

20. Jericho

Excerpt from *The Father: America Leaves the American Century* © 2019 by Brett Alan Williams

Morgan stood on his sun deck, Sammy on his shoulder, Hawkeye at his feet. He eyed passenger jets sweep over San Gorgonio Mountain, sixteen lined up in eight pairs for landing. A lacework of power lines, antennas, and billboards cluttered his vision. A view punctuated by ragged palm trees shedding last year's growth and accumulation of airborne grime. A recorded church bell played over loudspeakers.

"How ironic," he said. He looked down at Hawkeye. "Imagine, Hollyweird has churches."

Daylight worshipers could be seen dotting nearby roofs. Houses on Hollywood Hills balanced above like bricks on a stick. Downhill, rooftops and street lights stretched to the horizon, all coated in decades of pigeon visits.

Morgan covered Sammy's face. "Don't look. This whole place is made for cars and buildings. Not humans—or cats."

Beyond a tangle of phone, and cable connections, Morgan watched passenger jets touch down at LAX in front of a low-lying sun. "Hollywood is a factory town," he said. "A movie-factory town. And life is a maze. I was so certain...once."

Morgan searched the coast and recent history in his mind. In the words of a businessman, I am not well-capitalized, he thought. I can't save this picture. Insignificant financial horsepower to hang on over the long haul. There's a box-office ceiling I can't break, and the investors know it. Living hand to mouth like a monk, I'm no closer to taking charge of my future than...four and a half films and fifteen years ago. He cringed. And in a town that worships youth. I'd hate to get old here. Older than sixteen.

This filmmaking is barely controlled chaos, he thought. A business riskier than oil wells. Which makes it exciting. A gamble on being known, or making a difference. But not for long, even if you win.

He looked down at the apartment's front yard, a ten-foot width of asphalt, spray-painted green. A ground-to-rooftop sign pasted on the side of a Sunset Boulevard building beckoned him to visit ancient history in the Yucatan. Another painted with one large word, "LOVE," its letters diced by occasional windows.

What's that supposed to mean? he thought. Love someone, love something? He looked through smog toward the ocean. I haven't been in love since— He hesitated. Since college, he remembered. The word love means no more to me now than the word plastic.

The sun glistened through nitrous oxides off Pacific waves unseen. He spoke to the coastline. "Mister Otis Redding, I'm not exactly on the dock of the bay, but I can see the bay...sort of."

Three youths with chains in hand chased a fourth on the ground below. Without sirens, a police car slid sideways around the street corner at Sunset, up Martel. It accelerated so fast Morgan could hear its carburetor inhale. He watched them pass.

"That Pontiac was going the wrong way on Route 66," he muttered. "Why was that, Sammy? Was that hallucination trying to warn me of all this?"

"Tribal leaders told boy warriors not to go north in those Native American myths. So they went north, conquered dangerous forces, and became heroes. Could be said I satisfied the first part of that story, albeit westward. But the conquest and hero part...not so much."

Morgan could see a sliver of the 101 Hollywood freeway, its traffic gridlocked for the Hollywood Bowl, Santa Barbara, Mammoth Mountain. Thousands of headlights in unbroken columns like crazed eyes open and blind to the world.

“I’m so citified I’m solidified,” he said. “Desperate need of wilderness. Someday I’ll use those European flight miles gathered at The Center, travel that fifteen-hundred-mile Ruta Maya—the Mayan Road—until my money runs out.” He pulled nickels and dimes from his pocket. He showed Sammy. “Will that cover it? But since when did I let a lack of security mitigate my thirst for risk?”

Billboards along Sunset made celebrities of news anchors, real estate agents, auto mechanics. One presented a desert image; a trickle of water vanished into sand. It counseled conservation as sources like the Colorado River were already gone.

Morgan’s eyes strained to read its blurb—the river exhausted by farms and cities decades ago. His face relaxed. “My wish...it never reached the ocean.” His eyes wide, fixed on the billboard. “It died in the desert,” he whispered.

A television helicopter swooped overhead to film the LAPD for the Southland’s daily dose of police-chase coverage. Air conditioners rattled, jackhammers broke concrete in a half dozen places. The screech of tires and pulse of car horns could be heard with such persistence they combined for one continuous, fluctuating hum.

“Sammy, when I was young, all I wanted was to be somebody. Which turned out to mean having my worth determined by others. Then I tried to be that one who shows others the way, like the first fish. And to atone for my sins. Like every character in my films. But either the world didn’t want to be saved, or I didn’t show the world it needed to be.”

He exhaled a long-drawn breath. “Perhaps diplomacy requires as much effort as art and science. Not a talent I’ve developed with much alacrity.”

Hawkeye meowed. Morgan looked down. “Thank you, kitty. I always believed I could be a great man.

“But I wasn’t.”

He reached up to scratch Sammy’s head. “I wanted to find meaning in science and art, but neither would give it to me. Both are pointing away. But where?”

Morgan studied what he could see of Paramount Studios. He bit his lower lip, calculating. He shook his head. “No...It’s over.”

He watched Los Angeles, wondering if he would see it again. He slapped the railing with both hands in resignation, and said, “I honored my dream. My dream did not honor me. So it goes.

“I have no career, no friends, no family of my own. I don’t know a single human soul except my mother

“But I know you, sweetie.” He reached down to pick up Hawkeye, Sammy’s claws needling his shoulder. “And I love you both dearly. You are my friends.” He rubbed Hawkeye’s head. “You’re getting tired aren’t you, old girl.”

He faced the boulevard. He studied Yucatan’s offer. “No matter what happens, there’s always one thing I have to look forward to: leaving wherever I am. What do you think, guys, another adventure?”

He stood at attention. He saluted Hollywood, a childhood dream conceived on Route 66, and turned for the exit.

Morgan's plane landed in the state of Quintana Roo. He made his way to the ancient Mayan city of Chichén Itzá on a two-dollar bus filled with locals and their handheld livestock.

At the site, he sat on the ground to watch a line of people up and down stairs of Chichén Itzá's central pyramid, known as The Castle. Imagine sitting in this spot sixteen hundred years ago, he thought. A culture with the zeal of shared beliefs, common goals—cutting people's hearts out. Lost to foliage for a thousand years. As mysterious as what's happening to America.

Finally, no one remained to scale the pyramid. Morgan ascended. From its peak, green extended beyond a 360° horizon. Mounds of plant life still covered ruins, saved by archeologists for advanced excavation techniques in the future. Above the canopy, an observatory gazed over the same night sky. Morgan sat high on someone else's center of the world. "So this was The Promised Land," he said.

Morgan left the ancient ruins and followed a dirt road to Pieste, a village of cinder-block buildings and thatch-roofed houses. Light bulbs hung in series from a solitary wire, drooped from one tree or building to the next. Open-air restaurants and foosball tables summoned people in groups. Old told stories to young. The young listened with interest. Mothers with babies rimmed a public square to watch scarf-blinded children swing at a treasure-laden piñata. A group of boys played Latin music.

Morgan watched them. A rich poor town, he thought. People here openly enjoy the fellowship of others. But no luxuries? How can these people be happy? In America, we call this deplorable.

Pavement was uneven and potted, no billboards, no flashing lights. Morgan looked end to end at the only street in town; not a single car. This place isn't screaming at me like everything in the States, he decided. I can't stand it. I think I'm about to relax.

He pivoted about a point. "They have nothing to compare," he said. "I remember a move to higher social ground after college, where a rise in possessions brought a decline in camaraderie. This explains it. Once on the material track, people strive for more to fill in for less."

A marauding gang of eight-year-olds with dilapidated bicycles circled Morgan. "Gringo!" they said, and pointed to the piñata. Morgan shook his head no. They kept shouting. Adults noticed.

An old man approached and reached high to put a wrinkled hand on Morgan's shoulder. The man said something in Spanish and gestured toward the center space.

Morgan declined. "No, no. That means no in Spanish."

A courtyard full of people stared at the American.

"Oh my..." he murmured. He stepped forward. They applauded. "What if I hit somebody? Might be me hanging, not the paper pony."

The old man pushed Morgan and swatted his behind at center stage. A drum roll played. Blindfolded, clasping a stick, Morgan was spun about. He probed the air, swung, and missed. People sighed.

Time and again, he wandered toward the courtyard's edge. Shoved back in, his head bumped a package. He beat the horse with rapid blows. Children stormed the scene. Morgan threw his blindfold. "The gringo delivered!"

Cheers and applause sounded from the natives. Adults retold the scene just witnessed. A girl in a white lacy dress tugged at Morgan's pants. He looked down to see her with a doll from the piñata. Made of a corn cob, it wore a cowboy hat from a gourd over a face drawn with a pen. He accepted and thanked her. She smiled, shrugged, and ran through a crowd of well-wishers.

Morgan reenacted his blind wandering. People laughed.

Morgan looked skyward, then to an old man over a foot shorter than he was. “Did you hear that?”

The man shrugged. People dispersed.

Morgan considered the sky. “Did I hear that?”

The Ruta Maya was richer with distance. Uxmal’s Pyramid of the Magician towered one hundred twenty feet over Morgan, but it looked to be a thousand. He sat on the forest floor in a breeze given life by density of plants shading ground. Hung by vines having strangled their host, jungle tree branches like arms pulled from a man, swayed bodiless in the air. He watched one lone couple disappear beyond the temple. Some things never change, he thought. If aliens visit this planet, they’ll think humans come in pairs.

He read from his travel guide, “Uxmal was on a trade route with that Mother Culture and forerunner of all Central American civilizations, the Olmecs, who emerged from obscurity by 1200 BCE.”

So, he thought, the Olmecs and Hebrews came out of the woods at the same time. With the fall of Troy in Anatolia came the transient rise of Mycenae in Greece, while a decline of Egypt’s New Kingdom allowed Hebrews to form their state. And on the opposite side of the world appear the Olmecs...right here.

He drove his index finger into soil, drilling back and forth. He pinched earth from ground held close to squinted eyes. He smelled it. He rubbed fingers together to touch what he could of the past. He spoke to the pyramid, “This world, it’s a boneyard.”

Morgan flinched when a woman spoke English behind him. “Xiu legend claims this pyramid was built in a single night, by a single man,” she said. “So in love with the moon, he finished before the sun could betray his vision with daylight.”

Intrigued by the lilt of her dialect, Morgan turned to see a woman focused on the summit and was stunned by the sight of her. Hiking boots protected thick hiking socks; shorts secured a loose-fitting t-shirt; strands of dark curls across her face. Morgan’s typically single-second assessment stretched. He checked one feature after another, hoping for flaws, terrified by their absence.

In a biological riot, chemical transmitters in Morgan’s brain battled to bridge nonconductive gaps not roused by electricity in decades. Her face, so beautiful he could hear it. Her hands, perfect—meaning she had equivalent feet with delicate toes, satisfying his foot fetish without having seen them. Obsidian eyes cleaved light into a rainbow as fervent as any crystal-blue or green-eyed woman he’d ever known. She matched a template in his brain he dreamed about then forgot and never saw before. So this is how Newton felt when he saw the apple, he thought.

Gravity turned Morgan’s face toward the most beautiful female legs alive—tanned, fit, young. Wherever relics of attraction still lurked in his chromosomes, they had never been in such full blossom. He commanded his head to turn away as it battled to stare.

She continued her appraisal. “It’s believed this very sight was power central for the Xiu clan. When Xiu attacked the Cocom at Maypan in 1441, it was a massacre that divided the Mayan population and impoverished them all. Then faraway ice sheets changed ocean currents, and with those currents went worldwide average temperature. With that, Mayan civilization entered a tailspin.” She smiled at Morgan as he watched the pyramid. “That’s a long run for a civilization.

About two and one-half millennia in one form or another.” She studied the monument. “In that time they refined a calendar inherited from the Olmecs, independently invented agriculture in the Americas, and discovered the number zero. Must have been an amazing era.”

Still, Morgan looked away. “You know a good deal about this place,” he said.

“I’ve been on several digs here.”

“You’re an archeologist?”

“Used to be. Scientist turned author.”

Semi-recovered, Morgan looked back to ask, “Really? Books, articles?”

She dropped her backpack and sat cross-legged beside him. A solar glow cast off their tower of stone. Behind the Magician, a magnified full moon rose, dwarfed by their monolithic manmade mountain.

She tied loose laces. “I used to write love stories, then travel guides. Now I get an occasional feature in *National Geographic*, and I’m writing love stories again. I found that’s what discovery really is, a romance. Now that I know that, my travel tales are juicier, more alive.”

“Sounds like an exciting profession,” he said.

She nodded. “Was trapped for a bit in Rwanda during one of their civil wars. Since I had a computer, locals concluded I must know medicine. They were so desperate, you could practice as a physician if all you could do was spell *medicine*. Discovered some critical essentials thanks to a nifty satellite modem and doctors back home.”

The Magician pitched its spell. Morgan looked away. Intelligent, artistic, and a French accent to boot, he thought. He smiled, watching the temple. “The arts are a hard row to hoe in a business country,” he said.

“If not for business, my creativity would have no outlet. And what would pay for my travel?”

Morgan shrugged.

She pointed to his chest. “I like your t-shirt. It’s a famous story down here.”

“I bought it for the colors. Bartered it for five bucks worth of freeze-dried food. What’s the story?”

“That’s Itzamna,” she said, “fatally wounded beneath the seven stars of heaven. This is the Moon Goddess, Ixchel.”

“Looks like a jaguar to me,” Morgan said.

“She’s only in the form of a jaguar.”

“Ah, a fairy tale.”

“A mythical metaphor,” she said. “Like God in the form of a dove.”

Morgan nodded. “You mean like religion, it’s a lie.”

“No.”

Morgan said, “It can only be true or false, right?” He tapped his shirt. “Seven stars. Why do we see this same number in ancient stories, no matter where you go? *Seven*, from Gilgamesh in ancient Iraq; two thousand years later in the Old Testament as the time it takes to create the universe and get a bit of rest; and again, two thousand years after that for the Maya. Why? Because seven heavenly bodies move against a stationary sky. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sun, and the moon—seven. Ditto for the number three. The moon dies in darkness during new moon, *resurrected* in new light after three nights. Sound familiar? Civilizations absorbed these ideas through diffusion from others or discovered them independently. After all, Sumerians, Israelites, and Mayans all saw the same sky.”

She smiled. “Impressive.”

Morgan bowed. “That doesn’t mean numerology is true. Numbers are just numbers. If there were eleven visible planets, God creates the world in eleven days.”

“But they’re not just numbers from the sky,” she said. “They’re numbers from the sky with meaning. When strange things happen in a story—contradictory natural events, or intersections of different times in history—these are cues to read between the lines, to use your heart, not your head. You interpret myths factually.”

Morgan frowned. “What other interpretation could there be?”

“They don’t describe scientific truths,” she said. “But rather truths about us as humans, like music.” She motioned about their surroundings. “You could never communicate to others your experience in this forest before this spectacle unless you mythologized it. The ancients mythologized their experience with miracles, and every listener gets it. ‘Aha,’ they’d say. ‘Wonderful. Of course, I feel what you feel.’ This experience, this sense we have in communion with the world, it’s impossible to describe. That’s why myths are able to tell it.”

Morgan’s eyes widened. “Whoa... You must have been educated in Europe.”

“Born and raised in a small town south of Seattle. Moved with my family to San Francisco when I was in high school. Only child. Live in Southern California now.”

“No kidding. So do I. Where?” Morgan asked.

“Redondo Beach.”

He turned away. “Sure you do.” He laughed. “This is all a dream I’m having.” He faced her. “Hi, my name’s Morgan.” He shook her hand. “Morgan Whitaker. What’s your name?” He felt her skin. He scrutinized delicate fingers. Seems real, he thought.

“Ne Shoul De Roue. That’s nee shoal dee rue...Pleased to meet you. Ne Shoul is my first name, and my father is French—De Roue.”

“Ah, that slight accent. Love it.”

She fluttered black eyelashes. “My middle name is Cheron. My mother wanted to name me after the satellite moon of Pluto, but she misspelled it. Thank goodness she did. Charon—Pluto’s moon—is a mythic ferryman in the underworld; escorts dead souls across the river Styx. Who wants a name like that?”

Morgan frowned. “Hmm...I happen to know when Pluto’s moon was named.”

She paused. “Oh, how sweet.” She tapped his arm as about to divulge neighborhood gossip. “You’re guessing my age. I’m thirty-one.”

Morgan smiled, mumbling, “Under half my age, plus *seven*.”

“Really? I would have guessed you at least ten years younger.”

“Way to go! Points for you.”

“So you’re a seasoned citizen,” she said.

“Watch it.”

She chuckled. “Honest questions, always welcomed.”

“Excellent. What a name, Ne Shoul Cheron De Roue.”

“Ne Shoul’s native for pale moon,” she said. “Grandmother on my mother’s side was a Nez Perce Indian. Chief Joseph’s tribe. She liked to tell of how he defeated US troops at Big Hole River.”

Morgan nodded. “Quite an accomplishment. Stone Age beats steel. And my great-grandmother was Cherokee, while my great-great-grandmother was Blackfoot.”

Faded facets of a million stone reflections warmed them. New World monkeys flurried in and out of view on vines to snatch a glimpse of relatives below.

Ne Shoul wrapped arms around knees pulled tight to her chest. “So, here’s an honest question: How would you describe yourself, Morgan Whitaker? In a word.”

“Just one?...Dreams—my central force and principle.”

“*Entelechy*. What you said is called entelechy. A vital force and principle directing growth and life.”

“Really...Entelechy. You’re not making this up, trying to impress me?”

“No.”

“Just no? Not no, and yes?”

Ne Shoul looked down a row of temples still claimed by jungle cover. “Where’s your travel companion?”

Morgan held up his camera. “This is my travel mate. Tolerant of no-frills trekking and patient enough to let me focus on the story I want to tell. I use this as fodder for sculpture.”

“You’re a sculptor?”

“Of animals. Tried to sculpt living people, but they always want to look younger, thinner. So I switched to wildlife; they never complain.”

“My, my. What’s your goal as a sculptor?”

“Inspiration. And long after I’m dead. Like the creations of cave painters in France thirty thousand years dead, still an inspiration. But that can only happen if my work survives modernity when lacquered excrement is called sculpture; when screaming until unable to speak is called performance art; when colors spattered on a canvas is called painting. Snake oil as a substitute for talent.”

“What is it you hope to inspire?”

“Motivation to turn away from the world we made. To feel what I feel—like you said about myths.” Morgan squeezed his chin with index and thumb. “Never thought of that. Art, like myths.” He hesitated. “You see, I wonder if the *cause of awe* is the *soul of things*. True art reveals that soul, built from ourselves and from all the world. Our ancient and slaughtered ancestors, yours and mine, they knew that, and we call them primitive. If I could just release those souls from stone—the perfect work—nothing else could matter more. The Promised Land is everywhere, Ne Shoul. If we can just free it from what we made.”

She nodded. “Nice. That you know what you want. That you have the courage to be alone.” Ne Shoul halted, about to say something.

“I’m always alone,” he said. “Maybe I always will be, but I’m never lonely. There are times—”

“Do you nurture your independence on the world’s disapproval?”

A word froze on Morgan’s lips. “It’s an abundant source,” he said.

Ne Shoul touched his arm. She looked from beneath disarming eyelashes. “Go on, ‘there are times’—there are times what?”

Morgan rattled his head. “Yes, where was I? There are times I’d like to share my experience. To see Van Allen’s radiation belts trap those dazzling auroras on some backcountry hike. To see Neanderthal, eighty thousand years dead, buried in fetal position, facing east and the reborn sun of another day in Iraq. Does sharing confer joy beyond the solitary journey? I don’t know the answer to that. But I’m willing to try it.”

Ne Shoul rested her head on arms still wrapped about knees.

Morgan laid back, arrogant, hands behind his head. “What? Say it.”

Unseen creatures called for answers in the jungle. Heaven pierced the sun’s dominion in a thousand places overhead.

After a week together, Ne Shoul and Morgan sat side by side on a white sandy coast. Their legs extended into a warm splash of marine atmosphere. A waning moon glittered over water, stoic and more permanent than tombs of Mayan Pharaohs. But for bursts from deckside arc welders, ships were barely visible. Had they looked, no one could be seen along the entire length of their beach.

“My father used to remind me this show plays every night,” Morgan said. “Every night it’s new, and it’s pretty much free.”

Ne Shoul pushed a strand of hair from her face. “Pretty much?”

“Takes time to look. Good trade, though, you think?”

She agreed. “My grandmother said, Do not offend the sun by failing to praise it at dawn and wishing it goodnight.”

“Lovely... What do you love, Ne Shoul?”

Waves washed over her feet. “Music. Words. History not yet made.”

Morgan waited. “Wish I could do that,” he said. “Be brief, I mean.”

When Morgan turned toward her, they were within inches of one another. She studied lineaments of his face, battle records written in skin. “Morgan, at Uxmal, you said you might always be alone. Could you do that?”

“I received a degree in physics when others told me I’d be nothing but a ditch digger; survived psychological warfare in the same house with my assailant; my father’s death was shattering, but here I am. Not exactly tested by world war, but I guess I can do anything. Except convince Hollywood bankers to give me their money. Maybe the question is—much as I hesitate to say—can love survive in our modern world? When radical individualism vilifies mutual dependence, need, and the complementary nature that once united healthy relations.”

“What matters is if these errors inhibit *us*,” she said. “We can’t put the world together again. Rich, tropical islands do exist in hostile oceans, Morgan.” She drew an equation in the sand: $1 + 1 = 2$. “To you, the fate of love is a transpired reality. You are very pragmatic, Mister Whitaker. You have all the facts and stats and figures. But the sober approach to love is not the perfection of maturity. Shakespeare’s Romeo left room for the heart. It’s crazy, but what can you do? On this issue of love, you dictate existence with your head, not your heart. There is survival value in that. But humans are not described by equations.” She wiped flat the sand. “I cherish the empire of reason as well, applied where appropriate, but the poet in me feels there is more to us than machinery. Is it risky? Yes. You want to live life, Morgan? Live it all.”

“Ever been divorced?”

“No,” she said.

“Try it. See if it doesn’t leave an indelible mark.”

“So you’ve gone some painful miles. That made you meek about love?”

“Try it.”

“Why not wrestle with it as you do the other big ideas? For you, Morgan, the road less traveled is the one that opens your heart. Open your heart and find it really does make all the difference. You fear that you will fall hard. So fall hard.”

“As Romeo fell hard? Today he’d be labeled a stalker and Juliet would call the cops.”

Ne Shoul rolled her eyes. “So your solution is isolation? Yes, you will avoid the players, the duplicity, an era of vulgar humanity, and all the rest of your fluent indictments. But will your

reward of peace through disassociation outweigh the cost? Take that path to the side. The one you've never been on, or not for so long you can't find it. You've got a chance, Morgan. They don't come often."

His eyes seized hers. He tracked curves of her torso to the sand. "A chance," he whispered. "I didn't know it was a chance."

Beyond ships no longer seen, stars flashed warnings to stellar relatives about to be grabbed by an equatorial ocean. Tidewater slipped below their ankles.

Morgan leaned close. "Could you repeat that?"

She bit her lip. "Yes," she whispered.

"Yes what?"

"Yes," she said.

Morgan moved a curl from her face. "We're alone. Why are we whispering?"

"So as not to startle the universe. We are in a precarious place, you and I."

"We are the universe, No Shoul. Nothing exists but you and me."

Like the contact point of a battery, Morgan bristled with static charge. Every cell of his body was in frantic communication with every other as each strained to find out what was taking place outside. When their lips touched, current surged with a pathway established. Now the cells knew, and they were happy.

Throughout their travels amid dreams in the dark, Morgan thought he heard trumpets in the jungle, faint but stronger by the day. Now, fully awake, their sound was so loud he could feel them against his chest. On a dangerous margin, his world felt in peril for feelings he could neither elude nor endure.

Ne Shoul ran fingers through Morgan's hair. "Trust is the foundation of all things great. Do you trust me, Morgan?"

He studied her eyes. She smiled. She touched his cheek. "Did you know," she said, "that after World War Two the HMS *Queen Mary* was called the Ship of Beginnings? It brought GIs and their ten thousand brides home to the States."

Morgan shook his head. He began to speak. She touched her index finger to his lips. "Morgan, I go overseas for another story next week. I'll be there for *seven* weeks. After a quick stop in San Francisco, I'll be home on May Day. May first, Morgan. The Ship of Beginnings is a lovely place to meet. I will be on it. Will you?"

Learn more about the author and *The Father* at:

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