

(This work is copyrighted, and represents the author's blood, sweat and tears. Any duplication and/or modification, without the express, written consent of the author, is strictly prohibited – and just plain wrong.)

THE TURNING

By Matthew Acheson

“It sure is good to see a new face around here, but say, you look familiar. My name is Leonard Barnes, pleased to meet you. No, don’t get up on my account; that’s just a little joke.

“I’ll bet you’re asking yourself ‘where the hell am I and what are all these needles and tubes and shit doing in my arms?’ Now those are perfectly reasonable questions. I wish I could say it’s gonna be alright, I really do, but look what they did to me! I can’t even tell where I end and the machine begins anymore.

“Hold on friend, there’s no point in struggling; you’re buckled down to that gurney nice and tight. If you keep writhing around like that they’re gonna give you a shot that’ll put you right to sleep. You aren’t gonna like it, but my advice is to just relax and let them do their work on you; some things in life you can change and others you just have to accept.

“You won’t be the same when they’re done with you, but that can’t be helped.

“It’s best not to talk out loud to each other either. If you got something to say, do it from up high like me. I expect you know how to speak from the mind, seeing as you’re here and all. “So what’s your story anyway?”

“Nothing to say huh? Look friend, I’ve been here for a long while and I can tell you from experience that the places they’ll make you go will be cold, and lonely and dark. In a couple of days, once they’ve got you fully integrated with the machine and you start Pushing the Void you’ll be glad to have a friend like me! Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not anybody special, just another cog in the wheel like you, but recently I’ve set some things in motion that might just change everything. I mean everything.

“These bastards won’t be expecting what’s coming for them – that’s for sure.

“So what do you say friend, you tell me your story and I’ll tell you mine? Oh I see now, you don’t know how to speak from the mind do you? Well that’s no matter, as long as you have the Gift that’s something I can teach you over time. For now I’ll do the talking and you can just blink once for yes and twice for no. Alright?

“Seeing as how you can’t tell me your story just yet, how would it be if I told you mine? It’ll pass the time – you’ll find the one thing we have plenty of around here is time – and it’ll help with the pain to keep your mind occupied. One blink – now we’re talking!

“Back in my old life – before those bastards took me away, hooked me up to this goddamned machine and taught me how to Push the Void - I used to live all the way up in Bangor, Maine. I had a regular job, a house, a girlfriend and a dog. I’m not sure which one I miss more, the house or the dog – ha! There isn’t much in the way of entertainment up Bangor

way, so I used spend a lot of nights bouncing from cash-game to cash-game, you know, playing Texas Hold ‘Em poker and the like.

“That’s how I found out that I had the Gift.

“A lot of folks say poker has an expensive learning curve, and let me tell you my friend, they’re right. I lost a lot of money during those first few weeks, and very nearly my car. After a while I learned to follow my hunches and I got to the point where I could read a man’s face so well that I’d make the right hold or fold call nine times out of ten. With time and practice, my Gift developed such that I was no longer reading a man’s face, but his mind. Hell, I got so I was making so much money playing cards that I quit my day job. The girlfriend didn’t think much of that as I recall.

“Eventually a lot of the guys figured me for a card cheat, and I was eighty-sixed from most of the games in town; except for the Big Game. As far as I could figure, the only ways to get banned from the Big Game were to be caught cheating, or get blood on the poker table. I mean those guys were no joke, and even with my Gift there were more than a few nights where I went home with just the lint in my pockets.

“I’ll never forget the night it happened.

“The location of the Big Game alternated every week, and nobody knew where it was gonna be held until a few hours before start time. That night we were playing in a condemned section of the old textile mill, just behind Shaw’s Wharf down on the Penobscot River. It was after midnight and we were playing in a musty storage room with boarded up windows and poor lighting. Even though there were only six of us left at the table, the room was cramped with all the onlookers.

“I can’t explain it exactly, but there was something about the atmosphere there that night that didn’t sit well with me.

“It was the last round of the night, and I dealt myself the second best hand in the game - a pocket pair of kings. The new guy, a tall drink of water who wore a black fedora hat and a long black coat, raised the bet by \$600. “Sandbagger” Matthews and I called, while Tom O’Reilly and Gus Jameson - an old washed-up musician from Memphis - both folded in the pre-flop.

“I dealt out the flop – the three of spades, the king of hearts and the ace of diamonds. That left me in a beautiful position with three kings. The dark stranger immediately went all in for \$3,200. “Sandbagger” ditched his cards and all eyes shifted to me. I analyzed the flop and came to the conclusion that he either had a set of three Aces, two pair Aces and Kings, or he was bluffing on a straight draw. Only the set of Aces could dominate me, and as the odds of me pulling pocket kings while he pulled pocket aces was about 25,000 to 1, I felt pretty good about my triple Kings. But as the stakes were for more than \$5,000, I damn well had to be sure.

“I made eye contact with the dark stranger and reached out to his mind. My thought fingers raced across the space between us and pressed firmly against the outer membrane of his consciousness. It felt soft and pliant, like warm jelly. I caressed it methodically, looking for weaknesses, searching for a way inside. A long time passed, although who can say how long; time passes much more quickly in the mind than in the physical realm. His outer membrane was strong, and just as I began to think that I might never find a way inside, the jelly gave way beneath my fingers and my consciousness went tumbling in.

“Just when a picture of his cards should have begun to form in my mind, there was an explosion and bright arcs of light scattered across my vision. I felt my consciousness twist and

swirl wildly as it was thrown away from the membrane, passing into the long dark of the cosmos. Evil, twisted faces leered at me as I went careening madly into the gloom.

“When I was master of myself again I opened my mind’s eye, only to find that I was enveloped by a fog like, inky black darkness that seemed to extend out infinitely in every direction. In that moment, I felt the soft kiss of madness as it started to wail and scream outside the membrane of my own consciousness, but it didn’t take hold.

“Strange inhuman voices called to me from the blackness. ‘We need you Leonard,’ they said, ‘only you can show us the doorway.’

“As I awoke from the trance, a series of cold chills ran through my body and sweat poured from my face. From across the poker table the dark stranger grinned at me with cold grey eyes that seemed to shine with an inner light. Although I had failed to read his mind, I somehow knew that I couldn’t beat him. I folded my pocket Kings face up in front of me, stuffed my remaining cash in my pants pocket and walked away from the table. There was a tumult of voices and activity as I made my way quickly for the door.

“‘The fool folded three King’s!’ one of them said.

Then there was an even greater uproar when the stranger apparently showed his hand.

“‘Triple Aces!’ a woman said, ‘how could he have known!’

“The commotion became muffled when I slammed the door of the mill behind me. The cool night air felt wonderful on my face. I was tempted to light a cigarette – my nerves were shot to hell – but there was a strange sense of panic rising up inside me. Instead I ran towards my car, which was parked on the opposite end of the lot, at the very edge of the light provided by the only street lantern that worked in that part of town.

“As I reached my car I heard the mill door open and close behind me. Then a loud voice rang out - one that I heard with my mind but not my ears - and it struck me so hard that I had to lean against the hood of my car to keep myself upright.

“‘We have heard of you Leonard Barnes.’ It was his voice, the dark stranger’s, but it sounded different, like two steel bars being scraped together. ‘You passed the test.’

“‘Who are you?’ I said. Then a series of images played out in my mind. I saw men in white lab coats, syringes full of some evil looking green liquid, rooms packed with whirring machines and computers, and other rooms, empty ones painted with cosmic murals that resembled photographs taken by the Hubble telescope. ‘Scientists?’ I added feebly.

“‘We are explorers.’

“For no reason at all, my limbs began to feel weak, and my face flushed. I clung desperately to the side of my car. ‘What do you want with me,’ I shouted.

“‘You have a special Gift – one that makes you a natural explorer. You must come with us now, Leonard.’

“‘Come with you where?’ I could feel the power ebbing slowly out of my limbs. I slid feebly down the side of my car and squatted on the asphalt.

“‘We’re going to bring you home,’ the dark stranger said, ‘so you can help us continue the work.’

“‘What work,’ I said, ‘I don’t understand.’

“‘We scout the darkness, Leonard,’ he said in a whisper, ‘and Push the Void. We man the watchtowers to ensure that evil does not gather at the gates, and that humanity does not stray too far into the uncharted. There are dangers there, Leonard, that are too great and terrible to

mention. Without our work and guidance, the world would blunder into a new Dark Age unlike anything you could imagine.’

“‘Leave me alone!’ I heard soft footsteps approaching me from every direction.

“‘You are coming with us, Leonard, whether you wish to or not. You can come freely of your own will, and be a partner in our work. Or you can be taken and made into a tool – just another cog in the wheel. The choice is yours Leonard.’

“I opened my car door and tried to crawl inside. Many strong hands wrapped themselves around me and a foul smelling cloth was thrust over my mouth. Then the world went dark.

“When I awoke I found myself in much the same predicament as you are – strapped to a gurney, drugged, and wired into that wretched machine.

“I’ll never forget the first time they forced me to Push the Void. The dark stranger stood over me, explaining how I could project the power of my thoughts in such a way that I could propel my consciousness through space-time. Meanwhile, I could feel my arteries burning from that heinous green shit the lab technicians were pumping into me. They call the drug E5, and it’s a powerful hallucinogen. As far as I can tell the drug is the fuel and the machine is the engine that gets you out into the Void, but once you’re there you don’t need either of them anymore.

“‘Are you ready to fly, Leonard?’ he asked me with a smile. Then the dark stranger activated the machine and my whole world exploded into bending rays of light and motion.

“It was as if a black hole opened up and sucked me into its gaping maw. I felt the sensation of a tremendous pressure on my face, neck and shoulders as my consciousness was ripped screaming into the Void. Almost as suddenly as it began, the motion ceased and I found myself floating gently in what appeared to be the blackness of outer space. But the Void isn’t

space, at least not in the way we think of it. The Void is quite simply the river that separates one space from another, the hole that connects realities, the vast gulf between worlds.

“I could see stars in every direction, but they appeared hazy, intangible even; it was almost as if a barrier of thick black fog separated me from them.

“I can’t begin to explain to you how beautiful and terrible the Void is, nor the magnitude of the loneliness you feel when you’re there. These are sensations that only minds with the Gift will ever feel, and only some of those can handle the strain. A lot of folks go raving mad during their first Push into the Void and their consciousness never returns to the body. I’ve seen the scientists wheel away more than a few vegetables over the years – about one in three new fish don’t make it back, by my reckoning.

“Once I recovered from the shock of it all, I began to project my thought energy out in front of me in the manner that the dark stranger had explained. To my surprise I felt my consciousness Push itself out into the Void, parting the black fog before it as if I was floating through space in some great glass bubble. Through the dark misty window of the Void I watched in awe as planets, stars, and even galaxies floated past me in the distance. For the first time in my life I knew what it felt like to fly! Can you imagine it? I was as Zeus, and the Void was my Mount Olympus.

“I don’t know how long I was gone on that first Push – time doesn’t seem to work quite the same way in the Void. When they finally cut the power to the machine it felt as if my consciousness was torn asunder and sucked backwards at a million miles per hour. In a flash I was strapped to the gurney again, shivering and pouring sweat as my heart raced like a rabbit’s. There was a hollow, queasy feeling in my stomach and my toes were all numb and tingly; it was

a lot like the time I went to the top of the Eifel Tower in Paris and made the mistake of looking down over the edge, only much worse.

“When I came to, the dark stranger was standing over me, heatedly discussing the contents of a clipboard with several men in lab coats. He took my hand in his and gazed down at me with those strange grey eyes of his.

“‘My god you’re a natural, Leonard,’ he said, ‘a natural. You’re the most talented Pusher we’ve ever seen. We will do great things together, Leonard, great things.’

“I don’t even know how many Pushes I’ve made since then, nor how long I’ve been here with them. It’d have to be decades, I would expect, because I’ve watched the dark stranger’s goatee go from black, to salt and pepper and now to all white. In that time I’ve seen at least a hundred other Pushers come and go through the system. In the end all of them have been wheeled away from the machine either as raving madmen or drooling vegetables. All except for me, Leonard Barnes, the fucking rock these bastards are going to break themselves upon.

“If they have their way I’ll be Pushing until the day I die. I know they don’t have any intention of letting me go, not ever. My only chance of escaping from this hell-hole is to bring an end to their little games once and for all. I’ll bet you’re asking yourself how a bed-ridden cripple like me could ever hope to do that?

“I suppose there’s no harm in telling you. Even if you did spill the beans, there ain’t very much they can do to stop it now. The end is coming and right soon!

“In my journeys through the Void I’ve learned a few things and made some powerful acquaintances. There’s an Inner Void that the scientists don’t know about yet. I’ve managed to

tuck that and several other nuggets of information so far down into my mind that even their truth serum induced debriefings can't reach it!

“Powerful, terrible beings walk the Inner Void. Humanity has managed to survive unmolested for this long by being so remote and insignificant as to escape the notice of these intelligences, but no longer. In my travels there I came in contact with the Three – beings of immense power that were very interested in hearing about our world and those of us who populated it.

“I've shown them the way, if you understand my meaning, and even now they are coming for me.

“You do have a familiar face, and I just realized who you remind me of! There used to be a Pusher here by the name of Howard, a young man who died long before his time. He once told me that ‘the most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all of its contents’ and that we humans ‘live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.’

Sometimes when I'm all alone and I hear the voices, at night mostly, I stop and think that maybe Howard was right.

“What's that you say? I'm crazy am I? Well, well, look who can talk from up high after all. Wipe that surprised look off your face boy! I heard what you said clear enough.

“It's plain to see you think I'm mad. Well of course you do you ignorant son of a bitch, they all do! That's why they keep me in this goddamn straight jacket now isn't it? None of you've had to go to the places I've been! In time you'll learn, oh yes you will. One day soon the Three will find the door at the end of the path that I have shown them, and then we'll see who the

crazy one is! I shall be placed high in their kingdom when they come, while the rest of you will suffer in damnation!

“You don’t believe me? You will my friend, in time. It won’t be long now. In fact, wait, what’s that in the distance? There you see, look! At last, the time of the Great Turning is upon us!

“Behold, the Three that walk calmly out of the Void, and all of Hell follows with them!