

The Gibbous, a novel

Chapter 1 - Out of the Well

*The Well / Rising, Sinking / Republic of Catatonia / Other Patients / Babel / Drugged Sleep /
The Count / Aljahim / The Narcotic Fog / Rescue*

The first sensation that came to him was lift. His body hauled upward through the black, a bucket drawn up out of a deep and narrow well. Far above, first like a distant star and then growing nearer, the opening to a tunnel: light. Piercing light. The violent, bright blur of the world. Sounds muffled dull as though his ears were stuffed tight with wet cotton. There was a memory of opening his eyes under water in a dirty lake as a boy. He felt nothing but heavy pressing on his body. Gravity—holding him where he lay, a lead blanket keeping him from floating up and out of the room. There were people in masks standing all around and looking down, chattering absurd syllables. Fake languages. But there was no worry. No anxiety. He heard his brain say: They're working on us. Repairing damage. Fixing. No matter what happens, everything will be fine. Everything is going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine.

He descended back into the well.

He awoke next at night. Out of the watery blur of his eyesight came a plus sign spinning above him, flickering, beating. A propeller. Chinook blades. Finally it became a wobbling ceiling fan. The moving air dried out his dusty eyeballs. The walls and ceiling looked made of hard sand. Orange and yellow. Cracked and chipped. Unfaded rectangles on the sandstone walls where pictures had hung. Flies and heat. Heat burning out of him. Heat pouring onto him. A

beetle tapped stupidly, stubbornly at his bedpost. *Tip-Tip. Tip-Tip.* Machines beeped. Bags of air inflating, deflating. Breathing. There were others in the room with him. Victims? Patients? He could sense them. In other beds like his. A hospital? Drug-dozing minds tethered like kites to frail, suffering bodies. Casualties. *Tip. Tip tip tip.* Right...casualties. The word snagged in him like briars in his clothes. Casualties...soldiers. Yes, that was it. Soldiers. There came a vision of his own boots tramping on rocks in the desert mountains. A rushing river far below in a deep gorge. Monkey tracks in the dust. Bullet holes and burned out, skeletal cars. Billowing robes. A warthog grunting. Stars and night vision goggles. An operation. A mission. Contact. Two boys with shepherd's staffs standing on a bright rock. An explosion. The dry earth lifting into the air. Silence.

But most of the memory eluded him. Trying to think was like struggling against quicksand. Thoughts receded as he reached for them. And as he struggled, he sank away again into the dark. That beetle gnawing at his skull. *Tip. Tip. Tip-tip.* The fan wobbling overhead. He couldn't remember his name or where he was. He tried to remember his name and he sank. He tried to remember what had happened to him and he sank. He sank.

Day came. And then night. And then day again. His eyes would open suddenly and then sunlight like a firehose of heat blasting his bed. Then he would close his eyelids against the brightness and when he opened them again it would be dark. Night. Or morning again on a different day. Hospital attendants without faces approached the side of his bed. Wrote things down. Said nothing. Drew blood. Shot pharmaceuticals into his IV. Drifted away again like ghosts on roller-skates. The whole room would flicker, go dark. Sometimes he would hear the tiny scratching of rodents in the walls, the ceiling, or maybe it was his brain trying to think. How

hot it was. How hot. He was soaked through with sweat. Then he would shiver. He would tell himself to move. Get up. Just get up! But he could not. His body slack. It was a weakness and fatigue so profound he could barely move his fingers. Whenever the doctor came he would try to speak, but it was as though his throat were filled with hot sand, as though he was a lost and deserted man mouthing the word *Water* to a mirage. Always the clear liquids dripping—drop drop drop—from the bag into the IV cord, and then oozing sometimes cold, sometimes hot, into his arm. The friendly dose. And then drowsiness. A chemical gravity pulling at his eyes and brain into Sleep. Sleep. Morphine sleep bringing nightmares and hallucinations of a crash-landing on Mars. Of Civil War soldiers picking at gangrene with bayonets. Of chrome rims spinning off the wheels and flying like blades through children. Of dogs spitting racial slurs as they walked around on hind legs smoking joints.

Back again, into the well. Nightmares becoming ghosts; ghosts drifting into fog. Fog filling with smoke. Smoke nothing but rain. The rain washing over everything. The Republic of Catatonia.

Slowly, the somnolence lessened and his eyelids could lift apart. Like shipwreck castaways washed up and coming to on a beach, he became aware of the other patients in the room near him. He couldn't see them, but he could hear their breathing. Their groans. Their whispered words if they could form them. When at last he could pivot his head even a quarter turn to his right without suffering a lightning bolt of pain across his back, he strained to look. As he rolled his eye as far as it could go, there at last he saw the man next to him. Burned hairless. Brown and gold and moist, like a beaded rotisserie meat behind a gyro counter. The doctors lay thin bandages across the man, coated him in ointment. A machine helped him breathe. A white

accordion bag lifted up and fell down. The burned man would cough sometimes and then whimper. The salty tears burning in his wounds. When he looked away from the scorched man he felt sick. He thought perhaps he could smell him.

There was another patient, a boy he guessed by the sound of his voice, in one of the other beds at the end of the room. The boy stayed quiet all day but at night he screamed senselessly, endlessly, in a chaotic language. The only word the man could discern from the boy's wailing was *Mama. Mama! Mama!* And then one night the boy was quiet and the next morning he heard the nurses changing out the body and bringing in a new patient.

Later, he thought he had already been awake when suddenly he woke up with the word *mama* in his mouth. He worried there had been no boy at all. He wondered too if perhaps he himself had been the burned man.

Somewhere in the distance a rocket screamed down. A concussion rippled the air. Orange dust sifted down from the ceiling and into his eyes. He couldn't even move his hands to wipe them clean.

Through the hours the languages tangled in knots inside his ears. He heard Arabic and Russian. Dutch. Urdu. The burned man next to him mumbled prayers in Pashto. How did he know it was Pashto? What the fuck was Pashto? The doctor who came in the afternoons to take blood from his arm also mumbled in some other tongue. The warning/directions on the IV stand next to his bed were printed in French.

I speak English, he said in his mind. And then other thoughts trailed after that one: *Pero la lengua le gusto espagnol tambien.*

"What?" he asked himself.

No answer.

“What?”

“Qué?”

“Who said that? Hello?!”

The next morning he tried speaking to the nurse. A man with eyes like charred wood and lashes long and upturned. He gave no response but quickly called for a doctor who put another dose in his IV.

No. Please. Tell me my name. Tell me where...tell me who...

But then he was washed away again by a torrent. A whirlpool pulling a swimmer into the deep. It might have been days maybe, that he was down.

The memory of opening his eyes under water in a dirty lake was from his late boyhood. Call him eleven. Summer. They were swimming with girls off a dock. He'd wanted to look at their bodies. So as they laughed and splashed and tread water he made as though to dive after something on the bottom, but instead he turned to try and find their long-limbs and slenderness from below. Only the water was too silty to see anything. There was only a murky film over his eyes. A wash of grey and brown. He surfaced again, having seen nothing.

It was like that now—eyes blinking through cloudy water—coming back to wakefulness in a too-bright, bewildering scene. There was a penlight blasting into one eye and then the other. There was a doctor behind the instrument, peering down like a lapidary assessing the value of a cracked jewel. The doctor's eyes were hidden by the reflections on his glasses.

He tried to speak, and noises came out, but the words were malformed and incomprehensible.

“Do not speak,” the doctor said in a thick accent. “Your mouth is burned and we have on you now a muzzle. You are screaming in the night. ‘Mama, mama!’ But your Mama is not here and you only wake the others.”

There was a jarring quality of being spoken to. Reassurance he wasn’t dead. The doctor took notes on a notepad. The doctor was neither kind nor unkind. The doctor took his pulse with unmanicured fingers. There was dirt under his nails. Hair on his knuckles. A tattoo where a wedding ring should be.

“You should not still be living,” the doctor said in that strange accent. All the man could think of was The Count on Sesame Street. Where was the Count from? “Is a scientific anomaly you breathe. You understand this? You are lucky. Like survivor from plane crash, you see? Lucky that you breathe.”

Only his surgical mask moved as he spoke.

“Where am I? What happened?” he tried to ask. “Why can’t I move?” Malformed murmurs were all that came out. Dog whimpers. “What’s my name?”

“No talking. For now. Must rest, you see? Good boy. Rest.”

The Count leaned across him and yanked on something and his body was clasped even tighter to the bed. Restraints. Then the Count increased the flow on the drip and once again the chemical sleep poured into his arm and swallowed his body inch by inch—a fast, delicious tide.

The doctor lifted like a Peter Pan on wires over a stage. *Vonn! Too! Thrrree!* he called as he flew from the room. He missed the wobbling ceiling fan blades by inches. A centipede the length of a belt zipped across the ceiling. Faces began to emerge from the orange walls and

moaned at him. The stupid beetle *tip-tipped*. And then the world hushed and the room filled with warm water like a bath.

Next time he woke it was dawn. A day later. Maybe two. Maybe it had only been hours. There was sand in his eyes and he felt the narcotic nausea from the last dose lingering. His body itched for the next dose to set it right again.

The burned man was now gone. The man they brought in to replace the burned man was a triple amputee with bandages spiraling his head like whipped cream on a sundae. Only the man's expansive, woolly, black beard spilled out from beneath the bandages and revealed a human underneath it. His one arm seemed miraculously unscathed though the nurses handcuffed it to the side rail because he kept picking at his bandages.

In the meantime his own gag had worked loose. He wrenched his jaw back and forth to free his mouth and then, in the small hours, when the guard-nurse went to the lavatory, he tried to speak out to the triple amputee. His tongue felt like a limp frog in his mouth. Still he managed to call out a few syllables.

“Hey! Hey, man. Fuck are we?”

The amputee slowly turned his head to see the man who addressed him.

“What is this place?”

The one-armed man looked back at him with an emotionless gaze and said nothing.

“Can't you talk? Fuck,” he said into the room. “The fuck is going on?”

It was so hot. His skin itched like layers of poison ivy. Nausea like a spinning boat. Still he couldn't move. He was sick. He felt his heart trying to slide into his throat. The veins in his neck and head pulsing. His bones were hot.

The amputee said something.

“What? What?”

“Aljahim,” the amputee said through his wrappings. “Aljahim.”

This meant nothing to him.

Hours later, midday, wild with the morphine sickness. Shivering and fevered. He begged to be given some more. Vomit beside his face on the pillow. He strained and shouted for more. Sweat oozing out of him like heavy cream. *More. More. Please. I need some more.*

The pain in his back shot him through with voltage. His pores ached. The withdrawal sent him writhing against the restraints. When at last the nurse with the magic eyes appeared again at his bedside he was another person. Not a person. An animal. He begged her through his teeth. He cried tears from his desperation. Then she poked a needle through the end of the IV and pushed the narcotic into the solution. The furious giant that had been crushing his body in its fist, instead laid him down in a field of heather and a cool wind blew through him as though he were little more than a screen door.

Time slipped further into the narcotic fog, the dreaming sandstorm. The hours like days. Days came and went without his waking to them at all. Drugs lined the inside of his body with slime. He felt the presence of the doctors. Perhaps they cut him open and sewed him back. Perhaps he was revived. Pulled back from death. He'd been sent down into the well again. How many times? He wasn't sure. The amputee next to him lost his last arm. A hundred bad dreams later he looked over and the amputee was gone entirely. Amputated from the world. He dove from the dock into the water but there was nothing to see. Other times he walked in the desert and then the earth lifted all around him and left him in darkness. Beetles tapped his bedpost. *Tip-*

tip. The ceiling crumbled into his eyes and off the blades of the Chinook ceiling fan. He slept at the bottom of a well. He woke to numb, nausea, despair. *Mama! Aljahim.* And then a nurse with a black beard in a gown and a brimless cap fed his arm and he was a screen door again. Thank you. Thank you. See you later alligator. *Vemos mañana.*

And then suddenly, out of a dream, he jolted and was awake again instantly to the sound of gunfire. It was night. Not a dream. Smart, quick bursts. Flashes of yellow light, like lightning through the window, under the door. Adrenaline skating through his veins to ignite his heart. He struggled against his restraints but there was no give. There were people shouting, barking commands through the door. He could almost understand them. More gunfire. The sound of small explosions. The lights went out. Even the machines went dark. He heard them busting through doors and moving through the building—the hospital, the dungeon, or whatever it was. And then the voices were near, just outside the metal door:

“Device in place. Three. Two. One. Execute!”

A flash of light and another blast. Metal and rock breaking and crumbling. A cloud of invading smoke and dust. And then no sound but a ringing in the ears. Deaf. He choked, coughed. Spat wet sand from his mouth. Watched as rifles with mounted lights on their muzzles searched the clouded room like alien machines. Two beams came to rest on him. In the dark he watched the mouths move beneath their android night vision goggles. They were speaking to him but he couldn't hear a word. One knelt by the bed and pulled loose the bandage that held closed his jaw. Then the soldier shouted into his ear:

“What's your name?!”

“Who are you?!”

He blinked back at them, scrambling for replies. He didn't know. Couldn't remember. How could he possibly know who he was? How could he possibly not know? Words turned to dust in his brain as he reached for them.

Once he had leapt from the end of a dock into a lake. Later he had run over rocks and dry brush in his boots and then the earth lifted silently into the air and covered over everything. He shook his head and blinked.

“Help me,” he thought he said. “I don't know.” He couldn't hear his own voice.

The dust drifted to the floor. The black-suited soldiers came through the room searching but not finding anyone else to shoot. The fighting stopped, but their rushed, urgent movements didn't cease. Two of the soldiers conferred. In another moment they released his restraints and his body lifted, like a skiff free from heavy anchor.

The soldiers in black kept speaking intently—worriedly—he assumed about what to do with him. Then a stretcher appeared from some other soldier, and the two arguers hoisted him up and dodged their way out the door, through the small corridors of the building. There were bodies—doctors, nurses, other men in kufis—the burning smell of gunfire, the chemical smell of explosions, and suddenly they were borne out into the cold, desert night. Stars overhead like sparkling blue jewels, shockingly bright. No moon. The fresh cold air was a pleasure and a torment. Hurt his throat as he breathed. The gooseflesh on his arms and body screamed along his nerves.

They humped down the streets of the dark village cut into the side of a small mountain. There was another like him on another stretcher, in the line of black-suited soldiers, being carried ahead of him. The world seemed familiar to him. The shapes of the buildings. The smell of wood

burning. Old manure. The soft, dull clang of goat bells as they hustled passed a pen. No people. He knew this. If not this place, something about it. Something was coming back to him.

Beyond the top row of houses they crested the hill and the distance spread out ahead of them. A long, dark valley, fat on one end and skinny on the other, like a horse leg, stretched out. There were no lights. They met another group of soldiers waiting for them. Others took turns carrying him. Again he saw there was another they were carrying as well. How many of us, he wondered. His hearing was returning. In the silent night he could make out their heavy boot steps, heard them speaking in sparse, irregular intervals. The words shapeless and undefined.

Soon they were crouched in darkness along a road. No one spoke. Wind whistled along the rocks and shrubs. He felt the thudding vibrations of the chopper before he heard or saw it. A massive double-bladed evac. *A Chinook*, his brain said to him with confidence. It lifted over the hill like a space ship and was upon them almost instantly. The dust swirling, the wind pulling at his gown, whipping sand into his skin. His bare ass exposed.

They scampered to get to the chopper. Carrying his stretcher and breathing heavily like horses pulling a carriage. Then they were all in the belly of the Chinook and under the red lights in thirty seconds and off the ground again. The helicopter lifted out of the dark valley and into the free air above the mountains. Up up and away.

His stretcher was lodged between two soldiers along the port side. He read the badges on their sleeves. One was Canadian. The other Dutch. The Medic that came alongside him to check his vitals shouted in his ear with a Scottish accent.

“You can relax, soldier! You’re all right now! You’re safe! You’re going home!”

He nodded back. *Soldier*, he thought. *Yes. Right. Soldier. Going home.*