Here are some scenes from the book that might help with design choices:

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

On her twenty-sixth birthday, in 1982, Ella Mae sat in a plane on the runway of National Airport looking at the snow and slush covering the wing outside her window. She was scared of flying and the weather made her all the more fearful. As the plane lifted off the runway, the aircraft shook violently and then pitched to the side. Her fear turned to panic. Ella Mae’s blood curdling scream was merely one voice in a sea of hysteria. In the next few seconds, most of those around her would die and she had no reason to see herself as an exception.

The world slowed. She heard a different, non-human cry. It was the sound of tearing and grinding metal, as a wing tip hit the bridge and sliced through cars. She felt a clarity that she couldn’t explain. It was as if she could sense life slipping away on the bridge below. At the same time, she had a premonition of bodies being torn apart around her. She never did see or feel the full impact. She simply lost consciousness.

She awoke in the frigid waters of the Potomac River, not knowing how long she had been out. There were but a few voices around her, and not a single scream. She heard a lonely whimpering cry and then a single woman’s voice calling out for her husband and baby. Ella Mae didn’t remember moving her arms and legs. She was just floating in the ice filled water. Ahead of her, she saw the tale of the airplane and the Air Florida logo, a small "a" next to a capital "F." A man’s voice caught her attention. She turned to the noise just in time to see him jump from the shoreline into the water. She thought he was coming to save her, but he swam toward another person much closer to shore. As she watched, the effects of hypothermia took hold and she slipped under the cold dark water. Five minutes later, her lifeless body was pulled from the river.

"When I woke up in the hospital, I told the doctor that I had died and gone over to the other side. He laughed and asked if angels had wings and if God had a white beard."

"Did you really see God?" George asked, his eyes full of curiosity, his face telling her that he believed everything she said.

"In a way. It felt like I was part of a universe of pure energy. Everything around me hummed with a kind of electricity, creating the most beautiful music, like chanting monks. It was beautiful and so peaceful. No one talked, but I heard their thoughts just the same." She continued talking in rapid fire. "I knew that they all loved me, everyone in the universe. I knew I had died, and thought I was going to heaven, but a voice told me that it wasn’t my time, and they sent me back. When I woke up, the doctor told me it was all a hallucination. He acted like I had gone crazy."

Ella Mae still remembered the doctor's dismissive rumbling laugh. She hated him for it. She hadn't even told him of the colors, so vibrant and real beyond what she had seen in life, or the shapes—butterflies, birds and flowers floating everywhere, such a wondrous menagerie. Everything in life paled next to it.

"I never again told anybody in the medical profession, for fear that it would hurt my career. Doctors can be so condescending."

They talked right through dinner. "Dessert menus?" the bartender asked. Ella Mae waived him away, and then immediately regretted it. She looked at George, hoping he would order and she would have a chance to linger with him.

"I'm quite full, plus I really have to get home. I have an early flight."

Ella Mae watched his reflection, as he lifted his wine glass and drank the last drops. She wondered if that was it. Would he just walk out the door, a missed opportunity? The wait for the check lasted forever. Neither of them had much more to say now that the awkwardness of leaving had arrived. She adjusted her dress and wiggled her ass seeking comfort on the hard wooden stool, that to this point, she had hardly noticed. She thought he might offer to pay, but his chance passed and each signed their own credit card receipt. George stood up.

Ella Mae felt a ripple of nervous regret running through her mind. She watched as his hands adjusted his belt and tucked in his shirt. She looked at his face and noticed how he had somehow transformed into a much more handsome man over the course of dinner. His face now seemed ruggedly strong. The wrinkles adding to his allure instead of advertising his age. He smiled and told her how nice it had been to talk to her, then he turned to leave. Ella Mae looked back into the mirror at her own reflection. Sitting on the counter was the pen she had used to sign the credit card receipt.

"Fuck it," Ella Mae said aloud arresting George's forward motion. He looked back into the mirror with the same curious grin that had been pasted on his face when she told him about her own death. Briefly, their eyes met. She turned her gaze back to the counter, picked up the pen, flipped over the receipt and wrote her phone number on the back.

"Call me," she said and handed it to him.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

In the living room again, he found Sarah holding a piece of deep red pottery that Jean had purchased at the Waverly Street Gallery. "You have such pretty and interesting things," she said, then pointed across the room. "Is that real?"

"Yes it is, isn't it amazing?"

Sarah put the pottery back on the end table and walked across the room to a glassed-in frame that was about eighteen inches square. "I had no idea that butterflies could get so big."

"It's not a butterfly, it's a Hercules moth. The biggest moth species in the world."

Sarah held her right hand up in front of the frame and spread her fingers. The moth's gold and brown wings spanned well beyond her finger tips and long wing tales looped down below her palm. He watched as Sarah bent her head from side to side apparently inspecting the big fat bronze belly. "We travelled all the way to Papua New Guinea to find that one."

"It's Mothra," Sarah said with a laugh.

"Exactly, this is the species that inspired the old movies, though only the Japanese could turn a moth into a monster. Jean and I collected butterflies and moths, but we liked moths bests; hunting at night was so much more fun."

Hackett drifted back to the trip so many years ago. He saw Jean standing in front of a white sheet in the dark forest, a big flash light behind her making her frizzy hair sparkle. He remembered the moment that the big moth swooped in and fluttered around Jean's head before alighting on the sheet.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

(In the hill towns of Tuscany)

The idea of a bicycle tour and the specific destination had been Sarah's idea. He had been immediately worried that he would not be able to keep up. The travel guide billed this trip as "moderate/difficult," but the company had assured him it could be as easy as he wanted. Back in the U.S, he had expected to stay on the easy side. However, when he arrived, he couldn’t stand the idea of embarrassing himself and riding in the van while Sarah forged ahead, so each day he struggled to complete the circuit. He felt like he was a senior citizen trying to compete in the Tour de France.

Hackett lost himself in the long slow torture of exercise. He barely noticed when one woman and then another passed him. He did not bother to respond to their cheerful greetings, which were barely audible above his heart beat. In time the world around him went silent, and the silence became strangely soothing. He pedaled, unaware that the gray clouds had overtaken him, until he felt a fat rain drop slap his face. Within a few seconds the rain splattered uniformly on the pavement and eventually soaked his shirt. He pedaled. Sometime later, he realized that the rain had stopped. He was in a trance of dull ache when finally he rounded a corner and saw the tour company's familiar Renault chase van on the side of the road, surrounded by his fellow travelers. Hackett laid his bike against a tree and walked slowly toward the van and Sarah’s smiling welcome. She was talking to a fit and attractive young couple with whom she had been riding since they arrived. He forced a brave smile.

"You look a little ragged," Sarah told him as he guzzled water. "Perhaps you should take the van the rest of the way to San Jimmy."

Hackett's lips curled half-heartedly. "I can make it if I take my time." He spoke slowly, his hand on his chest. She put her hand on the wet fabric of Hackett’s t-shirt and patted him, as a father might comfort his child. "You’re such a good sport. If you’re game, I’ll ride with you the rest of the way."

The fifteen-minute break wasn't enough to erase the pain in Hackett's chest or awaken his tired legs, but it did restore the sun, which gave Hackett a slight mental reprieve. The two of them let all but a few riders go, before climbing on their bikes and heading out. They rode slowly, Sarah talking about the beauty around them, reclaiming it for Hackett, pulling the veil back from the hardship he had felt minutes earlier. They coasted down a long hill, punctuated with little uphill breaks that were hardly cause for effort. Little by little, he felt better.

The sun above now sparkled, and the landscape looked like jewels. Hackett's eyes focused on a single rose bush. "Stop," he yelled, braked, dropped his bike by the side of the road, and stared, mesmerized. Each flower pedal and each leaf of the rose bush were covered with beads of water suspended as if by magic. Hackett felt like he dare not breathe, or he would disturb the equilibrium and the beads would roll away, plunge to the ground and burst. He imagined the scene, in time-lapsed photography. The images faded, his pupils re-focused on the droplets still hanging steadfast to the plant. Each droplet shimmered with reflected light, mirroring the blue sky and trees above him. In one especially large bulbous drop he could even see his reflection with Sarah by his side. Life was like that, Hackett thought, happiness suspended in time, until you blink and fate changes everything. He vowed to hang onto the moment, to make his time with Sarah count. He put his arm around her content with his bride and his life.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

(Still in Italy)

Back at the hotel after dinner, Sarah and their two new friends stared up at the stars and the sliver of a crescent moon hanging high in the night sky, while Hackett unfolded a white sheet and hung it from a big bracket that linked together like a tent frame. They were standing in a flower garden at the far reaches of the property. Hackett explained that most moth hunters used bucket traps, but he preferred the old-fashioned approach. With a bucket trap, you just set the trap and went to bed, with a bed sheet, you could watch the moths approach, see their full beauty in flight as well as when they landed on the cotton fabric. Hackett set his beacon up on a tripod and flipped the switch. The sheet glowed like the moon had broken orbit and landed on earth. All around it, garden flowers basked in light.

"This is perfect," Hackett exclaimed. "Hawk moths love the light and they love the flowers." It was the first time in his life that he had gone moth hunting without Jean. That fact wasn't lost on him, but he didn't dwell on it either.

Next to him, Sarah opened a folding wooden chair, pulled a bottle of wine into her lap, and attacked it with a cork screw. When the bottle was opened, she offered her three companions a glass, but Hackett turned her down. He felt exhausted. If it weren't for his own anticipation of how Sarah would react to the sight of a hawk moth, he would have been in bed already.

They formed a semi-circle of chairs about ten feet away from the sheet and waited. "Do we have to be quiet?" the young women asked.

"Well, for the sake of the hotel guests, we probably shouldn't scream, but I don't think the moths are going to mind our conversation".

For the first few minutes, they carefully inspected each moth that arrived, but nothing special appeared on the sheet. Soon, all but Hackett lost interest. The others sat, talked and sipped as Hackett investigated the creatures that came to visit. After about an hour, Sarah no longer seemed to care what was in the air. "I don't mind sitting out here and drinking wine," she told Hackett. "But I hope you're not going to make us stay out here all night."

"Just a while longer," Hackett told her, feeling the need for sleep in his own weary body. He sat down next to Sarah, and let his old bones settle. In a matter of minutes he lost hold of the conversation and heard his pillow calling. His eyelids fluttered and slipped down over his pupils. A momentary sleep arrived, but his tranquility was shattered by Sarah's shriek and the soft flapping of wings. Sarah jumped to her feet and flailed her arms.

Now awake, Hackett stood brimming with a wide smile. "That, my dear, is a hawk moth."

"Jesus Christ," Sarah said, her voice calming. "It looks like a fat little mouse with wings."

Hackett looked at the furry body, quite fat and oversized for the creature. "In the light of dusk, many people mistake them for humming birds, as they feed on pollen and nectar, but I like your mouse description better."

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"Give us your fucking money," the other man yelled. His accent was thick, maybe Russian, but Hackett understood this time. As he reached toward his back pocket to comply, a fist came at him like a blurred missile shooting through the snowy night. It knocked him right off his feet. The sounds around him suddenly seemed dull. He made no attempt to get up. Hackett felt a hand on the back of his own head, recognized that it was covered in a thick leather glove, felt the man’s strength as his head was forced forward into the snow. Despite the discomfort, he focused his mind, as he would in the operating room, thinking about the scene of the two men walking out of the hospital like it was the incision he would make on a patient's scalp. He imagined them by the door, before either had put on their ski mask. He ran through it second by second, trying to imprint it on his mind. Both men were white, one shorter than the other, younger than Hackett, but not kids. He doubted that he would be able to recognize them. He saw them as they stood behind him just a few seconds before. One wore a leather coat and jeans, the other a puffy down jacket and sweat pants. Had they been waiting for him in particular? He saw no other details, but recalled the smell of menthol cigarettes right before the punch. There was another aroma as well, perfume, a light flowery perfume. How odd, he thought.

His ability to lie still slipped away as he struggled for breath. He tried to pull his head out of the snow, but the hand pushed harder, and the shock of a boot being driven into his kidney sent a wave of pain and fear through him. Finally, he felt the weight lift from his head, and he raised himself slightly, gulping the icy wet air. Hands rifled through his coat pockets. First, they pulled his cell phone out, then one of the men pulled on his coat with wrenching force. Pain seared through Hackett's shoulder, his buttons gave way and the coat slipped partially from his torso. He felt his wallet disembark from his pants, his keys scraped hard against his leg before they, too, disappeared, and finally, his watch was yanked free of his wrist. He lifted his head a little further out of the snow to breathe, trying hard not to move too much and cause a reaction.

"Get rid of keys," he heard the accented voice say. "You ready?"

The words gave Hackett hope it would soon be over.

"Hold him down," the other man answered.

Hackett felt a knee high on his back by the nape of his neck, and a hand on his head once again. A huge weight pushed down on him. He felt a sharp pain and worried that his spinal column would snap under the pressure. His face was now at least six inches deep. Icy cold stung his skin and the snow sealed his mouth making it impossible to breathe.

He struggled to be free. "Hold still for a second, old man, it'll all be over." There was no accent.

Enormous pressure bore down on him. He thought his neck would snap. He had to breathe, had to break free. His panicked struggle was met with more force, the pressure unbearable. He lost consciousness.

~

When he awoke, all he felt was a cold numbness. His face was still buried in the snow and there was a frozen ache from his scalp to his toes. He could not move.

One by one, he tried to move his arms, legs, fingers and toes. Nothing. He analyzed the situation as if he were his own patient, and he concluded that his spinal column had been severed. He tried to roll his head over and out of the snow. Nothing.

*Paralyzed!*

The word hung in the air around him and cloaked him in fear. That was his initial diagnosis, but he was not without feeling in his extremities. They ached with cold pain. Perhaps his neck was broken, and the spinal cord not severed. Perhaps his vertebrae pinched the nerves. It didn’t seem much better, but it gave him hope.

It was then that he first registered another feeling, one that he had ignored in his panic. He felt oddly faint, tired but not sleepy, conscious, but not fully alert.

*What is going on?* He asked himself.

He told himself to assess his condition once more. He tried to move his head.

Nothing.

He tried to move his eyebrow and blink.

Nothing.

He tried to move his tongue.

Nothing.

He realized he wasn’t breathing. He wasn’t gasping for breath, he simply wasn’t breathing. How long had he been there? He wasn't sure. All he knew was that it had been no more than a minute since he had regained consciousness. He concentrated his mind, tried to focus all of his diagnostic skills, but it didn’t add up.

He assembled the facts once again. He had been attacked. He had been kicked in the side. He had been held face down in the snow. He had felt pressure and pain from the knee and the weight of a man on his back. He had passed out. He couldn’t move. It all added up to a spinal cord injury, but he couldn't open his eyes, couldn't move his tongue. That didn't make sense. He wasn't even breathing. The reality of that last fact settled in.

*Am I dying?* He asked himself.

He concentrated, listening to the world around him. It had an eerie muffled quality. Even though he was face down, he could make out the glow of a street light above him. He turned his concentration inward. He felt and heard the slow rhythm of his own heart beat. He had no way to time it, but he had listened to the rhythm of countless hearts, knew the cadence. He could tell that his was very slow. Thirty beats per minute, he guessed.

*I am dying.*

Hackett lay motionless in the snow, listening to the solitary drumbeat of his own heart as it continued to decelerate. The feeling was oddly reminiscent of meditation. Only once or twice in his entire life, had he been able to reach such deep concentration that the world around him seemed to fade until only his internal awareness had been left. Those moments had been fleeting, but beautiful. This moment was more than that. He no longer felt panic. He accepted his fate, willed himself to remember his daughter Amy, her voice, laughter and smile. He thought of Jean, and felt her warmth despite the cold all around him. Finally he saw Sarah, naked before him. His heart stopped, as it had nearly done the first time he had seen her nude, except this time, it stopped for real. Hackett focused every ounce of his attention in an effort to feel and hear his heart, but there was nothing.

The cold night around him disappeared. He felt as if he were bathed in a warm light. The thought that he was dying was present, but seemed to be of little consequence. He told himself to get up, and to his surprise, he felt movement, not the slow movement of lethargic limbs, but a light ease of movement, like being set free from the invisible chains of gravity itself. He no longer looked through his eyelids into the dull glow of snow. Instead, he saw snowflakes all around him, hanging motionless in the air, engulfing him in a beautiful radiant cloak, ignoring wind and the ever present tug of mother earth. He took in the beauty of a world that shimmered with stunning elegance. It seemed, that he could see in all directions at once. He was kneeling, but felt as if all physical sensation had disappeared, replaced by simple thought and recognition. He saw his own head below him, still face down. A dusting of snow covered him from head to toe. He lifted higher, leaving his body prone and helpless. The snow around him resumed its fall, flakes gracefully drifting to the ground, gently piling on the other him, covering him. He saw each and every flake, their fluffy edges and the crystalline structure within. They sparkled with delicate color. He was Neo, living in The Matrix minus the violence. He was Robin Williams in What Dreams May Come. He was Bruce Willis in the The Sixth Sense. He was all those things, but this was real.

The snow bewitched him, falling, spiraling, swirling. The flakes formed together in groups, first twos, then threes and fours, mesmerizing him. He effortlessly counted. Snowflakes huddled together like a colorful bubble bath. He counted and summed instantaneously, seeing thousands and thousands of flakes. Beautiful numbers flew by into infinity. He saw another vision as well, there within the snow, but separate. He was again a small child standing alone in the woods behind his house, the trees looming above, his mind lost in them. He had counted leaves as he now counted snowflakes. He had almost totally forgotten that feeling, the comfort in it, the reassurance of numbers and solitude, the times when he could wash away his childish fears.

He noticed something else, a marvelous web or grid shining through everything. It was almost as if everything was supported on multi-dimensional translucent graph paper. Each snow flake, each atom, in its rightful place.

*I am dead.*

Hackett’s thoughts were effortless and without time. Snowflakes fell, and simultaneously hung motionless. He was drawn to memories of Ella Mae. He felt her smile, heard her voice. Her death experience was with him, a comforting light. He felt the truth within the words she had spoken at his winter barbecue.

*Forgive me. I was wrong.*

Without the benefit of eyes, he saw Yu Lai.

*I couldn’t have known*, he told her.

Hackett was being drawn up and away from his body. The snowflakes around him were swept up in a marvelous breeze and formed beautiful patterns, that resembled an impressionist winter landscape. The wind changed and he watched the snowflakes swirl and coalesce into a hoard of beautiful moths, wings fluttering softly. And then they, too, were gone. He was swept up with purpose, a need to move back down the street, to go to the hospital. It was just one thought in an endless stream, but it guided him. He wanted to observe everything. He wanted to understand what was happening. He was a neurologist, his training gave him a unique perspective to evaluate this beautiful experience, to observe and question it. He was flooded with the memories of more than thirty years of medical training and practice, everything he had studied and read was all there as he floated without movement. The street passed under him and he himself passed through the walls of the hospital. This was not fantasy. There was no confusion, no flight from reality that accompanied dreams or drugs. If anything, the clarity of his experience exceeded anything he had felt in life. He realized that time and place were no longer boundaries. The universe around him was hyper real. He had been so wrong; this was no hallucination.

He thought of the Tao and dharma, the oneness of the universe at the core of both. He wanted to understand this strange consciousness of death. Hackett focused his mind and directed his flight. *No, not flight, the term was insufficient*, he thought. Words and language could not adequately describe what he felt as he drifted through space.

He entered the cardiac unit, and saw the familiar faces of nurses and doctors as they worked. He had but one goal. He floated up towards the ceiling. A small bracket holding an eight and a half by eleven sheet of card stock passed through him until he was staring down at a dollar sign and an ink drawing of a puppy.

*Here is your proof,* he told his friends though they were not there to hear him*.*

Hackett drifted up through concrete, air conditioning vents, and plumbing pipes. He passed through hospital beds and felt the wondrous energy of human thought as he passed through bodies. He was again out in the dark night among the beautiful geometry and colors of snow. A light appeared to him and communicated without talking. There were no voices or words, yet he understood everything. Hackett absorbed it all, yearning for more.

"I am here." Her thought filled him with warmth. He didn’t have to hear her voice to know it was Jean.

"Where are we?" he asked. His question and her answer passed without movement of time. He recognized the truth of it, even though it was inexplicable. "I was so weak, so stupid. How could I have ever hurt you?" He wanted to say everything he had not said in life, his heart ached for her understanding. Hackett felt the weight of his mourning. There had been a facade of relief since he had met Sarah, but the shroud of grief had never really lifted. He had only been distracted from it. Now, in her presence, he felt the infinite sadness of loss, and with it, the beauty of reunion—a joy so deep that he could drown in it.

There was no need for forgiveness she told him. She knew his love, always knew the truth of it. That was all that was important now, not his human mistakes. He was good. He had lived the life given him to the best of his ability. He had made her happy. She loved him without regret.

Hackett looked at the snow around him, but it was no longer snow, other points of light, other souls he presumed. No, he knew. Individual beacons populated space until the infinite grid shimmered through everything and was everything. Hackett heard their ethereal call, understood that this grid was the universe itself, conscious thought its backbone. Within that same instant, a moment which was not past, present or future, he experienced a fullness beyond his earthly comprehension. He stared out at the grid, saw its infinite beauty not just as a lustrous pattern, but also as a mathematical truth. Equations that he had never seen materialized before him, made perfect sense, though his mind would have never comprehended them during life.

At that moment, Hackett knew no fear. Worries melted away, and he realized that they had never been important. Again he thought of dharma and the oneness at the center of all things. He thought of the baffling contradictions of theoretical physics and was no longer confused. His consciousness spanned everything, transcended everything. It was beautiful and powerful.

A deep resonant hum inhabited space, like the low drone of chanting monks. He understood that it was the sound of thought itself. His new reality was so much fuller than the reality he was accustomed to. Everything was so different—seeing, hearing and touching were all contained within a single new sense of shear understanding. He saw from the inside out, 360 degrees and more. A great consciousness flooded over him. Meaning did not come to him slowly, encumbered by words pronounced in linear time. It came fully formed, questions asked and answered slowly, clearly, completely, yet somehow instantaneously.

"There is a greater purpose." The words which he did not hear, but were nonetheless clear, were from Jean. Hackett’s mind opened to a billion memories. They did not flash before his eyes, for he no longer had eyes to observe and time no longer flowed in sequence. It was as if each moment of his life played out before him simultaneously, not just in memory, but in substance. It reminded him, of that sense of déjà vu that he sometimes got when he heard an old song that had defined a certain era of his younger life. He would hear the song, and momentarily, be transported back in time. With the help of those songs, he had somehow felt the intangible emotion of something that he thought had been forever lost.

In death, every memory was like that, but magnified a million fold. He didn't recall memories, he relived them, feeling every emotion keenly, seeing every detail, hearing voices, cars passing, hearts beating, even sensing touch in his absent finger tips.

The memories bombarded him without haste. His mother held him in her arms, her voice singing a lullaby he had not previously remembered, every note now clear. He made love to Jean, feeling the soft moistness of her lips as he watched Amy graduate from high school. His first real friend from junior high greeted him. He lay under his grandmother's piano, his body shivering with sound as she played a rag time tune, the strings ringing above and vibrating within, the perfect notes of a song he hadn’t heard since he was five. He felt love wash over him and he felt for the first time how his love felt to others. He understood that he had brought people joy in abundance and it surprised him, but he also saw the searing emotional pain he had sometimes inflicted. He felt everything, joy, sadness, hope and fear, each holding equal beauty. He worried that the pain he had caused, *his* hurtful pain, had overwhelmed the good in his life, but through it all Jean's love burned brightly. She gave him understanding that he was good and had done the best he could, no need for regret. He was loved.

Hackett felt the familiarity of Jean's love, singular in his life, a love that was unconditional. In turn, he felt an even greater love, a love that he had not felt before and could not have even understood. It was a universal love of brilliant intensity.

In his journey, he saw Sarah as well, and he realized for the first time how he had wronged her, how his love for her was propelled by a love of beauty, a vain and lustful need to possess. In this and other painful memories, he felt the assurance and forgiveness of the greater love that was all around him. He had wronged, but he had done no wrong, for he had lived the only way he knew. He had done his best.

His life review lasted forever, and it was over before it started. Hackett understood time as an illusion that his consciousness now transcended.

Even as his memories played out, he felt drawn forward toward a distant light. The feeling of peace and oneness with all things was overwhelming. His life had not been perfect, but perfection had still been found. It lay before him in death.

"You cannot come. It is not your time. Amy needs you. Our friend needs you.There are things that you must still do." He felt Jean's presence within those words. The thoughts came to him unlike anything else in death. They held him tightly and pulled him back, a thick knot in his brainless existence, unavoidable, but clear. In response, he felt anger. He did not want to go back, could not leave such beauty. He could not leave Jean, not again.

He would fight God if necessary. His anger burned, but Jean's thoughts calmed and reassured him. Memories of her flooded in—their first kiss, their last, the birth of their daughter, their wedding, their fights, even their love making. Hackett felt her arms clenched tightly around him, her hands trying to pull him to her with such force that their bodies might melt together. He was inside of her once again, surrounded by her flesh. He felt peace and ecstasy at once, but more than that, he felt their souls united. He told her that she was perfect, his only true love, he would not leave her again.

*We all live lives of illusion.* Unlike an instant before, her words were slow, her voice heard as well as felt. It filled him with questions instead of answers. *I was not perfect,* she continued. Y*ou just made me so. Sometimes we create the people we want, other times we let them create us. Perfection is not love, desire is not love. Go back. Open your eyes. Live your life. Love unconditionally.*

Hackett recognized that her words were not chastisement. He understood that he had so desperately sought happiness that he had turned Jean's death into his own living grave. Still, even in his own death, he could not let go of his mourning for her. Sadness came for him. *There is nothing left for me in life,* he pleaded.

There was no place for such dissent, no free will. What was, simply was. Karma.

Hackett felt himself being pulled backwards, drawn into a vortex. Unlike his earlier effortless flight, he struggled, his arms flailed and legs kicked. He wrestled with thoughts as well, screamed questions at Jean. He wanted to know why he had to return, and what he had to do. There were no answers.

In reverse, he saw the points of light fade, the snowflakes regain their place and then a fluttering of matter flying through him as he descended back into the hospital. Down he went flailing through people, blankets, beds and concrete, until he saw his own body lying on a bed in the emergency room. Doctors and nurses worked frantically.

The shock of re-entering his body felt as if he had jumped off a high dive into eight feet of mud. He felt his body jerk and he saw a doctor he knew, Doctor Bellog. Pain shot through him, and the world went black. In his last conscious thought he marveled at how empty and lifeless the living world could be.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Hackett’s struggle to keep his eyes open was a losing battle. He drifted in and out of sleep no matter how hard he tried to stay awake. Sarah sat silently beside the bed, reading a book, whose title was visible to Hackett, but held no interest. As consciousness came and went, Hackett fluttered between a dreamy remembrance of his death experience and a desperate impatience for Ella Mae’s return. As soon as his eyes flickered open, he turned his head to the door and watched for her approach. As he stared, his eyelids again grew heavy and visions of snowflakes captured him. In slow motion they formed groups of twos, threes and fours. He counted them again and again. He wasn't able to get very far, and he did not follow the numbers to infinity as he had in death, but it was still beautiful and comforting. The flakes formed into bubbles, the bubbles coalesced into larger forms, each and every one distinct. Their appearance somehow translated into a familiar number which was the sum of its parts. Over and over he counted and summed.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Hackett opened his eyes. Sarah stood above him, syringe in hand. Her anger was purple and raw, her intentions loud. The needle sank into the flesh of his thigh. In a single moment, Hackett's will to live battled his desire to see Jean once more. Time stopped and he debated. Time continued and he acted, striking her hand, knocking the syringe free before she could discharge its deadly serum. He saw Sarah's surprise, felt her determination as she grabbed hold of his arm, her strength seemingly much greater than his own. The needle came for him once more. It sunk deep into his shoulder. Hackett shielded himself with his left arm and reached behind him with his right, pulling the only thing he could from the wall, and smashing it against Sarah's head. He saw the picture frame shatter, points of glass impaled themselves in her scalp, a wing of the largest moth in the world fluttered to the ground.