

## THAT WE MAY BE AT PEACE

The thirty-hour drive from Talenkara to Kavale first winds through 300 miles of wooded mountain ranges, punctuated by occasional glimpses of distant snow-capped summits. The steep highway grades often force vehicles of greater weight or lesser power to a turtle's pace on the more severe slopes. If there is beauty here, it is soon negated by repetition, and after forty-five minutes one wishes to be done with it. Continuing southward, the mountain topography does finally give way to more level terrain, and over the next five hundred miles the green world slowly recedes and transforms into the white rocks and tan dirt of Southern Gehanna.

Having attained the southernmost corner, you now turn east toward the desert. For 1,100 miles it's flat baked earth under a clear and constant sky. The wide solitary road invites acceleration, and you feel invisible. You don't observe the landscape as much as you interact with the vehicle, watching the world as if on a screen: the alien desert, occasional cacti and shrubs, birds of prey circling high overhead, rabbit or lizard carcasses squashed on the pavement. In the final 200-mile stretch, the sand and rocks are replaced by diverse flora, the brash cacti gradually outnumbered by trees of increasing height and girth. By the time you've crossed the turbulent Cheung Houis River, it's all low hills and dark fertile soil supporting grass of an almost unnatural green.

I arrived in Kavale at 7:00 p.m.; my appointment was at 8:00. Though dull and fatigued from nearly two days without sleep, I'd no choice but to drive straight to the restaurant. I lived in this city many years ago, but it seemed foreign now, a different place. In truth, I had dreaded coming back, but this new unfamiliarity abated such concerns. Driving up Trahan Ave., which formed the western perimeter of the university, the memories did not overwhelm me as I thought they would. There were new buildings, some with

mirrored glass skins that reflected and repelled the surrounding environment. Certain older structures had been renovated or demolished and replaced. A street that previously cut through campus had been closed off and was now used only for pedestrian traffic. The campus was like a mini-city fortified against the surrounding urban space. The absurd notion that I hadn't actually lived here at all sparked in my soggy brain. I was relieved that it no longer felt like home.

Ino's Restaurant sat at the northwest corner of campus and had been in business 24/7 for some thirty-eight years. The solid blue awning simply read "Ino's," and tawdry neon lights promised victuals and libations. There was no "Open" sign since the restaurant never closed. I walked in the door at 7:20. While the rest of Kavale might've gentrified itself into an entirely different city, Ino's had certainly not changed. Dim blue and red lights, conventional booths with cracked burgundy vinyl, plain square woodgrain laminate tables, flimsy metal stack chairs. Above all, the unmistakable smell of the restaurant's high-fat offerings. It activated the corresponding memory neurons, and I was back again – countless days and nights spent studying, talking, or watching. Mostly watching. Not that there was much to watch, aside from personal dramas unfolding at adjacent tables or the occasional drunken altercation: things that seem significant when you're young and trifles when you're older. The boring and the banal.

Though I was more than half an hour early, I scanned the room for a man fitting Dekel's description. I had little to go on: medium height and build, short dark hair, and a brown or perhaps black shoulder bag. Four or five people in the restaurant fit the description. The difference, however, was that they all belonged there, just as much as the dartboards and arcade games. Dekel, I suspected, was of an altogether different character, and I believed I could spot him the moment he walked through the door.

I got a drink and sat down in a booth facing the entrance. I couldn't bring myself to order food even though I once devoured this slop, happily unaware of its death-hastening properties. A few minutes passed, and a man who

was not Dekel approached me. He wore oversized brown slacks that were covered in grime and had tears in the knees. His coat was a conspicuously new green camouflage fatigue. Deep creases lined the leathery skin of his face, sketching out a personal narrative of sorts. He mumbled and stuttered, and his teeth were uniformly brown, as if smeared with peanut butter. I had some difficulty understanding him, though there was little doubt as to what he was after. I wavered. Typically you say, No, I'm sorry, and they go away. One is so accustomed to the sight of these ragged ghosts that it is nothing at all to dismiss them. This time, however, something like empathy took shape in me; I too had come to know transience. He was less phantom now and more corporeal. Though he was maybe twenty years older than I was, I had no difficulty superimposing my face onto his. Perhaps this was the terminal point of my own uncertain path. The idea was not distressing as I had little left to lose.

No, I'm sorry, I said. He lingered a moment, looking at nothing, then moved on to another table. A man wearing an apron and waving a spatula emerged from the kitchen and ordered him out of the building. The shaking man slunk toward the door and exited. His matted hair was briefly illuminated by a red neon light as it was blown wildly upward by strong winds from the west. An emergency vehicle roared by, followed by a taxi and a campus bus.

It was nearly 8:00 now, and I decided to step out onto the back patio. Perhaps Dekel had been waiting there all along. I found the restaurant interior confining, the smells overpowering. While my heightened sensitivity was no doubt attributable to sleep deprivation, I suspect it also stemmed from my feelings of estrangement. To be certain, things had happened in Kavale that I'd rather forget, but it was a different place now, and I was a different person.

The patio was a square concrete slab enclosed by a tall chain-link fence topped with razor wire. There were perhaps ten small circular metal tables. The slab was at a slight incline, which sometimes caused drinks to slide off the table and crash on the concrete if one was less than vigilant. The patio

was uncovered, and there were no umbrellas on the tables. No one outside fit Dekel's description. Two unfamiliar men did come and sit with me, however. The first told me I looked tired.

I drove a long way, I said.

You're not from here, then? he said.

I haven't been back here in a while.

You came somewhere else, said the second man.

Yes.

I thought of asking about Dekel, but quickly reconsidered. The last thing I wanted was to discuss why I was there.

You drove, then? said the second man.

Yes, I drove.

Why not fly? asked the first.

I don't know.

Too much luggage, said the first.

Right.

Hassle.

Sure.

So that's your car outside? said the second.

My car is outside, I said.

OK.

They got up and left, leaving their drinks on the table. The only other person outside now was a girl of perhaps eighteen or nineteen reading a book. Soon, she too got up and went inside. Perhaps my occasional stares caused her discomfort, but I prefer to think she left because the retreating sunlight made it difficult to read.

I had no immediate way to contact Dekel. The one time we spoke, he had called from a public phone. To reach him now I would have to retrace my steps through a sketchy network of contacts and leave a message that may or may not reach him. I considered going back inside to look for him, but

my encounter with the two men left me thinking that Dekel might not come. Traveling great distances to no avail had become an occupation of sorts, and my capacity to experience frustration and anger was all but extinguished.

Beyond the chain-link fence, in the alley, I heard approaching voices. One man hurriedly walked by, followed by three more men. They were all shouting, but the exact words were unintelligible. The three men then pummeled the first to the ground and continued to kick, punch, and yell at him as he curled into a protective ball. Still seated at my table, I watched this unfold as if it were dinner theater. I thought for a moment that I should intervene – the fence had an emergency exit that opened into the alley. But there were three of them, after all. And what if they had weapons? I could've made a call, but surely they would be gone by the time someone arrived. In the time it took to process those thoughts, it was over. The three men rushed away, and the beaten man groaned and coughed for a moment before pulling himself up and brushing off. With alarming composure, he walked away in the opposite direction of the other men, as if this were a nightly occurrence.

I was back inside Ino's now. It was 9:00, and I'd abandoned any hopes that Dekel might still arrive. Hunger and fatigue got the best of me, so I ordered the least offensive item on the menu and again took a seat, this time with my back to the front entrance.

I recalled sitting here – perhaps at this same table – one night many years ago. I was alone with my books and an indistinct dread. I had been *there* the night before, and I saw what happened and how it happened. Complicity is a slippery thing, and it's no trouble at all to revise our memories so that we may live at peace, as if certain events never happened, or at least happened differently.

Still waiting on my food, I spied someone I hadn't noticed before. A young man, likely in his early 20s, was seated across the room from me. He had short dark hair and wore a black t-shirt and brown cargo pants. On the table were a brown backpack, a couple books, and a notebook in which he

occasionally scribbled. He shifted in his seat and accidentally knocked a book off the table. When he leaned over to pick up the book, his loose oversized shirt rose slightly, and I saw what might've been a small holster and pistol at the small of the back. In a second it was again covered, and he went back to his writing.

On the back of the Ino's menu was a brief history of the restaurant. Many years ago, it began, before Ino's was Ino's, it was some other restaurant. Or perhaps a different kind of business altogether. Whatever the case, the year was 1971, and Arvid Ino, Sr., fresh out of prison and looking for a new lease on life, sold his collection of vintage firearms and put the profits toward a down payment on the Trahan Avenue property. With no experience and little formal education, Arvid realized his dream when Ino's opened its doors on November 11, 1971. In no time at all, and with little advertising, the restaurant became a hit with students and Kavaleans alike. Following Arvid's tragic death in 1999, his son, Arvid Ino, Jr., assumed control of the business. With one foot planted in tradition and the other pointed toward the future, the junior Ino has heralded his father's vision into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With its unique combination of quality food, reasonable prices, and a cozy atmosphere, Ino's today is both a cornerstone of campus life and a Kavale tradition. Happy eating, and we hope you'll return, again and again, for many years to come.

I got up and walked toward the entrance. Just as I reached the door, someone called my name, indicating that my order was up.

The door closed behind me, and a pleasant breeze touched my face. The strong winds that earlier made a mess of the transient's hair had subsided, and the relative quiet of the city at night offered a welcome reprieve from the bustle and chatter of the restaurant interior. Unlocking the car door, I caught a glimpse of my face reflected in the glass. My eyes were steady, clear; my mouth turned neither down nor up. It was the same. I got in the car and drove east, looking for the nearest hotel.