

**FRACTAL
DESPONDENCY**
Trent Zelazny

For Angelyn, my love.
You left this world too soon.

"My melancholy is the most faithful sweetheart I have had."

—Søren Kierkegaard

**FRACTAL
RESPONDENCY**

1

Blake watched the beautiful New Mexico sunset, its oranges and purples and blues and yellows, thankful to be back. The heat was intense but at least it didn't have the humidity he'd never grown accustomed to in Florida. He likely could have spent his entire life in Florida and never gotten used to it.

The light diminished as he walked, blue to purple to darker purple and moving toward utter darkness. He briefly removed his baseball cap and scratched his buzz-cut head, listened to the traffic of Rodeo Road in the near distance. Any minute he would be walking alongside it, the sound of fast-moving cars rushing in his ears.

Work.

Walking, he thought about it. What did it do for him? Six days a week he busted his ass rattling off specials and carrying trays and listening to people complain. Unappreciated and thankless work, and not enough money to compensate for it—barely enough to cover expenses, which, all things considered, were not unreasonable.

He was glad to be back in New Mexico, but displeased to put himself back in the same rut.

The traffic was heavier now, a wash of running engines roaring. In another minute or so he would see the diner, and already knew that the knot would develop in his stomach. The knot that spoke to him. The knot that always spoke to him. The knot that told him he was allowing himself to die again. He was killing himself again. He wished the knot away but felt it growing inside him like a malignant tumor.

Clouds converged above him. The sky was dark but the clouds were darker. Maybe rain. It hadn't rained in Santa Fe since he'd returned, and while he detested the humidity of Florida, he hoped for rain now. The desert is a different world. A dry, skin-cracking world, and rain would be a welcomed gift.

The diner came into sight. The knot grew, tightened. It got tighter and evolved into fiery pain and he almost brought a hand to his stomach but forced himself not to. He was known in Santa Fe and didn't want to run into anyone while clutching his gut. He still wasn't thrilled about returning and, good or bad, he still had an ego. Or pride. Still ashamed but not trying to hide anything, the bandage on his wrist constantly stood out to him like a brand new tattoo. Most people he'd run into asked about it. He simply shrugged and said he'd had an accident.

Fairly accurate. While it wasn't an accident, it also was. He hadn't wanted to do it, but wasn't sure at the time that he had any choice. There had been a lot of blood. A crimson geyser that ruined the carpet and several papers in his Florida home.

Thunder crackled. Rain seemed more and more likely but he knew it was still far-fetched. Santa Fe liked to tease that way. He removed his hat and scratched his head again.

The diner was no more than fifty feet away now. He stared at the sign. He hated the sight of it. Hated the entire parking lot. The knot grew and tightened. Made him ill.

He stood and watched the diner. It looked busy. The idea of crossing the threshold was sickening and so he simply stayed where he was looking at it. It became a blackboard with vibrant colorful chalk, sketching out his fate in pink and red and white and blue.

He wanted to turn away but the diner was a magnet and he couldn't do anything but stare at it.

Then, as if from mist, a shape emerged out of the right-sided darkness. It generated more form, went from shape to silhouette to person. Hair just beyond shoulder-length. Blonde or red, he couldn't tell. Possibly a mix. Strawberry blonde, maybe. There was an unlit cigarette wedged between her left-handed fingers.

"You smoke?"

Blake looked back at the diner. Haunted, he looked at the girl again.

"Do you have a light?" The cigarette was between her lips now.

He reached into his pocket and took out a lighter, extended it to her. After she took it from him he wondered if he should have lit the cigarette for her. She got the smoke going and passed the lighter back. It didn't feel real when he pocketed it.

"You work here?" She tilted her head toward the diner.

"Yeah." He shrugged, wondered if he still worked at the diner or not. It was a prominent question on his mind. He was about to tell her otherwise but all words vanished as she took a step toward him. The smell of her cigarette crept into his nasal passages and made him reach for his own but he stopped before retrieving them.

Strawberry blonde. It was clear now. The parking lot lights enhanced details and she was also closer. She was prettier than he had initially thought, too.

"How long?"

"Huh?"

"Here. How long you worked here?"

Another shrug. "Too long."

"You don't seem thrilled."

"No reason to be."

She drew on her cigarette, held it, exhaled. The smoke came out in a perfect stream. Blake realized her eyes were blue. He stared into them, then looked back at the diner. He saw people racing here and there, back and forth. It was hectic inside. The knot grew tighter. Then he smelled her cigarette again and returned his attention to her.

"Least you have a job," she said, then smoked some more.

He reached for his cigarettes, stopped before he had even touched the pack. It didn't feel like he had a job. The diner was, in some ways, nonexistent. A form of torture, something out of Flannery O'Connor, or the Bible. A soul sucker, he could hardly recall ever even being there. It was surreal. He knew he worked there, before heading to Florida and since his return, but he currently couldn't name a single coworker, nor could he picture any of their faces. All he saw in the backs of his eyes were smudging faces.

Then he felt magnets again. This time they were the eyes of the blonde with the cigarette, blue glistening magnets riveting his eyes to hers.

"So, is this what you do?" she asked. "Just stand outside and stare at the place?"

"Maybe," he said. "It's no fun inside, but I forgot a book and my iPod tonight."

"You like reading?"

"Moreso than being in there."

Thunderous silence and the magnets became positively charged ions and they both looked away. The thunderous silence became audible thunder, as in the distance lightning flashed.

No work, he decided, as little drops of rain began pitter-pattering around them. Blake looked at her.

"Have a good night," he said, and turned to leave.

"Not going to work?" she asked.

"No book, no iPod," he said, took a couple steps, reached into his pocket and got out his cigarettes.

"There's a coffee shop around the corner," she told him, then drew on her smoke. She blew it out with words. "If you aren't working, how about buying me a cup?"

He got his own cigarette going, looked her up and down. He pulled his long-sleeves down to the wrists to conceal what was there. The rain picked up a little bit. He couldn't help being curious as to how she would look without all the night darkness swathed around her.

"Let's go," he said.