

FIREWALKERS

A Novel

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Last Passage

The tattered page stared blankly at him from the confines of his vintage 1936 Underwood typewriter. A carved wooden pipe lingered half full beside him and thin plumes of smoke drifted freely in the chill air.

The "I" and "V" keys of Robert's Underwood were well faded from overuse, though Robert still preferred the typewriter to the Macintosh laptop computer his eldest daughter had given him. The sound of the keys hitting the paper delighted him, even in such dire times. His typing was paced and deliberate.

Click ... clack ... click....

"The dangers of science versus nature were brought to light like...."

He stole a puff from the lonely pipe and considered the final paragraph. He had to finish this. They were getting close.

He exhaled and glanced around at the disorganized papers and dusty photographs that littered his old oak desk. He hoped to find some inspiration among the familiar images and scribbled notes. Framed pictures of his four children taken during brighter days stood like sentinels to guard his work.

There was Thomas, garbed in star-print pajamas and weathered moccasins. His long, tousled hair draped over his wild eyes like a shroud and a sly grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. Blain and Miranda stood side by side, although Blain towered over his beaming twin sister. Miranda's golden hair reflected the sunlight and she gripped her cherished magic kit, while Blain remained stoic as a mountainside, his arms crossed and stout legs apart.

And, finally, Bo. She must have been no older than three in the faded photo. She squatted on a long, striped beach towel with the sea and fire-red sunset behind her. Most of her little body was decorated with colorful stickers and acrylic paint her mother had brought along. Bo was laughing and her fingers shown of bright reds, greens and purples.

There was only one small picture of Robert's wife, Nicole. It was taken during her senior year of college, ten years before she succumbed to breast cancer. Robert thought she looked like an angel holding her books beneath the shading umbrella of a tall redwood tree.

But reflecting on the finality of life provided neither insight nor encouragement, so Robert returned to the image of his youngest daughter, Bo.

"The dangers of science versus nature were brought to light like ... waves crashing on the shore. Men were not meant to be Gods. I only hope this memoir can make amends for the trespasses I have helped wrought."

He ripped the page from the typewriter and read it aloud.

"Okay. Okay," he said to himself.

The rest of his 148-page memoir was stacked neatly beside him, the only sense of harmony on his cluttered workspace. He added the final page, wrapped the entire memoir with a worn rubber band and slid it into a large manila envelope. His only hope was that he had time to get the package to Thomas. In the least Thomas would have received the letter Robert had sent some six days ago. Perhaps that would be enough.

Robert Walker's remote home was in Bend, Oregon, nestled at the end of a shady, tree-lined street. It was one of the few places untouched by the Great Disaster. The event began with strained diplomacy and a tickle in the throat and ended with the largest single-day loss of human life in history. Robert could see nothing "great" about it. Illness and war ripped through the United States, Great Britain, Europe, Russia, the Middle East and China, and decimated populations like pesticide would wipe out a colony of ants.

The planet's tumultuous environment was also stirring unforeseen hardships. Japan was cloaked in an endless winter, while much of Africa suffered from a searing heat that left crops and children dehydrated shells. Yet somehow, Bend remained a pristine example of the world's forgotten beauty. It reminded Robert of Lothlorien from J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" tale – a secluded oasis surrounded by darkness and destruction.

But there was little time for reflecting on the world's woes. They were getting closer.

The only postman in Oregon was a friend and lived eight miles from Robert, but the midday sun was waning. Robert paced around his dim-lit office and popped an aspirin to calm the headache that had nagged him since breakfast. He was a heavy man and his dark corduroy coat was unable to hide his bulging 61-year-old stomach. His graying beard was unkempt and the smudged glasses perched on the bridge of his nose only partially blocked his bushy eyebrows.

He gripped his memoir with the same clenched strength that a child holds his bedtime blanket and walked briskly out of the office, through the wood-paneled hallway and toward the front door. The doorknob was cool and a quiet stillness seemed to seize the house. He peered outside and wondered if the distant shadows were those of shrubs or something more ominous. An uneasy chill penetrated him as his trembling hand turned the knob.

It wouldn't be long now. He knew they had arrived.

The creature called Chrysanthemum scurried up a tree behind Robert's house and crawled along a heavy branch that hung low over the home's roof. Chrysanthemum was a foul being – hairless and meager. Leathery skin enveloped his faulty bone structure, the angled edges of disproportioned ribs and elbows all but poking through. He wore tattered jeans and his misshapen hands were crowned with jagged, yellow fingernails. He moved with the quiet agility of a stalking predator, leaping from the branch onto Robert's roof and creeping on four limbs to the front of the house. He swayed back and forth above the doorway, breathing coarsely through his foaming, fanged mouth.

Robert swung the door open with trepidation to see two figures in the flat before him. One was wheelchair bound and bald, with narrow glasses propped low on the bridge of his thin nose. He was calm, and his clasped hands rested serenely on his lap.

The other stood steadfast, his arms hanging motionless at his sides. He was an exact genetic replica of Robert but younger, more virile. No frumpy posture or paunchy gut. His eyes shown no white and were a deep, smothering charcoal.

Robert knew them as Philip and Brother. He tried to swallow but it felt like a jawbreaker was lodged in his throat. Urine trickled down his inner thigh. He could hear subtle movement above.

A sticky mouthful of saliva streamed down Chrysanthemum's chin and landed on Robert's shoulder. Robert glanced up and had time for one harsh, penetrating howl as Chrysanthemum pounced. He dug his teeth into Robert's throat and plunged his thick fingernails into the back of Robert's neck. Chrysanthemum's powerful jaw clamped down on Robert's windpipe like a vice.

Robert died quickly. Blood flowed down his jacket and pants, and droplets of crimson spattered the envelope housing his memoir.

"That's enough Chrysanthemum. He's gone. Get the book," Philip said.

"Yesss father."

Chrysanthemum pried the envelope from Robert's still hand and carried it to Philip. Philip pulled a dark handkerchief from a pouch on his wheelchair and handed it to Chrysanthemum, whose chin and chest were wet with blood.

"Clean yourself up, child," Philip ordered.

"Yesss father. Sssorry, father," Chrysanthemum spat back. He aggressively wiped the blood from his face.

Philip peeked at Robert's motionless body.

"It's a shame, really. Robert was always a great chess player. Our matches were among the best I ever had. I'll miss that."

"Shall we retrieve Leonard?" Brother asked, coldly.

"Yes, let's. But I want you to keep an eye on Blain and Miranda. We don't need any complications."

"May I execute them?"

"If need be. But do not underestimate those two. They have grown up quite well."



The Transgression of Cyrus Calderon

One of the few functioning schools left in San Francisco was known as Pacific Heights Harbor for Higher Learning. It had exactly forty-eight students, ages ten to seventeen, most of whom had influential or preoccupied parents – or simply had nowhere else to go.

The school was overseen by Miss Vincent, a raspy-voiced woman with short silvery hair and small circular glasses. She was quick to correct those who dubbed her "missus." Miss Vincent forced the students to run three miles through neighboring streets after lunch. She felt exercise and education were essential to recovering from the Great Disaster and she intended to aggressively push those in her charge. She quietly studied her stopwatch and fondled the large whistle around her neck while the kids jogged and talked.

Some of the students snuck away down Lincoln Street and hid behind a mangled oak to smoke rolled cigarettes. Fifteen-year-old Jamie Crane was there often, nearly every afternoon, in fact. But Miss Vincent never seemed to notice.

That day Jamie had quickly tired of running and soon disappeared behind the safe shadows of the large oak. She pulled a pack of cigarettes and an orange lighter from her stocking, lit a cigarette and took two agitated drags. Her smooth black hair was taut in a long ponytail and vibrant bracelets adorned her wrists. Her fingernails were accentuated with a bright turquoise polish and her left shoelace was untied.

She took another drag and lost herself in thoughts of painting, and privacy, and peace.

That was when Cyrus saw her, standing alone in her plaid, schoolgirl skirt. Cyrus would park his weathered Ford Firebird along Lincoln daily, beneath where the overhanging branches of the oak created a deep shadow on the pavement. It was nearly impossible to make out Cyrus's profile when the shadow blanketed his car that way, and passersby believed the vehicle was abandoned – a forgotten relic from the days when having a Firebird meant something. Jamie had no idea he was there, watching her, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

Perhaps Cyrus's dark complexion helped conceal his presence – and vile purpose. Born of an African-American father and Brazilian mother, Cyrus's oily black skin was riddled with burns and scratch marks. His parents had abused him as a child – his father through violence and his mother through neglect – and their actions shone clearly on his body and in his behavior. Small, circular scars speckled his face. A cheap pair of sunglasses obscured his twitchy eyes.

He continued to tap his fingers on the steering wheel anxiously. Jamie flicked the stub of her finished cigarette to the ground and quickly snagged another.

Cyrus slowly opened the door of his Firebird, which creaked like the gate of a long-forgotten prison cell, though he was careful to not let Jamie hear. He reached over to the passenger seat and grabbed a shotgun that had sat beside him like a trusted ally. He took long, striding steps toward Jamie, his stained white tank top whiffing in the afternoon breeze. Despite his rather unimpressive stature – he stood just over five-foot-six and weighed little more than a starving coyote – he could easily intimidate most he met.

Jamie was about to experience it herself.

Cyrus got closer to the tree and pumped the shotgun once, hard, to let her know he was there. She looked up, startled. The freshly lit cigarette fell from her lips.

“Heya, boo,” he said with a grin. “How bouts you and me take a date?”

Jamie stared at the shotgun and began to panic. It looked as though it had been used more times than she cared to guess.