

Theron Montgomery

Lying at the Edge of the World

*I know I sing at the edge of silence,
I know I dance around suspension....*

Sophia De Mello Breyner. "I Feel the Dead"

He awoke in the dark and didn't know where he was. He sat up, feeling smooth metal bed rails with his hands while loud traffic droned in the night outside a window. "Where am I?" Louie said. He tried to stare through the dark, feeling a sharp, weakening pang of hunger. A ceiling light came on, blinding and bright. Louie blinked and his eyes adjusted to a white ceiling, white walls, and a green tiled floor. He was in the middle of three hospital beds. An old, frail man in the bed to his right had flipped on the light switch. The bed to Louie's left was empty and made-up, a fresh jonquil on its smooth pillow. The old man to his right, in covers and grey pajamas like himself, rubbed his eyes and reached for eyeglasses on a metal night table. He had wispy white hair, no teeth, and sagging bags under dark, hollowed eyes.

"Who are you? What am I doing here?" Louie said. He stared at the old man and around the strange room. The man slipped on his glasses, reached for a black cord clipped onto his bedspread and pressed a button.

"What am I doing here?" Louie demanded. But the old man seemed detached, even bored, and looked to the door of the room as it swung open. A dark headed woman entered, dressed in starch white, wearing scarlet lipstick. Louie stared at her and realized he had been asleep with his glasses on.

"Yes?" she said.

"Butch is at it again," the man told her.

Butch? Louie stared at them.

The woman shook her head, came forward. Her large, scarlet lips, dull blue eyes, and pinched nose seemed familiar, as if from another time. But it was not his wife.

"Where am I?" Louie said.

"You're home," Scarlet Lips said, her voice high and false. "Now, go back to sleep."

"Home?" He stared at her. He could remember black and white kitchen tile and sunlight in the window of a breakfast nook.

Scarlet Lips placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him gently down into the bed. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm hungry," he said.

"We eat in the morning," she answered, her tone not changing.

Louie sat up. "Answer me," he demanded. "Where am I? What am I doing here?"

The woman took a step back, set her lips, and crossed her arms.

"Careful, Butch," the old man made a terse whisper. "Remember last time."

Last time? He wasn't sure about last time. He looked at the man, then at the woman. He lay down and pulled the covers up to his chin.

"Much better," Scarlet Lips said. "Now go to sleep."

Louie nodded.

Scarlet Lips gave him a quick smile and left the room, turning out the light.

"Night, Butch," a sad whisper came in the dark.

"Good night," Louie echoed, still trying to see through the dark, and listening for familiar sounds in the steady din of traffic outside a window.

Louie awoke and the still room was filled with gray light from the windows. He heard the steady drone of morning street traffic outside the window and saw his blue bottle of Milk of Magnesia and a glass of water on the metal bedside table. Mac was asleep. Joe's bed was empty, made up, with a fading jonquil on its smooth pillow. Louie realized he had slept with his glasses on. He heard feet shuffling in the hallway on the other side of the door. His legs ached. He was hungry. But he knew to wait until someone came. The door swung open with brighter ceiling light from the hallway and the thin male orderly, whom all the patients dubbed "Too Nice" in his white maintenance suit and close, kinky hair, came in with their bedpans. "Good morning," he sang out. "Potty time."

Holding a broad smile, Too Nice poked Mac awake. Louie watched him lift Mac's bed covers and place the bedpan under Mac's body. Too Nice came and lifted Louie's covers, tugged Louie's pajamas down. Louie winced as the cold steel met his bottom. Too Nice watched and smiled while Louie let himself go. He handed them toilet paper and Louie and Mac wiped. He took the bedpans with the wipes into the bathroom, flushed the toilet, and left the room without looking back.

Louie watched the door swing closed and Mac drifted back to sleep. The door swung open with "Orange Hat," the short, obese dietician in blue overalls and the orange baseball cap, pushing in the food cart.

"Good morning, good morning," she piped. She had a dimpled face and a lazy eye. She wheeled the cart between Louie and Mac's beds. Mac opened his eyes. Orange Hat grinned and cranked each man's bed into sitting position and slapped clip-on trays across their bed rails.

"Look what we've got for you," she sang, like she had a surprise. She placed covered plates before them, silverware wrapped in napkins, and plastic, capped glasses of juice. Louie smiled for her. He thought her well intended but not all there. Mac gaped at her with his bare gums, reached for his eyeglasses on the table, and slipped them on.

"Why, Mister Smith," Orange Hat exclaimed, as she removed the lids from their glasses and plates, "whatever's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing," Mac said. He dabbed his eyes under his lenses with the edge of his bed sheet. "It was just a sudden memory."

"Now, now," she patted his leg. "That does no good."

"No coffee?" Louie said.

"Afterwards," Orange Hat trilled, smiling and reprimanding him with a waving finger, as if to a child.

Louie smiled for her until she turned and pushed the cart out of the room. He made a face. He and Mac unwrapped their napkins and began to eat.

"Say, how you feeling, Butch?" Mac skirted his eyes at him, mouthing toast.

"Fine," Louie said, spooning egg into his mouth.

"You got a little rowdy last night."

Louie stopped and looked at him. "Oh, did I?"

"But don't worry," Mac winked. "I looked after ya."

"Thanks," Louie said, nodding his gratitude. But he could not recall being rowdy or not.

After Orange Hat removed the trays, the younger attendant, "Blonde Braids," wearing a small white uniform with freckles and blonde braids and heavy makeup, came in. She did not acknowledge Louie or Mac and began to talk to herself, rehearsing a conversation between herself and her boyfriend about using the condom or the sponge in their love making. She took Louie's glasses and shaved him first, letting him hold the mirror while she talked, intoning a man's husky, demanding voice and then a meeker, wiser feminine one, stroking lather from Louie's face and wiping the plastic razor on a towel across his chest.

Louie and Mac listened in silent amusement while Blonde Braids shifted her voice and point of view between that of the woman and then that of the man. The woman said she would try to meet his needs and use the sponge, but only on the condition that he teach his eager member to be patient. Blonde Braids finished shaving Louie and wiped his face. She threw off the covers, stripped off his pajamas, and gave him a quick and warm sponge bath with her deft fingers, talking as the man, who said he wanted it when he wanted it. The wet, warm sponge made Louie's skin tingle, but little else. He liked this part. He tried to catch her eye but Blonde Braids didn't meet his look. Her mouth continued to intone like a recording, going on to the weather report or a fashion feature from some television channel she watched. Blonde Braids dried Louie with a towel, handed him his glasses, covered him up, and went to shave Mac.

"Can I shave myself?" Mac asked as she removed his glasses.

"No," she said. "You cut yourself, remember?" Mac pouted his lips. In a moment, he wiped tears from his eyes and she ignored him, beginning to lather his face, repeating what some fat man had said about the thrills and dangers of "bungee jumping" on a Today Show.

Blonde Braids finished Mac's sponge bath and stopped talking long enough to give Mac his glasses and walker, and Louie his cane. She helped them get out of bed and go into the bathroom to brush their gums, put in their dentures, and comb their hair. They came out to her

rendition of a Pepsi commercial with a basketball player dribbling in outer space as they sat in the steel chairs by their closets and she helped them dress in frayed underwear, old white shirts, faded suits, and worn shoes. Blonde Braids silently guided them by their elbows out of the room and down the hallway to the lounge where old and shriveled people, most in wheelchairs and in old clothes like themselves, played cards or checkers at tables, stood chatting with or without walkers, or sat gapping on a sofa at the wall tv. Louie recognized the scarecrow-thin old woman in the wheelchair with the moth-eaten paisley bathrobe and the frizzled blue hair who gave him a wink. "I got plans for you, baby," she chortled. Louie smiled for her.

"You get sun today," Blonde Braids announced and led them outside onto the patio, helping Louie and Mac sit at one of the concrete yard tables in the sunlight. She left and an orderly brought them coffee. Mac sipped from his styrofoam cup, set it down, swelled his chest, and looked Louie in the eye. "It was you and me, Butch," he declared. "You and me. We broke the grip at the Battle of the Bulge."

Louie smiled for Mac, but he could not remember that. He could remember the war. Dead boys and body parts. Hard, grimed faces. The shooting. The ever-constant knot of fear, crumbling buildings, dirt and smoke. Louie watched Mac close his eyes to the sun and felt sad. He shook his head to forget the war. Old people, some with visitors, were seated about the patio and the yard inside the steel linked fence. Some were seated by themselves and stared into space. You could tell the outsiders: younger, louder, and over-dressed. "There is the edge of the world," Mac interrupted, opening his eyes and nodding to the fence. "There is the edge of the world."

Studying the dirt path along the chain link fence, Louie remembered his cue. He rose on his cane and walked to the linked gate before the busy street of the outer world and stopped. He squinted, found his word *walk* scratched onto the post and smiled to himself. He peered about, hung his cane by its handle in a link of the fence, and began to swing his arms and take deep, wheezing breaths, hearing the harsh goads of his long dead boxing coach and a scratchy rendition of *Bye, Bye Blackbird*

for some reason. He began his walk, punching the air, unassisted along the fence, feeling the stiffness in his legs, his body tighten then loosen as he lapped the yard, staring out through the links of the fence at the noisy, busy street and people of the other world hurrying by on the sidewalk.

A white limousine went by and Louie remembered a DeSoto. Red and white. Big red steering wheel. Smiling Maude and the kids with him on vacation. He lowered his hands, shook his head, and continued walking. Each time Louie lapped the patio, wheezing for breath toward the gate, Mac saluted him from the table. Louie nodded. His breathing began coming fast. His legs ached. But Louie set his dentures and lips and made himself walk two more laps before he stopped and gripped the links, feeling his heart pulse, his hips and legs tremble. He sighed and grinned. He was not a quitter yet. Coach would be proud.

As he took his cane off the gate, Louie turned into the rigid, unseeing stare of a bald, old man in gray pajamas, slumped pale and thin in a wheelchair beneath a tree. Louie met the look. It reminded him of a fish. He blinked, dabbing the perspiration on his forehead with his sleeve, and quickly turned away.

After lunch in the cafeteria, the nurse, Scarlet Lips, led Louie and Mac to their room for a nap. She took Mac's walker and Louie's cane, helped them remove their glasses, coats, and shoes and lie back on their beds. No sooner did she leave than she was back.

"Mail call," she announced, handing Mac and Louie envelopes.

"My direct deposit slip," Mac said, slipping on his glasses.

Louie slipped on his glasses, opened a big envelope, and pulled out a gold card.

"Happy Birthday, Mr. Burns," Scarlet Lips informed him. She made a smile.

"Birthday?" Louie said. "How old am I?"

Scarlet Lips paused. "Er, well, I'm not sure," she confessed. "Eighty-five? Eighty-seven?"

Louie gingerly fingered the card. He opened it to small print he could not read. He looked to the signature. *From the staff*, he could

make out, and the last word, *Home*. Louie pondered and blinked. He sighed and looked up into Scarlet Lips' bland gaze.

"May I use your pen?" he asked, seeing a red one in her breast pocket.

"No," Scarlet Lips said. "It's time for your nap."

Louie smiled for her and then he lunged for her pen. Scarlet Lips shrieked and grabbed his arm but Louie clung to her breast pocket. "No," she screamed, "no," while Mac came off his bed and hugged her from behind. Louie got the pen and the cap off, fell back onto his bed, and printed the large, hasty letters *HOME* on the underside of his wrist before other hands came over him, seizing his arms and the pen.

Louie lay in the dark, holding his throbbing hand. *Where am I?* he thought, hearing the steady drone of night traffic outside a window. He tried to peer through the dark, wanting it to become familiar. "Where am I?"

A ceiling light came on. He blinked and squinted. He had been asleep with his glasses on. A bed on his left was empty and made up with a wilted flower on the smooth pillow. He was in a strange, white room with a green tiled floor. In a bed to his right was an old man in gray pajamas who had flipped on the wall light switch. The man blinked at him. He had mussed, white hair and dark, hollowed eyes.

"Where am I?" Louie said. "What am I doing here?"

The old man made a sad smile with bare gums and shook his head. He slowly slipped on glasses from a steel side table and raised a cord clipped to his bed cover with a button on the end.

"Don't make me do it, Butch," he said. "They've already given you one shot today."

Shot? Butch? Louie stared at him and about the room. He looked down at his bruised, veined hand. Two knuckles were bleeding. He saw the sprawled word *Home* printed in red on the underside of his wrist and then remembered. Louie threw off the covers and climbed over the bed rail onto the floor.

"What are you doing?" Mac said.

"I'm going home."

Mac stared after him, holding the cord button. Louie went to his closet, opened it, and dropped his pajamas. He dressed in the faded suit and an old white shirt, stepped into worn, two-toned shoes, and pulled on an overcoat.

"Butch," Mac said. "Don't do it. They won't let you."

Louie went toward the door, stopped, and turned to the window between his bed and Mac's. He unlatched the window and tried to lift it.

"You can't do it," Mac said.

Louie closed his eyes and strained against the window. It creaked, lifted. Mac cowered down in his bed. Somewhere an alarm sounded and Louie pushed out the screen.

"Take me with you," Mac pleaded. "Take me with you."

Louie shook his head. Mac's eyes glistened behind his lenses. He dropped the cord and offered his feeble hand. "Give my best to General Patton, Butch."

"My name isn't Butch," Louie told him.

Beyond the window and the shrubbery, shimmering vehicles streamed before him on an ink night street: shining headlights, brake lights, stop lights flowing among flashing, blinking business lights. Constant noise, motion, and blurs. He felt exhilarated by the possibility of adventure, flopped his overcoat like wings past the ice plants and onto the sidewalk, grinning and relieved, thinking of home, realizing he had forgotten his dentures, remembering to look for the North Star like when he hunted raccoons as a boy, and head east to where Oxford, Alabama, would be. Louie couldn't find the stars, but a sign flashed *walk*, an arrow sign pointed toward Eastern Boulevard. Louie turned east and walked along the curb, hiking up his thumb with a smile at the ever-flowing river of lights, cars and trucks, a scratchy *Waiting for a Train* reverberating in his mind, and remembering this was how his long ago buddy Hal and he once hitchhiked to the Chicago World Fair.

Among cans, broken glass, gravel, and weeds, he sat in the warm sunlight before the highway zipping with traffic, wondering where it was going and trying to recall what he had been doing. He tried to take in

the sweeping monotony of noise and motion, wanting it to become familiar. Louie rubbed his eyes, rose on stiff hips and legs, feeling a pang of hunger.

Like a slow, growing mirage, a young man came along the side of the road toward him, dragging a heavy wooden cross over his back, sweating in green biblical garb with a cord tied around his waist, long hair, and sandals. "Morning," the man nodded as he went by. "Been saved?"

Louie nodded and watched him grow smaller down the highway. He could remember pews and "Onward Christian soldier, Marching as to war," but he couldn't remember whether he had been saved or not. He tried to recall, turning into a pine thicket to urinate, unzipping and peeing and hearing soft singing that was not in his head but coming from below the bridge on the highway. Louie zipped up his fly and followed the sound down a slope to a sandy bank with a trickle of a creek, discovering a little girl in red overalls playing on the opposite bank with two nude dolls, and singing about "bare necessity." Louie stopped, stunned by her small face and shrill voice her dark curls and little fingers. She wore a clean white tee shirt and small green tennis shoes.

"Hi," she beamed.

"Hello," Louie whispered. "Where," he managed, "is your mother?"

The little girl pointed in the direction of nearby houses. But Louie did not dare look away from her. He brushed tears from his eyes.

"Want to play?" she said.

Louie nodded. He stepped over the water and sat beside her in the sand, marveling at her small face and large brown eyes.

"We're digging for worms to go fishing," she said. "They can't use their arms," she explained, "so they have to use their heads." She showed him by dragging the dolls' heads through the sand.

"Here, you be one." She handed him a doll.

Louie smiled and reached for it, noticing the rough printed letters in red on his wrist. He dropped the doll and stood up.

"I have to go home now," he said.

He stumbled across the creek, clambered up the slope to the highway, and walked over the bridge as a horn blared, cars and trucks whizzed and blasted by, a fragment of *Hang on the Belle, Nelle* echoing in his mind,

then *Stardust*. He used to drive, too, he remembered. Had a blue Buick and a black Packard. Louie shook his head. Or was it a Blue Packard and a black Buick? Plaid, rayon seats and a wood dash. Maude smiling beside him as he drove, the kids in back. He shook his head to be rid of it. What was gone did no good. But home was a place. He could see the black and white tile of the kitchen and quiet sunlight streaming into the breakfast nook. You could hold your own cup of coffee, listen to Dizzy Dean on the radio, catch the news on tv, or Ernie Ford or Jimmy Durante. You could pee on the floor if you wanted to.

The hill ahead of him began to look familiar. This was the road that went into town and at the foot of the other side was the stone and wood Rabbit Filling Station—no, no, it became a Texaco. And beyond that was Clement's Hardware, the lumber yard he once owned and Julia's Grill, and beyond that were framed houses and the left turn toward his house among the shady oaks. He smiled and walked faster, despite his hard breathing, the rising, stabbing pangs of hunger and his aching legs. A car pulled up even with him, then went ahead of him into the grass and braked.

"Hey," the driver called from her window. "Hey."

Louie stopped, stared. His head spun.

"Need a ride, Old Timer?" She was a smiling girl, blonde ponytail, yellow blouse, and gold on her neck.

Louie tapped his chest.

"Yeah, you," she laughed. "Get in."

The back door opened and a giggling brunette girl in cutoffs, sneakers, and a blue blouse got out. She smiled, lifted her brown beer bottle and led Louie into the back seat, got in beside him and shut the door. Inside, the car was white and cool, a loud and rhythmic noise throbbing from a speaker somewhere, and the faint smell of perfume. Another grinning blonde girl sat in the front passenger's seat. The girls smiled at him: young and bright eyed, in jewelry and in tight tee shirts or blouses.

"So...where to, Grandpa?" the grinning driver said.

"Over the hill," Louie said.

The brunette beside him lost a swallow of beer onto the floorboard. The girls howled with laughter and Louie tried to smile. The car moved

onto the highway with a surge of speed. He watched as they grinned at him and drank from their bottles, the driver grinning at him in the rear view mirror. The girl in front with the driver offered him an opened bottle over the seat. "Beer, Grandpa?"

"Thank you," Louie said. He was thirsty. "Thank you." He took the bottle and drank.

"Hey, Grandpa likes that stuff," the girl beside him exclaimed. The girls shrilled and laughed, watching as he finished the bottle and lowered it. "Thank you," he gasped.

"Sure," the girl who gave it to him said, and she winked at everyone.

Louie tried to smile back. "Am I at the Cross Roads?" he wanted to know. "Am I at Cross Roads?" The girls just nodded and grinned. The car went over the hill to no Rabbit Filling Station or hardware store, framed houses, or even trees. Instead, there was a bright, white pavilion and a parking lot, streams of cars, billboards, signs, and fast food stands built of brick and glass. The still-smiling girl in the front seat with the driver offered him another bottle, but Louie shook his head, staring out his window, wanting what was outside to become familiar. His head felt light. Everything began to float into a slow spin in loud and rhythmic noise: the cool, white interior; the sweet, faint smell of perfume; the young faces, their grins and eyes

Louie awoke. The room was still and full of light, the walls white, and chrome rails were on either side of his bed. He sat up, blinking. There was a bandage on his hand and the steady drone of traffic outside a window. "Where am I?" he said. He was in the middle of three hospital beds on a green tiled floor. An old, frail man was curled up asleep in the bed to his right and a dried and yellowed stem was curled upon the smooth pillow on the bed to his left.

"Where am I?" Louie called. "What am I doing here?"