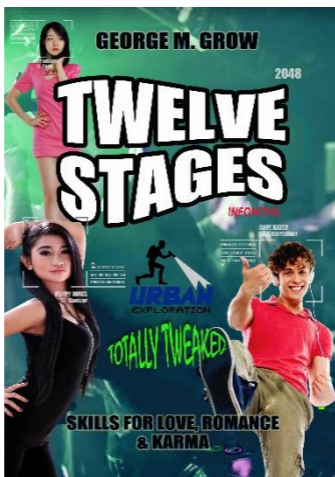


George M. Grow
Twelve Stages
Infonovel

A youth novel in youth language
about the life of a future youth gang
at the time of total digital control
and the first analog liberation
movement



From the series
The Books of Life®



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Reading sample 2, chapter 3-4

The Castle

At the end of his strength and soaked to the bone, Dave drags himself to the end of the asphalt. The shadowy figure in the woods was not lying: Atop the rocky plateau there towered an imposing structure. With its turrets and gables, it seems to be right out of a Gothic horror movie. Steampunk city. The lights are on, but as Dave passes the portal adorned with obelisks, dragons and gnomes, they suddenly go out.

He manages to push the heavy, eight-hinged door open a few inches. It was hanging half off and Dave, not waiting for an invitation, enters the main hall with pillars and doors surrounding him on all sides. A candle shimmers through one of the doors.

"Totally tweaked", he hisses lustily recalling the image of the old guy who told him the way. "Looks like the Addams Family's crib!"

Even though Dave had not lost his sharp tongue, he still has the willies. The hall is dark and twisted stone faces grimace at him from all sides. On the door with the light glistening off it, he sees a coat of arms adorned with...a white dog (!?) and the initials *CC*. He has no idea what that all could stand for and presses the handle. The door flies open and there he stands facing a sea of burning candles: on the floor, on the ledge along the wall, on the hearth clad in classic granite, in the candelabras, everywhere tiny flames flare up, enraged. Dave closes the door behind him. The draft dies down and the flames

cease flickering.

"Behold, Dave Kater, Lord of Light and Shadow", he jokes into the hall.

Except for a sofa next to the cold fireplace, the room was unfurnished. The walls were bare of pictures or mirrors, there were no chairs. The sea of candles, two rows of granite pillars and a prominent black circle drawn on the stone floor filled the vaulted hall.

"What is this, a man-cave for Illuminati?" he asks himself and calls out: "Anybody here? My car broke down, I need a telephone! There's gotta be somebody home, these candles didn't light themselves!"

Again he calls out to draw attention to himself. Don't want them to think he was here to make off with the silverware. Nobody is going to sneak up on him unless he really lowers his guard.

But no matter how loudly he shouts, the only answer is his own echo. And since that produces no response, he presses the handle and steps back into the ghostly hall.

"Wilma, I'm home!" he sings out in his best Fred Flintstone voice. Hearing no reply, he makes his way to look elsewhere in the castle to see who was home.

He was about to climb the sweeping stone grand staircase when a voice commands him:

"Step back, that is off-limits to you!"

"If it's such a big deal..." he sneers, despite the shock, at the old geriatric figure in a red silk dressing gown. "All that matters to me is my wheels, I'm stuck in a ditch and need to get out and get going asap. If you could just..."

"Our electricity is out, and the

phone as well", the white-haired old man cuts him off. "And might be for some time."

"Charles", the wavering voice of a woman from the upper flight of stairs interrupts him. "That is the young man, you need to help him."

"Yes, that's the point", thinks Dave, whose eyes can barely make out the woman in the darkness. And because he sees her only as a pale, white wisp, he asks the grandpa in his leather slippers:

"Is this place haunted? Could you turn on the lights?"

"I told you already, the electricity is out. If you would like to stay the night, then Alf can prepare the guest chambers for you."

Dave cannot believe his ears. "Really? Cool, sure", he enthuses about the sudden display of hospitality.

"Very well", the old woman responds with a slight lilt in her voice from the upper floor, "we have a guest, Charles, a guest."

A disembodied "Ho, ho!" echoes in the darkness in front of him.

"Alf, come here!" See to the young man's needs. Accompany him his room, and there will be three for breakfast in the morning."

"Really bitchin' that I get to crash here", Dave thanks his hosts. He is relieved that he does not have to go back out into the thunderstorm, which has increased in intensity.

The butler with the lantern appears unsettling but seems otherwise harmless. And the room is certainly okay. Nothing high fashion, but right now all he needs is a clean, dry bed. His quarters are elegantly appointed, but the dark nut wood on the walls, the Civil War-era furniture

and the rugs from some long since snuffed-out Indian tribe are not about to impress anyone he knows.

Lightning flashes through the high-set window while rain lashes at the windowpane. The room is illuminated by a gas lantern and the wash basin works fine. And since that is all okay, even a little bit exotic, Dave begins to wonder if his hosts might not somehow have known he was coming and were expecting him somehow.

Even the bed is made and turned down, the bedding smells fresh. "Where the hell have I landed, what the hell is going on?" And other questions follow him off to sleep.

"Illuminati bumbling about in the dark?"

Core Club

The noise awakens Dave way too early. Before he dozed off, he had jammed a chair under the door handle, and now some goon is trying to force the door from the other side. Grumpy as a wolverine, he goes over and opens the door. The bread-head says:

"Hwahhheehee!"

Dave assumes it is his idea of a breakfast call. He gets dressed and follows Lumpy along the long hallway and the grand staircase into the dining room. The white-haired man and the aging woman, who could really be easily be taken for ghosts, invite him to take a seat at the long table. The buffet is dead awesome, the coffee aroma wafts unplugged, accompanied by the tones of creamy violin music.

"Take a seat, young man! A good

breakfast is the start of a great day!" utters the old man with the chicken-skin neck. "Alf, pull up a chair for our guest!"

"Howdy", Dave greets the owners. "Lurch here is a bit slow on the up-take."

"Please be patient with him", says the old woman in a hushed voice. "Alf was recovered from out of the Connecticut River as a baby after having floated for hours downstream tied in a sack."

"Then he must be one lucky guy, eh?"

As Dave is seated at the table, he finds himself surrounded by rich Corinthian leather, porcelain, silver candlesticks and bare granite pillars.

It is some time before breakfast is served on over-sized plates and, as Dave notes to his disappointment, the servings on them are much too small.

The ancient lady in the white gown says:

"Help yourself, Dave, and tell us how things are going for you!"

"Onward and upward", he mumbles through a mouthful of food. "Me and my soldiers are out gigging four nights a week, we only pull the hottest babes, Sundays we chill at home, and Mondays and Tuesdays, we pump iron and work on the setlist."

The hosts stare at each other in astonishment. Then they laugh heartily, until the the old lady in the patent-leather romeos asks if Dave attended a school or a university.

"Nah, why should I", he spouts back with blunt pride. "I am a good five or six years ahead of all those safe-space snowflakes just piling up a lifetime of student debt. I'll have

my shit together soon enough, sooner than they will in any case."

The elegant old geezer with the white hair and the screwed-up mustache wipes his mouth and directs a questioning look that does not go unnoticed.

"Well, wait. I also hawk vintage comic books!"

"Impressive", replies the old gentlemen in his red silk BRIONI NAVY MORNING COAT while absentmindedly fumbling on his turquoise cuff links. "You've got moxie, young man, but right now I still see traces of ignorance. What you might not know is that a first-rate school doesn't just teach you how to make a living, it gives you a chance to meet and make friends for life. Without the right connections your career will quickly come to a dead end."

The next minutes are left to the violins. They are accompanied by Dave's champing and the unasked question of what these two geriatric patients want from him. They should call the AAA so he can finally just fuck offski and not assail him with stupid questions that are none of their damn business. But somehow he senses that there is something promising in the air, something significant. Why else would they have taken him in so graciously, why put out this entirely welcome breakfast spread?

Dave senses that this was all just for him, but he cannot grok just what is behind it. And since he leaves diplomacy to the Deep State and his approach is to put his head down and press ahead, he asks just *who* the two of them are, if this whole dude ranch belongs to *them*

and why they are so hesitant to introduce themselves to him by name.

"We just want to assure ourselves", answers the old lady in the creme-colored LIOJO BLOUSE with an inset covering her cleavage and ribboned sleeve ends, while she places a wrinkled hand with pearl bracelets across his, "that you are truly the Promised One."

"The *what?*"

"The Promised One", emphasizes the elegant gentleman with the cobalt-blue ascot with red flowers. "You may call me Baron Soiron, and this is my dear mother, Elizabeth. We are not only the owners of this estate, but we also manage the most exclusive club in the world."

"Absitively and posolutely", Dave replies, piqued. "Like I am about to fall for that line. Once. Everybody wants to tell you that *their* club is the most exclusive, but one dive is not much different than any other. What is supposed to be so groovy about it? The ghost dog, the candle trickery in the vaulted entry or the fire in the hearth? Just more gimmicks for another Geritol fest!"

The two sclerotic mummies freeze in silence. No hint of a smile shows in their stone faces. The Baron quietly strokes his snot-catcher and the Baroness bends over the table to have a better look at Dave over her horn-rimmed glasses. Finally, she asks him tentatively: "Are you or are you not Dave Kater?"

Dave's eyes bulge wide open. How do they know my name? Outraged, he throws the cloth napkin down and says: "It was you. *You* must have had me run off the road. I have *you* to thank for all of that. You sent that old goon with the dog. Why the

whole half-time show? What do you want from me?"

"Waaa-ha-ha!"

"Thank you, Alf, the young man would like to leave now", says the Baron to his hunchbacked servant. "He is used to kicking good fortune in the teeth. He wants to get back to his pathetic little excuse of a life instead of becoming a Master of the Universe."

"Hahahaha", Dave finds this entire plan to be ridiculous. "Then just tell me how you know my name!"

"The Promised One was announced by name", comes the Baroness' answer. "The Oracle never errs. Even when it almost always remains silent, when it speaks, it speaks the truth."

"Truth. Promised One, Oracle, Master of the Universe. What kind of crazy shit are you talking? Is this some sort of cult trip? Some Masonic supercult?" Dave demands to know on the spot.

"The Most Exclusive Club in the World is not a knitting circle", explains the Baron, and goes on to mention that the Core Club has been convening for 149 years.

That seems to ring a bell with Dave. He had heard rumors of a Core Club. Some sort of Eyes-Wide-Shut secret society. A super dark-web, Dark Web organization that infiltrates government to implement its plan to usher in the New Age of Humanity or some such progressive shit. A bunch of hackers and tweakers from all walks of life pushing for sustainable skills and development. But only a few know how deeply this whole thing operates. The members are into mystical cult shit and hold weird sex orgies full of

oddball supernatural events.

A few times, Dave and his crew set out chasing these foo fighters, following tips towards Lower Manhattan, where they were then sent back to Upper Manhattan, and from there to Brunswick, and from Brunswick to Jersey City, and beyond, until they finally gave up the search in the early hours of dawn. The Club might as well have been on the dark side of the Moon.

Most of the scene had no idea of its existence. Even insiders just shrugged their shoulders and talked about some sort of "new Scientology" or "cradle of the future", or some such crap. And now that Dave finally has a chance to see what was behind that all, he wants to know from the Baron if this Club is some sort of think tank.

The Baron smiles, sips at his coffee and doesn't say a word. *Keep safe and keep real.* And since the Baroness is also just staring silently off into space, Dave grabs a bottle of wine and says: "Time to loosen up."

Both decline the offer, shaking their heads.

"No problemo, then let's get right down to it", says Dave, unimpressed. "I will leave it up to *youse* two: Either spill the beans or I am packing up."

The old Baroness dips her croissant in her coffee, looks askance at Dave, bends over toward him and says quietly, as if it was meant only for the two of them:

"We are not only in possession of the Philosopher's Stone, but we have used it to to discover the Elixir of Life."

"Right on," says Dave interestedly.

"Whatever anyone else has ever

rumored about the Club", continues the Baron in in the red-brown leather slippers, "we are innovators, and more importantly, we research basic principles. The Oracle has chosen *you*, and now *you* are here. *We* are not the ones who landed your car in a ditch, that was determined by the hand of Fate. Do you believe in Fate, Dave?"

"Naaah", Dave's nut is spinning gravel. "If you ask me outright, it is all bullshit. Hmmpf", he murmurs, zipping and unzipping his gold-brown KENNTRICE AUTUMN LEATHER JACKET. "The future is a blank page." And a split-second later he adds: "I don't buy it for a second. Fate is irrelevant. But I believe in my own abilities."

"Great", exclaims the aged lady, "Just our man!"

"A promising talent", the Baron enthuses, and even Lurch expresses his joy:

"Hnnnn-hnn. Master is true wizard."

"Simply marvelous", the lady rubs her white hands together. "With Dave in our care, we can make a real hero out of him."

"Like in *My Fair Lady*?" Dave inquires.

"Like in *My Fair Lady*", replies the Baron. "Just that we assume that a person is not defined by their language but by their genius."

"Okie-dokie", Dave agrees. "Genius is the shit."

Dave sees himself on the verge of making a major haul. Even if he couldn't care less about any sort of Oracle or Prophecy or providence and that yoga and spirituality is for dateless losers who are ready for the retirement community lifestyle, wat-

ching what they eat and drink and hugging trees, but he sees these new acquaintances as a doorway to a new circle that will pay off nicely. And so he accepts the terms that the Baron presents without objection: that he will accompany Dave as his mentor, that Dave will spend three months at the castle and learn everything he needs to know. And since the Baron agrees to cover room and board, Dave accepts the deal with a high five.

"So, let us lift our glasses and toast the new Dave! May he shine and be an honor to our Club!"

A Dirty Plan

It rains without letup. Whereas it was large drops splattering on the windows, the rhythm has now gone over to those sheets of rain that New England is infamous for. It has been known to rain for three weeks at a time without letup.

Dave makes a bet with himself: If it rains for three months, then he will give himself over to the weather, and should it stop and the sun come out on the very day he finishes, he will start to believe in truth, the Promised One, in oracles and the Master of the Universe.

His quarters are comfortable enough to hold out for a while. How long the power will remain out is another question. He has seen the power go out for up to a week because some crazy fool cut a power main or a tree collapsed a line somewhere up in the Green Mountains.

It is a great change for Dave to get by without television, Internet and gaming console. There are antenna

and Internet connections, but without juice they are just dead wires. The only distraction he has at hand is the manuscript the Butler had placed on his table. Although even the title itself is enough to put Dave completely off, he has to play along, if he wants to maintain his credibility in order to grab the golden calf by the horns and guide it into his slaughterhouse. Just for this reason, he opens a page at random and reads that everyone is unconsciously striving to find the meaning of life by doing whatever they are already prone to do. The world is so arranged that we ourselves provide its meaning and follow it wherever it leads, knowingly or unknowingly. That is, we are helping to create the world, to inspire it. It is not up to the gods to inspire us, our task is to inspire the world.

"Whoa, that's some heavy shit", utters Dave just before there is a knock at the door. It's the spazz with the hunchback and game leg that he drags around behind him like Quasimodo. He limps up to the bed and drops off a plastic clothing bag, makes some primitive noises at him and then strains to turn himself around and finally leave.

Not even five minutes later, Dave is admiring himself in the mirror. The plastic bag contained an awesomely refined look. The GIVENCHY TUXEDO in brisk navy blue is brand new, and the violet ETON CONTEMPORARY SLIM FIT SHIRT with turned-back sleeves is first class. Both articles fit to a T and are the perfect accompaniment to his white sneakers.

"I don't have to keep a low profile in this get-up", he thinks, consider-

ing the scene he is about to be introduced to. "These duds really do make the man."

To Dave's eyes, the manuscript he is supposed to study contains nothing of any great interest. His gaze is set on the most exclusive casino in the world. All this woo-woo Yoda shit about hidden communication, not between chiller and chiller but with the world, about internication instead of communication, is Boring. Then the matter of God the Lord: He is said not to be outside the world, but the world itself. The whole of all matter is his Body, which was generated by his Mind and continues to be generated, just as Mind and Consciousness was created in the mind and body of each chiller and would continue to do so. Analogously, each chiller is a undivided part of the All-Embracing Secret, of the Great Force, and at the same time, nothing more than one of the almost infinite number of cells in the Great Organism.

"Made in the shade," enthuses Dave. "Esoteric fans make the easiest marks for a creative grift!"

End of the reading

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