ISHMAEL
An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit

Daniel Quinn
of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but God takes perfect care of them. Don’t you think he’ll do the same for you?’ In our culture the overwhelming answer to that question is, ‘Hell no!’ Even the most dedicated monastics saw to their sowing and reaping and gathering into barns.”

“What about Saint Francis?”

“Saint Francis relied on the bounty of farmers, not the bounty of God. Even the most fundamental of the fundamentalists plug their ears when Jesus starts talking about birds of the air and lilies of the field. They know damn well he’s just yarning, just making pretty speeches.”

“So you think this is what’s at the root of your revolution. You wanted and still want to have your lives in your own hands.”

“Yes. Absolutely. To me, living any other way is almost inconceivable. I can only think that hunter–gatherers live in a state of utter and unending anxiety over what tomorrow’s going to bring.”

“Yet they don’t. Any anthropologist will tell you that. They are far less anxiety–ridden than you are. They have no jobs to lose. No one can say to them, ‘Show me your money or you don’t get fed, don’t get clothed, don’t get sheltered.’ ”

“I believe you. Rationally speaking, I believe you. But I’m talking about my feelings, about my conditioning. My conditioning tells me—Mother Culture tells me—that living in the hands of the gods has got to be a never–ending nightmare of terror and anxiety.”

“And this is what your revolution does for you: It puts you beyond the reach of that appalling nightmare. It puts you beyond the reach of the gods.”

“Yes, that’s it.”

“So. We have a new pair of names for you. The Takers are those who know good and evil, and the Leavers are . . . ?”

“The Leavers are those who live in the hands of the gods.”

**TWELVE**

1

Along about three o’clock, the rain stopped and the carnival yawned, stretched, and went back to work separating the rubes from their money. At loose ends once again, I hung around for a while, let myself be separated from a few bucks, and finally had the idea of tracking down Ishmael’s owner. This turned out to be a hard–eyed black man named Art Owens, who was five and a half feet
tall and spent more time lifting weights than I do at the typewriter. I told him I was interested in buying his gorilla.

“Is that a fact,” he said, not scornful, not impressed, not interested, not anything.

I told him it was and asked how much it would take.

“Would take about three thousand.”

“I’m not that interested.”

“How interested are you?” Just curious, not seriously interested himself.

“Well, more like a thousand.”

He sneered—just a little, almost politely. For some reason, I liked this guy. He was the type who has a law degree from Harvard stuck away in a drawer somewhere because he never found anything to do with it that appealed to him.

I told him: “This is a very, very old animal, you know. He’s been here since the thirties.”

This got his attention. He asked how I happened to come by that piece of information.

“I know the animal,” I replied briefly, as if I might know thousands more like him.

“Might go twenty–five hundred,” he said.

“Trouble is, I don’t have twenty–five hundred.”

“See, I already got a painter in New Mexico workin’ on a sign for me,” he said. “Paid him two hundred in advance.”

“Uh huh. I could probably raise fifteen hundred.”

“Don’t see how I could go below twenty–two, that’s a fact.”

The fact was, if it was right there in my hand, he’d be delighted to take two thousand. Maybe even eighteen hundred. I said I’d think about it.

It was a Friday night, so the suckers didn’t start going home till after eleven and my senectuous bribee didn’t come round to collect his twenty dollars till midnight. Ishmael was asleep sitting up, still bundled up in his blankets, and I didn’t feel any qualms about waking him; I wanted him to reassess the charms of the independent life.
He yawned, sneezed twice, cleared his throat of a mass of phlegm, and fixed me in a bleary, malevolent glare.

“Come back tomorrow,” he said in the equivalent of a mental croak.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday—hopeless.”

He wasn’t happy about it, but he knew I was right. He managed to put off the inevitable by laboriously rearranging himself, his cage, and his blankets. Then he settled down and gave me a look of loathing.

“Where did we leave off?”

“We left off with a new pair of names for the Takers and the Leavers: Those who know good and evil and those who live in the hands of the gods.”

He grunted.

3

“What happens to people who live in the hands of the gods?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what happens to people who live in the hands of the gods that does not happen to people who build their lives on the knowledge of good and evil?”

“Well, let’s see,” I said. “I don’t suppose this is what you’re getting at, but this is what comes to mind. People who live in the hands of the gods don’t make themselves rulers of the world and force everyone to live the way they live, and people who know good and evil do.”

“You’ve turned the question round back to front,” said Ishmael. “I asked what happens to people who live in the hands of the gods that doesn’t happen to those who know good and evil, and you told me just the opposite: what doesn’t happen to people who live in the hands of the gods that does happen to those who know good and evil.”

“You mean you’re looking for something positive that happens to people who live in the hands of the gods.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, they do tend to let the people around them live the way they want to live.”

“You’re telling me something they do, not something that happens to them. I’m trying to focus your attention on the effects of this life–style.”
“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I just don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“You do, but you’re not used to thinking about it in these terms.”

“Okay.”

“You remember the question we started out to answer when you arrived this afternoon: How did man become man? We’re still after the answer to that question.”

I groaned, fully and frankly.

“Why do you groan?” Ishmael asked.

“Because questions of that generality intimidate me. How did man become man? I don’t know. He just did it. He did it the way birds became birds and the way that horses became horses.”

“Exactly so.”

“Don’t do that to me,” I told him.

“Evidently you don’t understand what you just said.”

“Probably not.”

“I’ll try to clarify it for you. Before you were Homo, you were what?”

“Australopithecus.”

“Good. And how did Australopithecus become Homo?”

“By waiting.”

“Please. You’re here to think.”

“Sorry.”

“Did Australopithecus become Homo by saying, ‘We know good and evil as well as the gods, so there’s no need for us to live in their hands the way rabbits and lizards do. From now on we will decide who lives and who dies on this planet, not the gods.’ ”

“No.”

“Could they have become man by saying that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”
“Because they would have ceased to be subject to the conditions under which evolution takes place.”

“Exactly. Now you can answer the question: What happens to people—to creatures in general—who live in the hands of the gods?”

“Ah. Yes, I see. They evolve.”

“And now you can answer the question I posed this morning: How did man become man?”

“Man became man by living in the hands of the gods.”

“By living the way the Bushmen of Africa live.”

“That’s right.”

“By living the way the Kreen–Akrore of Brazil live.”

“Right again.”

“Not the way Chicagoans live?”

“No.”

“Or Londoners?”

“No.”

“So now you know what happens to people who live in the hands of the gods.”

“Yes. They evolve.”

“Why do they evolve?”

“Because they’re in a position to evolve. Because that’s where evolution takes place. Pre–man evolved into early man because he was out there competing with all the rest. Pre–man evolved into early man because he didn’t take himself out of the competition, because he was still in the place where natural selection is going on.”

“You mean he was still a part of the general community of life.”

“That’s right.”

“And that’s why it all happened—why *Australopithecus* became *Homo habilis* and why *Homo habilis* became *Homo erectus* and why *Homo erectus* became *Homo sapiens* and why *Homo sapiens* became *Homo sapiens sapiens*.”

“Yes.”
“And then what happened?”

“And then the Takers said, ‘We’ve had enough of living in the hands of the gods. No more natural selection for us, thanks very much.’ ”

“And that was that.”

“And that was that.”

“You remember I said that to enact a story is to live so as to make it come true.”

“Yes.”

“According to the Taker story, creation came to an end with man.”

“Yes. So?”

“How would you live so as to make that come true? How would you live so as to make creation come to an end with man?”

“Oof. I see what you mean. You would live the way the Takers live. We’re definitely living in a way that’s going to put an end to creation. If we go on, there will be no successor to man, no successor to chimpanzees, no successor to orangutans, no successor to gorillas—no successor to anything alive now. The whole thing is going to come to an end with us. In order to make their story come true, the Takers have to put an end to creation itself—and they’re doing a damned good job of it.”

4

“When we began and I was trying to help you find the premise of the Taker story, I told you that the Leaver story has an entirely different premise.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps you’re ready to articulate that premise now.”

“I don’t know. At the moment I can’t even think of the Taker premise.”

“It’ll come back to you. Every story is a working out of a premise.”

“Yes, okay. The premise of the Taker story is the world belongs to man.” I thought for a couple of minutes, then I laughed. “It’s almost too neat. The premise of the Leaver story is man belongs to the world.”

“Meaning what?”
“Meaning—” I barked a laugh. “It’s really too much.”

“Go on.”

“It means that, right from the beginning, everything that ever lived belonged to the world—and that’s how things came to be this way. Those single-celled creatures that swam in the ancient oceans belonged to the world, and because they did, everything that followed came into being. Those club-finned fish offshore of the continents belonged to the world, and because they did, the amphibians eventually came into being. And because the amphibians belonged to the world, the reptiles eventually came into being. And because the reptiles belonged to the world, the mammals eventually came into being. And because the mammals belonged to the world, the primates eventually came into being. And because the primates belonged to the world, Australopithecus eventually came into being. And because Australopithecus belonged to the world, man eventually came into being. And because man belonged to the world, he grew and developed and became brighter and more dexterous until one day he was so bright and dexterous that we had to call him Homo sapiens sapiens, which means that he was us.”

“And that’s the way the Leavers lived for three million years—as if they belonged to the world.”

“That’s right. And that’s how we came into being.”

5

Ishmael said, “We know what happens if you take the Taker premise, that the world belongs to man.”

“Yes, that’s a disaster.”

“And what happens if you take the Leaver premise, that man belongs to the world?”

“Then creation goes on forever.”

“How does that sound?”

“It has my vote.”

6

“Something occurs to me,” I said.

“Yes?”
“It occurs to me that the story I just told is in fact the story the Leavers have been enacting here for three million years. The Takers’ story is, ‘The gods made the world for man, but they botched the job, so we had to take matters into our own, more competent hands.’ The Leavers’ story is, ‘The gods made man for the world, the same way they made salmon and sparrows and rabbits for the world; this seems to have worked pretty well so far, so we can take it easy and leave the running of the world to the gods.’ ”

“That’s right. There are other ways to tell it, just as there are other ways to tell the story of the Takers, but this way of telling it is as good as any.”

I sat there for a while. “I’m thinking about . . . the meaning of the world, divine intentions in the world, and the destiny of man. According to this story.”

“Go ahead.”

“The meaning of the world . . . I think the third chapter of Genesis had it right. It’s a garden—the gods’ garden. I say this even though I myself very much doubt that gods have anything to do with it. I just find this a wholesome and encouraging way to think of it.”

“I understand.”

“And there are two trees in the garden, one for the gods and one for us. The one for them is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the one for us is the Tree of Life. But we can only find the Tree of Life if we stay in the garden—and we can only stay in the garden if we keep our hands off the gods’ tree.”

Ishmael gave me a nod of encouragement.

“Divine intentions . . . It would seem . . . There is a sort of tendency in evolution, wouldn’t you say? If you start with those ultrasmall critters in the ancient seas and move up step by step to everything we see here now—and beyond—then you have to observe a tendency toward . . . complexity. And toward self-awareness and intelligence. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes.”

“That is, all sorts of creatures on this planet appear to be on the verge of attaining that self-awareness and intelligence. So it’s definitely not just humans that the gods are after. We were never meant to be the only players on this stage. Apparently the gods intend this planet to be a garden filled with creatures that are self-aware and intelligent.”

“So it would appear. And if this is so, then man’s destiny would seem to be plain.”

“Yes. Amazingly enough, it is plain—because man is the first of all these. He’s the trailblazer, the pathfinder. His destiny is to be the first to learn that creatures like man have a choice: They can try to thwart the gods and perish in the attempt—or they can stand aside and make some room for all the rest. But it’s more than that. His destiny is to be the father of them all—I don’t mean by direct descent. By giving all the rest their chance—the whales and the dolphins and the chimps and the
raccoons—he becomes in some sense their progenitor. . . . Oddly enough, it’s even grander than the
destiny the Takers dreamed up for us.”

“How so?”

“Just think. In a billion years, whatever is around then, whoever is around then, says, ‘Man? Oh yes, man! What a wonderful creature he was! It was within his grasp to destroy the entire world and to
trample all our futures into the dust—but he saw the light before it was too late and pulled back. He
pulled back and gave the rest of us our chance. He showed us all how it had to be done if the world
was to go on being a garden forever. Man was the role model for us all!’ ”

“Not a shabby destiny.”

“Not a shabby destiny by any means. And it occurs to me that this . . .”

“Yes?”

“This gives a little shape to the story. The world is a very, very fine place. It wasn’t a mess. It didn’t
need to be conquered and ruled by man. In other words, the world doesn’t need to belong to man—
but it does need man to belong to it. Some creature had to be the first to go through this, had to see
that there were two trees in the garden, one that was good for gods and one that was good for
creatures. Some creature had to find the way, and if that happened, then . . . there was just no limit
to what could happen here. In other words, man does have a place in the world, but it’s not his place
to rule. The gods have that in hand. Man’s place is to be the first. Man’s place is to be the first
without being the last. Man’s place is to figure out how it’s possible to do that—and then to make
some room for all the rest who are capable of becoming what he’s become. And maybe, when the
time comes, it’s man’s place to be the teacher of all the rest who are capable of becoming what he’s
become. Not the only teacher, not the ultimate teacher. Maybe only the first teacher, the
kindergarten teacher—but even that wouldn’t be too shabby. And do you know what?”

“What?”

“All along, I’ve been saying to myself, ‘Yes, this is all very interesting, but what good is it? This
isn’t going to change anything!’ ”

“And now?”

“This is what we need. Not just stopping things. Not just less of things. People need something
positive to work for. They need a vision of something that . . . I don’t know. Something that . . .”

“I think what you’re groping for is that people need more than to be scolded, more than to be made
to feel stupid and guilty. They need more than a vision of doom. They need a vision of the world
and of themselves that inspires them.”

“Yes. Definitely. Stopping pollution is not inspiring. Sorting your trash is not inspiring. Cutting
down on fluorocarbons is not inspiring. But this . . . thinking of ourselves in a new way, thinking of
the world in a new way . . . This . . .”
I let it go. What the hell, he knew what I was trying to say.

7

“I trust you now see a point I made when we first began. The story being enacted here by the Takers is not in any sense chapter two of the story that was being enacted here during the first three million years of human life. The Leaver story has its own chapter two.”

“What is its chapter two?”

“You’ve just outlined it, haven’t you?”

“I’m not sure.”

Ishmael spent a moment in thought. “We’ll never know what the Leavers of Europe and Asia were up to when the people of your culture came along to plow them under forever. But we do know what they were up to here in North America. They were looking for ways to achieve settlement that were in accord with the way they’d always lived, ways that left room for the rest of life to go on around them. I don’t mean that they did this out of any sense of high-mindedness. I simply mean that it didn’t occur to them to take the life of the world into their own hands and to declare war on the rest of the community of life. Proceeding in this way for another five thousand years or ten thousand years, a dozen civilizations might have appeared on this continent as sophisticated as yours is now, each with its own values and objectives. It’s not unthinkable.”

“No, it’s not. Or rather, yes it is. According to Taker mythology, every civilization anywhere in the universe must be a Taker civilization, a civilization in which people have taken the life of the world into their own hands. That’s so obvious it doesn’t need to be pointed out. Hell, every alien civilization in the history of science fiction has been a Taker civilization. Every civilization ever encountered by the U.S.S. Enterprise has been a Taker civilization. This is because it goes without saying that any intelligent creature anywhere will insist on taking his life out of the hands of the gods, will know that the world belongs to him and not the other way around.”

“True.”

“Which raises an important question in my mind. What exactly would it mean to belong to the world at this point? Obviously you’re not saying that only hunter-gatherers truly belong to the world.”

“I’m glad you see that. Though if the Bushmen of Africa or the Kalapalo of Brazil (if there are any left by now) want to go on living that way for the next ten million years, I can’t see how this can be anything less than beneficial for them and for the world.”

“True. But that doesn’t answer my question. How can civilized people belong to the world?”
Ishmael shook his head in what looked like a mixture of impatience and exasperation. “Civilized has nothing to do with it. How can tarantulas belong to the world? How can sharks belong to the world?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Look around you and you’ll see some creatures who act as though the world belongs to them and some creatures who act as though they belong to the world. Can you tell them apart?”

“Yes.”

“The creatures who act as though they belong to the world follow the peace–keeping law, and because they follow that law, they give the creatures around them a chance to grow toward whatever it’s possible for them to become. That’s how man came into being. The creatures around Australopithecus didn’t imagine that the world belonged to them, so they let him live and grow. How does being civilized come into it? Does being civilized mean that you have to destroy the world?”

“No.”

“Does being civilized make you incapable of giving the creatures around you a little space in which to live?”

“No.”

“Does it make you incapable of living as harmlessly as sharks and tarantulas and rattlesnakes?”

“No.”

“Does it make you incapable of following a law that even snails and earthworms manage to follow without any difficulty?”

“No.”

“As I pointed out some time ago, human settlement isn’t against the law, it’s subject to the law—and the same is true of civilization. So what exactly is your question?”

“I don’t know, now. Obviously belonging to the world means... belonging to the same club as everyone else. The club being the community of life. It means belonging to the club and following the same rules as everyone else.”

“And if being civilized means anything at all, it should mean that you’re leaders of the club, not its only criminals and destroyers.”

“True,” I said, then sat there blinking for a few moments. “Something you said a moment ago. We’ll never know what the Leavers of Europe or Asia were up to when the people of my culture arrived to plow them under.”
“Yes?”

“I think some information about that has been dug up in recent years.”

Ishmael nodded. “If it’s recent, then I might well not have heard of it.”

“An archeologist named Riane Eisler wrote about a widespread Leaver agricultural society that existed in Europe until it was overrun by the Takers five or six thousand years ago. Except she didn’t call them Leavers and Takers, of course. I don’t know a lot about it, but evidently the culture the Takers plowed under was based on goddess worship.”

Ishmael nodded. “One of my students was aware of the book you’re talking about but was unable to explain its significance as you’ve done. It’s called, I believe, *The Chalice and the Blade.*”

8

“Returning to the subject of inspiration, it seems to me that these days you have another promising source of it,” Ishmael said.

“What’s that?”

“All my other pupils, when they reached this point, said, ‘Yes, yes, this is wonderful—but people are not going to relinquish their hold on the world. It just can’t happen. Never. Not in a thousand years.’ And I had nothing I could point to as a hopeful example to the contrary. Now I do.”

It took me about ninety seconds to see it. “I assume you mean what’s been happening in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe in the past few years.”

“That’s right. Ten years ago, twenty years ago, anyone predicting that Marxism would soon be dismantled *from the top* would have been labeled a hopeless visionary, an utter fool.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“But once the people of these countries were inspired by the possibility of a new way of life, the dismantling took place almost overnight.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. Five years ago I would have said that no amount of inspiration could accomplish that—or this.”

“And now?”

“And now it’s just barely thinkable. Improbable as hell but not unimaginable.”

9
“But I do have another question,” I added.

“Proceed.”

“Your ad said, ‘Must earnestly desire to save the world.’ ”

“Yes?”

“What do I do if I earnestly desire to save the world?”

Ishmael frowned at me through the bars for a long moment. “You want a program?”

“Of course I want a program.”

“Then here is a program: The story of Genesis must be reversed. First, Cain must stop murdering Abel. This is essential if you’re to survive. The Leavers are the endangered species most critical to the world—not because they’re humans but because they alone can show the destroyers of the world that there is no one right way to live. And then, of course, you must spit out the fruit of that forbidden tree. You must absolutely and forever relinquish the idea that you know who should live and who should die on this planet.”

“Yes, I see all that, but that’s a program for mankind, that’s not a program for me. What do I do?”

“What you do is to teach a hundred what I’ve taught you, and inspire each of them to teach a hundred. That’s how it’s always done.”

“Yes, but . . . is it enough?”

Ishmael frowned. “Of course it’s not enough. But if you begin anywhere else, there’s no hope at all. You can’t say, ‘We’re going to change the way people behave toward the world, but we’re not going to change the way they think about the world or the way they think about divine intentions in the world or the way they think about the destiny of man.’ As long as the people of your culture are convinced that the world belongs to them and that their divinely-appointed destiny is to conquer and rule it, then they are of course going to go on acting the way they’ve been acting for the past ten thousand years. They’re going to go on treating the world as if it were a piece of human property and they’re going to go on conquering it as if it were an adversary. You can’t change these things with laws. You must change people’s minds. And you can’t just root out a harmful complex of ideas and leave a void behind; you have to give people something that is as meaningful as what they’ve lost—something that makes better sense than the old horror of Man Supreme, wiping out everything on this planet that doesn’t serve his needs directly or indirectly.”

I shook my head. “What you’re saying is that someone has to stand up and become to the world of today what Saint Paul was to the Roman Empire.”

“Yes, basically. Is that so daunting?”

I laughed. “Daunting isn’t nearly strong enough. To call it daunting is like calling the Atlantic damp.”
“Is it really so impossible in an age when a stand–up comic on television reaches more people in ten minutes than Paul did in his entire lifetime?”

“I’m not a stand–up comic.”

“But you’re a writer, aren’t you?”

“Not that kind of writer.”

Ishmael shrugged. “Lucky you. You are absolved of any obligation. Self–absolved.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“What were you expecting to learn from me? An incantation? A magic word that would sweep all the nastiness away?”

“No.”

“Ultimately, it would seem you’re no different from those you profess to despise: You just wanted something for yourself. Something to make you feel better as you watch the end approach.”

“No, it isn’t that. You just don’t know me very well. It’s always this way with me—first I say, ‘No, no, it’s impossible, completely and utterly impossible,’ then I go ahead and do it.”

Ishmael humphed, barely mollified.

“One thing I know people will say to me is ‘Are you suggesting we go back to being hunter–gatherers?’ ”

“That of course is an inane idea,” Ishmael said. “The Leaver life–style isn’t about hunting and gathering, it’s about letting the rest of the community live—and agriculturalists can do that as well as hunter–gatherers.” He paused and shook his head. “What I’ve been at pains to give you is a new paradigm of human history. The Leaver life is not an antiquated thing that is ‘back there’ somewhere. Your task is not to reach back but to reach forward.”

“But to what? We can’t just walk away from our civilization the way the Hohokam did.”

“That’s certainly true. The Hohokam had another way of life waiting for them, but you must be inventive—if it’s worthwhile to you. If you care to survive.” He gave me a dull stare. “You’re an inventive people, aren’t you? You pride yourselves on that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then invent.”
“I have neglected one small point,” Ishmael said, then gave way to a long, groaning, wheezing sigh, as if he were sorry he’d allowed himself to be reminded of it.

I waited in silence.

“One of my students was an ex–convict. An armed robber, as it happened. Have I told you that?”

I said he hadn’t.

“I’m afraid our work together was more useful to me than to him. Primarily what I learned from him is that, contrary to the impression one receives from prison movies, the prison population is not at all an undifferentiated mass. As in the outside world, there are the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak. And relatively speaking, the rich and the powerful live very well inside the prison—not as well as they do on the outside, of course, but much, much better than the poor and the weak. In fact, they can have very nearly anything they want, in terms of drugs, food, sex, and service.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“You want to know what this has to do with anything,” he said with a nod. “It has this to do with anything: The world of the Takers is one vast prison, and except for a handful of Leavers scattered across the world, the entire human race is now inside that prison. During the last century every remaining Leaver people in North America was given a choice: to be exterminated or to accept imprisonment. Many chose imprisonment, but not many were actually capable of adjusting to prison life.”

“Yes, that seems to be the case.”

Ishmael fixed me with a drooping, moist eye. “Naturally a well–run prison must have a prison industry. I’m sure you see why.”

“Well . . . it helps to keep the inmates busy, I suppose. Takes their minds off the boredom and futility of their lives.”

“Yes. Can you name yours?”

“Our prison industry? Not offhand. I suppose it’s obvious.”

“Quite obvious, I would say.”

I gave it some thought. “Consuming the world.”

Ishmael nodded. “Got it on the first try.”
“There is one significant difference between the inmates of your criminal prisons and the inmates of your cultural prison: The former understand that the distribution of wealth and power inside the prison has nothing to do with justice.”

I blinked at him for a while, then asked him to explain.

“In your cultural prison, which inmates wield the power?”

“Ah,” I said. “The male inmates. Especially the white male inmates.”

“Yes, that’s right. But you understand that these white male inmates are indeed inmates and not warders. For all their power and privilege—for all that they lord it over everyone else in the prison—not one of them has a key that will unlock the gate.”

“Yes, that’s true. Donald Trump can do a lot of things I can’t, but he can no more get out of the prison than I can. But what does this have to do with justice?”

“Justice demands that people other than white males have power in the prison.”

“Yes, I see. But what are you saying? That this isn’t true?”

“True? Of course it’s true that males—and, as you say, especially white males—have called the shots inside the prison for thousands of years, perhaps even from the beginning. Of course it’s true that this is unjust. And of course it’s true that power and wealth within the prison should be equitably redistributed. But it should be noted that what is crucial to your survival as a race is not the redistribution of power and wealth within the prison but rather the destruction of the prison itself.”

“Yes, I see that. But I’m not sure many other people would.”

“No?”

“No. Among the politically active, the redistribution of wealth and power is . . . I don’t know what to call it that would be strong enough. An idea whose time has come. The Holy Grail.”

“Nonetheless, breaking out of the Taker prison is a common cause to which all humanity can subscribe.”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid it’s a cause to which almost none of humanity will subscribe. White or colored, male or female, what the people of this culture want is to have as much wealth and power in the Taker prison as they can get. They don’t give a damn that it’s a prison and they don’t give a damn that it’s destroying the world.”

Ishmael shrugged. “As always, you’re a pessimist. Perhaps you’re right. I hope you’re wrong.”

“I hope so too, believe me.”
Even though we’d only been talking an hour or so, Ishmael seemed limp with exhaustion. I made tentative noises about leaving, but he evidently had something more on his mind.

At last he looked up and said: “You understand that I’m finished with you.”

I think it would have felt about the same if he’d plunged a knife into my stomach.

He closed his eyes for a moment. “Pardon me. I’m tired and not expressing myself well. I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

I couldn’t answer him, but I managed a nod.

“I mean only that I’ve finished what I set out to do. As a teacher, I have nothing more to give you. Even so, I would be pleased to count you as a friend.”

Again, I couldn’t manage more than a nod.

Ishmael shrugged and looked around bleary–eyed, as if he’d momentarily forgotten where he was. Then he reared back and exploded in a magnificently juicy sneeze.

“Look,” I said, getting up, “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

He gave me a long, dark stare; he was wondering what the devil more I expected of him but was too weary to ask. He sent me on my way with a grunt and a valedictory nod.

THIRTEEN

That night, before falling asleep in my motel bed, I finalized my plan. It was a bad plan and I knew it, but I couldn’t think of anything better. Whether he liked it or not (and I knew he wouldn’t), I had to rescue Ishmael from that goddamned carnival.

It was a bad plan in another sense, in that it depended entirely on me and my meager resources. I had only one hole–card, and if I had to turn it, I figured it would probably be a deuce.

At nine the next morning I was in a small town about halfway home, driving around in hopes of finding someplace to have breakfast, when a “too hot” warning lit up on my dashboard, forcing me to pull over. I popped the hood and checked the oil: oil okay. Checked the water reservoir: dry. No problem—a canny traveler, I carry extra water. I topped off the reservoir, got going again, and two minutes later watched the warning light blink back on. I made it to a filling station where the sign