, like so many others, was confounded by these seemingly irreconcilable contradictions, mysteries that have been pondered and debated by philosophers, theologians, by lay people, by the religious and nonreligious alike since the dawn of humanity, and never more so than in our time.

But one night I experienced a profound and disturbing but very realistic dream in which certain other-worldly “messengers” appeared to me and gave me the key that unlocked this overwhelming mystery I had tried to understand all my life. They also told me it would be my mission to tell the world.

The dream was so powerful that when I awoke, I was absolutely convinced that what they told me was unquestionably the truth.

The next day, I began to write this book. As the words flowed, as if dictated by a higher source, I realized that this was what I was born to do.

The novel you are about to read, *The Strange Odyssey of Peter Sampson*, is my attempt to carry out that mission.

Hal Schweig
October, 2006

Part I



Lori's Dreams and Desires

1.

Lori Sampson knew her father would be shocked. But would he do it eventually if she begged him, pleaded with him?

Probably not.

What father would? And what daughter would ask? She couldn't imagine herself asking, that was for sure. But then her life had turned upside down, hadn't it? She certainly didn't feel sixteen. She felt old. But not even old—beyond age, really. She felt closer to her mother, in a way, than to her father, although she loved him very much. That was because her mother was dead. And Lori, in her upside down existence was beginning to feel she had little in common with the living.

That was the strangest part of the way things were going lately. She no longer cared that much to see her friends, although since her illness they had been coming to see her frequently.

She had only one nagging thought associated with living: she was a virgin. She had never gone all the way. And now she never would.

She glanced down the front of her dress at the impressive swelling of her breasts. She had prayed since she was 13 to have a really nice pair. And her prayers had been joyously answered. A year or so ago, what had been a rather boyish figure had blossomed into a full womanly body. But no boy would ever possess it.

Lori put down the book she had been only halfheartedly reading. She turned on the TV. She wanted desperately to put it all out of her mind. The part about asking her father to do it was an idle thought. But then again it wasn't. It had crossed her mind in the first place because, despite her outward calm, she was terrified.

A true measure of her desperation: after all she had been through since she had gotten sick—including the loss of her hair—she still considered herself fortunate in certain ways. How lucky she was, she decided, that her father almost certainly would know what to do. He could do it if he wanted to. And if he agreed, he would give her something—a drug of some kind—and it would be over with quickly. She would not suffer. Instead, she would leave this world and join her mother. She would not have to face what she knew was in store for her: sleepless nights going out of her mind with fear; inability to handle normal bodily functions or even feed herself; and finally, what she dreaded most—the pain: pain that went on all day and all night without letup; pain so deep the drugs they gave you never even touched it; pain that grew worse and worse until it finally became...

The word was too hideous to form on her lips. She was desperate to wipe it out of her mind completely. Because even thinking about that much pain made her furious. And when she got this angry, she began to tremble. She held her right hand in front of her. It was shaking. She couldn't stop it. Sometimes when she became uncontrollably frightened, as she was now, she couldn't stop shaking for hours.

What's the sense of *living* like this? she thought, on the verge of tears. He *has* to do it. He fucking *has* to. I can't go on like this. No *way*.

But *will* he? Not much chance, she thought. Shit, not much chance at all.

2.

"Dr. Sydney? It's me, Lori. I know I promised I'd never call again in the middle of the night, but... It's like...I just freaked out. Been up three, four hours so nervous, thinking about nothing but hearing your voice. You're the only one I can talk to. But I told myself, 'You *can't* call him at this hour. *This* time you're going to control yourself!'

"You see, I'm no good at self-discipline. It's my worst fault. Guess you found that out. And I try so hard. I really do. I bitch at myself all the time. Get into big fights with myself.

"Tonight I yelled out loud when I couldn't hold out any longer. I was about to reach for my cell, when I yelled, '*NO!* Don't fucking *do* it! *Control* yourself! It'll be light soon. Get through the next four, five hours, you'll make it.' So I tried everything I could. Nothing worked. Finally I decided to count the minutes. Two hundred and forty minutes to go. Two hundred and thirty-five. I thought I was going to be okay. I was so proud of myself. But...but suddenly I just freaked out. Started dialing your number. Couldn't stop. Like those other times. I'm really sorry."

"What's that noise?" the doctor said thickly. His voice was heavy with sleep.

"Noise? Oh, that. My new CD. Been playing it all night. Hold on, I'll turn it down."

She reached over from her bed and lowered the volume lever on her receiver. Then she resumed her position, sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"That better?"

"You've been up all night?"

"Most of it."

"How often do you do that?"

"When I can't sleep."

"You need your sleep, Lori."

"I know."

"It's very important."

"I *know*. Geez!"

There was a pause, then the doctor said, "How're you feeling?"

"Oh, okay, I guess. I mean—that's stupid, isn't it? I always say, 'Okay' when people say, 'How are you?' But if I'm calling you in the middle of the night, I'm not okay, am I? Well, the thing is, at the moment I *feel* okay, I guess, sort of. But I just get so god-damned scared. Can't explain it. Happens at night. Every night. I'm better during the day. Don't spend so much time thinking. But at night...well, this has been one of the worst. I'm playing the CD and the television's on with the sound turned down, just watching the screen trying to figure out what they're talking about—some old movie from the eighties or something—and the lights are all on and I'm reading a book, but nothing works. I'm so scared I'm not going to...you know...not make it."

"I see. Is your father home?"

"Oh sure."

"Can't he help you?"

"Oh, he's a big help. He really is. He's swell. It's just...I mean, he tries hard and all that. But I can't get any... He doesn't... Oh, I don't know *what* I'm trying to say. He's not my doctor. He's just my

father. He doesn't know anything about what's going on with me *medically*. Dr. Sydney? Last time you said if I could stay in remission, I'd have a good chance. Well, I've been thinking about that all night. And that doesn't make any sense, you know? What did you mean by that? That's so *screwy!* That's like saying you'll live if you don't die first. Nobody tells me the truth. It's all bullshit! Why can't people tell the truth?"

There was a silence on the other end. Lori could almost hear the doctor choosing his words ever so carefully.

"Lori, when I said that," he began, quietly, thoughtfully, "what I meant was..."

But Lori couldn't wait for an answer. "Dr. Sydney," she blurted out, "I'm so afraid of the *pain*. There was something in the paper today about the levels of pain with this kinda thing. I don't have to read it to you, I memorized it: It said the pain starts out mild, then builds up to moderate, then becomes severe, then *very* severe, then incapacitating, and finally... oh, God—*overwhelming!*"

She said nothing for a moment. The doctor thought he heard her crying.

After a few minutes, sounding like she was making a great effort to control her voice, Lori said, "I just couldn't *take* that. If it comes to that kind of pain, I'll start slobbering like a baby. I'll go to pieces. I know I talk tough. I act cool. I swear a lot. But there's no way I'm going to make it. No way... I'm so scared. What am I gonna *do?* "

3.

Toward morning, an hour or so before the first gray light of dawn was yet visible, Lori drifted into sleep. Herky, her little black poodle, also was fast asleep on top of the bed covers, curled into the curve of Lori's legs as she lay on her side under the covers. The dog always found a way to lay hard against her, but Lori didn't mind. Both of them had fallen asleep despite the fact that the stereo, the television and the lights were all on.

Lori's sleep, however, unlike that of her pet, was fitful. Rarely, these days, did she sleep the night through. She had not, in fact, done it more than twice since she had been told her diagnosis eight months ago.

Now Herky woke up, jumped to the floor and began to pace back and forth in the room. His movements were enough to bring Lori back to consciousness. She opened her eyes as if something had startled her awake. She sat up in bed, not fully aware of what had wakened her. A slight breeze lifted the sheer curtains at her window. The window was open wide on this warm late summer night. The sky outside the window was still black and clear and sprinkled with stars. The sheer curtains fluttered and billowed wide, but Lori felt no movement of air this time. The breeze, in fact, had died down. Everything was still. Extremely still. Something made her climb out of bed and shut off the stereo and the TV. She turned off the light over her bed. She listened in the dark, straining to hear something, although she didn't know why. She didn't know what she was listening for. The quiet was unreal. Even the crickets had stopped chattering. As if they too were listening.

Herky cocked his head to one side and his little poodle ears swung forward. He sat very still,

hardly moving a hair.

A rustling sound broke the silence. Soft, vague colors and shapes began to appear before Lori's eyes. Something, some figure was entering the room. Lori gaped in amazement. "Mom? Is that *you*? My God, I can't believe it. Is it *really* you?"

Her mother stood in front of the open window. She was superimposed, as it seemed, on the starry night sky, attired in a gauzy, gossamer gown full of shimmering, but muted colors and woven with threads of silver and gold. It was like no gown Lori had ever seen her mother wear. Her mother's face was bright and shining. Her eyes sparkled and twinkled. She smiled at Lori, a smile that almost glowed.

"You're so beautiful. What are you doing *here*, in my room? Can't you talk, or what? Aren't you going to talk to me? I think about you all the time. I never expected to see you in my room. Are you like a ghost or a soul or what? Do you mind my asking?"

Her mother shook her head, but she did not answer Lori's question.

"I'm kinda...this is so...*awesome*. I'm...I can't believe it. Dad will *never* believe it when I tell him. I can't wait to see his face. I'll bet a thousand dollars he'll say I imagined the whole thing or dreamed it. He's so square. But you *are* real, aren't you?"

Her mother nodded and smiled. Then she sat down on the bed next to Lori. Herky jumped back onto the bed and squeezed between them.

"I talk to you all the time. I imagine long conversations with you. I started talking to you when I first got sick. I've been telling you all about it. Keeping you up to date on my progress. Or the lack of it. I always imagine your part of the conversation. But now you're actually here, in person. I always *knew* you'd come some day. I told Dad you'd come to visit me. I told him you were listening to me. I *knew* I was right. All he ever says of course is 'nonsense.'

"But aren't you going to *talk* to me? Don't ghosts talk? Is that it? What do you think of my bald head?" Lori ran her hand over her head self-consciously.

"Dad'll have a *fit* when I tell him. He thinks this kinda thing is so weird—believing in the immortal soul and all that. He thinks anyone who believes there's life after death is weird. I don't know why that's so weird, do you? People think teenagers don't believe in anything but drinking beer and listening to rock music. I know lots of kids who believe it. *They* don't think it's weird at all."

Lori leaned over and laid her head on her mother's shoulder. "Could you hold me a minute?" Her mother put her arm around her and Lori cuddled closer. "It's cool having you here," said Lori, sighing. "Can you stay a while? It stinks not having a mother to talk to. Every minute of every day I think of something I wish I could tell you. Things I can't tell Dad."

Lori stopped talking for a moment or two. She became aware that Herky, lying half on the bed and half in her lap, was licking her right hand. "I feel strange lately," she said. "Like I don't belong here any more. Isn't that weird? All my friends talk about what they're going to do next week or next month or next year. They talk about all the 'friends' they have on MySpace. And everything is boys, boys, boys. They're already talking about going to college. About getting into 'good schools.' They're so fucking full of *plans* makes me sick. But I don't have any... I...I can't make any. Not any more." Lori began to cry, but tried quickly to stifle her tears.

"Mom," she went on, her voice trembling, "am I going to die?" She looked at her mother's face.

She hoped her mother knew for sure it wasn't true. She was desperate to see a smile creep across her mother's face. Or a twinkling of her mother's eyes. Some hopeful sign. But her mother's eyes revealed nothing but a wistful sorrow.

Lori held her breath. She clenched her fists. She made a mighty effort not to fall apart. "It's true, isn't it?" She put her head down. For a moment she couldn't speak. She knew if she tried she'd break down. It was a full two minutes before she got control of herself.

"Well, that really, really sucks, doesn't it?" Her voice almost broke. "That's so fucking full of *shit!*" It was the first time she had expressed her anger and bitterness out loud. Anger was the glue that might hold her together. Anger made her feel better. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. But her tears continued to flow, independent of what she wanted them to do, like a leaky faucet she couldn't turn off.

"Dad gets *furiosus* when I try to talk about these things. He acts like he doesn't want to know what's going on. He won't *listen* at all. Keeps saying it's just a matter of time before I get well. Just a matter of time and everything'll be *fine*. Sure. Sometimes I feel *I'm* the parent and he's the child. We just don't get along very well these days."

Lori's mother stood up and appeared ready to leave.

"Wait, Mom! Don't go yet. There's something I have to ask you. It's very important. I was wondering... Is it possible...? I mean... *Geez*, I don't know how to say this. What I mean is, will you be there when I...? Will you wait for me?"

Her mother smiled. Her eyes glowed.

"*Will* you? Will you *really*? Really and truly? I can't believe it!" Lori jumped up and took her mother's hand. It was so soft she could hardly feel it. "I've talked to you about that a thousand times. I have so many questions to ask you about it. I'm kinda scared and I'm not scared. Kinda both, you know. Is it terrible to die? What's it really like? Is there a lot of pain? Do you feel anything at all? What's it like when you stop breathing? I won't mind so much if I can be with you. Is that how it works? Will I see you right away? Will you be there when it happens? Is it like going to sleep and waking up somewhere else? Will you be with me forever? Wait—I forgot to ask you something else! What was it now? Can't think of it. Wait, Mom! Don't go yet!"

Her mother's glowing face and glittering gown dissolved slowly. After a moment all that Lori saw shimmering at the window was the black, star-speckled night itself.

4.

Professor Peter Sampson held the killing jar up to the light to catch the bright rays of morning sun streaming into his study. Filtering through the glass panels of the French doors, the light heightened the brilliance of the iridescent blue wings of the captive butterfly within the jar: *Papilio troilus*, a magnificent swallowtail. He pushed his thick chestnut hair off his forehead and peered at it with his glass. Under magnification he saw the wings fluttering quickly to maintain balance. He watched the rhythmic pulsing of the pencil-thin thorax and abdomen, the ugly body between the

beautiful wings. At the head, the long delicate antennae quivered, sensing danger. And with good reason. Sampson was preparing to put into the jar a wad of cotton moistened with ethyl acetate. Within seconds, the pulsing, breathing rhythms would cease.

Lori rested in the garden just beyond the French doors of her father's study. She sat propped up in a chaise lounge, her frail shoulders covered with a blanket despite the warming rays of the September sun. She was trying to read a book. Herky, who never strayed far from his mistress, was nosing under some bushes about six yards away.

Sampson put down his glass and looked out over the top of the killing jar, which he still held suspended in the sunlight. He continued to hold the jar this way, rather absently, although his attention was no longer on it. He was peeking through the glass panel of the door which framed the nearly hairless head of his daughter. She had some, but it was extremely short. Shorter than a boy's crew cut. It was just beginning to grow back. How tired she looked these days, he noticed. There were dark crescents under her eyes. And how pale her skin. Pastey. The color was drained out almost entirely. She was ghostly white.

To the right on his desk a dead butterfly specimen lay on the drying board where he had fixed it with pins and strips of white paper. He had carefully arranged the wings in the position in which they would be placed into a permanent niche in his collecting chest.

He rose, and as if bearing a rare gift, went into the garden, carrying the still living specimen in the jar. "Lori," he called to her, "have you ever seen such a beauty?" He was trying to sound casual and lighthearted, despite his concern for her appearance. He settled his large frame into the chair beside her. "Those hind wings have a kind of metallic sheen to them," he said.

She took the jar, and staring intently at the creature inside, said, "Is it true they live only a week?"

She continued talking as she held the jar. He listened, fascinated, not so much by what she said, but by the tone of her voice. It was a mixture of the child-like and the full blown woman—all in one. At 16 she had not completely lost the innocence and wonder of childhood. Yet, now and then her voice conveyed a bit of sex and seduction, flirtation and intrigue.

Despite her dreadful pallor and short-as-peach-fuzz hair, he was convinced she was on the road back. This is just a phase the disease is going through, he told himself. And all those drugs must be taking a toll. Another month of rest, she'll begin to snap back. He was sure of it.

"Why no, Lori," he lied. "No, this one lives quite a long life. Problem is, they have so many predators."

"Including *you!* Why do you have to *kill* them all? Don't you think they want to *live?*"

Sampson was startled by her sudden outburst.

"You've got a whole *graveyard* in your study. Two thousand dead butterflies."

"My collecting chest."

"That's what *you* call it." She was really mad. "How would *you* like to be stuffed into a jar along with some gunk that made your breathing stop? And all for somebody's *collection!*"

"Lori..."

"Well, that's what you're doing!"

"There are thousands of collectors, all over the world. Amateur and professional. I'm just one of them. Just trying to find a little beauty in the world and preserve it."

"Well, you can kill this butterfly, but you can't kill its *soul*," Lori said defiantly.

"Not the 'soul' business again?" said her father. "We've had this argument no less than a hundred times. Butterflies don't *have* souls."

"*Yes!* This butterfly has an immortal *soul!*"

"That's nonsense. There isn't a shred of evidence for such a thing as a human soul. How in the world could you possibly know if a *butterfly* has one?"

"I don't know *how* I know," Lori said with irritation. "I just *do*. I can feel it. There are some things you can feel, without being able to *prove* them."

"That's very romantic," said her father with just a tinge of sarcasm. "But nothing to do with logic or reason. It'd be wonderful, wouldn't it, if we all had souls. Life after death is a great idea. It really is. A great romantic wish. But it defies logic. Rational people don't believe that sort of thing."

"Good thing I'm not rational," said Lori, almost in tears. "I'd be sunk."

He knew he had hurt her by making fun of this soul business. He tried to smooth things over. "The ancient Greeks were as irrational as you are. They thought butterflies were the departing souls of the dead."

"Yeah? Maybe they *are!*"

"And maybe the man in the moon is made of green cheese," her father said. "Just as likely."

Lori frowned. "That's shit, Dad."

He didn't want to get into another terrible argument over this thing, like they'd been having lately over so many things. "The butterfly *is* a kind of miracle creature," said Sampson. "Transforming itself from a rather ugly, crawling, earthbound caterpillar into a weightless beauty, light as air, able to soar into the Heavens."

"Is that why you kill them, Dad? You can't stand miracles?"

5.

Sampson felt her words like a slap in the face. A powerful thirst came over him. He was about to go into the house for a drink when the doorbell rang. The dog went yapping and barking from under the bushes in the garden and ran through the open French doors into the house.

"Grandma," they said to each other.

He got up, leaving the killing jar and its doomed prisoner in her hands, and went into the house. His stepmother came in and he immediately began to feel uncomfortable.

"Have you told her yet?" was the first thing his stepmother said. She had not even put down her purse. Despite the warm day, she was carrying her fur jacket over her arm.

Sampson picked up his clay pipe from the resting tray on the mantle and began to fiddle with the crusted remains of the previous smoke. He struggled vigorously—almost viciously—with a small digging tool to extract the dead material from the smooth bowl.

His stepmother remained standing in the center of the room. It always seemed to Sampson that she did not simply walk into a room, but made "entrances" and stood waiting for "recognition" the way old-fashioned stars of the theater did when taking the stage for the first time in each performance. Posing self-consciously while the audience applauded. Today, she wore a designer suit handsomely tailored in red silk. Matronly, as befit her age and taste, but rich and expensive nonetheless. Her hair looked freshly "done." A number of real gold touches—pins, rings, etc.—adorned her costume.

"Told her *what*?" he answered with undisguised annoyance.

His stepmother took a few measured steps toward the French doors and stopped at her son's desk. Her eyes glanced disapprovingly at the collecting materials and the drying specimen. Then they darted for a quick look at Lori still examining the killing jar in her lap.

"We discussed this thoroughly the last time, Peter. It's obvious to everyone but you. The girl's dying." His stepmother sat down stiffly on the edge of a chair.

"The *hell* she is! She's doing just fine. She's going to be all *right*, damn it!"

"All one has to do is look at her," she said.

Sampson stuffed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe from a can on his desk and tamped it down repeatedly. "She's been trying to do too much lately. Can't hold her down. She'll just have to take it easy 'till she gets her strength back." He did not look up at his stepmother as he talked, concentrating all of his attention on the pipe and the task of filling it, lighting it and drawing the bowl to glowing red. "No question, she's beating it altogether."

There was a grimace of exasperation on his step-mother's face. She could hardly tolerate his futile hope. "It's better for the girl if she *knows*," she said. "Everyone tells me that. All my friends. She can plan her last months. Settle her affairs, her important business."

"Her important *business*? Her only important business is to get well!"

Mrs. Sampson rose and, bending her head back slightly so that her wrinkled neck showed beneath her white silk scarf, looked at an ugly crack in the ceiling. Then she took another step toward the glass door, cautiously, to squint again into the dazzling garden at the bald-headed, frail girl sitting there amid the overgrown greenery and flowers. She held back from a closer approach, so that her granddaughter could not see her, and thought how unkempt and run-down the garden and the whole house was becoming.

Still squinting into the sun, she said, "You never could take your losses very well, Peter. Even as a boy."

His stepmother always made him think of losses. Losses seemed to be his fate.

"You've never stopped your unnatural grieving over your wife. You *still* haven't accepted your father's death, and that was over thirty years ago. He was also my husband. But I've made a life for myself. I've gone on. Hard as it's been." She continued peering into the garden as she talked, keeping her eyes on Lori. "And now—what can I say?—your total inability to deal with *this* situation like a reasonable adult."