

## Three Labors

by Jake Maynard

Following a map penciled on the back of a receipt, Ike walked across the city to meet the guru he'd finally tracked down. Having heard that the guru was very selective, he'd dressed himself as spiritually as possible—a loose, patchwork shirt cut deep down the front, drawn together at the neck with rawhide lace. Bell-bottoms. A hemp necklace with a little vial tied to the end. The vial was empty because he thought the symbol of an empty vessel would appeal to the guru. In the same way, Ike wished it would rain. A soggy pilgrim might look more committed.

But it didn't rain by the time he found it—a fourth floor Victorian walk-up with a staircase so narrow Ike could reach across and touch both walls at once. The steps sagged. This was not how he'd imagined climbing toward absolution. He hadn't actually considered an apartment at all; in his mind, the guru rested on beaches or under cherry trees.

For the last five years, Ike had investigated stories of this guru's accomplishments. The guru supposedly cured the manically depressed.

The shell-shocked. Drunks, junkies. Celebrities, killers, victims. You name it. Someone always knew someone who'd been transformed, but Ike had never met any of the guru's pupils firsthand.

Ike thought the guru should be wearing linen robes, but the man answered the door in faded blue jeans and a canvas button-up. He was white, paler than Ike from lack of sun. They looked a lot alike. The same brown curls, the same svelte lips. But the guru was too symmetrical, almost uncanny. He didn't share Ike's sun-pitted temples, his twice-broke nose.

"I am Ike," Ike said, stammering.

"You took an awfully long time getting here."

The guru looked him up and down, approved, and welcomed him into the apartment. The place was odd-shaped, its many doors bedazzled with bead curtains. Spider plants hung over each of the arched windows, stretching for the sun. The carpet below was a tacky orange, so shaggy that Ike imagined mowing it as the two sat down opposite one another in the living room. A coffee table fashioned from the crosscut of a huge redwood tree was between them, a copy of *Rolling Stone* sitting on top.

"Some tree," Ike said, running his hand over the varnished rings.

"Like trees, do you?" The guru asked, disinterested.

"I work at a sawmill. Or, I did. It has to be eight or nine years ago now."

"Please, Ike. No backstory."

A spicy smell was gliding in from the kitchen. Ike hadn't eaten a real meal in days.

"Anyway," the guru said, "what it is that you seek?"

"Forgiveness, or absolution."

"Well which is it?"

"Either."

"Please, Ike. Use specific language in my home."

"Forgiveness. I need forgiveness. You have no idea how much I need it."

"I don't, nor do I want to. But forgiveness *is* my specialty. It's quite simple. You do exactly as I say, no wavering. You complete three labors. Then, at the end, either you are forgiven or you are not."

"And if it doesn't work?"

The guru clicked his tongue. "You're already off to a poor start here, Ike."

"Don't you want to know what I've done?"

"Who is to say that I don't?"

"I really feel like I should tell you, because, what if it's unforgivable?"

"I do this almost every day, Ike. You want what they all want. Whatever you did, whoever you are, or were—it's not that special. You're just another story to me."

The guru picked lint from his shirt and flicked it into the carpet. "Don't try to think too hard about this, Ike. There will be plenty of time for that later. For now, you have your first labor."

"Can I ask two questions first?"

The guru shrugged, nodded.

"What do I call you?"

"You don't."

"And about payment?"

"Payment!" A hard grin rose on the guru's face. He was frustrated, and it showed. Ike felt reassured by his reaction, a little sign of humanity.

"Look," the guru said, snapping his fingers. "From here on, you only *do*. First, you will go up into the mountains, near Mt. Desolation. And you will spend seven days there, and you will drink only water and eat only huckleberries. And you will sleep on rocks. And at night, when you get cold, you will lift rocks and set them back down again until you are warm."

He stopped and waited for Ike to make eye contact before continuing. "And then, on the seventh day, you will catch lightning. And you will bring it back to me."

Ike raised a finger, squinted, and said, "that's a metaphor, right?"

"You're not as dumb as you look. Now go."

"How will you know if I follow the rules?" Ike asked, standing and fingering the vial around his neck.

"Maybe you are as dumb as you look. Get."

Ike walked to the door and stood at the threshold, looking back at the guru as if for encouragement. He watched the guru pull a small

clipboard from the end table drawer and begin writing notes.

Nine days later Ike returned, covered in sand and filth. His skin was chapped by sun and wind; his bottom lip was split like an overripe tomato. His clothes were torn. The vial around his neck was filled with sand. His left hand was wrapped with a tube-sock leeching brown blood.

The guru answered the door with alarm in his eyes.

“Jesus Christ, Ike. Did you come straight here?”

“Where else would I go,” he said. And with that, he fainted and fell headlong over the threshold.

When he awoke, he found himself on a bamboo mat. His body was clean, dressed in fresh underwear. The wound on his palm, earned while lifting a boulder, had been bandaged.

The room was dark, cool, and quiet. It smelled as if something was in bloom. Chimes chimed softly. Again he slept, awaking hours later confused and sore. A pitcher of water sat beside him, next to crisply folded blue jeans and a canvas shirt. He drank, dressed, and left the room to find himself in the guru’s apartment.

“Come, sit,” the guru said. “Sit and eat and tell me what you know.” On the coffee table, a tray steamed—rice and beans, half a grapefruit, black coffee.

Ike sat and explained. There’d been moments in the wilderness that had felt profound. Others had felt plain stupid. On the fifth night, while a storm fumed in the distance, he thought he could feel forgiveness coming but it turned out to be the static in the air. Now, nothing made sense. All he knew was that he had to pee but was too afraid to ask to use the restroom.

“Whose forgiveness do you seek?” the guru asked.

“My own. God’s. My family’s. I don’t know.”

“Good, very good.”

“I already knew that. Or knew that I didn’t know.”

“To be certain of uncertainty is certainty, Ike.”

Ike was too tired for paradox. He could never stand grapefruit, its bitter tang and sticky labor, but he ate it anyway. A penance. He’d staked it all on this guru. He had no money, no future, nothing but a full bladder.

An awkward minute passed. Quiet. When it was clear the guru was not going to speak, Ike mustered the courage to talk.

“Can I ask you—really ask you—what the point of that was?”

“If you need to ask, you don’t deserve to know.”

Ike felt like a valve inside of him was slowly being turned open.

“Well, let’s not waste any more time here,” the guru said. “You’ve had your rest and your meal and you’re young and fit.” The guru lifted his arms, exaggeratedly, and flexed. “Let’s get you going on your second labor.”

He disappeared through a door off the living room and returned with a bulging green duffle.

“Why are you weeping?” the guru asked.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“No.”

He handed Ike the duffle. “Rope,” he said. “To climb.” He mimicked a man climbing a rope. “Go north to the Redwoods. Or South to the Sequoias. I could care less. Or, I couldn’t care less. Whichever.”

“Okay.”

“Climb high up into a tree. A hundred feet, at least. Climb and sit there for seven days, and then return. Because I like you, Ike, I have decided to give you some food. Consider yourself lucky.”

He then gave Ike a paper bag full of grapefruit and raw carrots and hurried him into the hall. Ike wanted to object, but he couldn’t think of anything to say.

Ten days later Ike returned emaciated. His clothes hung tattered, and his arms were shellacked with pine pitch. He barely had the strength to rap his knuckles on the door. He staggered like a drunk and his eyes struggled to focus.

“Come in, come in, old friend,” the guru said. He was dressed the same as always. An empty burlap coffee sack flopped in his hand.

Ike entered, still unforgiven.

“Before we talk, I want to show you something,” the guru said, more animated than usual. He led Ike across the living room to a painting that Ike had never noticed before. On the canvas, a bearded giant held a corpse in his hands. The corpse’s head had been bitten off. The bloody nub of an arm flailed near the giant’s mouth. All of it was

rendered in long, clotted brush strokes.

There was a panic in the giant's eyes. But still it ate. Ike moved closer.

"It's *Saturn*," the guru said. "Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*. Like the myth."

Ike's legs wobbled below him. The guru spoke excitedly, a warble in his voice. "Goya, you know, didn't believe in reading—just painting and conversation. He went deaf from the lead in his own paint!"

Ike nodded, wondering why everything had to be such a goddamned riddle.

"Goya supposedly hid a message in the giant's left eye." Ike leaned closer, and the next thing he knew the sack was over his head and drawn shut. He flailed, gasping, seeing the world only through the pinholes of light poking through. He screamed, swung his fists wildly. He ran headlong into the sofa and flipped over onto his face.

"This is labor number three," the guru said, "and it'll be easier for both of us if you just calm the hell down."

Ike hollered, punching empty air and scrambled to his feet. The blurred shape of the guru moved toward him, quick, cat-like, juking side-to-side as it came. Then, a sharp crack on the side of the head. Ike lost all sense of up and down.

He came to with a throbbing headache and blood crusted in his hair. The sack was gone. His eyes opened to blackness and a pain like a blanket of quills.

"Hello?" he whispered, his own voice a siren in his ears.

"Sorry for the crack in the head, friend." The guru sounded distant. "But you just wouldn't listen."

Quiet.

Then, "Here we are—the third labor. You have twelve hours to forgive yourself for what you've done. Twelve hours for you to define forgiveness, and for you to apply it. If you do not, I am literally going to murder you."

For some reason he couldn't understand, Ike began to laugh.

"I may shoot you. I may poison you with chlorine gas. I might just allow you to dehydrate, or maybe I'll give you a whole bottle of sleeping pills so you can do it yourself. Hell, Ike, I might even come in

there and smother you when you're too weak to fight back."

Ike thought of the rumors he'd picked up over the years. He'd never met a pupil firsthand. Was this why he never found the forgiven? Were they any? Maybe, Ike decided. Maybe he was dealing with a certifiable psychopath—Oh well.

Lying there wrapped in a wool blanket, Ike washed in and out of consciousness, concussed, while the guru counted down. Eleven hours. Ten hours. Nine hours. Eight. Ike let it come. At hour seven he spoke quietly to the woolly darkness. "In the tree, you know, something strange happened."

"What's that?" the woolly darkness answered.

"At first, I would rope myself to the tree at night to sleep. But, on the third day I forgot. When I woke up I looked down at the ground and I could see my body down there, broken on the rocks."

"Go on."

"Eventually I just kind of accepted it, that my body was down there, crumpled and dead, and also up there with me at the same time."

"Okay."

"And when I ate, I could see right into myself. The bites of carrot sliding into my stomach. I was like frosted glass. I could see inside, but only a little."

The guru laughed. A deep belly laugh that covered Ike like alcohol.

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Not at all, Ike. Not in the slightest. Looking *in* is not remotely the point. We don't do talk therapy here."

Eventually Ike's eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could see the faint threads of yellow light outlining a door. It was a windowless room. The desert, the forest, and now a windowless room. The guru was far from subtle, Ike thought, as he traced the room's perimeter, just a few steps each way. No cracks, no escape. He focused what little energy he had at that door. He grabbed the knob and lifted with all of his strength.

He shouldered it.

He punched it and elbowed it until a fierce electric pain surged through him.

He took two running steps and leapt at it.

He reared back and kicked. Once, twice, and on the third his ankle twisted and could take no more weight. What good is a body, he thought, flopping onto the floor. He'd wait it out, hope for sleeping pills. The concussion pounded behind his eyes. Sleep swelled in him, no matter how he tried to fight it. He felt cold, then chilled, then chilled but sweating. He wrapped the wool blanket tightly around his body and shivered himself to sleep.

With one hour left, the guru banged on the door and reminded Ike that he was just sixty minutes away from what would probably be an agonizing death.

Ike was jolted into a panic. The blanket was tangled all around him. He was unbearably hot, the wool itching and scratching at his raw skin. He thrashed, spasmodic, and when the blanket came loose, it happened. Not like an epiphany. Instead it arrived as if it were leaving, like walking backwards. A word on his tongue forgotten, swallowed instead of remembered. He reached up and touched the doorknob's backplate and there he found the flip lock. Of course he hadn't noticed it. Of course there was a lock, he thought. It had to be this way. That guru and his tricks. So obvious, so dumb.

Ike flipped the lock, turned the knob, and crawled out into the guru's living room.

"I'm cured," he said to the back of the guru's head. Behind the guru, the painting was gone, the wall naked without it.

The guru dog-eared his page, tossed the magazine on the table, and rose.

"Really," Ike said. "The guilt, the shame. It's gone. I get it."

Then they were touching, the guru helping Ike to his feet. "Good luck," he said, tousling Ike's bloody hair. "Everything should fall right into place for you now."

Together they walked to the front door, Ike feeling a tremor of relief jitter through his body. He was limping, but it didn't matter to him. He thought about how he had first stood in that spot just weeks before. But now it was as if he'd read it in a story; it was someone else that had stood there. Not him.

The guru said, "This is good. There's nothing like ending on an

up-note."

Ike nodded.

"So, how'd you get there?" the guru asked. "Was it the windowless room itself, or was it finding the lock within it?"

"Neither."

"It was the Goya, then."

"No."

"Ah." The guru tapped his temple. "The forest makes sense, thematically. Just took you some time to process it, huh?"

"Actually it was the wool blanket," Ike said. "I get it now. Your past is like a wool blanket. Wrap yourself too tightly in it and..."

The Guru slammed the door on Ike and walked across the room, shaking his head as if a leaf had fallen into his hair. He entered a small room off the living room, separated by bead curtains. In the room lay hundreds of paintings shelved vertically like books. He grabbed one at random, blew the dust off it, and hung it on the nail in the living room. It was some red color-field thing, little more than a big blurry square. The guru couldn't remember with certainty if it was a Rothko, who he'd thought had committed suicide, so he made a mental note to look it up before the next pupil arrived. The painting hung crooked. The guru adjusted it, looked, and adjusted it again. Satisfied, he returned to his magazine but found himself reading the same line again and again. He thought about the wool blanket. He'd never heard that one before. It was funny that they always found something of significance during the third labor. It was always the third, the one with consequence. The first two were basically just for show.