The first time Jason Samuelson met up with his fate was in September, when the lilies were fading and the air had begun to grow chilly at dusk. Later, those who loved him looked back on that day and realized that Jason's downward spiral had been happening for some time. They simply hadn't noticed what was right there in front of them, the way some people manage to overlook the sand shifting beneath their feet until an earthquake actually strikes and reveals just how unreliable the whole world can be.

When Jason collapsed on the loading dock of the Food Star, the last thing he saw was the blue sky above him, a vision so cloudless and vast that even he, a careless boy of twenty who had managed to constantly receive without ever giving in return, felt helpless and small. Jason had shot heroin into his veins in the meat locker of the supermarket where he worked, and he'd known something was
wrong right away: The peace which usually settled over his soul when he got high did not come to him. Instead, he felt filled to the brim with something slithery; it was as if black toads and newly hatched snakes had been trapped beneath his skin, and now they all struggled to break free in a horrible clawing fashion that took his breath away and left him sprawled upon the asphalt.

That was where his girlfriend, Terry LoPacca, found him when she checked out of fruits and vegetables. By then, Jason’s pulse had slowed and his skin was ashen. He had no idea that Terry was on the ground beside him, weeping and calling for help, or that an ambulance from Franconia Hospital would soon be on its way. Unlike many people who experience a blast of welcoming white light when death is near, Jason was surrounded by empty space, as though he’d been swept right into the sky. He was enveloped in something far more powerful than himself, and he flailed out against it. He could feel the burning, endless grip of eternity snapping down on his wrists and shaking his soul; there was a syrupy poison engulfing his heart and his lungs, but he wouldn’t give in. There on the loading dock, Jason fought and he fought well. He lashed out and kicked, he
growled like a dog; he was not ready to die on the asphalt, between crates of bananas and canned dog food.

Four attendants and the ambulance driver were needed to restrain him and carry him off the loading dock, and even then they had to tie him to the stretcher for fear he'd break his neck as he twisted and turned. When Jason regained consciousness, four hours later in a metal bed in the emergency room, he was surrounded by women. All he could hear was the low murmur of their voices. For an instant he thought he'd lost the battle and that due to some celestial error, the angels were beside him now.

"You idiot," Jason's sister said to him. Gretel was so relieved to see his eyes open that she nearly passed out herself; her face was chalky with concern. She had always looked up to her brother, but current circumstances had required her to look down and she didn't like what she saw. Didn't any one else notice that the boy who had once had everything was quickly becoming a man who could neither be trusted nor satisfied? Terry LoPacca, always so grateful for a snippet of Jason's attention, was fawning over him, kissing his hands and his eyes, pledging her love. Gretel's mother and their cousin Margot, were already considering a law suit against the hospital
attendants, whose rough treatment had left their sweet boy with bruises on his arms and legs. Did they fail to see how much weight Jason had recently lost? Had they never realized that all the good silverware in the house had slowly been disappearing, sold for a meager profit, then displayed in a case at the pawn shop behind the shopping center? Devotion had kept them from recognizing who he had become, and even now they cooed as they tenderly untied Jason’s ankles and wrists from their restraints. Even now they blamed everyone else for the troubles he’d seen. He was their darling, after all, their one and only boy.

That night, Gretel sat out in their backyard and stared at the sky. She recognized Pegasus in the southern sky and for some reason this made her cry. She was a girl with a forlorn nature who desperately wanted to believe in something, but so far the most she had managed to believe in was bad luck. On this evening, she couldn’t find her way past the black despair that wraps around anyone who loves a person who cannot be saved. Jason came out of the house in a clean white shirt and baggy jeans; he sat down beside Gretel and lighted a cigarette. In spite of everything he’d done to himself, he was still incredibly handsome. Women on the street often
stopped to stare, unable to collect themselves for hours after he’d walked by; they dreamed about him for weeks if he bothered to give them a second look or a smile. He was Gretel’s brother, the same flesh and blood, but every day he was more of a stranger. He’d always taken risks, but the level of danger had increased. He’d walk right into the center of anything perilous - any fight, any drug, any chance he could take - just for the hell of it, even if the odds were so set against him anyone could tell he’d never win.

“Are you trying to kill yourself?” Gretel asked.

Jason blew out smoke. He also spied the square of Pegasus, but he paid the constellations no mind. When he tallied up his reasons to live, all he could come up with were ways with which to numb himself.

“You are so stupid,” Gretel told her brother. She hadn’t expected him to respond, but that didn’t mean she didn’t know the answer.

“Well?” Jason stubbed out his cigarette in the flower bed where their mother had tried to grow tulips for years. Not a single one had managed to bloom. “What’s the speed of light, missy?” Jason asked. “What’s the square root of 144?” After all he’d been through, his smile was still worth seeing. “Who’s stupid now?”

"You’re going to actually do it if you’re not careful," Gretel warned. "Then I’ll be furious."

"Gretel, if I wanted to die, I’d already be dead."

After they had both thought this over, Gretel took her brother’s hand in hers, the hand that had so often bought heroin and methamphetamine up on the Avenue, the hand that had stolen from his own mother and reached for all the most beautiful girls in town, and she bit him, hard.

Jason let out a yelp and got to his feet. He looked at the teeth marks his sister had left as if he couldn’t quite believe what had happened.

"I guess you’re right," Gretel said. "You are still alive."

Later that night Jason almost corrected that situation when the car he was driving on a dark road through the woods spun out of control. He was behind the wheel of Terry’s red Trans Am, the one her father had bought as a graduation present, intent on forcing the speedometer to its highest level, when he noticed that the stars had shifted in the sky. The reason for this, he soon realized, was that the car was on its side in a ditch. Terry was screaming, but all Jason could pay attention to was the burning in his chest; it was as if some
blazing creature was now astride him, pinning back his arms, holding a staff of fire to his lungs, heart and spine.

He fought back with a strength no one would have predicted. Another man might have given up, but Jason threw that fiery monster off his chest with such force that sparks streamed into the woods. By the time he got himself and Terry out of the wrecked car, the tall grass along the road was on fire and they had to run all the way to the Parkway to flag down a passing car for help.

Jason had only two broken ribs that time, but there was a mark on his chest which resembled a hand. In a few days the imprint faded to the puckered red shadow of any common burn; only a faint impression had been left behind. All the same, he broke up with Terry. She was bad luck when you came right down to it; in his opinion, most women were. They cried and they wanted things from you; they just wouldn’t leave you alone. There were times when he sat in his very own house, with his mother and sister and cousin, and he wouldn’t be able to understand them; they spoke a distinctly different language, one he couldn’t even begin to fathom, one he certainly didn’t want to hear.
That autumn, Jason took to staying away, for a night at first, then for days at a time. He crashed with friends, and when they'd had enough of him, he invited himself to stay with acquaintances. Finally, he had nowhere to go but the drug houses up beyond the Avenue, where anyone with a little cash and a taste for ruin was welcome. He stopped going to work because he didn't want to deal with Terry and all her needs. He could no longer face his mother because she continued to gaze at him as though he were the same boy he once was. That wasn't him anymore, not in any way, shape or form; he could barely remember what he had once believed in or cared about. He dreamed of oblivion and angels, and he couldn't even bring himself to eat a decent breakfast. Weight fell off his frame and his gums began to bleed; people who'd known him since he was a child avoided him now, hurrying past any corner where he was stationed to beg for a loan or a little spare change. He never went home unless he needed money, and then only after dark, when no one would catch him rifling through drawers for jewelry and cash.

One cloudy November night he came upon Gretel in the kitchen, positioned near the door, as if she'd known he was on his way. He was so strung out he didn't have the sense to be embarrassed when
he was discovered creeping around in the middle of the night, climbing in through the window above the sink, since he had long ago lost the key to the front door. Though the temperature was dropping and frost was on the lawns, Jason only wore jeans and a black T-shirt and he was shivering badly. He'd sold his leather coat for a quick fifty bucks, but the truth was, he hadn't even noticed that ice was collecting on the streets or that the palms of his hands had already turned blue.

That night Jason actually talked Gretel into giving him two hundred bucks; he was going straight, he told her, he was pulling his life together, but he could see she didn't believe a word. She stared at him as though she could see the faint outline of the burn on his chest, right through his shirt. She wanted to ask him why he was doing this to himself, but instead she bit her lip; he was clueless when it came to disaster and denial, and he always had been.

Gretel walked him out to the front porch. She had the sense she might never see her brother again, or that if she did, she might not recognize him; she could pass him right by, as though the world he now inhabited was on another plane, one entirely unseen by those who still lived their everyday lives of work and sleep, milk and
butter, obligation and concern. The temperature was near freezing and a ring around the moon signaled snow before morning. Gretel considered giving her brother her own leather jacket, but she knew that if she did it would only be a matter of hours before it was sold.

"It's going to happen," she told Jason. "If you don't watch out."

"Not to me," Jason said. "You're such a worrywart, Gret." As he leaned over to hug her, he had the strangest feeling, almost as though he had left his body to watch himself embrace his sister.

"Nothing will happen to me," he vowed. "You wait and see."

But Gretel couldn't even see him once he'd walked out the front door, not that Gretel was surprised. It is amazing how quickly someone can disappear into the night when he has a craving for destruction and two hundred dollars in his pocket. Since Jason hadn't the money for his own car and no one with any common sense would lend him one, he walked three miles in order to score, even though snow had already begun to fall. Halfway there, Jason had the sense that he was being followed, but when he turned the street was empty. He went on, though the mark on his chest had begun to burn. As he neared the Avenue, the shirt he'd been wearing for days suddenly darkened, as though it had been singed, and then, without
warning, the fabric ignited. There on the sidewalk in front of houses where families were safely asleep in their beds, Jason tore the shirt from his body. It burned down to ash on the asphalt and left nothing but fiery dust. By then, Jason was broiling and freezing at the very same time, and he felt true fear. Clearly, a warning had been tossed down before him on the dark and empty street. All the same, he stared up at Pegasus, which was now in the western corner of the sky.

"You can’t stop me," he said.

Jason words went upward into the icy night and disappeared, swallowed by the cold. He went on, half naked, so spent and exhausted he collapsed when he reached his destination — a basement apartment where a man could buy just about anything, from heroin to a clean shirt; here, Jason could crash here for a while, as long as the money held out.

The apartment was just what he thought he’d wanted; there was no longer anyone to tell him how to live and what to do. But each time he got high the fiery creature appeared again, there to torment him. Time after time, he had to fight for his life just to get back to that basement, where mattresses were strewn about and no
one ever discussed the future. After a while, he began to spy the creature even in the first moments of the day, when he was completely sober and straight.

"Did you see that?" he'd say to whoever else was hanging out, as though he were a madman who needed validation from any passing junkie. They stared at him with contempt, and even worse, with pity. Couldn't anyone tell that sparks had scorched his eyelashes and his hair? When he removed his boots he often discovered a phosphorous element inside, which glowed with a faint yellow light. The air around him was brutal and hot. Were they blind to all this? Were they too far gone to see? "Seriously," he'd ask anyone close enough to listen. "Did you feel that?"

"Sure, buddy," people would answer to humor him or simply to get him off their backs. "We feel it."

When it came down to it, Jason didn't care what they all thought or what they believed. He knew the truth: Something was waiting for him. At night he peered out the window to look upward; even in this dank basement, he could read his fate in the stars. Still he fought; if anyone came up behind him, he was likely to strike out of pure instinct. He had a wild countenance, that of a man who can
find neither courage nor rest; he made certain to lock every window and door. He stopped sleeping, because the thing was there in his dreams, sitting on his chest, aflame with incredible light; on the occasions when he dozed off, he awoke to find a thin layer of soot on his skin.

The weather had turned even colder, and Jason had developed a terrible cough. All the same, when his money ran out and he had borrowed and begged far too much, they threw him out of the basement. It was a dreadful night, with ice on the roads inches deep and a gray unforgiving sky, but Jason really wasn’t concerned. He’d been pilfering heroin from his host, and he had more than enough to get him through the night. He went down by the Parkway, then kept on walking, to the stretch of woods that was still forest, where a man could find some privacy. But his destination was so far and he was so tired, he stopped to rest beneath a Parkway overpass. He got high right there, like the abandoned souls he and his friends used to laugh about back in high school. He knew he was alone and desperate, but he didn’t care. The world had retreated into this, getting high, a single action, the apex of all misery and desire.
Jason lay down, his head resting against the tunnel. He was shivering so badly that his head banged against the concrete and he bit his own lips. His fingers and toes were numb and his stomach ached, as though he had consumed nothing but ice and stones. He waited, certain that the thing that had been following him would come, ready for the fight, but this time when he felt the creature upon him, Jason was grateful for the warmth. The cold he'd experienced was so horrible that it was a relief to encounter so much heat. There were flames around his elbows and his ankles which could melt anything: ice and flesh, bone and blood. Despite the sulfur and the ash, Jason embraced his enemy, and as soon as he did he discovered that its appearance mirrored his own: The same blue eyes, the very same smile. He could still see the constellations, even though his eyes were closed; he could see farther than he'd ever imagined possible. He'd thought he was lost, but now he recognized that eternity was all around him, like salt from a shaker or stars in the sky.