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The Shack

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In collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette Livre UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 340 97949 5

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodderfaith.com



Foreword

Who wouldn't be skeptical when a man claims to have spent an entire weekend with God, in a shack no less? And this was *the* shack.

I have known Mack for a bit more than twenty years, since the day we both showed up at a neighbor's house to help him bale a field of hay to put up for his couple of cows. Since then he and I have been, as the kids say these days, hangin' out, sharing a coffee—or for me a chai tea, extra hot with soy. Our conversations bring a deep sort of pleasure, always sprinkled with lots of laughs and once in a while a tear or two. Frankly, the older we get, the more we hang out, if you know what I mean.

His full name is Mackenzie Allen Phillips, although most people call him Allen. It's a family tradition: the men all have the same first name but are commonly known by their middle names, presumably to avoid the ostentation of I, II and III or Junior and Senior. It works well for identifying telemarketers too, especially the ones who call as if they were your best friend. So he and his grandfather, father, and now his oldest son all have the given name of Mackenzie, but are commonly referred to by their middle names. Only Nan, his wife, and close friends call him Mack (although I have heard a few total strangers yell, "Hey Mack, where'd you learn to drive?").

Mack was born somewhere in the Midwest, a farm boy in an Irish-American family committed to calloused hands and rigorous rules. Although externally religious, his overly strict church-elder father was a closet drinker, especially when the rain didn't come, or came too early, and most of

the times in between. Mack never talks much about him, but when he does his face loses emotion like a tide going out, leaving dark and lifeless eyes. From the few stories Mack has told me, I know his daddy was not a fall-asleep-happy kind of alcoholic but a vicious mean beat-your-wife-and-then-ask-God-for-forgiveness drunk.

It all came to a head when thirteen-year-old Mackenzie reluctantly bared his soul to a church leader during a youth revival. Overtaken by the conviction of the moment, Mack confessed in tears that he hadn't done anything to help his mama as he witnessed, on more than one occasion, his drunken dad beat her unconscious. What Mack failed to consider was that his confessor worked and churched with his father, and by the time he got home his daddy was waiting for him on the front porch with his mama and sisters conspicuously absent. He later learned that they had been shuttled off to his Aunt May's in order to give his father some freedom to teach his rebellious son a lesson about respect. For almost two days, tied to the big oak at the back of the house, he was beaten with a belt and Bible verses every time his dad woke from a stupor and put down his bottle.

Two weeks later, when Mack was finally able to put one foot in front of the other again, he just up and walked away from home. But before he left, he put varmint poison in every bottle of booze he could find on the farm. He then unearthed from next to the outhouse the small tin box housing all his earthly treasures: one photograph of the family with everybody squinting as they looked into the sun (his daddy standing off to one side), a 1950 Luke Easter rookie baseball card, a little bottle that contained about an ounce of Ma Griffe (the only perfume his mama had ever worn), a spool of thread and a couple needles, a small silver die-cast U.S. Air Force F-86 Jet, and his entire life savings—$15.13. He crept back into the house and slipped a note under his mama's pillow while his father lay snoring off another binge. It just said, "Someday I hope you can forgive me." He swore he would never look back, and he didn't—not for a long time.

Thirteen is too young to be all grown up, but Mack had little choice and adapted quickly. He doesn't talk much about the years that followed. Most of it was spent overseas, working his way around the world, sending money to his grandparents, who passed it on to his mama. In one of those distant countries I think he even picked up a gun in some kind of terrible conflict; he's hated war with a dark passion ever since I've known him. Whatever happened, in his early twenties he eventually ended up in a seminary in Australia. When Mack had his fill of theology and philosophy he came back to the States, made peace with his mama and sisters, and moved out to Oregon where he met and married Nannette A. Samuelson.

In a world of talkers, Mack is a thinker and doer. He doesn't say much unless you ask him directly, which most folks have learned not to do. When he does speak you wonder if he isn't some sort of alien who sees the landscape of human ideas and experiences differently than everybody else.

The thing is, he usually makes uncomfortable sense in a world where most folks would rather just hear what they are used to hearing, which is often not much of anything. Those who know him generally like him well enough, providing he keeps his thoughts mostly to himself. And when he does talk, it isn't that they stop liking him—rather, they are not quite so satisfied with themselves.

Mack once told me that he used to speak his mind more freely in his younger years, but he admitted that most of such talk was a survival mechanism to cover his hurts; he often ended up spewing his pain on everyone around him. He says that he had a way of pointing out people's faults and humiliating them while maintaining his own sense of false power and control. Not too endearing.

As I pen these words, I reflect on the Mack I've always known—quite ordinary, and certainly not anyone particularly special, except to those who truly know him. He is just about to turn fifty-six, and he is a rather unremarkable, slightly

overweight, balding, short white guy, which describes a lot of men in these parts. You probably wouldn't notice him in a crowd or feel uncomfortable sitting next to him while he snoozes on the MAX (metro-transit) during his once-a-week trip into town for a sales meeting. He does most of his work from a little home office at his place up on Wildcat Road. He sells something high tech and gadgety that I don't pretend to understand: techno gizmos that somehow make everything go faster, as if life weren't going fast enough already.

You don't realize how smart Mack is unless you happen to eavesdrop on a dialogue he might be having with an expert. I've been there, when suddenly the language being spoken hardly resembles English, and I find myself struggling to grasp the concepts spilling out like a tumbling river of gemstones. He can speak intelligently about most anything, and even though you sense he has strong convictions, he has a gentle way about him that lets you keep yours.

His favorite topics are all about God and Creation and why people believe what they do. His eyes light up and he gets this smile that curls at the corners of his lips, and suddenly, like a little kid, the tiredness melts away and he becomes ageless and hardly able to contain himself. But at the same time, Mack is not very religious. He seems to have a love/hate relationship with Religion, and maybe even with the God that he suspects is brooding, distant, and aloof. Little barbs of sarcasm occasionally spill through the cracks in his reserve like piercing darts dipped in poison from a well deep inside. Although we sometimes both show up on Sundays at the same local pew and pulpit Bible church (the 55th Independent Assembly of Saint John the Baptist, we like to call it), you can tell that he is not too comfortable there.

Mack has been married to Nan for just more than thirty-three mostly happy years. He says she saved his life and paid a high price to do it. For some reason, beyond understanding, she seems to love him now more than ever, even though I get the sense that he hurt her something fierce in the early

years. I suppose that since most of our hurts come through relationships so will our healing, and I know that grace rarely makes sense for those looking in from the outside.

In any case, Mack married up. Nan is the mortar that holds the tiles of their family together. While Mack has struggled in a world with many shades of gray, hers is mostly black and white. Common sense comes so naturally to Nan that she can't even see it for the gift it is. Raising a family kept her from pursuing dreams of becoming a doctor, but as a nurse she has excelled and gained considerable recognition for her chosen work with oncology patients who are terminal. While Mack's relationship with God is wide, Nan's is deep.

This oddly matched pair are the parents of five unusually beautiful kids. Mack likes to say that they all got their good looks from him, "…cuz Nan still has hers." Two of the three boys are out of the house: Jon, newly married, works in sales for a local company, and Tyler, a recent college grad, is off at school working on a master's degree. Josh and one of the two girls, Katherine (Kate), are still at home and attend the local community college. Then there is the late arrival, Melissa—or Missy, as we were fond of calling her. She…well, you'll get to know some of them better in these pages.

The last few years have been, how might I put this, remarkably peculiar. Mack has changed; he is now even more different and special than he used to be. In all the time I have known him he has been a rather gentle and kind soul, but since his stay in the hospital three years ago, he has been… well, even nicer. He's become one of those rare people who are totally at home in their own skin. And I feel at home around him like I do with nobody else. When we go our separate ways it seems that I have just had the best conversation of my life, even if I usually did most of the talking. And with respect to God, Mack is no longer just wide, he has gone way deep. But the dive cost him dearly.

These days are very different than seven or so years ago, when *The Great Sadness* entered his life and he almost quit

talking altogether. About that time and for almost two years our hanging out stopped, as if by some unspoken mutual agreement. I only saw Mack occasionally at the local grocery store or even more rarely at church, and although a polite hug was usually exchanged, not much of any consequence was spoken. It was even difficult for him to look me in the eyes; maybe he didn't want to enter a conversation that might tear the scab off his wounded heart.

But that all changed after a nasty accident with… But there I go again, getting ahead of myself. We'll get to all that in due time. Just to say that these last few years seem to have given Mack his life back and lifted the burden of *The Great Sadness*. What happened three years ago totally changed the melody of his life and it's a song I can't wait to play for you.

Although he communicates well enough verbally, Mack is not comfortable with his writing skills—something that he knows I am passionate about. So he asked if I would ghost-write this story—his story, "for the kids and for Nan." He wanted a narrative to help him express to them not only the depth of his love, but also to help them understand what had been going on in his inside world. You know that place: where there is just you alone—and maybe God, if you believe in him. Of course, God might be there even if you *don't* believe in him. That would be just like him. He hasn't been called the Grand Interferer for nothing.

What you are about to read is something that Mack and I have struggled with for many months to put into words. It's a little, well…no, it is a *lot* on the fantastic side. Whether some parts of it are actually true or not, I won't be the judge. Suffice it to say that while some things may not be scientifically provable, they can still be true nonetheless. I will tell you honestly that being a part of this story has affected me deep inside, in places I had never been before and didn't even know existed; I confess to you that I desperately want everything Mack has told me to be true. Most days I am right there with him, but on others—when the visible world of concrete

and computers seem to be the *real* world—I lose touch and have my doubts.

A couple of final disclaimers: Mack would like you to know that if you happen upon this story and hate it, he says, "Sorry…but it wasn't primarily written for you." Then again, maybe it was. What you are about to read is the best Mack can remember about what happened. This is *his* story, not mine, so the few times I show up, I'll refer to myself in the third person—from Mack's point of view.

Memory can be a tricky companion at times, especially with the accident, and I would not be too surprised, in spite of our concerted effort toward accuracy, if some factual errors and faulty remembrances are reflected in these pages. They are not intentional. I can promise you that the conversations and events are recorded as truthfully as Mack can remember them, so please try and cut him a little slack. As you'll see, these are not easy things to talk about.

—Willie

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A Confluence of Paths

Two roads diverged in the middle of my life,
I heard a wise man say
I took the road less traveled by
And that's made the difference every night and every day

—Larry Norman *(with apologies to Robert Frost)*

March unleashed a torrent of rainfall after an abnormally dry winter. A cold front out of Canada then descended and was held in place by a swirling wind that roared down the Gorge from eastern Oregon. Although spring was surely just around the corner, the god of winter was not about to relinquish its hard-won dominion without a tussle. There was a blanket of new snow in the Cascades, and rain was now freezing on impact with the frigid ground outside the house; enough reason for Mack to snuggle up with a book and a hot cider and wrap up in the warmth of a crackling fire.

But instead, he spent the better part of the morning telecommuting into his downtown desktop. Sitting comfortably in his home office wearing pajama pants and a T-shirt, he made his sales calls, mostly to the East Coast. He paused frequently, listening to the sound of crystalline rain tinging off his window and watching the slow but steady accumulation of frozen ice thickening on everything outside. He was becoming inexorably trapped as an ice-prisoner in his own home—much to his delight.

There is something joyful about storms that interrupt routine. Snow or freezing rain suddenly releases you from expectations, performance demands, and the tyranny of appointments and schedules. And unlike illness, it is largely a corporate rather than individual experience. One can almost hear a unified sigh rise from the nearby city and surrounding countryside where Nature has intervened to give respite to the weary humans slogging it out within her purview. All those affected this way are united by a mutual excuse, and the heart is suddenly and unexpectedly a little giddy. There will be no apologies needed for not showing up to some commitment or other. Everyone understands and shares in this singular justification, and the sudden alleviation of the pressure to produce makes the heart merry.

Of course, it is also true that storms interrupt business and, while a few companies make a bit extra, some companies lose money—meaning there are those who find no joy when everything shuts down temporarily. But they can't blame anyone for their loss of production, or for not being able to make it to the office. Even if it's hardly more than a day or two, somehow each person feels like the master of his or her own world, simply because those little droplets of water freeze as they hit the ground.

Even commonplace activities become extraordinary. Routine choices become adventures and are often experienced with a sense of heightened clarity. Late in the afternoon, Mack bundled up and headed outdoors to struggle the hundred or so yards down the long driveway to the mailbox. The ice had magically turned this simple everyday task into a foray against the elements: the raising of his fist in opposition to the brute power of nature and, in an act of defiance, laughing in its face. The fact that no one would notice or care mattered little to him—just the thought made him smile inside.

The icy rain pellets stung his cheeks and hands as he carefully worked his way up and down the slight undulations of the driveway; he looked, he supposed, like a drunken

sailor gingerly heading toward the next watering hole. When you face the force of an ice storm, you don't exactly walk boldly forward in a show of unbridled confidence. Bluster will get you battered. Mack had to get up off his knees twice before he was finally hugging the mailbox like some long-lost friend.

He paused to take in the beauty of a world engulfed in crystal. Everything reflected light and contributed to the heightened brilliance of the late afternoon. The trees in the neighbor's field had all donned translucent mantles and each now stood unique but unified in their presentation. It was a glorious world and for a brief moment its blazing splendor almost lifted, even if only for a few seconds, *The Great Sadness* from Mack's shoulders.

It took almost a minute to knock off the ice that had already sealed shut the door of the mailbox. The reward for his efforts was a single envelope with only his first name typewritten on the outside; no stamp, no postmark, and no return address. Curious, he tore the end off the envelope, which was no easy task with fingers beginning to stiffen from the cold. Turning his back to the breath-snatching wind, he finally coaxed the single small rectangle of unfolded paper out of its nest. The typewritten message simply said:

> Mackenzie,
>
> It's been a while. I've missed you.
>
> I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together.
>
> —Papa

Mack stiffened as a wave of nausea rolled over him and then just as quickly mutated into anger. He purposely thought about the shack as little as possible and even when he did his thoughts were neither kind nor good. If this was someone's idea of a bad joke they had truly outdone themselves. And to sign it "Papa" just made it all the more horrifying.

"Idiot," he grunted, thinking about Tony the mailman; an overly friendly Italian with a big heart but little tact. Why would he even deliver such a ridiculous envelope? It wasn't even stamped. Mack angrily stuffed the envelope and note into his coat pocket and turned to start the slide back in the general direction of the house. Buffeting gusts of wind, which had initially slowed him, now shortened the time it took to traverse the mini glacier that was thickening beneath his feet.

He was doing just fine, thank you, until he reached that place in the driveway that sloped a little downward and to the left. Without any effort or intention he began to build up speed, sliding on shoes with soles that had about as much traction as a duck landing on a frozen pond. Arms flailing wildly in hopes of somehow maintaining the potential for balance, Mack found himself careening directly toward the only tree of any substantial size bordering the driveway—the one whose lower limbs he had hacked off only a few short months before. Now it stood eager to embrace him, half naked and seemingly anxious for a little retribution. In a fraction of a thought he chose the chicken's way out and tried to plop himself down by allowing his feet to slip out from under him—which is what they had naturally wanted to do anyway. Better to have a sore butt than pick slivers out of his face.

But the adrenaline rush caused him to over compensate, and in slow motion Mack watched his feet rise up in front of him as if jerked up by some jungle trap. He hit hard, back of the head first, and skidded to a heap at the base of the shimmering tree, which seemed to stand over him with a smug look mixed with disgust and not a little disappointment.

The world went momentarily black, or so it seemed. He lay there dazed and staring up into the sky, squinting as the icy precipitation rapidly cooled his flushed face. For a fleeting pause, everything felt oddly warm and peaceful, his ire momentarily knocked out by the impact. "Now, who's the idiot?" he muttered to himself, hoping that no one had been watching.

Cold was creeping quickly through his coat and sweater and Mack knew the ice rain that was both melting and freezing beneath him would soon become a major discomfort. Groaning and feeling like a much older man, he rolled onto his hands and knees. It was then that he saw the bright red skid mark tracing his journey from point of impact to final destination. As if birthed by the sudden awareness of his injury, a dull pounding began crawling up the back of his head. Instinctively, he reached for the source of the drum beat and brought his hand away bloody.

With rough ice and sharp gravel gouging his hands and knees, Mack half crawled and half slid until he eventually made it to a level part of the driveway. With not a little effort he was finally able to stand and gingerly inch his way toward the house, humbled by the powers of ice and gravity.

Once inside, Mack methodically shed the layers of outerwear as best he could, his half-frozen fingers responding with about as much dexterity as oversized clubs at the ends of his arms. He decided to leave the drizzly bloodstained mess right where he doffed it in the entryway and retreated painfully to the bathroom to examine his wounds. There was no question that the icy driveway had won. The gash on the back of his head was oozing around a few small pebbles still embedded in his scalp. As he had feared, a significant lump had already formed, emerging like a humpbacked whale breaching the wild waves of his thinning hair.

Mack found it a difficult chore to patch himself up by trying to see the back of his head using a small hand-held mirror that reflected a reverse image off the bathroom mirror. A short frustration later he gave up, unable to get his hands to go in the right directions and unsure which of the two mirrors was lying to him. By gingerly probing around the soggy gash he succeeded in picking out the biggest pieces of debris, until it hurt too much to continue. Grabbing some first-aid ointment and plugging the wound as best he could, he then tied a washcloth to the back of his head with some

gauze he found in a bathroom drawer. Glancing at himself in the mirror, he thought he looked a little like some rough sailor out of *Moby Dick*. It made him laugh, then wince.

He would have to wait until Nan made it home before he would get any real medical attention; one of the many benefits of being married to a registered nurse. Anyway, he knew that the worse it looked the more sympathy he would get. There is often some compensation in every trial, if one looked hard enough. He swallowed a couple over-the-counter painkillers to dull the throbbing and limped toward the front entry.

Not for an instant had Mack forgotten about the note. Rummaging through the pile of wet and bloody clothing he finally found it in his coat pocket, glanced at it and then headed back into his office. He located the post office number and dialed it. As expected, Annie, the matronly postmaster and keeper of everyone's secrets, answered the phone. "Hi, is Tony in by chance?"

"Hey, Mack, is that you? Recognized your voice." Of course she did. "Sorry, but Tony ain't back yet. In fact I just talked to him on the radio and he's only made it halfway up Wildcat, not even to your place yet. Do ya need me to have him call ya, or would ya just like to leave a message?"

"Oh, hi. Is that you, Annie?" He couldn't resist, even though her Midwestern accent left no doubt. "Sorry, I was busy for a second there. Didn't hear a word you said."

She laughed. "Now Mack, I know you heard every word. Don't you be goin' and tryin' to kid a kidder. I wasn't born yesterday, ya know. Whaddya want me to tell him if he makes it back alive?"

"Actually, you already answered my question."

There was a pause at the other end. "Actually, I don't remember you askin' a question. What's wrong with you, Mack? Still smoking too much dope or do you just do that on Sunday mornings to make it through the church service?" At this she started to laugh, as if caught off guard by the brilliance of her own sense of humor.

"Now Annie, you know I don't smoke dope—never did, and don't ever want to." Of course Annie knew no such thing, but Mack was taking no chances on how she might remember the conversation in a day or two. Wouldn't be the first time that her sense of humor morphed into a good story that soon became "fact." He could see his name being added to the church prayer chain. "It's okay, I'll just catch Tony some other time, no big deal."

"Okay then, just stay indoors where it's safe. Don't ya know, an old guy like you coulda lost his sense of balance over the years. Wouldn't wanna see ya slip and hurt your pride. Way things are shapin' up, Tony might not make it up to your place at all. We can do snow, sleet, and darkness of night pretty well, but this frozen rain stuff. It's a challenge to be sure."

"Thanks, Annie. I'll try and remember your advice. Talk to you later. Bye now." His head was pounding more than ever; little trip hammers beating to the rhythm of his heart. "That's odd," he thought, "who would dare put something like that in *our* mailbox?" The painkillers had not yet fully kicked in, but were present enough to dull the edge of worry that he was starting to feel, and he was suddenly very tired. Laying his head down on the desk, he thought he had just dropped off to sleep when the phone startled him awake.

"Uh . . . hello?"

"Hi, love. You sound like you've been asleep." It was Nan, sounding unusually cheery, even though he felt he could hear the underlying sadness that lurked just beneath the surface of every conversation. She loved this kind of weather as much as he usually did. He switched on the desk lamp and glanced at the clock, surprised that he had been out for a couple hours.

"Uh, sorry. I guess I dozed off for a bit."

"Well, you sound a little groggy. Is everything all right?"

"Yup." Even though it was almost dark outside, Mack could see that the storm had not let up. It had even deposited

a couple more inches of ice. Tree branches were hanging low, and he knew some would eventually break from the weight, especially if the wind kicked up. "I had a little tussle with the driveway when I got the mail, but other than that, everything is fine. Where are you?"

"I'm still at Arlene's, and I think me and the kids'll spend the night here. It's always good for Kate to be around the family…seems to restore a little balance." Arlene was Nan's sister who lived across the river in Washington. "Anyway, it's really too slick to go out. Hopefully it'll break up by morning. I wish I had made it home before it got so bad, but oh well." She paused. "How's it up at the house?"

"Well, it's absolutely stunningly beautiful, and a whole lot safer to look at than walk in, trust me. I, for sure, don't want you to try and get up here in this mess. Nothing's moving. I don't even think Tony was able to bring us the mail."

"I thought you already got the mail?" she queried.

"Nope, I didn't actually get the mail. I thought Tony had already come and I went out to get it. There," he hesitated, looking down at the note that lay on the desk where he had placed it, "wasn't any mail yet. I called Annie and she said Tony probably wouldn't be able to make it up the hill, and I'm not going out there again to see if he did.

"Anyway," he quickly changed the subject to avoid more questions, "how is Kate doing over there?"

There was a pause and then a long sigh. When Nan spoke her voice was hushed to a whisper and he could tell she was covering her mouth on the other end. "Mack, I wish I knew. She is just like talking to a rock, and no matter what I do I can't get through. When we're around family she seems to come out of her shell some, but then she disappears again. I just don't know what to do. I've been praying and praying that Papa would help us find a way to reach her, but . . ." she paused again, "it feels like he isn't listening."

There it was. Papa was Nan's favorite name for God and it expressed her delight in the intimate friendship she had with him.

"Honey, I'm sure God knows what he's doing. It will all work out." The words brought him no comfort but he hoped they might ease the worry he could hear in her voice.

"I know," she sighed. "I just wish he'd hurry up."

"Me too," was all Mack could think to say. "Well, you and the kids stay put and stay safe, and tell Arlene and Jimmy hi, and thank them for me. Hopefully I will see you tomorrow."

"Okay, love. I should go and help the others. Everyone's busy looking for candles in case the power goes out. You should probably do the same. There's some above the sink in the basement, and there's leftover stuffed bread dough in the fridge that you can heat up. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, my pride is hurt more than anything."

"Well take it easy, and hopefully we'll see you in the morning."

"All right honey. Be safe and call me if you need anything. Bye."

It was kind of a dumb thing to say, he thought as he hung up the phone. Kind of a manly dumb thing, as if he could help if they needed anything.

Mack sat and stared at the note. It was confusing and painful trying to sort out the swirling cacophony of disturbing emotions and dark images clouding his mind—a million thoughts traveling a million miles an hour. Finally, he gave up, folded the note, slid it into a small tin box he kept on the desk, and switched off the light.

Mack managed to find something to heat up in the microwave, then he grabbed a couple of blankets and pillows and headed for the living room. A quick glance at the clock told him that Bill Moyer's show had just started; a favorite program that he tried never to miss. Moyer was one of a handful of people whom Mack would love to meet; a brilliant and outspoken man, able to express intense compassion

for both people and truth with unusual clarity. One of the stories tonight had something to do with oilman Boone Pickens, who was now starting to drill for water, of all things.

Almost without thinking, and without taking his eyes off the television, Mack reached over to the end table, picked up a photo frame holding a picture of a little girl, and clutched it to his chest. With the other hand he pulled the blankets up under his chin and hunkered deeper into the sofa.

Soon the sounds of gentle snoring filled the air as the media tube turned its attention to a piece on a high school senior in Zimbabwe, who had been beaten for speaking out against his government. But Mack had already left the room to wrestle with his dreams; maybe tonight there would be no nightmares, only visions, perhaps, of ice and trees and gravity.