

A ROLICKING LITERARY MURDER MYSTERY
BASED ON WILLIAM BLAKE'S CHARACTERS & IDEAS
UPDATED TO 1970s SAN FRANCISCO

WHO KILLED JERUSALEM?



William Blake 1793

GEORGE ALBERT BROWN

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GALBRAITH LITERARY PUBLISHERS INCORPORATED

CHAPTER 1



THE PRISONER

Just after midnight on Sunday, October 23rd, 1977, in the first-class section of a droning 747, Ickey Jerusalem, the thirty-three-year-old poet laureate of San Francisco, a man who appeared to have everything—looks, wealth, genius, passion, the love of a beautiful woman—was sitting alone and motionless in a backward-facing toilet cubicle, the door securely locked.

Jerusalem's pants were puddled around his ankles. His wrists were tied behind him. His back was leaning against the front wall. His plum-purple face was frozen in a look of terror. His mouth was soundlessly screeching inside a transparent plastic cleaning bag that shrouded his head.

Ickey Jerusalem was dead.

Jerusalem's eyes, however, seemed still alive. So wide and frenzied, and yet so focused, it was as though they were now seeing what a living person couldn't. Piercing with X-ray vision straight through the veil of the locked toilet door toward the back of the plane, through the upholstered partition at the rear of first class, through the shabby gentility of business class, through a clutch of overused toilets with their

tissue-clogged bowls and suspicious wet spots on the floor, through a metallic-neon food galley, and then into the long, sweatily compressed bowels of tourist economy, where, after driving onwards to the very last row, Jerusalem's penetrating vision stopped dead at the hard outer surface of a pair of Coke-bottle spectacles sturdily shielding two closed eyes.

They were the eyes of a man who appeared to have neither looks, nor wealth, nor genius, nor passion, nor the love of any woman, let alone a beautiful one.



Ded Smith opened his eyes and stared through his thick glasses.

When he had booked this red-eye flight from New York to San Francisco, he had assumed there would be plenty of empty seats on which he could stretch out and sleep, once he had completed his necessary tasks. He had not counted on being accompanied by a hundred cowboy-hatted members of the New York State Used Car Dealers Association, who were traveling to a national convention at San Francisco's Cow Palace, nor on finding himself crammed between what had to be the two fattest and drunkest of the lot, monopolizing his armrests with their elbows while shouting locker-room ribaldries to their friends.

Ded had gone through the motions of trying to join in, letting rip at the wrong times with an awkward "Whoopee!" or "Yessiree!" In the end, though, he had reverted to his long-established role of the severely myopic, highly intelligent, forgotten, only child of aged parents—alone in his room, drawing stick figures of the other kids playing far below on the street. He had withdrawn into his airplane seat, overwhelmed with his usual feelings of isolation, loneliness, and suffocating claustrophobia.

Luckily, Ded had been able to escape to do his business. During a severe bout of turbulence, the less sedate of his seatmates—the one blocking him from the aisle—had clambered up onto the back of the temporarily empty seat in front of him, straddled it as though it were

a bucking Brahman bull, and begun waving his cowboy hat in the air, yelling, “Yippee-Yi-O!” in a high-pitched Brooklyn accent.

The salesman, his riding skills on par with his yodeling, had soon fallen off. More precisely, he had been bucked off when an accidental flick of his spurless heel on the seat-adjuster lever had combined with a fortuitous, forward-driving air pocket to hurl his 350-pounds yippee-yi-o-ing headfirst into the next row up, where he became the topic of conversation for some time thereafter.

No one had noticed Ded slip into the aisle and head toward the front.



The turbulence had long since ceased. Most of the passengers were asleep. The huge, breathing carcass of the ride’em cowboy had been repatriated to the aisle seat next to Ded, where it was currently slumped, obstructing any escape. Its stupefied head was rotated towards Ded, its gaping, aspirating whirlpool of a mouth threatening to suck him, ear-first, into oblivion.

On Ded’s left, in the window seat, sat the other, still conscious salesman, who, having discovered Ded did not own a car, was eagerly peppering him with sales pitches, like a hydra-headed monster looking for an opening.

“I can see,” the salesman said, his huge, stubbled jaw jiggling, “that you are a man who appreciates the better things in life.”



In his mind, Ded saw his long-dead father, a senior accountant at the Buffalo, New York, water company, working away in his paper-stacked office. “There is no better thing in life,” he was telling his son, “than a sense of duty.”

Young Ded, awed at being invited into the sanctum where his father spent almost all his waking hours, had written down every word. His father spoke to him so seldomly that when he did, it was an event to be remembered.

Ded's mother was not there that day. But then, Ded already knew what she thought. In her view, the better things were not in this life at all. As a devout Catholic, she spent almost every one of *her* waking hours in the local cathedral, kissing the cold, polished toe of the statue of St. Jude. "The patron saint of lost causes," she often pointed out to young Ded. The saint's name was so close to "Judas" that, according to legend, the only way he could get anyone to pray to him was to specialize in causes no other saint would touch with a barge pole.

Ded couldn't help but take his mother's veneration of this particular saint as reflecting adversely on her only child.



"That's why I know I've got just the car for you," the salesman enthused, his eyes fixed on his prey. "A brand-spanking-*used* Oldsmobile. Your classic cloth-top convertible. Four-on-the-floor. Tuck-and-roll upholstery. Humongous tail fins. Glasspack mufflers. Low-rider lifter shocks. Chrome-reverse wheels. Bright orange, flame detailing. And with only one owner, a little old lady who drove it to and from church on Sunday mornings."

Ded did not respond.

The salesman cleared his throat. "And the price is a steal, all due to a minor accident."

The salesman put his lips to the glass of beer in his right hand, his bloodshot eyes raised in an imitation of trustworthiness, waiting for Ded to take the bait. When Ded didn't, the salesman continued.

"One Sunday morning, on her way to church, the little old lady was rocketing up New York City's East River Drive at ninety miles an hour. Coming upon a Maserati hogging the fast lane, she accelerated to the right. Reaching the top of fourth gear, she attempted a rapid, double-clutch shift into fifth—forgetting the Oldsmobile doesn't have a fifth gear—and accidentally jammed the stick into reverse. The inertia of her still-speeding car tore through the gearbox, causing the frontend of the drive shaft to break loose, drop to the ground, and pole-vault the

car into the air, where, despite the little old lady's vigorous application of the brakes, it bounced off the right edge of an overhead sign and pinwheeled into the river."

Ded turned to the salesman.

The salesman, thinking he had hit Ded's hot button at last, shifted into a higher gear with his many-pronged attack. "The little old lady was totaled. But the car was fine. The water was—"

"I don't need a car," Ded cut him off. "Do you know why?"

The salesman's hippo jowls quivered a no.

"Because I don't have a home. It's my job, you see." Ded settled back in his seat. "I'm traveling all the time."

A statement that was true. Having no community of his own, Ded traveled all the time, perpetually dipping into other communities, becoming responsible in each for yet another death before hastily flying away.

In every case, the people he encountered seemed so wrapped up in where they were—their local politics, their social clubs, their sports teams, their schools, their family, their friends, their enemies. Meanwhile, to Ded, always the outsider, none of it meant a thing.

Eight years earlier, around Christmas, just after he'd first started traveling for his current job, Ded was sitting at a stool in a diner in Beulah, North Dakota—population 3000—when a local businessman next to him, full of the holiday spirit, invited him on a four-hour, guided tour of the town. Having nothing better to do, Ded went along.

Certainly, even the most ardent booster of small-town America would have to admit that a four-hour tour of the tiny town of Beulah, North Dakota, was some kind of world record. After all, how much can a sane person say about a motley collection of characterless, low-rise boxes set in a grid against the barren plain, and providing, as its only color, neon signs on fast-food franchises along the highway?

The Beulah businessman, however, thought his hometown the greatest place on earth. At one point, he had gestured proudly over the nine-hole municipal golf course, buried under three feet of ice for

as far as the eye could see—which, because of the raging blizzard, was not all that far—and declared, “You know, I couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.”

Which, to Ded, was the point.

Now, after eight years of business travel, Ded had come to believe that this limited outlook didn’t afflict just the people of Beulah, North Dakota, but people everywhere—in whatever city, or state, or country, or, in fact, on the whole goddamn planet.

A limited outlook, I guess, Ded mused, is what allows them to live their lives unafflicted by claustrophobia.



In the aisle seat, the comatose salesman made a slight strangling sound in his throat. Ded turned and peered deep into the black void of the man’s yawning mouth.

The trained-to-be-persistent salesman by the window, his curiosity getting the better of him, asked, “So, what type of business requires you to travel so much?”

Ded disconnected himself from the void. Before he could stop himself, he answered, “The business of death.”

The fleshy face registered a flicker of anxiety. “Death?” He studied Ded’s thick glasses and skinny body. “What... what exactly is it that you do?”

Ded, trapped between the whirlpool and the many-headed monster, chose to stare straight ahead towards the front of the plane. *Damn. What should I say now?*

CHAPTER 2



HOW THE CHAINS WERE FITTED

The plane landed without further incident and docked at the gate. The window-seat salesman had just recounted for the newly awakened aisle-seat salesman the job title Ded had volunteered. The aisle-seat salesman was laughing uproariously.

Why couldn't I have kept my big mouth shut? Ded reprimanded himself. He sighed. *At least, I'll be out of here soon.*

There was a crackle on the public address system. "I'm afraid your disembarkation will be held up for a while," the captain announced. "During our descent, we had an incident in the first-class section. We'll have to wait for the police to arrive."

The police? Ded thought. *Am I going to have to run a gauntlet at the front of the plane? Or worse, are they going to search economy class?"*

Ded recalled the stunningly beautiful, strawberry-blond young woman in dark glasses, a paisley silk dress, and a white leather coat he'd glimpsed entering first class at the beginning of the flight. Ded had been presenting his boarding pass to a steward, had looked up, and

caught sight of her face. That was all, for maybe half a second, before she disappeared behind the curtain. Against her shades, the woman's pink skin had seemed so soft, so innocent. He could almost feel his fingers stroking her delicate cheek.

He wondered whether she was okay.

Ever since his divorce, he had been so lonely that he'd found himself becoming instantly infatuated with every halfway decent-looking woman who crossed his path. Glancing at the date indicator on his watch, he saw that the midnight that had just passed marked the third anniversary of the final decree.

My ex-wife had the same soft pink skin, he thought. *God, do I miss her.*

Ded had met his wife, Harriet, shortly after graduating from Buffalo State College. His social isolation at college had been a continuation of his experience at school—primary, middle, and high. As a day-student lacking the skills to relate to others, he had confined himself to the classroom and the library. While he made a few acquaintances, he had no friends. Each evening, he would retreat to his room at his parents' house to eat leftovers from the refrigerator, reduce everything he had learned that day to a cryptic logic tree on a piece of paper, and on Friday evenings between 10:45 and 10:50 p.m., engage in a perfunctory, though usually successful, act of self-knowledge, to take care of what Ded called, "the sexual side of my personality."

Harriet had rescued him from all that.

Still, Ded knew it wasn't fair to say his college years without her had been *all* bad.

It was there he had discovered something arguably much more important than human relationships could ever be, something—

His thoughts were interrupted by another crackling sound, followed this time by the captain's announcement that deplaning was about to begin.

The salesmen struggled to their feet. Ded let them out and then returned to his seat as the mob of conventioners slowly exited. Ded,

eager to be rid of his two sniggering companions, was happy to wait until the plane had emptied.

Several minutes later, Ded retrieved his case from under the seat, his garment bag and coat from the overhead rack, and trudged up the long, empty aisle. At the front, on the other side of the perpendicular exit corridor, a policeman guarded the entrance to first class, arms folded across his chest.

Ded knew he shouldn't show any interest, but he couldn't help himself.

He glanced past the cop into the cabin in the hope the beautiful young woman was still there. He couldn't see anybody. He did, however, hear a couple of muffled masculine voices. Slowing his exit, he kept both ears pointed to first class, hoping to make out what the voices were saying. Soon, his head was facing almost completely backwards, like an owl.

Ded suddenly felt strong hands gripping his shoulders from the front.

"You're under arrest, Smith!"

Ded spun his head around to come face to face with a burly, disheveled man standing in the jetway.

"At last," the man gloated, loudly chewing his gum, "I've got the infamous Dr. Deadly."

CHAPTER 3



THE EXPERT IN THE CAVE

*I*nspector O’Nadir,” the puffy gum-chewer said, letting go of Ded. “*Inspector?*” Ded stammered. “Good God. Don’t tell me you’ve been promoted?”

“Yep,” the inspector beamed. “The Knife case. That’s what did it.” The inspector put his hand on Ded’s shoulder. “I owe you for letting me take the credit.”

“It was nothing. Evidence in court always looks better when it comes from the police. Anyway, I got what I wanted. The Olympian Life Insurance Company no longer had to pay out under the policy.”

O’Nadir smiled politely at Ded’s professional modesty. “Sorry for rattling you with the phony arrest. I just couldn’t resist.”



Yes, Ded was a life insurance claims adjuster. To most people, including those sniggering fat salesmen, the job title conjured up the mental image of some middle-level bureaucrat sitting at his desk before an overflowing inbox, matching the items in his checklist against those in the doctor’s death certificate. Yet Ded was about as far from that kind of

life insurance claims adjuster as one could get. In the first place, he was never at a desk. More importantly, though, was that no checklist could ever hope to resolve the cases he was brought in to adjust. They were the tough ones, where the facts were so unclear that they required a detailed, on-scene investigation from someone with exceptional deductive skills.

The Knife case, which he had investigated the last time he had been in San Francisco, four years earlier, was a prime example. It began with the coroner concluding, “All I can say is that the expression on the dead man’s face leads me to believe that when he sat down, he was not aware of the butcher’s knife wedged in the center of his chair, sharp end up. His expression, although not fitting neatly into any category I could think of, was perhaps, on the whole, closer to one of astonishment.”

Following the local Olympian Life representative’s memo to the home office, in which the representative had been forced to admit that after spending quite some time locked in a room with a butcher’s knife and a chair, he still hadn’t been able to figure it out, the company, at last, sent for Ded.

Examining the body, Ded noticed right away the tattoo on the right bicep: a large anus being stabbed by a dagger and the word “MOM” on a semi-circular banner across the top.

Ded laid out for O’Nadir side-by-side photos of the central tattoo and the unlucky orifice, showing an almost perfect match, apart from an enormous gash.

“Damn,” the inspector said. “So, it’s not a tattoo of a black-and-blue sunflower?”

After that, some quick interviews by Ded of various barflies in a nearby saloon revealed that the night before the incident, the drunken insured had made repeated death threats to “his asshole”—evidence even the coroner had to admit clinched the case.

Although Ded’s skills far exceeded those of your average insurance claims adjuster, he had no delusions of grandeur. Just the opposite. As he saw it, no one with an outsider’s view like his could have any

delusions whatsoever. Far from thinking he was anything more than he was, Ded knew he was something much, much less.



“So, what brings you back to this neck of the woods, Dr. Deadly?”

“I’m waiting for the six-thirty connecting flight to Tokyo this morning.”

O’Nadir showed his watch face to Ded. It said 3:01 a.m. “Great. You’ve got time. I’m here to investigate the death of some guy on your flight. How’d you like to join me?”

“Why not?” Ded answered, while thinking, *So, that’s what happened in first class. Doesn’t sound like it was the young woman, thank heavens.*

Ded stood aside as O’Nadir entered the plane. Although a loner, Ded had a soft spot for old acquaintances. He often daydreamed that when he was elderly, decrepit, and ready to die, he would meet for a few minutes all the people he had ever met. He had nothing in particular to say to them, but he somehow believed the mere existence of such a meeting would tie up the loose ends of the rather bald and unconvincing narrative that was his life.

Of all his old acquaintances, San Francisco Police Inspector O’Nadir was Ded’s favorite. O’Nadir had a special quality that made him endearing: he was one of the few who actually liked Ded. Why was never clear. True, O’Nadir was grateful that Ded had let him take the credit for a bit of detective work, but the inspector had liked him even before that. With his down-to-earth, almost subterranean manner, O’Nadir was immune to Ded’s detached objectivity, logical thinking, and other such social inadequacies. To him, Ded was simply one hell of a good investigator.

O’Nadir flashed his credentials to the cop and led Ded into the first-class cabin, which had the standard 747 design. A row of two seats ran along each wall, coming together at the front. A triangular-shaped table with fruit and newspapers on it sat in the middle. On Ded’s immediate right was a blank partition; in front of that, a galley; and in

front of that, a spiral staircase leading to the upper deck, where Ded knew there were more seats, a toilet, and the door to the flight deck.

Ded trailed the inspector as he circled around the front to the right-side aisle, where the row of paired seats continued back along the wall to a closet compartment. Opposite the aisle from the closet, behind the central galley, was a small corridor leading inward across the plane. At the far end of that corridor was the blank partition Ded had seen when entering. On the forward, galley side of the corridor were a couple of toilet compartments.

Two men were in the corridor. One was an airport security officer who was standing with his back to the aisle. The other was a brown-suited man on his knees, bent so deep into the far toilet cubicle that only his trouser cuffs and shoes were in view.

"Hey," O'Nadir hollered, "is this the line for blowjobs?"

The security officer turned around sharply, a look of confused non-recognition on his face. The man in the brown suit leaned back on his haunches and grinned at O'Nadir. "I didn't know you were into necrophilia, Inspector."

"Shit, I've been married for twenty years to a Catholic convent-school graduate. What more proof do you need?"

The brown-suited man held forensic tweezers. He looked up at the security officer. "Officer Jarvis, may I introduce Inspector O'Nadir. One of the city's finest."

The security officer extended his hand.

O'Nadir gave Officer Jarvis's hand a perfunctory pump and cocked the back of his head at Ded. "This is Ded Smith, a trained investigator."

"The kneeler with the tweezers," O'Nadir said out of the side of his mouth to Ded, "is Ben, my best forensic guy."

Ben waved in acknowledgment.

"You okay inside of a plane, Ben?" O'Nadir asked.

"As long as it's not up in the air."

"Ben's just like me," O'Nadir said in another aside to Ded. "Terrified of flying. So, neither of us have ever taken a flight."

O’Nadir leaned forward. “All right, Mr. Best Forensic Guy, what’ve we got here?”

“He’s pretty much as we found him. Seems he had a plastic bag over his head. It was removed before we got here and placed in the next-door toilet for safekeeping.”

Ben and Jarvis stepped aside to give O’Nadir and Ded a view into the cubicle.

The victim was sitting on the toilet, hands behind his back, pants around his ankles. His face was streaked purple and pink, and contorted with fear.

O’Nadir, blanching, turned to Ben. “You *sure* you didn’t give this guy a blowjob?”

Ben pretended to chuckle.

Ded didn’t crack a smile. “He have a name?”

Ben supplied it. “Ickey Jerusalem.”

“No shit.” O’Nadir whistled. “Didn’t recognize him with all the facial contortions.” The inspector rotated his head to give Ded the lowdown. “He’s San Francisco’s poet laureate. Fucking rich, supposedly. I saw him in person, several years ago. Once, at the Condor strip joint, playing his favorite game with Carol Doda, the city’s first topless dancer. She would put a breast under each arm. He’d place his nose in between them, cry, ‘Arms up!’ and then luxuriate in the resultant blubbering against his cheeks. Another time, I had to arrest him for disturbing the peace outside Finocchios, the transvestite show on Broadway. He was drunk on the sidewalk, loudly announcing to a small crowd his guesses concerning the sexual predilections of the middle-aged Iowans stepping out of the tour bus.”

O’Nadir, mimicking Jerusalem, took on the bellowing demeanor of a head butler announcing guests at a party. “*Mr... Jethro... Spotsbottom, Jacob’s sheep... bondage and discipline. Mr... Homer... Butterball, Guernsey cows... missionary position only.*”

O’Nadir clucked his tongue. “Look at him now.”

Bucking up, Ded stepped past the inspector into the cubicle to

peer behind Jerusalem's back. "Wrists tied with two shoelaces twisted together, a slip loop on each end."

He knelt, avoiding eye contact with Jerusalem's private parts sprawling from between his naked white thighs onto the hard-plastic surface of the toilet-seat lid. Ded examined the running shoes on the dead poet's feet. "Laces missing."

Ded swapped places with O'Nadir so he could see for himself. "What do you think, Ben?"

"Looks like suicide to me. Made the loops himself, placed the plastic bag over his head, put a wrist in each loop, and then pulled the loops tight. Neat. Clean. And deadly."

Ded eyed Jerusalem's staring, fear-deformed face. The poet's suicide—if it was suicide—had been anything but peaceful. Whatever Jerusalem had intended when he had begun, in the end, he had died horribly and unwillingly, desperately trying to gasp in the life-giving air a mere micro-millimeter beyond the plastic bag.

Ded suffered a brief burst of claustrophobia.

"The door was apparently locked from the inside when he was found," Ben said, to bolster his suicide hypothesis. "There isn't any latch on the outside. And see the farewell message on the mirror?"

Starting in the lower left corner of the mirror above the basin, written in soap, were two four-inch-high block letters: B I. The vertical line and bottom horizontal line of the "B" were aligned with the respective edges of the mirror.

"Anybody else in first class with him at the time?" Ded asked.

It took Security Officer Jarvis a few seconds to realize he was being addressed. "Six others. I've got them back in the main terminal. I didn't want to let them go until the inspector had a chance to interview them. They're being fingerprinted right now."

O'Nadir let out a sigh. "Let's get it over with. Since it's clearly suicide, not much to investigate."

"I'm not so sure," Ded said, about to point out some discrepancies in the evidence.

“In that case, Deadly,” O’Nadir called, already halfway down the aisle, “why don’t you come along and check ’em out? Your sharp investigator’s eye might see things I can’t.”



Ded got into the back seat of the electric cart with his bags, while Security Officer Jarvis got into the driver’s seat with Inspector O’Nadir next to him. The cart then beeped its way to the main terminal through the empty concourse.

“Who were the six passengers?” Ded asked the security officer.

With one hand on the wheel, Officer Jarvis pulled a folded piece of paper out of his breast pocket, and after eying O’Nadir for approval, gave it to Ded.

The claims adjuster unfolded the paper. He skimmed the list of names. “Robert N. William. Adam Ghostflea. Beulah Vala. Tharmas Luvah. Bacon Urizen. Dr. Bromion Ulro. Hmmm, Robert N. William sounds okay, but are these other names for real?”

“They’re the ones they gave me.”

“Sounds like some kind of joke,” Ded said as he studied the list more closely. “Hey, O’Nadir, you mind if I copy these names down?”

“Knock yourself out,” O’Nadir called back, as Ded pulled a small, loose-leaf notepad from his inside suit jacket pocket.

Notations by each name were apparently written by Officer Jarvis. All six were Bay Area residents. Two appeared to have no connection with Jerusalem: Robert N. William, the flight purser, and Dr. Bromion Ulro, a physician. The remaining four were Adam Ghostflea, Jerusalem’s chauffeur; Tharmas Luvah, his business manager; Bacon Urizen, his lawyer; and Beulah Vala, his personal assistant.

Recognizing the latter as the only obvious female name on the list, Ded felt a slight anticipation quickening inside. *Beulah? Is the name a coincidence?*

From the glimpse he’d caught of her face, he wouldn’t have thought she was from North Dakota.

CHAPTER 4



THE DANCING SHADOWS—SECTION 1

The interrogation room, lit by overhead neon lights, had an institutional table in the middle. O’Nadir sat at the table in front of a tape recorder, facing the door, next to which was a hat stand with the inspector’s coat. On the other side of the table was a folding metal chair where the interviewee would sit. In the wall on the policeman’s left was a large two-way mirror.

Ded, sitting in a darkened observation chamber behind the mirror, his bags and overcoat next to him, watched through the slight haze of the glass as O’Nadir tested the tape recorder, leaned back, and rested the outside of his right ankle on his left knee. The hidden sound system filled Ded’s space with the noise of the inspector’s cracking gum.

Here I am, Ded yawned wryly, back in the Cave, once again.



Ded saw himself sitting virtually alone in the gloom of the red-eye flight from Miami to L.A., three years before, the night his divorce became final.

A week after Harriet filed for divorce, he had signed the house over to her and arranged to receive his assignments in the field. At that point, he'd already been traveling on his job for several years. From then on, without anyone or anything left to anchor him down, he'd become completely rootless.

On the outside, Ded had acted as if his wife's rejection meant nothing to him, but on the inside, it had evoked an emotional response so powerful it made all other emotions he had ever experienced during his life seem but anemic parodies of the real thing. The pain was unbearable, as though a huge claw had ripped out his internal organs and left him bleeding and empty, floating alone, backwards through space.

He had hoped, too optimistically, that the agonizing pain would soon be dampened by his increasingly frenetic travel. Instead, it had become more acute, growing in intensity, until the last night of the six-month waiting period, when Ded sat on the near-empty red-eye flight from Miami to L.A., he'd begun—for the very first time—to wonder whether perhaps suicide was the only logical solution.

The drinks service, the meal service, the movie, and the post-movie trip to the toilets had all come and gone. Ded adjusted his thick glasses and stared at his watch. In a few minutes, it would be midnight. His marriage would be over. He rotated his wristwatch until the face was out of sight, then leaned against the pressure of his seatbelt to examine the contents of the seatback pocket, looking for something—anything—to keep his mind off the gnawing hollowness inside him.

Grabbing the first thing that caught his eye, he pulled out the airline's fold-over of safety instructions. With great concentration, he scrutinized the two-dimensional passengers passing wordlessly through the stations of the crash, sliding out of the plane, leaving behind an empty, dying hulk, devoid of—

Pitching the fold-over away and returning to the contents of the pocket, Ded retrieved an unused air-sickness bag stamped with the airline's motto.

With forced concentration, he recited the words out loud.

“Flying through the air with the greatest of ease.”

In the context of airsickness, it was not all that reassuring a motto.

The graphic images conjured up in Ded’s mind made him feel emptier than ever.

After dropping the bag on the floor, he reached deeper into the seatback pocket. There was something crumpled up, way at the bottom. He lifted it out and smoothed it flat onto his tray.

It was a pair of soiled pages torn from a comic book. On the top left of the first page was a header: “Universal Comics, History of Philosophy, Part 1.” Below that, in the center, was the title: “Chapter 1: Plato’s Cave.”

Ded had heard of Plato, but he had never gotten around to studying his works—or those of any other philosophers, for that matter. If he’d known the ancient Greek philosophers had written comic books, he might have taken a greater interest.



All Philosophy 101 students (of which Ded was never one) know Plato’s parable about prisoners chained from birth in a cave, facing the back wall, onto which are cast by a flickering fire behind, the shadows of moving stick puppets. The prisoners, unable to see anything but the shadows, believe them to be the only reality. The parable has the well-known plot in which a prisoner breaks loose and sees, step by step, each time rubbing his eyes in initial confusion, what he has never seen before—the other prisoners, the puppets, the dazzling fire, the bright mouth of the cave, and then outside, the ground, the stars, the planets, the moon, and eventually, the blinding sun. After having learned the truth, the lone prisoner returns to the cave to tell the others that everything they thought was reality was but a mere shadow.

In the comic-book version, however, the chained and blinkered prisoners were anthropomorphic cartoon animals. The main character, like Bottom the weaver in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, had a man’s body and a donkey’s head, the latter all rolling eyes and lolling tongue.

The other characters, although dressing and behaving like humans, were physically wholly animal: a black goat with a goatee; a voluptuous pink cow with movie-star dark glasses; a pale fat pig with a top hat and tails; a vain python twined around a staff; a neatly clipped poodle with a trimmed mustache; and a carapace-backed, musclebound insect standing on his hind legs with a too-small head sporting bulging-out, crossed eyes and a skinny sucking tongue between tiny fangs at either end of his mouth.

The dialogue in the voice balloons was peppered with Bottom's "hee-haws" and "guh-yucks," as well as other comic touches that Plato patently lacked the creativity to imagine. Such as in one of the later pages, when Bottom returned, hee-hawing, to the darkened cave to give the prisoners the word, and due to his eyes not yet having adjusted from the brightness of the sun, failed to notice a low stone platform around the fire. "Yikes!" he yelled as he banged his big cartoon toe on the corner. Instantly gathering his injured digit up into both hands instead of first paying attention to stopping completely his forward momentum, he slowly rotated counterclockwise an involuntary 180 degrees on his barely balancing other leg, fell backwards over the platform, landed bottom-first on the fire with a pathetic "Oh, no," and immediately thereafter, while letting out an echoing "WHAA-HOO-HOO-Hoo-hoo," and using nothing more than his arms, legs, donkey's head, and flaming rear end, created what the prisoners agreed to be an award-winning wall shadow.

After which, for some reason, no one took him seriously—other than to exchange a few thoughtful murmurings about the necessity of killing this deranged fruitcake before he hurt someone.

The remainder of the comic-book parable was missing. But Ded didn't need more pages to know what had happened. Moments before his divorce became final, the perpetually traveling claims adjuster intuitively understood that Bottom, having seen the light, had only one choice: to turn away from the prisoners and head out of the cave and into the glorious sunlight, guh-yucking as he went, never to return.

Ded laid the comic-book pages onto his lap and gazed out over the near-empty cabin of the 747.

“Two-and-a-half millennia ago, the ancient Greeks had already come to the same conclusion as I did,” he marveled out loud, his painful emptiness having briefly faded in the brilliant light of Plato’s parable. “The only way to see what is really going on is to widen your perspective until you are outside the cave.”

He put the fingertips of his right hand to his heart. *I am Bottom*, he thought, without irony. *Unlike the bulk of mankind, enamored of the shadows on the wall, unable to imagine themselves in a position other than that which they are in, I’ve been able to so widen my perspective that I can look up and see—*

Ded turned to the airplane window. Putting his face near the glass to block out the reflection in the low-lit cabin, he peered into the night sky, past the remaining thin atmosphere, past the planets, past the stars, into the enormous black vacuum in which the earth, the sun, and all the other meandering accidental specks of matter seemed lost—doomed to spread out forever into an energyless nothingness. Or was it, instead, to contract into a geometric point? Ded could never remember. Either way, the vastness of it all made human concerns seem so small, so transitory, so meaningless.

Ded’s excruciating emptiness returned.

For some time, he sat forlorn in the plane, gazing into the enormous black vacuum, searching for something, anything. *Why did Bottom’s widened perspective lead to a guh-yucking happiness*, he wondered, *while mine leads only to emptiness and despair?*

Then, in a flash, he understood.

Of course!

He sat up straight and smacked his thigh with his hand. *That’s where Bottom went wrong!*

George Albert Brown, a graduate of Yale University and Stanford Law, started as a hippie in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury and retired at age 40 after having co-founded a successful international finance company. Following stints thereafter as a humorous author (*The Airline Passenger's Guerrilla Handbook*) and an angel investor in over a score of high-tech university spinouts, he built a catamaran in Chile and for more than a decade, cruised it across the globe with his significant other. Today, as a father of three grown children, a grandfather of four not-yet-grown children, and an involuntary lover of stray cats, he continues his peripatetic lifestyle by other means.

Who Killed Jerusalem? is the book that George, a life-long devotee of William Blake, had always wanted to write.