

THE POWER OF ZAHN

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Art by
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for

Sara Jean and Finnegan
&
Aimee, Mady, Katie, and Sarah

Dedicated to the Great Beaver

A copy of the 23rd album from the Flat Tail Pickers accompanies the novel, *The Power of Zahn*, as a free gift for the reader.

“Ponderosa, Stage Two” is a collection of B-sides and demos from FTP's “Whiskey Jamboree” sessions. These are the real songs pulled from the pages of *The Power of Zahn*, and chronicle the first thirty-two years of the life of megahero Hans Halvorsen.

Get your copy at www.flattailpickers.bandcamp.com.





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Book 1
The Beaver and His Salmon

Episode 1 – The First Calling

Megahero – (n). A new genre of hero, having depth and complexity far exceeding the traditional superhero.

Those born to the city claimed it was particularly cold and wet the fall of his twenty-first year. Winds howled between Seattle's seven hills, awoken and restless. The weather conjured mythical undertones, a drenching omen of a true darkness to come. Was it fictionalized foreshadowing or an earnest warning cry from above? None could say. Spiritual uneasiness washed over even those void of religion. City-folk strolled anxiously—unbroken ponies corralled in a storm—cup after cup of steaming coffee fueling their steps.

Hans Halvorsen figured the dripping sky was part of the city's character, nothing to wrangle a fuss over. The Cascadian natives disagreed. Many felt man's plunders, not a cycling Mother Nature, had finally forsaken them. Others believed it was just the year for such things. All longed for the lush spring, seeing it as evidence of the world's loving redemption. When the rainy season ended, all promises would be kept and their gloomy lives would bud like the daffodils and tulips of Skagit Valley.

Still the rain pattered down, indifferent to all opinions. It fell without the accompaniment of thunder and lightning. Like a broken faucet the precipitation never turned off completely. At gentler moments the mist seemed to linger in the air on its silent

descent. When it took to pouring, the earth below winced and shuttered, as if being punished for sins not atoned.

The notion of cold known to Halvorsen and the chill that tortured the Seattleites weren't of the same blood. In Hans's view, real cold could only register as subzero. Indeed, cold and wet's pairing seemed to be an oxymoron. For the truly cold could only fall from the heavens in pelts of hard white. True cold robs the breath right out of one's lungs and burns internally. True cold leaps from one's body like a soul escaping in a thin, rolling fog.

Aside from the city's twinkle and endless green of the trees, the Emerald City dimmed. Hans envisioned a gray veil descending each new day, a prelude to a final cloak of black. He pondered what troubling shadows might the looming winter cast. Perhaps the darkening paid homage to the colorless abyss from which all had sprung. Hans sipped his espresso and scribbled out lyrics in the margin of a to-go menu from the Blue Star Café: "You had no ploy, ah Helen of Troy / You followed your loins and the savages clamored / To honor thy heart by tearing each other apart / But oh sweet Helen, you didn't cause this Trojan War." Feeling the lines to be singer-songwriter bunk, he erased madly and wrote two words, a title perhaps, "Danish Modern."

The event that transformed Hans Halvorsen into the megahero Zahn took place at Pier 46, along Seattle's Elliott Bay waterfront. The morning paper read December 6, 1994. Months earlier Hans had circled the date on his Van Gogh calendar, alternating between black and red ink for added effect. Tuesday the 6th of December had nothing to do with the Great Beaver Spirit or the Cherokee people. Hans knew nothing of either. No, that particular rainy Tuesday marked the release of Pearl Jam's acclaimed third album, *Vitology*. Halvorsen was a Pearl Jam megafan.

Hans had spent December 5th elbow deep in sockeye salmon. After his shift at Frankie's Fish Market, he caught the bus home and washed clean the stench of death-of-the-sea, which clung to everything except his minty breath. Hans and Holly Hinkley were catching a movie that night before their gig at the Blue Moon. A little fooling around after his shower cut into the coming attractions. Holly hated to miss the trailers, but Hans had an extra twinkle in his eyes. A supper of popcorn and a megasoda made up for lost time. The pair slowly crept to their balcony seats as the screen flickered to life.

The Neptune Theater screened the new Pike Filson action-cop sequel, *Shields of the Asbury Beat II*. Holly had scored free sneak preview tickets from a KEXP radio contest (the on-air answer being "Blind Boy Grunt").

The movie debuted a handsome young Native American actor, Stud Wesley, who played Pike Filson's rookie partner. In the opening scene, Stud smoked half a pack of unfiltered cigarettes and told a prostitute, played by Pam Pennington, how being daffy had taken her far.

"You wear your sin, girl," Stud's character said as his boot crushed an ashy stub, "but I don't mind because it fits you fine."

"Are you going to bust me, copper? You know I don't hurt a soul. You and me could take a walk. I can show ya how to racketeer or something."

"Or something," he replied. "Girl, you know I wish I could."

The call girl pulled the pack from Stud's shirt pocket and lit two smokes. One danced in the corner of her fiery mouth as she passed the other to the detective in a puff. Sirens howled in the distance. A dog sang along.

"Right from the start you break my heart," the girl said, locking into Stud's big browns.

"If you were a jukebox and me a pile of dimes, only then would you be mine all the time. It's a shame, too. You're pretty as

an ocean pearl. You shouldn't waste your life on that shitbag pimp of yours."

"A treat like you wouldn't be no trick," the actress said as the opening credits smashed.

Hans noticed Holly's smitten smile and realized why she'd been so eager to see the violent, testosterone-infused flick. Goosebumps on the nape of her neck appeared as Stud and Pam's characters danced in a high-roller jazz lounge, the cop spinning the whore's skirt.

After the movie, Holly confessed. The Hollywood rags she read (based solely on industry buzz and studio stills) billed this Stud Wesley guy, straight out of historic Tahlequah, Oklahoma, as the next phenomenon. He'd already cracked the music scene. In an interview with *The Rubber Doll Rag*, Stud mentioned signing with a new label and a world tour between movie shoots. "Inflamed guttural passion" and "soul art spasm" were phrases he used to describe his songs. Stud Wesley spoke of his internal collaboration with his "spirit animal" and rambled about his muse, the Illinois River. Acting was to be "creative left-fielding, tipping the mind to explore new avenues." (Miraculously, Stud spouted this off without sounding like a total douche.)

Hans and Holly walked hand-in-hand down 45th Street. She felt the greasy popcorn butter on his hand. The night hung black, and the wild full moon was lost to sight. They arrived at the gig, and after a beer and a chat with the booking manager, The Spitting Cobras were assigned the third slot. They had a 10 o'clock stage time. The preceding act, Cocaine Gums and The Cavities, ran late and played long.

"If you play one more fucking encore, I'll cut your goddamn cords with an axe," Hans screamed at the front man from Cocaine Gums, a filthy looking vagrant in Dickie's and tattered flannel.

"Grab a 'lude, man," the front man hissed back into the mic, before breaking into another contrived rendition of modern slurs.

Hans cursed for forgetting to put Uncle Norman's leather grip Sportsman in his gig bag.

Alas, The Spitting Cobras took the stage at ten of eleven, the third of six bands playing that night. Z-Day dropped at the chime of midnight, although any chime would have been lost in the explosion of distorted, double-timed sound. Hans double-timed every song, which gave the illusion of a tweaking junkie—a perfectly accepted entity in the grunge scene.

At 12:15 Hans ditched the gig and caught a cab over to Easy Street Records. Navin had promised to pack up and give Holly a lift home while Hans picked up *Vitology* at the midnight sale. He tapped the glass as the lock turned. Seeing the lovely madness in his eyes, the manager turned the lock back and fired up the cash register. Few words were spoken, but all was understood and appreciated.

Hans missed the last bus by half a block, so he set off to cover the four miles home on foot. He had secretly hoped this would come to pass, with only the music and rainy cold to keep him company. He found a payphone and called Holly. Standing inside the glass box, Hans smirked as the Pink Elephant Car Wash sign rotated and basked in the nighttime darkness. The sign was a lone beacon of triumph in the drowning city. If he ever owned an automobile, he promised to get it washed there.

"Get a cab. It's freezing out there," Holly said with a sleepy voice.

"Nah, it's not cold. And it's barely even raining."

"You could get mugged. Just grab a cab."

"Pacific Northwesters aren't muggers. They're pacifists, or passive-aggressive at worst."

Knowing the argument was lost, Holly finally bargained, "You can wear your headphones to bed."

"That's sweet of you, but I don't have cab fare anyhow."

"You and your rambling ways," Holly said sweetly, giving up. "You followed the buffalo in a former life. I'd swear to it."

“And you were waiting in my teepee under deer hides.”

The girl laughed. Hans looked towards the pink lights and waving trunk of the electrified beast, a comrade wishing him a proper journey home and the best of luck beyond. If he hadn't been on the phone he would have spoken to it: “The same to you my friend.” But with Holly listening on the line, he said nothing and smiled.

“Hurry along. This bed is cold,” she said with an intentional yawn.

“I will. Your Stud Wesley pictures can keep you company until I get home,” Hans smart-assed with love.

His headphones rocked Pearl Jam the entire trek from lower Queen Anne. He consumed it like the water of life in a dry desert. Rain walked with him and gathered on the brim of his slicker. Hans pushed on until he reached the Aurora Bridges sometime around track nine. As if on cue, the rain switched to snow flurries. Each flake silently disappeared as it softly landed on the concrete overpass.

His key hit the lock of his little apartment two hours before his alarm would announce the breaking morning. The window that the winds had yanked off completely three nights earlier was still held in place by a web of bungee cords. Hans saw little point in sleeping, but loved the warmth of his girl. As he drifted off, his mind thought of the lady beside him and how his odyssey had brought him to Seattle.

Born to second-generation Danish immigrants, Hans bore the looks of his Norse forefathers—barrel chest, sandy hair, and murky blue eyes. He grew up in a drafty old farmhouse down the road from his Uncle Norman's Wisconsin dairy farm. The town was named Luck, but Hans didn't feel much of it there.

Most of his time was spent working on his parent's hobby farm. Every morning he went straight from the barn to the bus idling at the end of the long driveway. And when the school bus

returned him in the evening, Hans headed back to the barn where the chickens and cows waited impatiently for food and water. Halvorsen felt destined for one thing: a dull, laborious life. The land or the factory didn't require a diligent mind, just diligent hands.

Things got busy for Uncle Norm around the summer's second hay crop, and Hans always lent a hand. He loved hauling hay with his uncle—subsisting on fresh sweet corn and strawberry Kool-Aide—but it wasn't enough. He could talk to Norm about yearly crop rotations and the freshening of the new heifers, but he really didn't give a shit. If this was all life offered, 80 years of it seemed ridiculously excessive.

The first time Hans's life forever changed, he was privileged enough to stay conscious. The rebirth of sorts took place in Holly Hinckley's bedroom on March 21st, 1991. Holly was the older sister of his buddy, Buck Hinckley. Knowing her from afar as he grew up, Hans had liked her hair. It was always a different color, sometimes two or three, and the Luck boys all speculated about the true hue. She had gone off to Puget Sound College in Seattle and was home for spring break. Holly spent the week sleeping in, lunching with her mom, and listening to music with her little brother and his goofy friend.

Holly's CD player was the first he'd seen. Hans's folks had a tape deck and Norman was partial to eight tracks. That fact only added to the significance of what she was about to play.

"I never heard music before this," Hans said, as if he were Thomas Jefferson stumbling upon democracy.

"This is a promo. The album will be out in October, but it's already huge in Seattle," Holly told him.

"You've seen them live?"

"Oh yeah, and it's a bunch of bands: Screaming Pandas, 2 Minutes On High, Flurry Strain, Loaf Pinchers, The Hungry Hungry Creep-Os. It's a wave crashing down on rock music. Like a Seattle invasion," Holly said. "*This* is the new sound."

That was the change. It had happened as the verse broke to chorus. A megaton bomb exploded in Halvorsen's head and the fallout washed over him. The guitar's power chords puked havoc, but never reached punk chaos. The songwriter didn't give a shit and had no desire to give the listener more, even though more was all Hans wanted. As the new sound surged through him Holly smiled a smile for the ages. It was over.

The two took turns stealing glances at each other. Hans had no idea how this was happening, by forces beyond his understanding for sure. With all his might he tried to hold onto the moment, which glowed red and shiny in his mind.

Uncle Norman had once told him, "You only get 30 truly happy moments in your life. That's it, 30. Know one when it shows itself. Savor all 30."

Wise words. The combination of Holly and the mythical music was certainly worthy of dragging a mental anchor.

The music was a breaking dam. Hans knew right then that he would hunt it down like a hound and splatter open its guts. His destiny was the Pacific Northwest and every aspect of his Wisconsin life seemed pointless and simply in his way.

"This is a big middle finger to hair bands," Holly said, leaning back on her bed.

"No, this is death for the hair bands. They're bankrupt. Always were." Hans fell back beside her, tucking a pink pillow under his head.

"It's rebellious."

"It reinvents the wheel."

Like a magician Holly appeared curled up around Hans.

"Awesome," Hans muttered to himself with private glee.

"It's so cool you get this music. Lame-O still likes boy bands." Holly alluded to her brother who was playing Tecmo Bowl in the basement while blasting Boyz II Men.

“I’m coming out there. I’m starting a band. I can play guitar. Uncle Norm and I jam these old truck-driving songs. I just need a distortion pedal. Holly, I got the fire in me.”

Hans put those last words into instant replay. It might have been the cheesiest shit he had ever said. *I’ve got the fire in me?* Seriously? This college babe was going to laugh his ass back under a cow utter.

Only what he said was the truth, and Holly knew it.

“Let’s play a game,”Holly said in a mischievous whisper. “It’s called Spitting Cobra.”

Episode 2 – From the Farm to Jet City

Boomer – (n).

1. Something large or notable of its kind.
2. A large wave.
3. Future Oklahomans, the individuals of the "Boomer Movement," made up of white settlers who rushed to partake in the land runs of Indian Territory.

True to his word and empowered by love, Hans pushed forward with his dream of becoming a grunge rocker. Each day after school, work, and chores he plugged up his T-P-Mart guitar in the old barn. Leaning against a stack of tractor tires he played as loud as the knobs would twist. Without a microphone, Halvorsen screamed his vocals over the roar of his electric fury. While the noise spooked some cows, many crowded close to listen. Some even swayed.

Holly dubbed every CD she bought onto cassette and mailed them to Hans. He traced the purple-inked, hand-written liner notes over and over with his finger. Hans absorbed the music like a starving wolf devouring fresh flesh. School didn't matter. Other girls didn't matter. College admission didn't matter. Little Luck, Wisconsin didn't matter. The only things that mattered were Holly Hinkley and grunge music.

Spring break of his senior year found Hans on a Seattle-bound freight train. Along the way he wrote five songs and survived on peanuts and four pounds of deer jerky. As he rode the rails across

the St. Croix River into Minnesota, Hans said goodbye to Wisconsin and his former life.

The next week he called Uncle Norman and gave him the news that Seattle was now his home.

“That’s silly, Hans,” Uncle Norm protested. “At least come back and finish school. You can head out right after graduation.”

“Can’t do it, can’t walk away. I’m a rocker and I’ve got a woman.”

“Do you have work out there? Rockers have bills too.”

“Not yet. I picked up a few shifts at the shipyard. My resume isn’t much. 4-H awards and farm hand don’t quite fill up a resume.”

“Does dropout look good in the education section? Or do you hope to work dipshit jobs for the rest of your life? It’s two more months.”

“No, sir.”

“You like dipshit jobs?”

“If it’s honest work.”

Norm paused. The sound of a deep sigh filled the phone’s earpiece.

“Okay then, I’ll call up Frankie. It’s good pay, and she’ll get you working. It’s right on the Sound. She met Grandpa during the war. Your dad and I stayed with her when we went to the World’s Fair in ‘62.”

“What’s the job?”

“Seafood processor.”

“Thanks, Norm.”

“Chop that Seattle music scene with an oak-handled axe, Hans. Do the Halvorsen name proud. And stay off the dope.”

Hans Halvorsen in Seattle was a fish *in* water story, almost literally. Gone was the bitter north wind that iced his body to the bone. That brutal cold was replaced with winters of gentle rain and mercury in the 40s. The showers washed everything clean.

He performed not only on stage, but around the clock. His behavior wasn't phony, but admittedly a show. Hans figured being shy and modest wouldn't get him anywhere, so he became the lead character actor in the movie *Be a Rock Star*. Coming from Nowhere, Wisconsin gave him the mystique of a rambler who just drifted in off the dusty highway. His new role required that he talk much more than he cared to, but his introduction to dark roast coffee helped. Hans mumbled frantically like the Luck auctioneer and explained nothing. The bigger and more overly abstract his ideas were, the better. Who was this thunderous troubadour from the North Country? Who was this guy walking down the street with his fists stuffed in his jean pockets and a pretty redhead wrapped around his arm?

Hans formed The Spitting Cobras and found immediate 3-chord success. Good buzz and loyal fans got them some attention in the local music rags. With labels picking up grunge bands like dollar bills lying in the street, hopes were high. They released a self produced EP on October 14, 1994, selling 893 copies worldwide, all of which were either sold at their gigs or by mail order from Hans and Holly's apartment. A week after the release the great storms arrived.

The Crocodile Café's '94 New Year's Eve concert had The Spitting Cobras sharing the marquee with Potted Meat Sauce. It was to be Hans's big break. Success was coming quick—so fast it was scary. He'd only written ten songs and he openly disliked seven of them.

"What if we end up famous? What will we do?" Holly asked after Hans told her about the big show.

"Try heroin first off. Try and make it a regular thing."

"For real."

As it turned out, Holly kept a hard beat and became the band's drummer. The couple lived in a five-plex apartment converted from an old house up by Cowen Park. Guitarist Navin Smicks and bassist Lyle Dregs lived in the second

floor studio and basement bungalow respectively. The band formed like four magnets coming together at a common pole.

“I just want a deal and some time in a real studio. That’d be the coolest thing.” Hans strummed a new progression he was discovering with sustained and minor chords.

“I could paint the album cover, maybe,” Holly said.

“Yeah you could.”

“Maybe we could bring in a horn section for ‘Taint Thinner’ on the soft bridge.”

“Yeah, and you know, lay out a whole album track by track,” Hans said in a voice filled with child-like imagination. “If we get a big enough sign-on, we can get a van to tour in. We’ll get to see the world. Tour Japan.”

“It could happen, Hans,” Holly said.

It never happened. Three-and-a-half weeks before the show, December 6, 1994 rolled in with the dark howling cold.

Episode 3 - Finding the Spirit

Nirvana - (n).

1. King of the 1990s Grunge bands.
2. A state of being characterized by oblivion to pain, worry, and the external world obtained without the use of narcotics.

Aside from working the 6 a.m. halibut catch with burning, sleep-filled eyes, the morning leading up to his encounter with the Great Beaver was typical. What was Halvorsen's breakfast that chilly December morn? Most likely lukewarm coffee and two handfuls of granola, for Hans was a creature of habit.

"There was no last supper to savor," Hans explained to the boys at the 26-mile landing a decade later. "If I'd known, I would've skipped work. I'd have cruised down to Dick's around 10:30 and had two deluxe burgers—right off the grill. Around noon, when my appetite struck up again, I'd score some chowder at Duke's. That is, if there was no way out of this deal."

Did he look at the hills and water as his bus rolled over the bridge? Did he kiss Holly goodbye? No idea. All Hans remembered was trying to reconstruct a lost dream from his lone R.E.M. cycle the night before. In the dream he was in an elegant bathroom at the Kennedy Compound, trying to take a dump. The stall walls were awkwardly low, and Stud Wesley, wearing a harmonica rack, sat on the john across from him, intimate as a table for two. The Cherokee sang the sweetest lullaby, a shit ditty if you will. Hans had hoped to

capture the dreamed melody for a Spitting Cobra track, but he couldn't piece it together.

As Hans cleaned flopping halibut he happily hummed, lost in a world of fish guts and the fragments of his dream. Likely it wasn't Stud's riff, but an offshoot. Hans arranged and rearranged words and phrases and hit on different marks. Just a subtle change makes for something completely new. This went on for hours, until he got it just so. To this date, the only thing Hans remembers is the name of the song, "Flushing JFK Dream Duet #2." The song lived that single morning, and then died forever.

"Thirty-nine straight days and counting. Broke the record on Black Friday. Horrible retail numbers because of it," Coke Bottles said on that fateful day. "That's a lot of rainy days all lined up."

"Kind of Biblical," Hans said.

Coke Bottles McGee was Halvorsen's faithful sidekick at Frankie's. The black-rimmed glasses that sat perched on the man's nose looked more like a novelty gag, or an accessory from a prepackaged "nerd" Halloween costume, than actual corrective spectacles. The thick lenses caused light to gleam in his eye sockets, despite it being the dimmest of days. Coke Bottle's pupils appeared the size of Kennedy half-dollars. Even with the constant cloud cover, the sun was drawn to the powerful magnifiers. The harnessed UV light burned Coke's upper cheeks and nose a rosy red.

The two were on a break, halfway through their 12-hour shift at Frankie's Fish Market. Coke nodded to end the chatting and diverted his attention to a Snickers bar. Fine by Hans—small talk wasn't his style anyway. Playing the role of rock star drained him, and he loved the silence of work. His total word count, lyrics excluded, during a cleaning shift rarely broke fifty.

The Great Rain Streak of '94 made all the headlines, but it was the number of days without any sunshine that caught Hans's attention. The sun had popped out here and there, but he'd always been indoors ripping away at crustacean entrails. Twenty-two days

passed without one ray splashing upon him. In the beginning, the gloom sent Hans into a sort of blue period. Holly told him seasonal depression was the cornerstone of grunge.

“There’s a reason this didn’t start in Miami. You’ve gottalive it, Hans,” she said. “Bummed out and cooped up in a murky basement is how grunge works. Happy people write disco. Now go think about your certain mortality or something.”

“Screw that,” Hans said. “Brian Wilson never surfed. Elton John never got a boner for Marilyn Monroe. Just a little sunshine would give me some peace of mind.”

“When you’re in a river,” she said. “You either fight the current or go with it. Which seems more natural to you? Do you want to suck down vitamin D pills with your tears like everybody else or embrace the darkness? Jesus, is peace of mind really what you’re after, Halvorsen?”

Hans thought on the question.

“Not so much, no.”

“So let’s hide from the sun. You know, flip the table. If it pops out, we’ll pull the shades and stay inside. Let’s see how long we can last. Let’s get weird.”

“Sounds wild, I’ll give it a shake,” Hans said. He had never loved Holly more.

Two sunless weeks later, back on Pier 46, a seagull flew overhead as the 11:20 a.m. Bainbridge ferry ported 500 yards down the waterfront. The gray sky again began to rain. After wrapping headphones around his ears, Hans snagged the high-powered specs off Coke’s face. Coke didn’t mind. He could get the candy bar to his mouth without sight.

Hans spent every break lying on his back and looking through Coke’s high-octane trifocals while listening to tunes. December 6th was no exception. A distorted masterpiece clawed into his head while warped clouds resembling psychedelic bruises floated by. Halvorsen stretched out in the rain and stared at the

droplets that formed like swelling bubbles on the lenses. He had escaped to a new universe without even a trace memory of this mundane world.

“She dreams in color / She dreams in red / Can’t find a better man,” the lyrics went. Hans loved the song and everything about it. Like any love, obsession was involved and he hit repeat.

“Can’t find the Vedder man,” Hans echoed in refrain.

Then in a flash it happened.

Perhaps ripped open by the hand of the Great Spirit herself, a hole opened in the gray sky. The sun beamed through like an almighty flame. Let there be light! Like a bulls-eye, Hans’s gaze was directly in the crosshairs of the mighty solar bolt, and the magnified ultraviolet power lit up his murky blues like a case of 4th of July sparklers. The thick lenses multiplied the light in ways that would baffle Albert Einstein, producing an energy equation of the infinite unknown.

Hans found his feet and ran from the burning fury in his head. Blinded, he stumbled over the rail of Pier 46 and fell into the icy waters of Elliott Bay. The harnessed power of the sun routed through the Dane’s receptors and body tissue, forever changing him. Coke Bottles McGee, a nonswimmer, stumbled off in search of help while the dark clouds swallowed the ray of light like a black hole.

Hans’s body temperature dropped in a free fall as he plunged down into the cold depths of the bay. Quickly, his conscious life slipped away. By all accounts, Hans Halvorsen should have died that rainy December day. Had it not been for the prophecy of the Great Beaver, he would have surely perished.

Cherokee folklore claims that a beaver with the heart of a bear will give his eternal Spirit to a mortal man. The man will become known as Zahn. The power of the Beaver Spirit is said to be beyond fathom. A secret society of tribal elders has monitored the Great Beaver for as far back as anyone’s grandfather could

recall. They call themselves The Order of the Beaver. By a 4 to 2 majority (with one member absent) the Order believed that the Great Beaver was taking his sweet-ass time picking the spirit vessel.

The Great Beaver is not a myth, but rather a 127-pound, teeth-and-fur giant flat tail. The natives say he was born with the earth and rose from the mud and fallen trees. They say he is wise and strong. Over countless moons, the Great Beaver communicated with the Cherokee people, guiding them spiritually and teaching them to build and to work. He also knew of the prophecy and of his greater importance.

The chosen man would carry the mark of the Great Beaver: scars from sunken teeth on the inside of his left forearm. The Spirit and this man will guard the Cherokee people, deliver them from evil, and usher in the glory days for the tribe. Since the Cherokee first met the Europeans it's been a bumpy trail for the tribe, and over the years they lost contact with the Great Beaver.

Just as the Cherokee were displaced from Georgia to Oklahoma, the Great Beaver found himself in Elliot Bay on December 6th. Like Hans, the Great Beaver did not know it was his day of destiny, and after eons of waiting he had all but forgotten about his calling. He only thought of love.

As a young beaver he lived along the Ca Crack Creek in the land now known as Georgia. The Great Beaver was not an expert mythological prophecy and figured the chosen man would find him. Ages passed. Meanwhile, the Great Beaver hung out with his Cherokee soul brothers, offering wisdom here and there as needed. For kicks, the Great Beaver taught the water to follow him. With well-placed woodpiles, he made the Oostanaula River zigzag down from the Blue Ridge Mountains and flow into the Etowah. The merged rivers headed southwest and formed the Coosa, and the Cherokee people thanked him for spreading the water across the land.

When the white man scooted the Cherokee out of their home and West to what is now Oklahoma, the Great Beaver walked

by their side. His speed and grace in the water didn't stand on land. The hard trails kept his steps shaky and slow, often causing him to fall back with the elders and the sick. He saw much bravery from the Cherokee on their journey; however, the man who was to take the spirit was yet to be found.

The Cherokee people settled in northeastern Oklahoma, and the Great Beaver took up residence on Barron Fork Creek, a runoff of the Illinois River. Once more the ages passed. On February 3, 1958 a group of wildlife rangers found and trapped him. The Great Beaver spent the next week in the back of a van until at last he was and released into Oregon's Columbia River as part of a repopulation effort. Many deserts and mountain ranges separated him from his Cherokee brothers.

On the Columbia, the Great Beaver built dams, hundreds of them. But no matter how strongly they were constructed, storms, brisk currents, or time itself eventually disassembled them. But it wasn't only Mother Nature. The white man got in on the act too, fiercely taking down his structures.

"Why are they so angry?" he thought. The Cherokee had thanked him for his work. No matter, the Great Beaver just built more.

He saw many men in the waters of the Columbia, but he had no idea if any of them was the one to whom he should pass the spirit. He figured that it should surely be an Indian, but which one? He often wondered how one even passes his spirit to a man, but he found no answers. So, he just continued building dams.

Then something happened that the Great Beaver had never figured upon. He fell in love.

One day a beautiful salmon swam up to him as he was searching for driftwood. She asked him if he wanted to go for a swim. It was lovely. After fifteen minutes he had to go up for air. She kept swimming, and he figured he would never see her again. She returned the next day and wanted another swim. Day after day they performed their aquatic ballet, going longer and further each

time. Soon, all dam construction had halted. The Great Beaver grew stronger. Each day he cut upstream a little further, until one day he realized he had followed her all the way to Elliott Bay.

It was a forbidden, impossible love, the likes of which yield unmatched power.

On the morning of December 6th, the Great Beaver was patiently waiting for her beneath Pier 46 while she was off spawning. He was saddened by the fact that he could not father her young.

There he spied the lifeless, sinking body of Hans Halvorsen. Having never seen a distressed man, the Great Beaver instinctively dove to his aid. He slapped Hans across the face with his tail and sank his teeth into Hans's left forearm. Beaver spittle and man's blood mixed. The Spirit and Power of Zahn were transferred just as the Indian prophecy had foretold. Hans's whole body shook as the power of the sun merged with the Great Beaver's spirit.

Coke Bottles heard a rumbling rise up from beneath the water. Quickly, Hans's earthly body shut down. The son of Carl and Margaret Halvorsen died, in a sense, and Zahn was born.

The Great Beaver hauled Hans into the net of the *Mary Virginia*, a fishing boat out of Tacoma. The crew pulled Hans out of the water along with some 170 pounds of sea life. Hans was flown to Seattle Mercy Hospital.

Episode 4 – The Voice in the Darkness

Prologue – (n).

1. A preliminary speech calling attention to the theme of the story.
2. An introductory event or period.

No long tunnels emerged, and there was no blinding light in the distance. Smash to black, and the curtains dropped on Hans's being. The Darkness swallowed him, and for all he knew this was the afterlife, the end of days. A thought did not return to his mind until May 19, 1996, eighteen months after his encounter with the Great Beaver. Of course, Hans had no idea of the date. It felt like coming back from nonexistence. Only his thoughts and ears awoke to consciousness. All else remained lost. Hans figured himself a spirit without a vessel. Little did he know his teeth had been the first to return.

With cracks and pops, a wave of music found him in the Darkness. It was a tide of songs vastly different than his beloved grunge rock. Hans greeted them as if they were hymns sung by a choir of angels. They were distant at first, but soon the sounds clicked like a freight line: boom-chicka-boom, boom-chicka-boom, boom-chicka-boom. They grew ever closer. Twang-twang, chicka-boom.

Uncle Norman had played old 78s of country music, but Hans never took the time to let them fully soak in. He figured it was old-timer's stuff. Now, a catalog of honky-tonk penetrated Hans as if he had become a mortal jukebox in the greasy-spoon diner of the

ether. Hans hung on every twang-ridden note. It was all he had. Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Ray Price, Kris Kristofferson, Buck Owens. The gang hit Hans with endless golden classics. He didn't know the titles of the songs or the names of the artists. The songs stood for themselves. Country music became a feast for his wayward soul. Hans would slip back into the depths of the Darkness, but he always emerged to find the songs waiting for him, waltzing in the eternal midnight with only a kick drum to guide their way.

One could live a life based on the lessons of country music. Each song has its own story. Unlike grunge, it didn't get all emo-angsty. But it was just as savage, just as raw. Cowboy music could be a lot of other things too. It could be silly or sweet, coldblooded or sentimental. It played all parts, the two-timer and the cheated-upon fool. Above all, it had plainspoken honesty. Here's the human condition laid out in four beats a measure. Make peace with it, or it'll kick you until you don't have ribs. Even in the Darkness, Halvorsen wanted to wash it all down with a beer.

In time, voices seeped into Hans's consciousness, and it didn't take long before he realized that he was still alive and being kept in some sort of a medical facility. This conclusion depressed the man, knowing that he lay trapped in a dormant body. Doctors and nurses spoke of him, but never to him. They were like car mechanics working on a junker which lay rusting in a salvage yard.

"Doctor, have you ever seen anything like this?"

"No, this isn't natural. He needs to be put in restraints for his own safety, and further sedated."

"Have we ever sedated a man in a coma?"

"This is off the books."

"Can we give him more Pormestro?"

"We've already given him enough to kill a litter of elephants, but we can up it 150 ccs. I don't know what else to do."

"What about his family?"

"Just another rambler."

What was happening to Hans was not an ailment that could be looked up in any medical journal. It wasn't the spell of a coma that he was under; rather, Hans found himself in an incubation period. It was the maturation process required to gain the powers of a megahero. The molecules in his human tissues adapted to the Spirit of the Great Beaver. As time and medical costs moved on, the doctors began to realize that heavily drugging him was not medically sound. They took Hans down to IV fluids only. His body came back to life through pains and aches like those of a mighty flu. His back hurt, his head ached, and his left forearm throbbed endlessly. It was nearly unbearable.

Amidst the music, he heard the constant beeps of machines and orderlies complaining about giving him sponge baths.

"You do it, Rog. I'm afraid this fucking sonofabitch will chew my finger off, or crush my skull with a kick. I'll give you twenty bucks."

"Not even for a handjob from your wife," Roger said.

All these conversations swirled around him, but none were directed towards Hans. He knew Uncle Norman couldn't leave the cows to visit. A dairy farm is far too demanding. But where was Holly? Hans had overheard a phlebotomist discuss watching fireworks over the Space Needle on some lower Queen Anne rooftop.

"That's eight months at least," Hans thought.

For all he knew, it was four years and eight months. Maybe Holly had been there night and day in the beginning, holding his hand. Hans didn't want her to waste her time. Life is for living, he told himself, but the potential loss of Holly still felt like an elephant on his chest.

No voice called out to Hans until September 25, 1997. The prologue began in the middle of a Johnny Cash live recording.

"Say there, I hear you're a musician. Your lady once told me 'bout your band. You need to play music like this. That's *real*."

That's a story of love, and love lost." The voice was sturdy and slow, which immediately gave Hans the impression that it came from someone wise, someone who pondered his words before releasing them. It was the voice of a storyteller, and one that he would come to know very well.

"You and I will go back to Oklahoma in time. I can't tell you when, for time knows nothing of man's calendars. You can join my country band as soon as you wake. We call ourselves the Flat Tail Pickers. Our lead singer just enlisted in the Coast Guard, so you're in luck. I didn't care for Ray much anyway. We'll get a fill-in until you're ready, but the job's yours."

The hand of the mysterious voice covered Hans's mouth, as if to keep a secret from escaping his unconscious lips. "Don't think I can't see the Great Beaver Spirit in you. He speaks to me in my dreams, the same as you," said the voice in a whisper. The man sat down with a guitar in his lap, and using a pocketknife as a slide, played along with Cash. The voice spoke the truth. Hans had been dreaming about this beaver.

"Sorry it took me so many moons to break the silence. What to say to a man that cannot reply? It's difficult for me as well. The price of finding you is all the love I've ever laid a claim to. It seems fate's path can be cruel...for both of us. That girl of yours hasn't been back for almost two years. She said something about a tour and moving on with her life. Each time she visited you she was wearing more and more makeup. She left a letter. I'll let you read it. Seems like a private matter, and until you can read it yourself you can't do anything about it anyway. If you sleep too long it won't matter what it says. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it. Forget I said anything. I've always preferred listening over talking, but you leave me no choice."

The voice in the Darkness went back to playing music. He was a convincing performer and his tone was subtle, yet sublime. He sang the words and meant them, and picked his notes as if he were sorting diamonds, plucking only the finest. And when words

couldn't say it, he went to bending and hammering on the guitar. Hans had never heard a more skilled picker.

Every day for the next nine years the voice spoke to Hans and played records for him at the Roy Aging Complex in Renton, Washington. That is worth repeating. This went on for *nine years*. During their second talk the voice properly introduced himself.

"The name that came to me is Bart Featherstone. I'm Cherokee, as you probably guessed. My wife lies in the bed next to you, stilled by a coma. I found her floating in the Illinois River. It sounds unreal, but I swear by the Raven of Light, mutated cockfighting roosters attacked her."

There was a long silence. "But now's not the time to get into that. I want to shake her. Isn't that crazy? This doll? I want to slap her awake. There's a life we need to live. I can tell you this because you're the one person who can't say I'm crazy. You're a good listener." Bart looked over at his wife. "She's beautiful, and her name's Snoqualmie. I call her Sno. Now she's a sleeping beauty. I kiss her every day, but I can't wake her."

With each passing day Hans loved cowboy music more and more and missed it when it abruptly vanished. Nine years meant that love and hate were his only options. Indifference is impossible with nearly constant exposure. Even after visiting hours were over, Bart often put headphones around Hans's ears.

"Elvis's cowboy album. Enjoy it. It's tight."

On Sundays, Bart spun gospel records and talked about his home. He had a way of giving sermons without getting preachy—he wasn't even religious in the conventional sense. Awe is what dripped off the Bart's tongue.

Bart called his home Green Country. The pictures Bart painted hung in Hans's mind like that of a timeless museum. The descriptions awoke visions in Halvorsen. Most of the time Bart spoke to Sno, but Hans listened anyway. There wasn't much of a choice; he certainly couldn't cover his ears or hum loudly. Though people and places were lost upon Hans, this land called Oklahoma

became comforting to him, a fabled home he never knew. Featherston described a utopia that managed to avoid the widescreen vulgar truth of the place. He sifted the shit to gather the jewels.

“We met at the dream catcher convention in Muskogee. It was the spring of ‘86. Who would have thought? Thousands of people were there that day, and you found me—walked right up to my knife booth. You asked me to share a walk and a funnel cake. It was all over, and it had just begun.”

This went on every day for nine years, from early fall to late spring. Bart sang Crystal Gayle ballads to Sno and brushed her hair. He attempted to give Hans’s locks a once over, but the comb returned full of blonde hair. He told Hans about the strange phenomenon that was occurring in his body while he filed away at Hans’s always-growing front teeth.

The weeks between Memorial Day and Labor Day were lonely for Hans. The music died. Bart had struck a deal with Cherokee Bob, proprietor of Cherokee Bob’s Floats in Tahlequah. In exchange for Bart’s return during the summer months, Bob would pay all of Sno’s expenses at the Roy Aging Complex. It was a deal Bart couldn’t refuse, but it left Hans alone in the Darkness. At times the loneliness was so great that he wished he had sailed off the Aurora Bridge when he had the chance. Bart felt guilty for enjoying the mandatory escape.

The year 2001 was a black pool of gravity that sucked down all delusions of hope. Neither man was able to throw the other a cosmic life preserver. Bart’s spirit finally broke late that September. The Cherokee returned from Oklahoma beaten and worn by a long, hot summer. His skin was worn and red like the hide of a steer. Hearing Bart’s voice void of any optimism was worse than the lonesome silence of the summer months for Hans. Bart spoke of the cruel nature of war and of man. He spoke of a sun black as night and of an ocean as dry as a desert. He expressed deep grievances toward spiritualism and materialism, capitalism and religious

fundamentalism. The last words he spoke that year came in October while the two listened to a Marty Robbins gunfighter ballad. Bart scratched a deep slash into the record as the jerked the needle away.

“I’m so tired of words. You open a book and a hundred thousand of them sucker punch you. What’s their aim? To explain things? Do you really think we can write our way out of anything? The good book itself can’t do that. And lyrics are more foolhardy. They forever spark the flicker of romance. But we all know fires can’t last. Songs offer three minutes of pulling the wool over your ears, but the happiness leaves with the outro. The orderliness of rhyme and beat are tricks to hide the chaos. Can I relate to a clever verse? Do they paint reflections of our own experiences? Sure they do. But make no mistake, that’s not understanding. Shared loneliness doesn’t make us not alone. It matters not that we’ve felt the same things. What does that change? I’m all done. Words will no longer help on this or any other night.”

With that speech, the Chet Atkins period began. Bart was true to his word, and he didn’t so much as clear his throat. Only the sound of boots crossing the tile floor accompanied the flip of a record. Even Featherstone’s breath was shallow and faint. Oddly enough, Hans was okay with the absence. The guitar instrumentalist couldn’t be more enchanting, and Bart had the entire Chet Atkins catalog on vinyl—some sixty-plus LPs. To Hans’s amazement the guitar itself articulated a subjective truth that words failed to summon. For the first time in this Darkness Halvorsen felt something other than pain in his body. His skin tingled and danced as Chet played. There was breeziness in his mythical finger style, and it was unthinkable that one man and one guitar could make all those sounds. The notes sparkled like bubbles in a champagne flute. Hans felt the music deep in the marrow of his bones, and it raced through the valves of his growing heart. Atkins’ fingers somehow spoke to the strings with clarity beyond words.

But the spring came, and Chet Atkins and the muted voice in the Darkness again departed.

The next fall Chet's country gentleman returned, and to Hans's surprise, so did his friend Bart. Somewhere in the middle of "Alice Blue Gown" Featherstone spoke.

"Chet is right. I'm sorry I gave up on, well, everything. You both deserve better. He had me convinced pretty early on, but I'm more stubborn than the winter is long, apparently spring too. I spent all of June out at the Ponderosa. If that land can't get you thinking straight, you don't have any love left in you. My problem is I have too much love. I promise you both I won't lose the faith again. Towers may fall, but love always stands."

"But enough of such talk. I have good news: your muscles aren't deteriorating. Last night you ate through your restraints and threw your hospital bed out of this 8th floor window. Nurse Aimee told me these beds weigh 1,400 pounds. What are they putting in your feeding tube, PCP?" Bart snuck to his friend's ear. "Just kidding, and don't worry, it's just the transformation. Soon you will be Zahn."

The Cherokee took to his feet and gripped the posts of Hans's bed. The wheels began to move. "I'm taking you to the hall just this one time. I'll be back for you very soon. There are some words that need to be just between Sno and me."

Featherstone still saw vibrant life in his frozen wife, like a glistening pond covered by ice. He told her that no matter how long the coma continued, season after season, he'd be there. He knew she would come back to him. There would be picnics and lazy days on the river, children and grandchildren, music and love. He managed to say the things that he thought only music could convey. In love and longing thrives the poet of hope.

He told her about the man sharing her room and how he recognized the mark on Hans's left forearm. He told about seeing power in the orange wood-mangling front teeth that protruded when he slipped Coke Bottle's glasses over Hans's sleeping eyes. Bart saw the Power of Zahn and Hans's destiny with the Cherokee.

“I joined the Order of the Beaver on my 26th birthday and have spent much of my life searching for the chosen one,” Bart told his wife. “Like the compass of my heart, you directed me to him. For the Great Beaver resides in you, my love. Soon I’ll see your brown eyes open. Soon we will be as we had once been in the sweet long ago.”

Naturally, Snoqualmie’s death on February 2, 2005 hit Bart with horrifying disbelief. Fate took the form of a floating blood clot. After the death of his lovely Indian princess, Bart only spoke once more before heading back to Oklahoma.

“I haven’t told you this, because...because I only cared about bringing Sno back to health. I loved her. While she breathed fresh air I remained a grateful man, aside from that Chet period. When I believed she’d come back, I had no room for hate and revenge. With my Sno in the next life I will seek justice,” the big Cherokee whispered.

“A man named Capon did this to Sno. He aims to cripple the entire Cherokee Nation. I’m asking you to join me in Tahlequah, as both my friend Hans Halvorsen and as Zahn. There is much you must learn about the nature of your megapowers. I’m putting the Chosen Glasses in a safety deposit box at Wa-Mu Bank on Stone Way, along with some cash. The key is on the table in a blue envelope. When you get to Highway 10 along the Illinois River, look me up at Cherokee Bob’s. I’ll be waiting. Remember the name Capon.”

As he left, Bart placed a single CD next to the bed, along with the envelope holding Holly Hinckley’s farewell note.

“I made you a mixer for the road. Check out ‘Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain.’ It’s beautiful.”

Bart was greatly missed, and Hans was once again in silence. But the Power of Zahn grew. The great currents came together in him like the Oostanaula and Etowah. If Hans could repay that man who had suffered a loss equal to any, he’d do it.

After all, when there was only the Darkness it was Bart who had found him. Hans figured he might as well be of some use in this life. Besides, Bart seemed to have insight into what was happening to his body. Clearly it was something cathartic. Hans felt it.

“Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” Hans willed his body.

The Seattle Scene had ended before the millennium. Holly was undoubtedly making babies with some other asshole. It was time to get going. Oklahoma - the letters streamed in Hans’s mind. O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A. O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A. O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A.

It took another 400 days or so, but to the shock of the medical staff at the Roy Aging Complex, Hans awoke from his 11-year hibernation on April 21, 2006. He was in perfect health.

Sitting up for the first time, his back popped like feet romping across bubble wrap. It was a liberating crack. Everything was blinding to his opening eyes, despite it being the wee hours of the night. Hans slid out of bed. His feet shook and his knees buckled, but balance was eventually gained. He picked up Holly’s note on the bedside table and ripped it into pieces.

“Nothing but lick-sealed heartache,” he thought.

The pieces rained down into the wastebasket like confetti as the door swung wide. Hans cinched the back of his hospital gown with one hand and grasped his mixer and the blue envelope with the other. He walked down the hall toward the exit sign.

Bart had been thoughtful enough to put all Hans’s stuff in storage after Holly Hinkley hitched it. Two days after Hans emerged from the Darkness he sold all 379 grunge albums in his CD collection.

“Fuck grunge music,” Hans decided.

He paid \$425 in cash for a 1970 Ford F-100 truck—baby blue. He loaded the back with Uncle Norman’s old flannel shirts, an axe, and three pairs of blue jeans. He left most of his other shit behind.

With a Wisconsin driver's license, twelve years expired, Hans pushed the gas pedal towards Oklahoma. Curious desires rode shotgun. The much-billed honky-tonk life that waited in a place called Tahlequah promised a new start. That voice in the Darkness had indeed been the light at the end of the tunnel, and Hans needed to find the man it belonged to. He felt shooting pain in his gums as he ticked off the passing state lines. Holly was gone, but each mile he put between them did nothing to get her out of his head. At least she was likely out there living her life, unlike poor Sno. Whoever he was, Capon had robbed Bart of everything. Fuck Capon.

As his four bald tires rolled over the Rocky Mountains, Hans stole a look in his rearview mirror. He was eyeing a hybrid that was riding his ass, but something else caught his gaze. He hadn't bothered to look at his reflection since the awakening. His face had surely aged. The baby fresh quality was gone, but it was arranged pretty much as he remembered it (aside from the teeth). But to his astonishment, Hans caught a glimpse of his hairline. A war was raging, and the follicles on his upper forehead had signaled to retreat and pulled back the troops. He was losing the battle of the bulge.

"Sonofabitch," Hans cried as he laid on the old horn.