

**2014**

**1984, 30 Years Later**

**By Derek Joe Tennant, following from  
George Orwell**

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As you may deduce from the above, my joy derives from the act of creation. I write to inspire you, to move your heart, and hopefully to amuse you all the while. We live in a sea of energy and consciousness. This energy is like water: its best work is when it is moving, vibrant and cleansing, alive with possibility. When it is trapped, captured, unable to flow it becomes stagnant and even toxic, a breeding site for dis-ease. I best serve when I allow energy to flow through me, when I am but a channel for consciousness to evolve. Moving my energy into the Universe allows room for energy to flow into me, nourishing and supporting me.

I hope you are grateful for what I have created, that it has moved you in some way. You can thank me for my work in several ways:

- bringing it into the awareness of others spreads the energy
- using any inspiration to take your own action or to embellish this work before passing it along feeds the flow
- or if you are so moved, showing your appreciation by passing some of your energy in the form of money back to me via my website also continues the flow that nourishes everyone.

I welcome your comments and/or questions. Contact me at [derek@derekjoetennant.net](mailto:derek@derekjoetennant.net)

For my granddaughters, especially Panjarat (Thailand)  
and Dana (America)

# The Rise

## *Winston*

Unconsciously, he scratched his arm. All the literature had said it would rest unfelt, unobtrusive, just millimeters below the skin. But it seemed to burn and itch, sometimes more, depending on how close he was to an RFID reader. With a start, he realized he was once again scratching an itch that wasn't supposed to be. That is, if you believed the propaganda.

And he didn't believe it, not for a second. But he had no choice, to accept or reject the RFID implant. He had decided the benefit of keeping his job was worth the inconvenience of being always watched, always on 'radar', every move accounted for in a database and sold to... who knows? It didn't feel like a real choice somehow, chip and job vs. homeless oblivion. He'd not last a week on the streets of Silicon Valley, alone. Or so he thought.

"Winston!" He glanced quickly to his left, scanning to try and locate the speaker. "Winston! Come on inside! We have a special deal for you..." the voice dropped to a low, conspiratorial volume, "... on your favorite candy!"

Fooled again. He hadn't realized a month ago, when he was pondering accepting the RFID chip in his wrist, how many businesses scanned the sidewalk for prior customers. Providing tailor-made advertising was simple, once you identified the target. He scurried on quickly; head down, hoping no one would figure out that he was the person with the sweet tooth. In those moments when he was feeling especially paranoid, he wondered if the information gathered by even small, local businesses was sucked up and examined by Google mainframes. His usual conclusion? Most likely it was.

Just a few steps further, the text message icon in the lower left of his personal heads-up display (PHUD) lit up. After speaking quietly, "PHUD<sup>1</sup>, open", the words "r u busy?" appeared, overlain on his vision by the glasses he comfortably wore. He gave a quick shake of his head. The glasses translated that motion into a 'no' and returned an automated message in reply. A small window opened in the lower right corner of his vision, and he saw his boss. Still at work, and multitasking as usual, Mr. Jenkins spoke quickly while reaching for something off-camera.

"Winston, are you coming back today? I've a rush assignment, want you to handle it, gotta know."

As he continued moving along the sidewalk, Winston weighed his options. He had left work early, telling Janice in the cubicle next to his that he needed to buy a birthday present for his Mother. She looked at him oddly; 'who actually goes out to buy anything, these days?' her look seemed to say. He had actually planned to go home and curl up in bed. Cocooning was his way of coping with his frequent anxiety attacks. But, knowing Mr. Jenkins could see his expression, he tried to smile.

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<sup>1</sup> PHUD, pronounced 'fuhd'

“Give me another hour, if that’s OK, and I’ll be back.” It didn’t pay to piss off the boss, no matter how bad he was feeling. His job at Truth Network had disturbed him when he first got it, but now it was just routine. Truth Network, now the news consolidator with the most hits per cycle, functioned as the mouthpiece of business. What ever was good for business received high visibility in its reporting. Bad for business? That fell on Winston’s desk, to be ‘corrected’ or just plain deleted.

There was a tiny bit of hesitation, but his boss finally agreed that an hour would suffice. The window winked out. Winston breathed a heavy sigh, and slowed his pace. No afternoon nap today. The electronics store on his right had a giant screen TV in the window. The ticker along the bottom of the drama broadcast reported that progress was being made in the War on Terror. ‘Nothing new there’, Winston thought to himself, allowing the TV to be a distraction. ‘There is always a victory, somewhere in this global conflict, to cheer us up.’ He remained unhappy. His eyes followed the ticker unconsciously while his mind tried to decide what to do for the next hour.

He was startled back to reality when someone brushed quickly by him. Surprised at being touched by a stranger, his paranoia rose full-force, and he jumped to the right, bending his knees, raising his arms for protection and gaining his balance. Glancing all around, he realized there was no threat, he had merely been lost in thought for several minutes and hadn’t been aware of who was around him. His racing heart began to calm, and he wiped the sweat off his hands and onto his pants. Returning to the store that had offered him a special deal on candy, he made a small purchase. Pressing his thumb to the scanner to verify the deduction from his bank account, he wondered who might learn of his purchase. What would they think about his steady record of candy consumption? Was his account being tracked to determine his shopping pattern? Would he be automatically routed into a diabetes prevention program, because he loved chocolate-covered butter creams? Would they understand that it was a relic of his worst moment in life? Still, it made sense to return to the office with a bag in his hand, a sign of a successful shopping trip, and Janice would surely believe that candy was an appropriate birthday gift for Mom. Distasteful as it may be returning to work, it would be best to get this special assignment out of the way. He retraced his steps, back to his cubicle.

\* \* \*

Winston didn’t buy the Truth Network slogan, painted on a banner that hung over the entryway into his department. It read, “Ignorance Brings Bliss”. Couple that with the other primary company slogan, “Hope Brings Change”, and you pretty much have this decade in a nutshell, he thought every time he entered the building. Change and bliss, is that what our world has come to? Of course, it means change that *business wants*, and bliss that *business allows* you to have. Winston doubted he had ever known what bliss was. He certainly knew what change was.

He logged onto his workstation. It only took a few seconds before the work packet blinked open on the screen. Wondering what this special assignment would entail, he began to scan the instructions. Just another salvo in the ongoing clean coal debate, he realized. Wondering what made this special, and not finding an answer, he made sure he understood exactly what he was to do. Some guy named Amory Lovens must have always been against using coal, clean or not, to generate electricity. Now he has changed his mind, and Truth Network wants to broadcast his support with great fanfare. Not publicize that he *changed* his mind, just that he supports the idea. Winston's job is to search the Truth Network archives, and find any prior reference to Lovens's stand against the use of coal. He would either delete that reference, or use a program to recreate the video clip and make it appear that Lovens has always been in favor of clean coal. He figured, but had never had the guts to ask, that someone else would be tasked with verifying the changes he made to the past. Surely they would have to monitor the changes to ensure they met the company's goals. Today's work packet was all typically normal, and Winston wondered what was so special about this assignment that it had Mr. Jenkins in a knot. No time to ponder, though, and he settled in to begin his task. Janice poked her head over the cubicle wall, asking, "What'd ya get?"

"Her favorite." Continuing to type with his right hand, Winston motioned with his left to the bag of candy sitting on the table by his side. He didn't tell her what it contained. Let her wonder, he thought, eyes focused on the job at hand. She took the hint, and returned to her seat.

\* \* \*

He worked on the project for two hours after everyone else had left for the day. He enjoyed working in a quiet, deserted office. The clack-clack of the many keyboards didn't bother him during the day, but he felt a calm wash over him when the only sounds he heard came from his own typing or clicking. This Lovens guy hadn't shown up much in Truth Network video clips. That meant he was probably anti-business through-and-through, Winston thought. Writing new articles was easy, but instructing the program that created the new video to supplant the old clips needing to be changed was creative work. It made sense they would want more than one person, in essence, writing the 'new script'. They, being some unidentified manager much farther up the company food chain, probably picked the clip they liked the most. He wondered if *any* of his work ever made the grade.

This made him sad. He saw that it was entirely possible that his work here was meaningless. He had always had qualms about changing the past to affect the future. He remembered his stepfather telling him about a book from long ago. His stepfather had repeated a quote several times, as if it were important for Winston to remember this idea. The quote was, "Who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past." That pretty much summed up Winston's career at Truth Network, for sure.

Remembering his stepfather, Winston felt suddenly tired. It had always been a struggle to be in the same room with him. He never came home sober, and he was never home and happy. His stepfather beat him, though infrequently. Certainly, Mother was beaten more, for some imagined disrespect, preparing an unappetizing meal, or inadequate housekeeping. Winston usually didn't understand the reason for his own beatings; stripped and forced to stand facing a wall while his stepfather's belt raised welts that pained him for days afterwards. While his sister was never struck, Winston suspected that she endured a special, different, brand of abuse. Now when he thought of his stepfather, the current pain in his heart was far greater than the remembered pain of his flesh. He could only imagine what had driven his mother to remarry after his real father had died. If being cared for had been her desire, she had made a huge mistake.

Winston decided that two hours overtime was enough for today. It would show he was dedicated to helping when needed, and had made up for the time he had spent shopping earlier. Mr. Jenkins did say this was an important job, didn't he? He had finished rewriting the articles; tomorrow he would edit the video clips. He packed up his backpack, made sure he had his pad in his pocket, and checked out with security; first near the elevator on this floor, and then with guard at the front door of the building.

He lived close enough that he could walk home. He lived in a small apartment, on the fourth floor of a 12-story tower. He paid minimal rent, as the units were under the latest rent control directives. He had lived there for almost seven years now, ever since taking a job at Truth Network, but there was talk among his neighbors that soon the building would convert to condos. He would either have to buy his space or move if that happened. He had no intention of buying, mostly because he was sure the asking price would be beyond his meager salary at the Network. He earned barely more than the kids stocking shelves for minimum wage, who had never graduated from high school. Though he needed a college degree to even interview for his position, that requirement seemed to have no bearing on his rate of pay. The result of globalization, he had heard someone complain in the lunchroom one day recently, which was driving down wages worldwide. If there weren't so many people unemployed, he would work up the guts to ask for a raise, he felt sure. But today, one takes what one can find, and beggars can't be choosers.

A chill evening breeze, 56° according to the temperature displayed on his PHUD, ruffled his medium-length black hair. As he passed the coffee shop closest to his home, he was struck with an outlandish idea. At first he dismissed it without a second thought, and pulled the door of the coffee shop open. The thought would not go away though, and he paused half in and half out of the shop, thinking hard.

He had just remembered that his stepfather kept a diary of sorts. He wasn't good about writing in it everyday, but he did so often enough, just after waking up in the morning. Of course, he couldn't write at night, always being drunk. On the few occasions when Winston had asked about the diary, his stepfather had told him that it pleased him to write about stuff he couldn't actually tell anyone else: his hopes and fears, suspicions about people at work, that sort of thing. He

threatened Winston, saying with conviction, not anger, “I’ll beat you to death if you ever peek at this”. The book was kept locked in a desk drawer in the den. Winston so feared a beating that he never tried to peek. What made this such a powerful memory, tonight, was the feeling that he might get some respite, however brief, from his own demons if he could just write them down. He knew he would never trust anyone enough to speak his fears and suspicions, but just the thought, imagining how it would be to write out his deepest, most intimate fears, was already bringing some welcome relief. He spun in the doorway, desire for hot chocolate forgotten, and walked quickly the rest of the way home.

\* \* \*

Once inside his apartment, he faced a difficulty: how to *actually write* out his thoughts. He dared not use his computer. It linked to the outside world and he was deeply afraid that the security department at work monitored his laptop, at least occasionally. He would also have to remove his glasses, since the video camera was ‘always on’. It wouldn’t do to be bent over a paper, writing out seditious thoughts, and having the whole world able to watch as his horrible printing filled the page. He had not planned ahead and brought paper home with him. In seven years, he had never so much as thought to write a letter, nor had he brought work home that he might turn over and use the blank backside for a project like this. After several minutes of wracking his brain, and searching through the few piles of empty take-out food bags that cluttered his otherwise neat apartment, he came across a pad of Post-Its. He laughed softly when he spotted it, the pastel pink color was the very reason he had never even opened the package. Given to him by a friend, well, actually, by his date, three (or was it four?) years ago, it hadn’t moved from the spot on the table next to the microwave oven in the kitchen where he had tossed it once he returned home. Goodness, that had been such an awful date. It had taken him three months to work up the nerve to ask Jennifer out, after she had started working in the cubicle next to his. And that evening had just been one train wreck after another. He couldn’t decide what to wear; he had changed his shirt four times, and so he was late to pick her up. He got lost on the way to the restaurant; he was so focused on talking about his work that he missed the turn and didn’t realize it until he saw the sign, ‘Welcome to Woodside’, 10 minutes later. He spilled his drink, although not *on* her, thankfully. He tried to make small talk, but ran out of things to say about himself. He was too shy to ask her anything, he just kept his eyes focused on his plate and fidgeted with the silverware. As they were leaving, he pulled the wrong credit card out of his wallet by mistake, and it got rejected. He had to pull out the right card, and that was when his date pulled the Post-its from her purse. “Put a sticky paper on the one you shouldn’t use, just to remind yourself next time,” she whispered, as they waited for approval on the second card. He couldn’t tell if she was serious or mocking him. He never spoke to her again, after that night. When she cleared off her desk a few weeks later, he didn’t even ask if she was quitting or just moving to a different department.

Tonight he tore off the plastic wrapper, fished around in his junk drawer for an old pen, and sat down on the chair in front of his computer. He removed his glasses, setting them on the empty keyboard tray that hung underneath the desk. The computer desk had belonged to his sister originally, but after she was killed (Winston tried *really* hard not to think about that) he had taken it rather than see it go to the local secondhand store. Now that he had this apartment, it was handy. He didn't have any other table, but this desk gave him a place to eat and use his laptop just fine.

He held the pen in his hand, ready to write, but now that he was set to begin this treasonous act, he had no idea what to write. Being a diary of sorts, he figured it should include dates whenever he wrote, and he knew he would have to get proper paper from now on. Tonight was just the beginning, and so he wrote the date, '4 April 2014'. He paused, then printed in tiny letters,

I begin this effort in the spirit of explaining my thoughts and fears about life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I don't know if you will understand what life is like for us now, or if anyone will even ever care enough to read what I have written. I hope you do not get into trouble for reading this, and I ~~m~~ostly hope I don't get in trouble for writing it.

He almost signed it, but realized that was silly. He would get a proper notebook tomorrow, and transfer this before his next entry. He sat back in the chair and a great peace came over him, as if every cell in his body relaxed and let out a sigh.

He was startled by a knock at the door and jumped to his feet, almost tipping the chair over backwards. Had he been found out already? In a panic, his eyes darted around the room, seeking the camera that must have given him away. His glasses could not have transmitted what he had written. The knock came again, louder this time. He took two steps towards the door, and then remembered his glasses. He darted back to get them and put them on, setting the earpieces as he moved towards the door.

"Who's there?" he called out, in a tight, strained voice.

"Joan, from across the hall. Could you help me please?"

He opened the door, relieved to recognize the lady standing there. She and her family had moved in over a year ago, but until this moment, he had not known her name. The door to her unit was open; he could hear two children fighting over something. A boy's chortle and a girl's screaming told him who was winning that battle.

"How can I help?" he asked.

"My sink is clogged, and I'm no good with plumbing. Do you think you could take a quick look? I'd be forever grateful..."

"Uh, I'm no plumber, ma'am. And I don't have any tools. I'd love to, but..." his voice trailed off, and for several seconds they both just stood in silence, looking at each other.

"I have a plunger, could you at least try using that?" her voice had risen in pitch a tiny bit; she sounded pretty stressed over this problem.

"Sure." When he took a step forward, she spun around and led the way to her kitchen.

Her apartment, despite having very little furniture, was cluttered; filled with piles of magazines, discarded plastic bags, and old newspapers. Broken toys littered the floor, the fabric covering the sofa was torn, the dining room table scratched. The boy, probably eight or so, was hitting his younger, blond-haired sister as Winston followed Joan into the kitchen. Both children wore torn and dirty clothes, and as the girl rolled on the floor in pain from her brother's blows, Winston was embarrassed to see she didn't have on any underwear. When she saw him, her screaming became shrill and intense. She couldn't keep it up for long, Winston thought; she'd soon run out of breath or hurt her throat, screaming like that.

The kitchen was by far the dirtiest of the rooms. Dishes were piled high in the stopped-up sink, and bits of food floated in the brackish water. A small puddle lay on the floor beneath the sink, proof that the plumbing problem had not been noticed before the sink filled up. Dirty utensils littered the counter in between empty cans and boxes. Dirty pans were piled on every burner of the stove, and the stovetop hadn't been cleaned, probably since they moved in. The lone, small trashcan overflowed onto the stained linoleum floor; fruit flies hovering overhead.

"I didn't think you'd help," Joan seemed to offer as an excuse for the mess. "I'll just get these out of the way..." She began to remove the plates from the dirty water in the sink. With a nod of her head towards a door just past the stove, she told Winston, "The plunger should be in the closet there. See if you can find it."

Winston approached the door with a sense of dread; afraid something might jump out and bite him when he opened the door. He breathed a sigh of relief as the door easily swung open to reveal a rather neat arrangement of canned goods, several bags of rice and potatoes, and a plunger, standing upright on the floor just inside the door. This was the only space in the apartment he had seen so far that was clean.

Picking up the plunger, he closed the closet door and walked to the sink. Joan had succeeded in getting all of the plates onto the countertop, so he carefully placed the plunger in the dark gray water and began to work it up and down over the drain. It didn't appear to be clearing the clog, but it was managing to splatter water out of the sink. He took a quick, small step backwards, trying to avoid getting wet. A stink arose from the disturbed liquid, so foul he almost gagged. When he heard a man's voice behind him ask, "Why is he here?" he stopped plunging and turned to look.

Joan stood in the kitchen doorway, and Winston couldn't see who had spoken. "The sink is clogged, and I had no idea when you would get home from work," she replied. "Would you like to deal with it?"

"Of course. Why didn't you wait?" Joan stepped out of the doorway, and Winston was surprised to see a man he recognized from work, enter the kitchen. He worked on a different floor; Winston had seen him in the lunchroom from time to time, but they had never spoken to each other. Winston didn't even know his name or what work he did there. Winston just nodded to him, acknowledging their connections at work, and now at home.

"Thanks for coming over," the man said, seeing Winston's face for the first time. He seemed a bit startled when he realized he knew Winston from work. He glanced quickly at his wife, and then looked back at Winston. "I'm sorry if this has

been an inconvenience for you. I assure you, my wife won't be troubling you again, will you Joan?"

Joan mumbled, "Thank you, sir, for helping me. I won't bother you again." She seemed suddenly afraid.

Throughout this exchange, the children had been quiet. Winston saw the girl peeking around the doorframe into the kitchen. When she saw that he had spotted her, her head jerked back out of sight. "It's no bother at all. Always happy to help my neighbors."

He looked unsuccessfully for a towel to use to dry his hands, but finally settled for wiping them on his pants. "Sorry to have met under these circumstances, my name is Winston. I've seen you at work. I am in editing, what do you do?"

"I'm Ampleforth. I'm in accounting." Winston stuck out his hand, inviting the other man to shake it. Ampleforth stood still.

"Well, I'll be going then." Winston was unsure why he was getting the cold shoulder, but he didn't care enough to spend any more time here trying to figure it out. He moved quickly back through the apartment and returned home.

He thought about what he had just seen, a family struggling to survive on the paltry salary that Truth Network pays. Wages have fallen throughout my lifetime, Winston thought. It is only by using credit, or by both partners working, that most people had any decent standard of living. It would seem that Ampleforth and his wife are having a rough time of it, raising two children on one income.

He remembered several years ago, just after he had gotten his job at the Network. Each morning the employees in his department gather in the large conference room on the third floor. Together, for long moments, they chant the company slogans, "Hope Brings Change" and "Ignorance Brings Bliss", as well as other temporary, focused chants. Sometimes, especially lately, the chant would trash a competitor, rather than exalt the Network. "CNN Lies" had been a recent favorite. The short 'pep talk' that followed the chanting usually focuses on improving teamwork and cutting costs.

On that one particular day, he had been intently following the pep talk, eager to learn the company culture and fit in well. He heard a low voice behind him say; "Together we will bring our light to the world." He jerked his head around, but had been unable to determine who had spoken those words. When he transferred into the editing department and first met his current boss, Mr. Jenkins, he had an eerie sense of *déjà vu*; he sometimes wondered if he remembered Mr. Jenkins sitting behind him that morning, and thought maybe Mr. Jenkins had been the person who had spoken those words.

His PHUD ticker, running across the top of his glasses, lit up with the "Breaking News" flashing icon designed to get his attention. The item described another victory in the War on Terror. Apparently, if one could believe everything that is reported as news, a leader in the global terror network had been killed by a drone attack in Mexico. The next item reported a decrease of 6% in everyone's fuel ration, to begin in 3 days. Apparently the Mexican reaction to the drone attack on their soil was to freeze petroleum exports to their Northern neighbor, in clear violation of their membership in the North America Bloc. Winston had a sudden thought: a new company slogan could be, "Victory Brings Sacrifice".

He removed his glasses, placed them on the tray, and took his seat at the desk. He reread his first diary entry, and then took up his pen and wrote his new slogan three times. He stopped, realizing that if he were ever caught with this diary, he would be banished. He would lose his credit, lose his bank account, lose his job and be blacklisted for life. He would not be able to pay the rent for his apartment and would eventually end up outside the city, living in the fringe. People who had no access to finance squatted in the abandoned suburbs that surrounded the city, outside the security walls, eking out a meager existence on what they could steal or grow themselves. He pitied them, more for their lack of electricity and the gadgets it powered, the tools that made life bearable and easy, than for their disconnection from the money system of the civilized world. He couldn't begin to imagine how one could survive without power, and didn't want to have to learn.

He tore the top page off the pad of Post-its, folded it twice and slipped it under a book that lay on the nightstand beside his mattress. He doffed his dirty, splattered clothing, showered, and lay down on his bed. He drifted off to sleep, the phrase running through his mind over and over, "Victory Brings Sacrifice".

\* \* \*

Mother came to him in his dream. He hates when she does that; he awakens covered in a cold, clammy sweat, with the sheets soaked, his heart rapidly pounding. It is never the same dream, but always the same message: "I," she tells him in the dream, "died because of you, your not being here to defend me from the marauding gangs, your selfishness and greed, your not being able to provide me with security and support."

He doesn't believe it, at least not consciously, but it distresses him endlessly that she would say that, even in a dream. His sister, who was also killed in the same vicious attack, often accompanies her but never talks. Her eyes speak volumes, her condemnation clear for any and all to read in her icy stare. Tonight at least, his sister did not appear.

In this dream he found himself riding on his mother's shoulders as a young boy. He felt four or five as he clutched her coarse black hair, hanging on as she strode over the freshly plowed ground in the field behind their farmhouse. He loved looking down over her forehead and seeing her wide lips and the smile they formed, a broad smile that could happen in dreams but that he had never seen in real life. It was spring; the corn peeked from the ground just far enough that he could make out rows in the Iowa dirt. Father was nowhere to be seen, another reason Winston could easily be four. The heart attack that had taken him from Winston's family would have been last Christmas. It felt so new, this feeling of loss, though Winston could not remember what his father had looked like, nor anything about him other than what his mother and sister had told him.

As they approached the edge of the field, Winston's mother reached over her head and lifted him off her shoulders, standing him on the moist, crumbly soil. He looked up at her, blinded by the Sun perched just above her head, unable to see the details of her face. Just a silhouette, Mother spoke, "I'm depending on you to

care for your sister. She can't take care of herself, and I won't live forever. Grow up to be big, my son. Be a success, be a better man than your father, and most of all, *make money!*"

He felt an odd sensation as his awareness detached from his dream body and rose to float several feet above his mother. He looked down at the scene below, noticing every detail: his own round, chubby face turned upwards, eyes watery from trying to see his mother through the Sun's bright glare, the rich brown soil, disturbed by the plow and planter, the little tassels attached just above the toes of each of mother's black Sunday shoes, even the trail of ants, ignorant of the drama playing itself out just overhead, that snaked between their anthill and a dead moth that lay next to a bright green shoot of new corn. He replayed mother's directive over and over. First he examined his own reaction of confusion and misunderstanding, only to be expected since he was too young to comprehend any of what she had said. Then he watched her as she spoke, trying to delve into what she really meant as she tasked him with a life mission. His father, she told him when he was older, had endured two years of drought on the farm. They had taken loans from the bank in town, for seed and fuel and hired hands to help with the planting, but both crops had died from lack of rain before they matured. After these two loans could not be repaid, they had faced a dismal prospect: father would have to work as hired help on someone else's farm. It was, Winston's mother believed, the angst this caused his father that led directly to the heart attack. She never forgave the banks for their unwillingness to fund one more year's crop, and she passed her loathing of finance onto her son as completely as she had passed on her genes.

He watched yet again, as mother spoke words that he realized, in his elevated and separated dream state, she would never have said to a four-year-old boy. He noticed for the first time, a butterfly that wove its way through the tableau, hovering first over his own feet, then over Mother's, and finally bobbing slowly away into the distance. As Winston raised his gaze to follow the butterfly's departure, he saw someone standing on the other side of the field.

Curious, he began to fly towards her. When he was but a hundred yards away, he began to slow his flight and sink towards the ground. Looking down to ensure a safe landing, he watched as his legs grew in length; he was getting older. By the time his feet touched the soft dirt, he felt 18, and knew he would be leaving for college in just a few days. The girl, or rather young woman, was running towards him. She was petite and shapely, with long blonde hair that streamed out behind her as she ran. She almost floated across the rough ground, and as she neared him, she slowed and finally stopped, 20 yards away.

With a toss of her head to flip her bangs out of her eyes, she reached up to her throat with both hands, grasped her shirt's collar, and then flung her hands out and away from her body. All her clothes flew off, and she stood there, proud and unafraid. Winston could not believe what he was seeing, a woman full of poise, possessing the *freedom* to show her true self to the world. He felt heat course through his body and immediately began to get an erection. He wanted her, not for sex although he wouldn't turn *that* down, he wanted what she exuded: power, confidence, and capability. He sensed a strength and assuredness that he had

never imagined possible in himself; and here was a *woman* who possessed it and willingly put it on display.

“Someday, maybe.” She answered his unspoken request. As her last syllable drifted off on the light breeze, she too began to fade, dissolving from Winston’s perception. Like the Cheshire Cat, her smile was the last feature that remained frozen in Winston’s vision. With a start, he sat up in bed, in his soaking-wet sheets, and felt the chill of the nighttime air on his cold and clammy skin. Mind racing, he tore into every scene of this unusual dream, parsing it for meaning, committing it to memory. *Freedom*. This dream spoke of freedom, beckoning him to a future (perhaps with her?) beyond the fear and self-loathing he lived today. Was *freedom* even possible?

He fell into a fitful, unsatisfying sleep just before dawn.

\* \* \*

He was groggy when he woke up, and it was too late for his usual morning exercise. A month ago, he picked up the habit of taking a brisk walk on the streets around the Network building on his way to work. It helped him get to his desk in a relaxed state of mind. Today, he couldn’t let go of the dream, even as he dressed, gobbled a bran muffin and walked slowly to work. His mind bounced from lusting for the woman, to pondering the meaning of freedom, to feeling a burning jealousy that the woman was more competent than he. He sought to understand how his mother’s directive to make money had led to his accepting a mediocre job that he hated, as if he only wanted to disobey her. Was that freedom? He didn’t think so.

During the morning motivational meeting, he was called out for not paying attention. He had been mouthing the words, adequately following along, or so he thought. But the monitor had barked at him, “Mr. Smith! Participate fully! No distractions!”

His cheeks burned with embarrassment and his brow became wet with perspiration. He absently wiped his forehead with his left hand as he loudly shouted the slogans. He glanced around to see if anyone was watching, and was relieved to find that most of his peers appeared as distracted as he had been. He wondered, with his usual paranoia, why he had been singled out for criticism.

He left the motivational meeting without speaking to anyone. Once at his desk, he continued to work on his assignment. Last evening he had completed the easy portions of his work: he compiled the list of articles and videos that needed examination and correction, and he rewrote the articles. This morning he set to work modifying the video segments. There were only three that mentioned coal, and only two of those indicated that Mr. Lovens opposed it. The program Winston used scanned all three videos and parsed the syllables that had been spoken. Winston would enter what he wanted the speaker to say, and the program would build the new speech and video to match. It would take about 20 minutes per video, once the initial survey was complete, to generate the new clips. Because the video would be completely reconstructed, it would pass as unaltered if a viewer were to use the new authenticity software to test it for tampering. Winston

would submit a summary of the written changes he had made and the new video segments to Mr. Jenkins. If he remembered to check, he could find out if his new videos were on the website tomorrow.

He spent the first part of the morning deciding how to change the videos. This turned out to be the hardest part of the task. Winston didn't consider himself to be the most creative person. He wanted to do more than just substitute the word 'oppose' with the word 'support'. He wanted to give some context for the change, a reason to back up the position. This meant he had to do some research; he had never paid the clean coal debate much attention. He didn't even vote, believing it to be a waste of time in a corporate-controlled world; why should he waste time studying the issues? He went online to find out what arguments were being made about coal. His search took him to websites that were outright treasonous. Some sites continued the lies that humans caused climate change and some perpetuated the myth of Peak Oil. Many blamed business, or more accurately, greedy CEOs, for the ever increasing need to generate power, as if people themselves did not want electricity to power their toys and light their homes.

It may have been because of his dream last night, but one website in particular horrified Winston. It began with a description on the home page, about how money is created. It told how banks just give loans and credit to people and businesses, not from money that is in the vault, but money they conjure up 'out of thin air'. On pages deeper inside the site, Winston read complaints that businesses use their close relationships with banks to banish people for no apparent reason. This engenders fear, and forces people to be silent and to not resist the consumer, materialistic mentality that feeds always-growing profits. One writer questioned the very idea of eternal growth, noting that we live on a finite planet with finite resources that must meet the needs of more than seven billion people. He claimed that oil prices would continue to rise faster than inflation, and that corporate profits and executive bonuses would continue to inflate even as more and more people were put out of work by automation and outsourcing. Winston evaluated these ideas in light of his newly discovered desire for freedom. 'I should be free to buy or not', he thought. 'And I should be free to tell others about my decision, and to encourage them to join with me.'

He remembered several people who had been fired from Truth Network, and he wondered if they were let go because of poor performance, or if there was another, more sinister motive. One in particular, Gene Ashland, had not gone quietly. "You can't banish me and get away with it! One day, everyone will wake up and see your lies!" he had shouted, over and over, as Security had literally dragged him by his feet out the door near Winston's cubicle. The last shout Winston heard, as the elevator doors closed on the chaotic scene, was, "Truth Network's lies are not enough! This society will fall..." At the time, Winston figured he was raving mad, or just plain anti-social. He accepted without question the company's explanation that 'we are better off without people like him contaminating our desire to tell the truth'. Today, the seed was planted that maybe, just maybe, Gene had been right. If Winston became free, he could question the very foundation this capitalistic culture was built upon. Of course,

that questioning was traitorous, and would get him banished from society just like Gene. And that would never do. Winston shook his head vigorously, trying to lose these dangerous thoughts. He went to the lunchroom fifteen minutes early, just so he could get away from these websites. He had a lot of thinking to do.

\* \* \*

Winston sat at a lunchroom table by himself, picking at his food. Lost in thought, he twirled a few strands of spaghetti on the tines of his fork, and then laid it down. He wondered how one went about verifying information gleaned from websites, without attracting undue attention. He already feared he might have gone too far this morning; if his Internet activity was monitored, they would know he had seen some pages that were forbidden at work. Would they search his apartment, following his arrest, and find his diary? He realized that he didn't care. Let them find out. He was already tired of this game.

He looked up at the clattering sound of a tray being dropped on the floor. Before he could locate the mishap, he spotted Mr. Jenkins standing just inside the lunchroom's doorway. He appeared to be scanning the room, and before Winston could look back down at his meal, Mr. Jenkins spotted him. Mr. Jenkins never ate in the lunchroom; supervisors had their own cafeteria. Winston assumed it was so that they could share information about the workers without being overheard, but like so many of his thoughts, he was unsure if that was fact or just imagined out of his paranoia.

Winston watched from the corner of his eye as his manager picked up a tray, placed a muffin on it, and paid the cashier. He turned and walked straight to Winston's table. Winston felt his heart rise into his throat. He didn't know why his boss was here, and his paranoia began to rise.

"Winston, mind if I share your table?" he asked before taking a seat. Winston nodded his assent, not trusting his voice to say a word.

"That was a good job you did on that project this morning." Mr. Jenkins tore open the plastic that encased the muffin, dropping the package on the tray. He took a bite of food, and appeared to chew it thoughtfully. Winston remained silent.

"I see that you stayed late last night." Mr. Jenkins's tone was neither threatening nor accusatory. He seemed to be just stating a fact. Winston nodded. His boss continued, "Are you happy in your work, Winston? Is everything going well for you?"

Winston knew he would have to speak. He cleared his throat, and managed to say, "It's good. I'm fine." If he was about to be fired, he'd have been called into an office in the HR Department, or security would have dragged him out like they took Glen. Winston thought, 'What is he after?' but he had no answer.

Mr. Jenkins took two more bites of muffin, chewing them slowly while staring at Winston, as if trying to decide what to do with him.

"Well, if you ever begin to have problems, you be sure and come tell me before you decide to do something rash, like quit the Network. Promise me?"

Winston nodded his agreement, and watched with his head down, as Mr. Jenkins left the lunchroom. He didn't believe that Mr. Jenkins had come to visit only to see if he was happy editing the past for Truth Network. In his paranoia, he felt certain that his manager had wanted to try and detect the first signs of rebellion. He hoped he had passed the test, but he couldn't shake the sense of doom that filled the pit of his stomach.

He managed to avoid doing any real work the rest of the day by reorganizing his files and his desk drawers. He collected papers that he could use for his diary. There was no store within walking distance that sold notebooks, and he didn't want to spend money on gas for the car driving to one that did. He made too much money reselling his gas ration coupons to people who had no choice, who had to drive to get to work, to use up gas for such a petty errand.

After a dinner of canned soup and a peanut butter sandwich, Winston pulled the papers he had brought home from his backpack and placed them on his sister's desk. Unsure what to write, he first copied his first diary entry onto the top page of the pile. He stayed true to his first writings, even copying the slogan three times as he had written it the night before. He did leave out the word he has crossed out, however. Pen poised, he thought hard about what to write next.

His mind was preoccupied with thoughts of the woman he saw in last night's dream. Was he about to meet her in real life? He didn't remember her from his life before; usually he could identify the persons and places in his dreams. He hoped he would meet her, but he knew he would not be able to begin a conversation with her. He was just too shy, too afraid. He had only had one long-term relationship, with Marsha, just after high school. His mother had set up their first date, because Marsha's mom was a friend of hers. Marsha was not pretty, and two years his senior, but Winston didn't want to disappoint his mother. He let Marsha think he was falling in love, but he remained half-hearted whenever he declared his love for her. He had always assumed he would find a beautiful wife, isn't that the promise offered by TV shows and ads? Didn't he deserve to be happy, with a nice home and a loving family that attended his every whim once he returned home from a hard day at the office? That would not be life with Marsha, he was certain of this. He suspected she knew it was all a charade; she often would come to his room and curl up in a ball on the bed, her arms wrapped around a pillow as if it were a teddy bear, watching TV and not even trying to make conversation while Winston trolled the Internet. If this was love, Winston wanted no part of it. Their sex, when they had finally tried it after months of dating, was perfunctory and unsatisfactory. She just lay there, and Winston felt like he was forcing the act upon her. He was unable to finish, and when the scenario replayed the next few times, he eventually gave up even trying. He broke up with Marsha after nearly 3 years, wanting to focus on getting the best grades he could his final year at college. It was a relief to spend evenings alone in his room, and thankfully, his mother never asked why Marsha didn't come around anymore. Winston would have lied to her, saying it was Marsha's idea they break things off, and he hated lying to Mom.

He didn't see what the big deal was about sex. He managed to get himself off with his hands, when he needed release, and it seemed a better solution than

dealing with all the emotional baggage that went with having a mate. If he were to be honest, he would admit that he doubted anyone would ever consider him loveable. With no social skills and no confidence, he would always be at her mercy, depending on pity to get any conversation started. That would never lead to anything like a happy marriage.

Not wanting to put any of these thoughts on paper, not wanting anyone to ever see his confession of how messed up he was when it came to relating with people, he finally penned a few words about meeting Mr. Jenkins in the lunchroom. He speculated on the reasons for the visit, settling on the overt praise Mr. Jenkins had given him for a job well done. He made a mental note to check tomorrow, to see if his video clips had indeed been selected for use on the website. That would be the proof that the praise was warranted, and not just cover for some other more sinister agenda. He tucked the diary under his mattress, and prepared for bed.

## ***Angelina***

Angelina crept along the catwalk, letting her MicroSon VR unit's artificial intelligence (AI) handle camouflage and noise tamping. A small spill of light ahead indicated a corner approaching, and the whisper of voices meant people were talking in that light. She was surprised, she had expected the theater to be empty this early in the morning. Her whole reason for this excursion was to learn what secrets the new building in her 'territory' held; she sensed she was nearing that goal.

As the MS AI ramped up the amplification of the voices, she could make out the conversation, and she froze in her tracks.

"... gave me the funds I needed to build this venue. And my house on Lake Como. And to berth my yacht in Monaco. It's because of this scheme that I am insulated from the problems caused by last year's solar flares. The good news, for you great news, is that there's enough room inside for more, and I'm inviting you in."

"I definitely want to join, that's for sure. I know you know that, or you wouldn't be offering. Tell me as much as you can about what I'm getting into." This second voice sounded eager.

"You'll remember WorldNews Corp's solution to the disruption of the communication system. When the sunspots ruined the majority of the comm sats and threw the Internet into gridlock, one of our boys in R&D came up with a compression algorithm that allowed the few remaining satellites to handle, if not as much traffic as before, at least 85% of what had passed through the communications net before the flares. This was the key that reopened the global economy, following the chaos of those first weeks following the crash of the net."

Angelina remembered those days all too clearly. When Sol reached the peak of sunspot activity in early 2013, a series of 4 gigantic solar flares, 3 that seemed to be aimed directly at Earth, destroyed nearly 80% of the satellites that carried global communications and Internet traffic. With the inability of banks and companies to communicate, and with the loss of the infrastructure that supported

the pads and smart phones society had come to love, modern culture teetered on the edge of anarchy. With nearly a third of the US population unemployed, credit and bank funds frozen or lost and conveniences reverting to the technology of 30 years ago, this might qualify as the 'end of the world' foretold by the Mayan calendar.

The first voice continued, "We publicized and profited from this immensely. But what wasn't in the press releases, and what must remain secret, is that there is a 'back door' in the compression software that allows us to search for and delay certain traffic by a few milliseconds. The delay is undetectable, but it allows us to screen for certain bits of data, a purchase order for a large amount of gold for instance, and it gives us time to place an appropriate buy or sell order ourselves, to profit from the information."

Angelina was stunned. She slowly sat down on the catwalk above the stage. She had climbed into the upper story of this new theater through a bathroom vent that had been easy to remove. Sometimes, it was helpful to be barely 5 feet tall and 100 pounds. Her hope was to find that the snack counter was left stocked when the theater was closed. Who would miss a box of Whoppers here, licorice vines there, and several tall cups of soda in a carry tray?

There was a pause in the conversation. Just as she was beginning to think she was alone in the theater, the second voice asked, "What do I do?"

"Keep quiet. Give me access to an account overseas stocked with whatever amount you choose to start with; the more you open it with, the quicker we can leverage that money into more money than you will know what to do with. A list of the financial instruments you'd like to play with: commodities, managed funds or individual stocks or bonds, or precious metals for example. If you have something on your list that someone else is already playing, you may get little or no action there, so make the list fairly large. Right now there are six of us, you are number seven. We expect to add five or six people and then stop. Can't have too many hands in the pie, eh?" There was a low chuckle, then two.

"I'm in, my friend. I'll courier the information in a few days." The voices began to fade, and Angelina's MS AI began to raise the volume in her earpiece to accommodate the movement.

"I can't thank you enough, for including me in your little party."

"No worries, my old pal. This is payback for all those tests you helped me pass in college." The two men laughed loud enough she could hear them without the help of her AI. The conversation turned to mundane affairs as they passed out of hearing.

She thought momentarily of leaving through the vent empty-handed, but her stomach protested way too much. She hurried to the lobby, filled her backpack with snacks and made herself the four drinks to carry, and then left the building, to eat and ponder.

\* \* \*

This morning Winston decided to extend his morning walk, partly to increase the amount of exercise he was getting and partly to see new parts of town. As he

aged, now in his early thirties, he was gaining weight. It was a good sign that he was curious again; in the months following the solar flares, he couldn't turn on the news without getting terribly depressed. The economy was trashed, so many people were out of work and for a long time after the flares it seemed that every day another neighborhood business closed down. In the past year, he had hardly left his room after work. Recently, at least within the protected city of Mountain View, most people who wanted work had found it. He knew that many businesses had reopened, and it was probably time for him to explore his neighborhood once again.

His walk today was taking him to the edge of his comfort zone. He was leaving the 'good' part of town, and entering the sketchy side, the part of town that was in between Mountain View and the fringe area of Sunnyvale, outside the wall. RFID readers here were few and far between. Police response was minimal, and the buildings reflected that fact: the further he was from his apartment; he saw fewer structures that looked to be whole and in good repair. As he walked quickly, more and more windows were broken out, and more roofs were patched or full of holes. Few fences separated lots, and many of the parked cars he saw had been stripped of parts and even wheels. He still didn't have the courage to walk these streets after dark, but in the early morning's light, he felt safe enough. Just as he was about to turn back, he saw a group of three teenagers, clustered around a light pole, move away from the pole and approach a petite lady carrying a tray of cups and pulling a wheeled suitcase. The hair on his neck rose, and if trouble has a smell, he smelled it. "PHUD, zoom 3" he murmured, and his PHUD enlarged his view three times normal.

\* \* \*

Angelina realized later, in her room, that her mistake had been becoming too engrossed in pondering what she had heard in the theater. She broke the cardinal rule of self-protection: stay aware of your surroundings. Her reverie was broken when she sensed someone standing in her path. She looked up, right into the eyes of a tall, athletic teen standing 10 feet in front of her. He was flanked on either side by shorter boys; neither one seemed nearly as balanced or cocky as the first. Without a hint of fear, she continued walking, moving slightly right, intending to step out into the street and bypass the boys.

As soon as she was close enough, the taller boy swiped at the tray of sodas she was carrying and knocked it from her hand. She froze.

"Now why would you do that?" she asked quietly.

"You can't have anything in your hands and still take off your backpack and give it to me."

"Like *that's* gonna happen" she murmured, taking another step forward. The boy closest to her pulled back his right arm, and swung at her head. She released her grip on her carryall and using her aikido training, grabbed his fist as it came toward her and redirected his mass. It was easy to spin her body, whipping him around her and throwing him into the boy on the other side of the instigator. Hearing the snick of a switchblade opening, she stepped back, away

from the leader, and assessed the way he held the knife. He too, appeared to have had hand-to-hand training. He rose onto the balls of his feet, and held the blade loosely in his relaxed hand. "You can do this easy and walk away, or you can wish you someday walk again. Up to you."

The boy she had thrown was sprawled on the ground, nursing a skinned knee. The other boy began to circle around behind her. She took another step back, keeping her attention focused on the hips of the one with the knife, waiting for his next move. Would he lunge or slash? She saw a man coming towards them on the sidewalk, quickly but quietly, behind her attacker. The boys hadn't noticed him yet.

Both boys jumped at the same time, the one behind her threw his body into her, wrapping both arms around her, and lifting her clear of the ground. She managed to get her right arm free, and began clawing at his face, trying to find his right eye with her thumb. Her feet kicked repeatedly at his shins, trying to reach his kneecaps. The taller boy had jumped towards her, and he raised the dull side of the blade to her throat. "Stop it! I will cut you!"

He barely had the words out of his mouth when the approaching man broke into a run from 20 feet away. As he drew near, he threw his body sideways, into the backs of the taller man's knees. Knees buckling, the attacker fell forward into Angelina.

She was able to break loose from the grip of the teen on her back as the impact knocked them to the ground. She snapped her elbow back and struck her assailant square in the nose. He howled in pain, and released his grip on her. She turned her attention back to the other two men, and saw that the late arrival had both hands wrapped around the wrist that held the knife, and he was holding on as if his life depended on it. The teen was writhing and striking the man with his free hand. She reached over and pinched the teen on a pressure point in his shoulder. His hand went numb, and the knife fell to the ground. She snatched it, stood up, and then bent down and showed him the knife in her hand, point first, aimed at his right eye. "Stop!" she commanded, using the power of her security-officer voice.

He was still. "We are leaving now," she continued. "You will not get off this easy if you try this again. I won't forget this." She snapped the blade shut, dropped it in her pocket, adjusted her backpack, grabbed the handle of her carryall and with a nod to her new partner to follow her, turned and continued down the street.

Now that the commotion was over, Winston stared at the woman as she walked away, realizing that she was the woman who had been in his dream two nights ago. While small, she moved with a grace that hinted at great inner balance and strength. Winston looked back twice, as he hurried to catch up. She didn't appear to care if they were followed or not. Winston saw the three teens slowly get themselves together, and then swagger the other direction as if they had been the victors. He fell into step alongside her, and looked over at the woman setting a quick pace on his right. Seen in profile, Winston was again struck by her beauty. Her focus was straight ahead, as if he wasn't walking beside her. "I'm Winston," he finally said.

Her head snapped around to look at him, as if seeing him for the first time. "How rude of me, after all you did to help me. I'm Angelina, nice to meet you. Thanks for your help back there." She stuck out her free left hand as if to shake his. He took it in his hand, and shook.

"Do you often find yourself in situations like that? You seem to have some self-defense training," he observed.

"I used to work for a security company. I wanted to be a police officer when I was growing up, so I took lots of martial arts classes. But I'm too small to be an officer, security work was the best I could do."

"Used to work? What do you do now?" Winston asked.

She was quiet for a few seconds. "I haven't worked since a few weeks post-flares. I scrounge for what I need to survive. Would you like some candy?"

"Candy? What do you mean?"

She stopped, and with a shrug of her shoulders, brought the backpack around in front of her so she could open it. She showed him the candy inside. "Take anything you want. It's the least, and the only, thing I can offer you for your help. Other than my sincere thanks."

"You're welcome, and I don't need any payment, thanks. I, at least, have a job. I guess that makes me better off than you in many ways, huh?"

"Why do you think I'm bad off? I do just fine, Winston." She looked up and smiled at him. He fell in love with that smile, the one he recognized from his dream.

"I suppose you do. Sorry, I didn't mean anything by that."

"No harm, no foul. But I need to get back to my room. Thanks again for your help." Angelina turned onto a side street. Winston wanted to ask her out for coffee or something, but by the time he got up the nerve, she was too far along the sidewalk to hear him. He watched until she turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

\* \* \*

Angelina's background in security had given her the tools she needed to quickly track down the owners of the theater. There were three, two Limited Liability Partnerships and one corporation. All three companies were owned by a total of 6 men, all 6 were VP level or higher in WorldNews Corp. Big surprise, after what she had overheard in the theater this morning.

She knew she had bombshell information, and thought for a brief moment about how to announce it to the world. She was a particular fan of viral video, so she set up her pad to record. She devoted 30 seconds to explaining the scheme, as she understood it, named a few names, then ended with 90 seconds of rant against WorldNews Corp and greed in general. It took several minutes to upload to her favorite video site, the 'net was still slow following the loss of the satellites. She ate a dinner of candy while she watched the progress bar. Because she did most of her scrounging at night, she was tired and sleepy by the time the video transfer was complete. She turned off the pad, curled up in a corner of her room, and slept.

She awoke with a start, and found it was already dark outside. She hadn't slept this long in years. After using the toilet, she booted her pad and checked her video to see how many views had taken place while she was asleep. Odd, she couldn't find the video, no matter how she searched for it. She thought she must have been so tired when she was sending it, that she stopped uploading it before it had finished. She let it transfer again while she dressed for this evening's scavenging.

She had only taken a few dozen steps outside her room, a large closet in an abandoned office building really, before she felt eyes on her back. She whirled, but saw nothing. Still her sixth sense told her she was being watched, and after all that had happened since the theater, she moved quietly into the shadows. Being patient and deciding to stay close to home tonight allowed her to wait and see if anything came of that paranoid feeling. Soon she saw a pair of men approach her building. They were definitely not the teens she had run into this morning, they moved with the grace of men who were exceptionally fit and trained: professionals. They hid themselves where they could see anyone coming or going. After an hour they still hadn't moved, so she slipped away. She moved about three blocks east, to what had been a major intersection before the wall was built, and crawled into a dark shadow behind a large bush. Settling in for a long night of watching, she was curious if the men outside her building would be relieved before dawn. None of the people who crept along, ever watchful under the light of the full moon, looked like the professionals she had seen. Thankful for having slept so long, she was able to stay awake until after sunrise without a problem.

\* \* \*

Winston awoke two hours before dawn. He had slept dreamlessly for the first time in years, and felt remarkably refreshed despite the early hour. Following a quick breakfast, he decided to head back into the same neighborhood, on the chance that he might see Angelina again. His desire, burning hot inside his chest, overcame the fear that he would normally have felt being on the streets that far from home, while it was still dark. He returned to where he had seen the attack, and then retraced their steps as they had chatted. He came to the corner where he had last seen her and stopped, not sure where to go next.

He jumped when a hand clamped down on his shoulder. He spun around and found Angelina standing there, with some kind of mask over her face. She reached up and lifted the mask, and he saw her broad smile shine in the moonlight. "Don't worry, this VR system camouflages my noise and gives me infrared vision, so I could sneak up on you" she whispered. She stepped into the shadows of a large bush just off the sidewalk in what had once been someone's yard. Winston took the hint and followed.

"Well, you startled me" he said, keeping his voice very low.

"Sorry. I'm being followed, I think. I need your help, again. I hate to ask, but I don't have any other contacts."

"I'm glad to help. Why are you being followed?"

She told him everything, from the theater through the video disappearing from the website.

“Have you checked the second upload?” he asked.

“Yes, it disappeared immediately, as if they were waiting for it. I think it’s why those two guys were lurking outside my building, I think someone doesn’t want this info getting out, and they know who I am.”

“Which site are you using?” He was incredulous when she told him.

“You don’t know much about the web, do you?” he asked. “That site is *owned* by WorldNews Corp!”

Angelina had no clue. She didn’t think that big corporations owned sites that promoted viral videos. How could that be? She didn’t feel confident about what she was doing, suddenly.

Winston was quiet for a moment, taking advantage of having turned the tables on Angelina. “This has to get out, you are right about that. But what you need is a blitz that can’t be stopped by just deleting one file. Can you stay out of sight for 48 hours?”

“As easy as I breathe,” she replied.

“Get your email open on your pad, attach your video, and let me enter an address.” He actually entered 3, 2 that went through anonymous remailers, making the source untraceable.

“What’s your number?” She gave it to him, and he nodded, without writing it down. “Are you expecting any calls in the next few days? Any job interviews coming up?”

She laughed softly, “That would be a big ‘no’.”

“Then only answer a number ending in ‘563’. Got that?”

“I’ve got it. What are you gonna do?”

“Leave that to me. I’ve more experience with the Internet. I’ll call you as soon as I can, and will tell you then. Stay low, stay safe.” He almost leaned in to kiss her goodbye. He moved out onto the sidewalk, cracked as it was, and was quickly out of sight.

\* \* \*

His plan came together as he walked back home. He called Mr. Jenkins’ office phone and left a message that he was going to visit the dentist before coming in late to work today, and that he would make up the time by staying late tonight. He opened webcrawlers to locate as many email addresses at the Treasury and Justice Departments as possible. He set up dummy emails through the remailers, addresses that looked legitimate and would get past most spam filters, but would be untraceable. He researched the video submission urls for CNN, BBC and Al-Jazeera, the 3 major international news channels, and then for good measure, he mined emails for those three outfits and searched for a few hacker chat rooms. He prepared his own video explaining not only the scam, but also the need to spread the word as quickly as possible. He hoped that hackers would be just as outraged by this greedy misuse of software as he was, especially since it originated within corporate America and wasn’t their own play. Finally he set up a

program to upload Angelina's video to over three-dozen other video sites, and to reload the video every ten minutes under a different name, until he broke the loop. By this time, his webcrawlers had given him over 7000 email addresses, a small number that his email program could easily handle. With a great sense of anticipation, he pressed the enter key and sent the videos and emails in a massive data dump, then he dashed off to work.

\* \* \*

He was grateful that his tasks for the day were simple; making easy hacks to history gave him the space to ponder his feelings for Angelina. He had never before been in the presence of a woman this sexy. This physical attraction was new to him and he was clueless how to relate to her. The fact that she lived near the wall, on the very edge of the world of money and electricity, was terrifying to Winston. How could he convince her to come into his world? Was that even possible? How does an outcast get back in the good graces of the banks, and regain their credit? Winston didn't have a clue, having never given a second thought to what it is actually like to be outside the civilized world. But he couldn't get her out of his thoughts; she had needed him, although not in a sexual way, and that gave him hope that he would be able to build a relationship with her that would change his world forever.

\* \* \*

Angelina stayed well hidden during the daylight hours, and pondered her next move. She had obviously stirred up the wrong people; their power and resources would make it a very tough battle to stay alive. She'd have to move, that was clear. Could she walk away without ever going back home? She was loath to leave behind her computer; but even that is easily replaceable, if one merely ignores the incriminating nature of its contents. She also didn't want to leave her stash of tradable goods. Outside the wall, nearly all looters are men. Consequently, when they loot a pharmacy, they leave behind the contraceptives; foam, condoms and dams. Angelina has found, however, that women inside of the wall will pay dearly for these now-unobtainable supplies. That's how she manages to have enough cash to buy minutes for her pay-as-you-go, anonymous phone, and pad connection.

She wouldn't bother trying to find a place nearby; it would be better if she could leave the area and start over somewhere else. One advantage to being outside the wall is that it is very difficult to track someone; this freedom of movement was one reason she loved her life. She gave serious attention now to planning a way to get the computer and contraceptives out of the room safely. Then she could decide on where to go. As dusk approached, she moved back into a position where she could watch the men watching her room without being seen by them, and waited.

\* \* \*

Winston rushed home from work and checked on the videos, then called Angelina to tell her what he had done. He had to apologize; there had not been any mention of their videos in the news. The net buzzed with speculation, but for some reason, the news networks made no mention of either of them. “No worries, I can stay out of sight for a long time as naturally as not,” she murmured.

“You might consider finding a place where you can stay for the longer-term,” he advised. “It may not be safe to return home anytime soon. Should we plan how to get your stuff out of there safely?”

“Let me give that some thought” she replied quietly, allowing him to think it was his idea.

“I’ll keep you posted, okay?”

Trying to remain hidden from the awareness of the men, she grunted her agreement and hung up on his call. The men hadn’t moved.

A few hours later, she watched as two men took over for the pair watching the entryway to the building. She couldn’t hear any conversation; the changing of the guard appeared to be very business-like. The two that were leaving remained in shadows as much as they could; apparently they didn’t want to be noticed if at all possible. Watching them leave, Angelina was struck by a thought: they hadn’t moved all day, hadn’t gone around to the backside of the building. Of course, the windows on this office tower didn’t open, and there was only the one entrance, so it would be easy to think that Angelina would have to use this entryway. If she could manage to get in through the back, though, she could get her stuff out unseen. Creeping away quietly with the help of her MS AI, she circled around to the rear.

Her luck was running hot, there was already a window broken out on the second floor. It was easy for her to scramble up the ledges of the window and the edges of the bricks in the façade underneath, and to sneak inside the building. She quickly tucked her laptop into her backpack, and then surrounded it with most of her stash of trade goods. In a matter of minutes, she was once more checking the ground outside the building, then scrambling down and away. She would stay close to the tunnel she used to get to Winston’s neighborhood, to see if anything developed in the work he was doing to help get the word out, more out of curiosity than anything. It hardly mattered to her whether these high-powered greedy bastards got in trouble or not; she was long past caring about what happened in that world. For Angelina, the real world was out here, outside the wall, where she was free to make her own way through barter and using her wits. It wasn’t a bad life, usually. She set about finding new digs.

\* \* \*

Winston had no news to report, the buzz was dying down about the videos, and they had never been mentioned on news that he could see. After a few days, he called Angelina to fill her in. Rather than talk on the phone, which could be recorded, he asked if they could meet. Angelina named an intersection not far from where they had first met, and Winston picked a time that was after dark, but not scary-dark in that part of town. He continued to be awestruck by her voice; he

wondered if the word *sultry* meant low, barely more than a whisper, and with an underlying current that really turned him on. If it did, then sultry described Angelina's voice quite well.

He arrived at the rendezvous point early, but she was already waiting. Happy to see her again, he found himself babbling about everything and nothing at the same time. She occasionally would ask a question or "hmmmm" in response so that he would know she was still listening, but he dominated the conversation. They walked slowly along the sidewalk, towards the wall, but on a street that had a few streetlights functioning. The soft orange light they cast made Angelina's blonde hair seem fluorescent.

Winston found himself telling her how desperately he wanted to be free of the system. He asked, "What do you think, are people like you who are outside the walls happier than those of us inside?"

Angelina pondered this for several long seconds before carefully answering, "I feel that I am free, and it makes me happy to feel that way. Is that the question?"

"But are you free? Do you use money, and if so, how do you get it?"

Angelina stopped walking and turned to face him. Taking his hands in hers, she looked deeply into his eyes. He noticed that her eyes seemed to sparkle. "You know what? It's actually your state of mind, your consciousness, which determines whether you feel free or not. Me? I get along just fine, without a job, without credit cards, and without always feeling a deep fear that someone is going to kick in my door and haul me before a judge and then maybe even a hangman for not paying back my debts. I guess I feel free, but it is how I define free that matters. Will I live as long as someone like you, behind these walls? Who knows? But it is the quality of the time we have that matters more than the length of our life."

She dropped his hands, and began to walk. "Did you make the choice to leave, or were you forced out?" Winston asked, as he took a few quick steps to catch up.

"Depends on what you mean by forced, I guess. I lost my job. I couldn't pay anything anymore when the money ran out, I had to find a way to eat, and I ended up outside the wall to do that. Was I forced? Yeah. Am I an outcast? Yeah. Am I free? Yeah." She glanced to her left to look at him. "I'm glad about it, any way you slice it."

"But, aren't you scared that you will be found, be forced to join in the economy in a productive way, and be punished for not helping to build our society?"

"You believe that there is no alternative. My friend used to call it *TINA*. It was kind of an in-joke, Tina was also our boss's name. He'd say, "That's our TINA" every time we had to work overtime, or every time they'd cut our pay, or every time he and I would get stuck with the shitty patrol on a cold, dark winter's night. He meant that we were stuck, that we had no way out. But for you, you are scared there is no way out, so you won't find one. For you, TINA."

Winston was silent. Angelina had hit it right on the head, and drove that nail deep into his consciousness. Of course he was scared; hadn't they just recently executed three men on TV for not paying back their debts? Or was that, too, just

a scare tactic designed to keep the meek people cowed and bent nose-to-grindstone? How could anyone be sure, one way or the other?

They walked in silence for another block, and could see the wall where it crossed over the street three blocks ahead. Just to their right, on the other side of the street, candles flickered in the window of a shop. The sign was unlit and unreadable at night. Winston nudged Angelina's arm with his elbow and nodded in the direction of the shop. "Take a look?" he asked.

Without a word, she turned and stepped off the curb. Approaching the window, there were many knick-knacks set on boxes and shelves just behind the glass. The candles were set up above and behind the display, so that they lit both the window area and the room behind. Now that they were close, they could see that the front door was open just a few inches, and they heard a man singing inside. His voice was deep, and though he sang very well he wasn't trying to attract attention or impress, he just seemed to be enjoying making music. Winston and Angelina paused until the song had ended, then looked at each other. Angelina pointed out a snow globe in the window display, and said, "I had one of those when I was a little girl. My grandmother gave it to me one Christmas, when I was six. It wasn't the same scene inside, but we never had snow here in California and I used to lie on my bed and watch the flakes and dream of a *white Christmas*. I miss my Grandma." Her voice seemed to catch; Winston was afraid she would start to cry, and he hated it when women cried. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, or say, when they did that.

The door swung open and a man stepped out of the shop. He jumped, startled to see the two standing outside his door. "Oh!"

"I'm so sorry," Angelina said. "We were so taken by your singing, and then I saw the snow globe. We don't mean to be a bother. We'll be going now."

"No need! I'm the one who should be sorry. I just didn't expect anyone to be on the streets this time of the evening. Please, do come in!" He opened the door wide, stepped to the side, and flourished his left hand to encourage them to enter the doorway.

The man seemed vaguely familiar to Winston, as if he had seen him before. He was tall and thin, and his hair was salt-and-pepper gray. It was parted in the middle, with one long shock of hair hanging down over his left eye. Winston guessed his age at around 60, though these days everyone seemed to age faster than before. He felt the man's name sitting right on the tip of his tongue; he just couldn't shake it loose.

Angelina looked up at Winston, and asked, "Do you mind?"

Winston shook his head no, and indicated she should enter the building. Winston followed her through the door, and the man kept close behind them. Once inside they were astonished to see a room full of the same souvenir-like items that were in the window. The shopkeeper moved aside the partition at the rear of the window display, and lifted the snow globe out. He handed it to Angelina, a smile lighting up his face. "This belongs to an elderly lady, she asked me to sell it for her but only to someone who will take good care of it."

Angelina held it up close to one of the candles and peered at it. Inside, there were two people, lovers it appeared, facing each other and holding hands just as

she had taken Winston's a few minutes before. They were leaning in close, as if about to kiss. In the background, a small home sat with bright yellow lights streaming out of every window and onto the snow outside. She turned the globe upside down for just a second, and then watched the flakes roil and settle around the lovers. "Oh, I love it!" she exclaimed. "Will you buy it for me?" She looked up at Winston.

He was taken aback; not really prepared to make a large purchase for this woman he was just getting to know. This opened up a whole new vista on their relationship, one that he hadn't yet thought about. Still, he didn't want to appear to be a *cheap Charlie*, so he asked the shopkeeper, "How much?"

The man leaned towards Angelina and smiled, "Promise to take good care of it? I'll expect you to come in from time to time and assure me it's still safe."

"Of course I promise!" Angelina gushed. Looking again at Winston, she demurely asked again, "Please buy it for me? I don't have any money on me at the moment; I'll pay you back if it's a problem."

"It's only a dollar," the shopkeeper said, "since I feel you meet the requirements laid out by Mrs. Daughtry. And I wouldn't want you to have to use credit for something as precious as this." Without a word, Winston pulled out his money clip and handed over a dollar. He realized he had been a little dense; Angelina probably didn't have any money with her, if she had any at all.

The man offered to wrap the globe in paper and put it in a bag, but Angelina would have nothing to do with that idea. "No way! I'll carry it home. This is just fine."

"Well, you remember what I said, you have to come back and see me again. Deal?"

"Deal," Angelina was all smiles. "We'll be back soon, I promise." Winston wasn't so sure, and he led the way to the door. The whole scene struck him as odd, but he couldn't quite get his mind around what made it seem that way. He was glad that Angelina was happy, of course. He didn't get the reference to credit, though. And he for sure didn't see what the big deal was with the snow globe. Really now, it's not snow, it's just little bits of *plastic*.

\* \* \*

Winston was about to add a comment to his diary after buying the snow globe for Angelina, when he heard loud knocking outside his door. It didn't sound like knocking on his door, but someone else's. He quickly put his glasses back on and went to the peephole.

There were several men in police uniforms in the hallway, their attention focused on the Ampleforths' door across from Winston's. They continued to pound on the door, and eventually Mrs. Ampleforth opened it just a crack. One of the men threw his shoulder against the door, forcing it open all the way, and the crowd burst inside the apartment. One man stood watch in the hall, and in a mere dozen seconds, the crowd reappeared, with Ampleforth being held between the two biggest officers. Even through the distortion of the peephole's lens, he could see that Ampleforth's eyes were wide with fear. His movements were

hesitant, jerky, as if part of him wanted to fight and flee, and the rest just wanted nothing more than to curl up on the floor and die. The officers pulled him along, not because he was resisting, but rather because he seemed stunned. Joan followed them as far as the door. She was crying loudly, wringing her hands, and Winston could see the two children cowering behind her. Stepping back from his door, Winston could hear the sounds of crying diminish even as his paranoia rose; she had apparently shut her door on the chaos now moving towards the elevator. In seconds, all was quiet once again.

Winston moved quickly to his window and peeked out through a tiny gap in the curtains. Several police vehicles, including a large van, were parked haphazardly along the curb in front of his building, red and blue lights flashing in the darkness. He could see lights shining inside numerous rooms in the apartment building across the street; those curtains had been opened and people were watching all the activity. Winston wondered if the police had taken the wrong man by mistake; could they have come for him instead of Ampleforth? Had his small rebellious acts already been noticed? He thought he had done a good job of covering his tracks, but maybe he had overlooked one key monitoring device. He began to run through all the possibilities, searching for what he had missed. The police began to come into his view as they left the building and approached their vehicles. Ampleforth had gathered his wits together now; he was actively resisting being thrown into the back of the van. From his fourth floor window, Winston could hear that Ampleforth was not going quietly, but couldn't make out the actual words. A couple walking along this side of the street quickly crossed over to the other side, heads down, trying to slip past unnoticed. Winston noted the natural tendency to avoid becoming enmeshed in other peoples' business, to not get involved. He also noted the many people who gathered at their windows across the way, and the voyeuristic trait that they revealed. "We may not risk helping, but we sure like to watch," he thought to himself. "This is but one face of freedom, the freedom to mind my own business and let others deal with their own mess, to choose who I will stick my neck out for." He wondered what he would do, if anything, should Ampleforth not come back home soon. How long could Joan and the children last, without the sole breadwinner bringing home a paycheck? Where would they go, if they were unable to pay the rent? How would they eat? Winston felt guilt rising inside his heart, overwhelming the paranoia of just a few moments before. Had he ruined four lives, albeit unintentionally, by hiding his tracks well enough that the police raided the wrong apartment in the right building? Was he going to be responsible for those kids growing up hungry and uneducated, and ending up living outside the wall?

He pushed these thoughts aside. There had to be something that Ampleforth had done to deserve this. He must have said something to the wrong person in the cafeteria, or sent a message that somehow fell into the wrong hands. There is no need to take on all this guilt without a shred of evidence, he told himself. But he had lost all motivation to write this evening. First there was the rapidly growing depth of his relationship with Angelina, and now the paranoia and guilt of Ampleforth's arrest. He had a lot of emotion to process. He didn't sleep at all well, this night, with both his heart and his mind racing.

\* \* \*

The following days, Winston threw himself into his work. He didn't take his morning walks, allowing him to arrive early. He took lunches in the cafeteria and hurried back to his desk, and made sure he was the last one leaving for home. He didn't touch his diary; in all respects he was a model employee. If he had a bit more credit to draw on he would also have been a model consumer. In this regard however, he was not able to pull his weight; his credit was pretty well maxed out. His mind however, was anything but a role model for others: he was in extreme turmoil.

He was still unsure if Ampleforth had been the actual target of the police, or if they had knocked on the wrong door. He went over and over his own actions, from first conceiving of the diary to the arrest of his neighbor, and was unable to think of any way he could have betrayed himself. He was diligent about not having the camera in range of his diary, and he couldn't remember anything he had said to Angelina that could have been transmitted or overheard. After days of agonizing over this, he finally felt his paranoia ease; Ampleforth must have brought this down upon himself. Winston had neither seen nor heard anything going on in the apartment across the hall. He could only assume that Joan was trying to make the best of a bad situation, and he was somewhat relieved that she had not come knocking on his door, asking for help. He didn't have money to loan her, and he didn't want the three of them moving into his space. He couldn't think of anything he could do to help, and he hated saying "no" when asked to do something for someone else.

He also decided he was making too much of the interaction with Angelina. As much as he felt he was falling in love with her, he doubted she felt the same about him. She needed him, for help with her problem about the video, but she couldn't possibly be attracted to him. He didn't have a good opinion of how he appeared to others, especially women. He decided to give up on having any kind of relationship with her other than helping with the video.

There was no progress on that front, either. The buzz had died down; Winston gave up hope of it ever making the mainstream news. The comments on the videos indicated that this was no surprise to anyone who doubted the fairness of the current economic paradigm; indeed, large institutional traders had long been pushing the small individual aside when it came to getting the best prices, and computer programs and algorithms seemed to have precedence over small sell orders from individual investors. Computer trading and day traders had both changed the landscape of investing so much that there was little room at the table anymore for a buy-and-hold investor. While outrageous, few people felt that these videos shed any new light on corporate misbehavior. Winston decided to wait another few days, and then call Angelina with the bad news. He'd find out then if she had any desire to see him again.

Having taken several days to reach these conclusions, he was once again eager to get out of the apartment. He strolled the sidewalks, heading wherever his feet felt like taking him, and enjoying the late spring breeze that kept the city cool. He had not planned it, but he looked up at one point and saw that he had

returned to the shop where Angelina had found the snow globe. Like the first time, the candles were lit and the door was open just a bit, but he heard no sounds from inside. Having met the owner once, he felt emboldened, and pushed the door open. A small bell tinkled gently as he did so, and the candle nearest the door flickered brightly in the swelling breeze. He closed the door and cleared his throat before saying, "Are you still open?"

He heard a shuffling of papers, a chair scoot along the floor, then steps approach from the rear of the building. The same man stepped into the room and smiled when he saw Winston. "Pleasure to see you again, sir! Where is your... is it friend? Spouse? The lovely lady who was here with you last time?"

"My friend, actually. We'd only just met. I've not seen her since we left here." Winston began to feel peeved that the man seemed more interested in Angelina than him. But of course, she was the one who purchased an item, so it made sense.

"Ah. Indeed. Well, it's good that you came back, at least. I take it you weren't too keen on buying that snow globe, eh?"

"No, that was her idea." Winston paused. He was about to take a monumental leap; a leap of faith that what he said next would fall on sympathetic ears. If he was wrong, this could go very, very badly.

"When we were here and she was negotiating with you about the globe, you mentioned you didn't want her to have to use credit. What did you mean?"

The man looked intently at Winston for a long time. Finally he spoke, "What's your name?"

"Winston." After a few more seconds, he added, "Smith."

"Well, Winston, I only meant that I prefer it when people don't use credit to make a purchase. I was raised that if you couldn't pay cash for something, then you couldn't afford it."

Winston pondered this for a moment. He remembered the first time his parents had applied for a credit card. They had agonized over the decision for months; it was not the way they had been brought up, either. His mother was for it, saying that if the bank agreed, then what was the harm? His stepfather was against it, saying it would just make him an indentured servant, working to pay off debts that had accrued, money already spent, and the banks would profit, so of course they would agree to make loans to anyone.

"Just like Mom and Phil," Winston murmured, barely loud enough to be heard.

"Indeed. But this modern system, and you'll notice that with the candles I try to not participate in the electrical grid, and with my items for sale I try to not participate in the credit system. I don't actually have a terminal for processing non-cash payments; this modern system is one I can't agree with."

"You are close to the wall, but how do you manage, without those things, to stay in business?"

"Oh it's easier than you might imagine. I take it you have a job and credit and all the trappings of modern life? I see you're wearing a PHUD, for instance."

Subconsciously, Winston reached up and touched his glasses, nodding his agreement to the last statement. "All of those, yeah, although it's beginning to worry me."

“How so?”

Winston wasn't sure how much to reveal, though this man seemed, by what he was saying, to be able to answer some of Winston's questions. Take the leap, he thought. “I came across a website that explained that money is actually debt, created to keep us enslaved; just as my stepfather used to say. I don't know that I understand it, or even believe it. I'm just curious, really.”

“Well, that is true, at least the part about money coming from debt. In the days when I was growing up, I used to think that the bank had money sitting in the vaults, that they would lend out to people they trusted. Since their money was being used, it made sense that they charge interest, a fee for the use of their money. But really, from as far back as the 1700s, it hasn't been that way. People used to use gold for trade, but that was difficult. It was hard to make change for a gold nugget. Gold is heavy, making it hard to carry a large amount. And gold can be stolen, which means you could also be hurt in the attempt, not to mention losing your gold. So people would store their gold in the only safe in town, that of the goldsmith. The goldsmith would give them a receipt for their gold, so that they could return and collect it at any time. Some smart goldsmith, though, figured out that very few people actually came back for their gold; it was so much more convenient to just trade the receipts, rather than trade the gold itself. So he started issuing more receipts than he had gold, or he sold some of the gold rather than keep it, thus making a huge profit on his “storage” business. Am I making sense so far?”

“Yeah, you are, except I would imagine that sooner or later, some goldsmith would get greedy and sell too much, and get caught without enough gold. That must have been ugly!”

“I'm sure that happened. Later, early last century, in the U.S. first then worldwide, we did a similar scheme with our money, but instead of goldsmiths being the ones with the safe, it became banks and their vaults. So a bank getting caught short, because it's impersonal and not like you have a relationship with the owner of the bank, is called ‘a run on the bank’. That's when people lose confidence that the bank has their money, so they take it out just to prove the bank still has it. If enough take their money out, the bank is broke long before it gives everyone their share. But the important thing here is that the banks collect interest for money they never even had. They create money out of thin air, every time someone agrees to a loan. The promise to pay, written into the loan agreement, allows the bank to put that amount of money into the borrower's account. The bank doesn't have the money to begin with. So after you have made just a few loan payments, the bank is whole. They've recovered every bit of their own capital that they included in your loan; the rest of your payments are pure profit. This is why banking is such a lucrative business. And of course, banks want everyone to borrow, since that's how they make money. And of course, by spreading a few stories about poor schmucks who fail to pay back the debt and end up being executed for the *crime*, they scare most folks into paying even if means they don't have money left for food.”

Winston didn't know what to say. Dad had been right, all along. "We are bombarded with ads encouraging us to buy, and the only way we can afford to buy is with credit, so it's not even our fault we owe so much money."

"Winston, you're correct, I'm afraid. And because bankers fear deflation, during those times when the prices fall because no one is buying, they will do anything to ensure that consumption increases. They will loan money to anyone, just to keep them buying, in other words. Even if a few people fail to pay it back, they make so much profit on the others; defaults become just a small cost of doing business."

"But if *everyone* decided to stop making their payments..." Winston was not quite sure what to say next.

"If everyone stopped paying, the whole system would collapse. We'd end up pretty much like today, except *everyone* would be outside the wall, not just a few people. But you know what? Have you gone outside? It's actually not too bad out there. People trade their time and skills for what they need, or they barter goods they had before the flares, for other things they need now. They grow their own food, and yeah, they don't eat strawberries from Brazil in January, but they don't starve to death, either. It's not the end of the world to be outside the wall, or to have no access to credit. But it does take lots of work. And speaking of work, is there anything you'd care to purchase, tonight?"

Winston looked around the store. The flickering of the candles made the place feel warm and inviting. But the shelves were filled with knick-knacks, and nothing caught his eye. "Sorry, but no. I will make sure Angelina comes back though, and I imagine she will have no trouble picking out something."

"I appreciate that. My name is Jones, by the way. I've enjoyed talking together this evening, Winston. In fact, I'd love to talk with you again. I have a room upstairs that no one uses. I'd be happy to let you use it; no rent, just your conversation once a week, is all I ask. Would you like the key?"

Winston thought quickly. This close to the wall, and without electricity, it would be unlikely that there is surveillance in the room. He also didn't think that Mr. Jones would stand for it, after all. He could get an anonymous pad, charge it with pay-as-you-go funds, and surf the 'net to find out more about this whole credit issue. It would also give him a rendezvous point with Angelina, much closer to where she feels comfortable. "I thank you, and I agree. I'll take the key."

Mr. Jones reached into a drawer of the desk near the rear door and handed him a key. "The door is at the top of the stairs at the rear of the building. I look forward to our next conversation, Winston."

"I'll come back soon, Mr. Jones." Mr. Jones turned away, and left the room through the rear door. He seemed unconcerned that Winston still stood in the middle of his shop. Winston quickly moved through the front door and onto the street. He went around to the back of the store, and found a stairway there, just as Mr. Jones had said. The key worked in the door at the top of the stairs, and Winston stepped into a bare room, about 12 feet by 15 feet. Winston found a small candle and a box of strike-anywhere matches on the only bit of furniture in the room, a small end table just inside the door. A thin layer of dust covered the surface of the table; it left a residue on his fingers as he arranged the candle and

picked up the matchbox. Lighting the candle, he could see two small windows along the outside wall, covered by faded curtains that appeared to have a pattern comprised of farm animals. Winston wondered if a child had last used this room. The room smelled musty, as if it hadn't been opened for months or even years. He'd have to find a way to get a chair and table into the room, he decided. And depending on how things go, maybe even a bed. He blew out the candle and locked the door, returning down the stairs and to the street.

What Mr. Jones had said tonight made sense; but Winston still wasn't sure he could trust what he had heard. How could he verify the information without raising suspicions? And what if it is true? What does that mean for his future? His mind racing, he returned to his apartment.

Diary entry:

17 April 2014 The banks are running a scam to keep us working until we die. They make us pay interest on money they never had. They imprison us or kill us if we don't pay. We don't make enough money to buy what we need without using their credit, and credit is just a product that they advertise and sell so that bankers get rich.

Freedom is Sacrifice. To be free, I have to sacrifice my credit? Do I know how to live without credit? Can I find out?

\* \* \*

It's 3 a.m. when Winston awakens, heart pounding, on his knees at the foot of his bed. Images from his dream still cloud his vision; he reaches unconsciously for the sheet to wipe the sweat from his face as he remembers. He doesn't recall the beginning, but the brightest image is of Angelina, standing at the window of a bedroom. The room is dusty, much like the room Mr. Jones offered to Winston earlier this evening. There is a bare mattress on a queen-size bed frame, and a small nightstand and candleholder just inside the door. There is no other furniture in the room; the walls are covered with floral-patterned wallpaper. Angelina holds the snow globe, turning it slowly in her hand, and silently weeping. Winston is so touched by her tears that he feels himself begin to cry. His heart fills with grief; he remembers when Tuffy, his Labrador, was hit by a car and died when Winston was just nine years old. No tragedy, no loss, has ever come close to matching the grief he felt when he lost Tuffy. Now Angelina turns abruptly, uses the back of her empty left hand to wipe the tears from her face, and Winston tastes the bitterness of betrayal, metallic in his mouth. His heart feels cold, frozen, as if his best friend had accused him of something he didn't do. He remembers that happening, actually; they had been playing outside in the yard, and Andy had picked all of the flowers from Winston's mother's flowerbeds and strewn the petals all over the spring grass. His mother had stormed angrily from the house, demanding to know who had done this terrible thing, and Andy had wordlessly pointed to Winston. The beating his mother gave him didn't hurt half as much as the feeling that his friend had turned his back on him, had given him up just when it mattered. Angelina looks up to the ceiling, as if searching for an answer to a profound question, and then raises her hand holding the snow globe high behind

her head, and hurls it against the far wall. The crack of the globe hitting the wall portends the crack that appears on its surface, and the crack that grows wider in Winston's heart. It rolls back towards Angelina, and stops a yard short of her feet. He knows, without understanding how, that Angelina's anger, her feelings of betrayal, and her grief, all these feelings are his fault. What has he done to her, to cause her such anguish? To save his life, he can't imagine he could ever hurt her in this way. He hopes this dream is wrong, and that it never returns again. "I must take it as a warning and make sure I never do this thing," he thinks as he lays his head back onto the pillow and tries to go back to sleep.

\* \* \*

Winston was headed back to his cubicle after lunch when his PHUD showed an incoming call from Angelina. But even before he could react, and tell the PHUD to open the call, it blinked out. He ordered the device to call her back, and when she answered, her voice was even more quiet than usual.

"Did you just call?" Winston inquired.

"Yeah, but then I thought I shouldn't bother you at work. Hope this is OK, calling you now."

"Sure. I'm on my lunch break. If I can't talk, I won't answer; call me anytime. What's up?" He leaned a shoulder against the wall of the hallway as he talked.

"I...uh, I guess I just wanted to ask if I could see you tonight?" Angelina sounds so sexy, Winston thought, when she talks low like this.

"Sure. Want to go back to visit Mr. Jones?"

"Mr. Jones? Who's that?" Winston had forgotten that they had not been introduced during the visit when Angelina had bought the snow globe.

"The shop where we bought the snow globe. I've something there I want to show you."

"You've gone back already? I didn't think you liked those kinds of things, or even shopping in general."

"There's more there than just stuff. I like talking with him. I'm learning some things, and I want to share them with you. See you around 6?"

"Fine. See you." The connection closed, and Winston continued back to his station as if walking on air.

\* \* \*

Again, he arrived early only to find Angelina was already there. She tossed her head, throwing the lock of hair that tended to fall over her left eye to the side, and stretched out her arms as if inviting a hug. Winston was only happy to oblige, though he had to bend over and put his back into an awkward position in order to get his arms around the small lady. If he were more comfortable with the relationship, he would have lifted her right off her feet and planted a juicy kiss on those big lips. Instead, he quickly pulled away.

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What about you?"

Hoping she wouldn't hear his stomach growling later, he lied, "Me too. Want to see my surprise first, or go inside?"

"Oh, I love surprises! Show me."

He led the way around the back of the shop, and as they climbed the stairs, he began to tell her about the offer Mr. Jones had made for him to use this room. At the top, he unlocked the door, swung it wide open, and stepped back so that she could enter first. She stepped in and paused, looking around quickly. "It needs work."

Winston laughed at her understatement. "Know where I could get some furniture for free?"

She turned back to face him, and smiled. "Yeah. If you don't mind carrying it here from outside the wall, that is."

Winston thought about that as he entered the room. "How do you bring furniture in through the wall? In fact, how do *you* get through the wall?"

Again, Angelina smiled. "Walls only keep in the timid and the compliant, which is most people, actually."

Winston noted her use of the word *in* in that statement. "This is something I want to talk about: what's life like outside? Are you safe, and happy? Or would you rather be back here?"

"I'm as safe as you are. There are plenty of vacant buildings for the few people who live outside, and even though there are no keys for the locks, I prop a chair against the door to give me warning if anyone tries to come into my room when I sleep, and always keep my gun close. Most people outside just scavenge what they can from empty buildings, some sell or trade what they find for food or ammunition."

"And are you happy?"

Angelina paused for a few seconds. Sounding wistful, she said, "Yeah. It takes a different point of view, though. I'm always learning, finding new tactics to get what I need to survive. That makes every week a little easier. I had to redefine what I want; now I just want enough to get by. That's a huge shift from what I was like when I had a "real" job, and spent every paycheck to buy stuff I didn't need just for the thrill of shopping and finding a "bargain". I don't have a retirement account, but you know too, I don't have the stress of thinking that the stock market going up or down is impacting me. I get up when I want, and I sleep when I want. I miss having books to read. Is it a perfect life? No. Am I lonely sometimes? Yeah. Am I happy? Yeah, I am."

"We are told all the time, on this side, about how chaos and brutality mean that everyone outside dies a quick and nasty death. I take it that's not true?"

"Winston, don't fall for that media bullshit. Everywhere, there are problems and there are joys. Inside, outside, we all want an easier tomorrow because we know we are getting older every day. We all want relationships that feed us. We all find pleasure in a beautiful sunset, a bright rose, or a haunting song. Sure, some of us have to worry about the nutcase with a gun, or about finding a stash of goods that everyone wants that we now have to give up or fight to defend. But look at your life: have you seen anyone taken away by the police? How is that different from a nutcase? And have you ever had your apartment broken into? Many

people have, even inside the wall. Is inside really any better than outside? Let me ask you, are *you* happy?"

Winston shook his head. "I am afraid. Afraid of the police, afraid of losing my job, afraid I can't repay my debts, which are getting bigger every month. Fear is in every thought, every thing I do. I'm lonely, too, just like you. I want to get free of this cycle. I don't see a way out. How do I get free, Angelina? Can you tell me?"

Angelina stepped up close to Winston, and looking directly into his eyes, answered, "Hold me."

Winston took her into his arms, again having to bend into an awkward shape to match her height and maintain eye contact. She continued, "There is another way. But *you* focus on freedom, on rebellion, when you should be focusing on survival. What do you need to survive? How can you get that? I can show you the outside; you may find what you want there. But wherever you go, you still have to deal with what is happening *inside your head, and inside your heart*. That is all that matters. Get that straight, and you won't have to rebel. Know what? You are already free, you just can't see it."

She stepped back, breaking his hold of her. Winston was grateful; his back was really starting to hurt. But he missed her touch, her energy blending into his own. "We need a way to sit, and we need a bed. Want to go hunting for furniture?"

Still processing what had just happened, Winston only nodded. He turned and put the key into the lock, so that Angelina could close it on the way out. Silently, deep in thought, he led the way down the stairs and onto the street.

Angelina stepped into the lead as they approached the wall. The wall had been hastily constructed in the first weeks following the solar flares. It was an electrified chain link fence actually, topped with razor wire. There were sentry posts along its length, but there were blind spots that couldn't be watched from a fixed post. Foot patrols walked the fence line, though not continuously; a watchful person could easily find times when sections of the wall were not being monitored. It was installed to limit the amount of territory that had to be policed during those first days of anarchy, when the whole world teetered on the edge of collapse. Unprepared for the wholesale looting that accompanied the freeze in the economy, the few police that remained had more trouble than they could handle. The solution was to limit the area they needed to control, hence the wall. It made for a convenient place to put people who otherwise would clog the jails. Some people still ended up in prison if the police or the courts felt that they were able to be rehabilitated, and to become good consumers once again. The rest found themselves outside of "civil" society, and outside the wall.

She glanced from side to side, very aware of every movement along the road. Winston couldn't see anything happening, which was actually quite fine. He didn't want to spend the rest of the evening dodging police and trying to make his way home without being caught. Soon enough, Angelina edged up to a broken window in a two-story structure. With a last glance up and down the street, she shimmied her way inside, and then beckoned for him to follow.

Winston also worked his way into the building through the window. He found himself alone in a small empty room, probably a bedroom, with no door hanging in the doorway. Hearing small sounds from further into the apartment, he followed where he believed Angelina had gone. There was a layer of dust everywhere, but no furniture. The place had been completely gutted of possessions. Entering the hallway outside the bedroom, Winston saw Angelina disappear through a door at the other end. He followed, and found she had taken a stairway down into what had to be the basement of the building. At the foot of the stairs, he paused to let his eyes get used to the limited light. To his right he heard a match being struck, saw the flickering flare of the match, and then the warm yellow glow of a candle lit the space. Angelina held the candle up above her head, and motioned for Winston to approach.

When he was by her side, she pointed to the wall, and Winston could see there was a tunnel dug through the concrete block wall and into the earth beyond. It slanted slightly downward, and was about four feet tall and wide. "Think we can get a bed through that?" Angelina whispered.

"Two twin size mattresses? Sure." Winston whispered back. Angelina bent slightly, and entered the tunnel. Winston got down on his hands and knees, and followed.

They worked their way along in this manner for what seemed like forever, at least to Winston's knees. He was not used to creeping along, so his body hurt in various places before they emerged in a room similar to the one they had left. In truth, it was probably only about 300 feet away. Winston joined Angelina in the room, and brushed the dirt from his clothing as he looked around. There wasn't much to see, this room had also been stripped of anything that could be taken away. "I'm taking you to my room, first. Then we can hunt for furniture."

Winston followed her up the stairs, through the barren apartment, and onto the road just outside the wall. The fence could be seen about 100 feet away, across the street and at the back of a lot that had been cleared off by bulldozer, Winston guessed, based on the scrapes in the dirt that remained. Angelina turned to the right, and led him down the street. Winston's senses were on full alert, wary of the chaos he had heard described in the news. The street, however, was very quiet. After walking two blocks, Winston heard some yelling to his right. Angelina froze, and then her hand went to a pocket sewn onto her pants just below her knee, and emerged holding a small handgun. She watched for several breaths, gun at her side, standing on the balls of her feet and ready to jump into action. There was no more yelling, and soon she relaxed, returning the gun to the pocket. She turned and smiled at Winston. "No problem." She whispered.

Three blocks later, she paused under a tree, in front of a four-story building. It looked like a mansion, with a steep, gabled roof and columns on either side of the porch. She looked up and down the street, and hearing and seeing nothing moving, moved up the steps and into the home. Winston followed. Once inside, she took the stairs just inside the front door and led the way to the second floor. Again pausing and listening, she cautiously moved along the hallway to a door on the left near the end. Opening the door, hand near the pocket with the gun, she peered inside. After a few seconds, she reached into the room, and Winston

heard her lighting a candle. She turned to him and swept her arm in a motion that invited him into the room.

There was only a bed and a table inside the room, but Winston was stunned to recognize the room he had seen in his dream last night. He turned to look at the wall where the snow globe had cracked, but could see no mark in the feeble light. Then he spotted the globe, sitting on the window ledge. He moved to it and picked it up; examining it for the crack he had seen in his dream. The globe was still pristine. With a long sigh of satisfaction, Winston returned the globe to its place on the sill and turned to face Angelina. "This is your room?" he asked.

"Do you like it?"

Winston cast his gaze around the small quarters, noting the backpack and wheel-around Angelina had been toting the first time they met leaning against the left-hand wall. He couldn't remember those items from his dream. "It's nice. Nice and cozy, in a way. How long have you been here?"

"Just a few days. I moved after they started watching my place, following the video hassle. I'm still feeling out the neighborhood." Angelina sat down on the edge of the bed. "Don't know if I will stay here or not. That guy we heard yelling, back there, he does that a lot, all hours of the day and night. I'm not sure I like that too much."

"Is he your 'nutcase with a gun'?"

"Maybe. I haven't seen him; don't know if he *has* a gun. Come here, and sit." She patted the bed next to her.

"So everything you own, fits in those?" Winston asked, pointing to the backpack and the suitcase.

"Yeah. Stuff just gets in the way, ya know? It's a distraction from what's important. We fill our space with stuff so that we don't feel empty. We measure our worth by how much stuff we have, and compare our stuff to what others have, always hoping that ours is better. Do you see that, in your own life?"

"Some stuff is necessary. I mean, for instance, if I want to shave, I need stuff for shaving. If I want to write, I need stuff for writing. I have friends who depend on having a car, and that means having lots of other stuff, too."

"Do you have a car?"

"I do, but I don't drive much. It's better to sell my gas rations to people who need them because they live far from work. I could easily let it go."

"Why haven't you already?"

"I might need it some day. Things change. It's easier to keep it in case, than to have to buy another one."

"But is it really? How much do you spend on upkeep, registration, repairs? And how much psychic energy do you spend worrying about whether it is safe on the street, or wherever you park it, or whether it will even start the next time you need it? And when you drive it, do you drive alone? See how this car adds to your stress, adds expense to your life and means you have to work more, and keeps you from building relationships with friends and neighbors? What if you shared a car with other people, instead of each person having their own?"

“It’s nearly paid for, so soon there won’t be a lot of expense involved. But I see your point about not using it much. When I think about getting rid of it, I feel, I don’t know, *afraid*. Can you understand that?”

“Yeah, I understand, I had a car once, too.” Angelina was silent, Winston waited for her to continue. She remembered the days when she was part of the whole consumer system, and not fondly. “I had a car payment, insurance, rent and the usual food and gas and internet connection like everyone does. But when I went shopping, it just didn’t work for me anymore. I didn’t enjoy shopping, I wasn’t thrilled with finding a bargain, bringing home something new didn’t leave me feeling happy or fulfilled like it did before. Then when I lost my job and had no money for all these things, I found no way out. I could only leave, and at first I was scared to death. I found a vacant room and stayed there for days, leaving only to pee. But slowly, I began to see that what was important, I hadn’t lost. I could still relate to people, I just had to use different terms, a different way of getting what I needed. I began to survive, to find enough, to find joy in new and unusual places, and to see adventure in everything I do.”

She got up from the bed, moved to the backpack, and took out a large plastic bag filled with blackberries. “Care for a snack?” she asked as she held out the bag.

“Where did you get these?” Winston asked as he took a few berries from the bag.

“The back yard of a home about five blocks east of here. There’s also lemon, orange, apple and plum trees, in various yards, if you know where and when to look.” She settled back onto the bed beside Winston, and continued to eat and share from the bag of berries.

“Thanks for sharing, for all of your sharing, today. I think I’m ready to find a table or a bed. How ‘bout you?” Winston said after a few minutes.

“Sure. But first, more berries?” They sat for several more minutes in silence, enjoying each other’s energy and the bond they were forming. And the sweet, sweet blackberries.

Then they went furniture hunting in nearby homes.

\* \* \*

Winston was exhausted by the time his head hit the pillow at home. Angelina had taken him to several houses that still contained some furniture, and they had found a small table and chair ideal for a computer. They were small enough to drag through the tunnel, but it was nearly midnight before Winston was able to rest. He was not used to this kind of physical work.

The next day at work, his thoughts were preoccupied with Angelina. He couldn’t get her face out of his mind’s eye, as she patted the bed next to her and invited him to sit; as she smiled at him as they talked, faces mere inches apart. He remembered how she smelled, and how the room itself seemed to glow, reflecting her warmth. He blushed, as he remembered watching her hips move as she walked ahead of him, leading him to the tunnel and as they searched for

furniture. He hoped she had not noticed, one of the times when she had turned to talk with him.

He also struggled with the idea of love and sex. In the culture, sex was prominent in advertising, movies and TV shows. Yet, if talk around the office was any indication, most people were so wrapped up in their distractions and their separateness that little actual lovemaking was going on. Winston saw that creating a loving partnership was about building connection on all levels: mental, emotional, physical, and even spiritual. The mandate of this culture, however, was to increase one's sense of separation from other people and from Nature itself. It was so successful, that few partnerships this complete existed, at least in Winston's circle of friends and co-workers. This line of reasoning led Winston to the conclusion that developing a truly integrated relationship would be an act of rebellion against the culture. It would signify a rejection of the idea that we are all separate islands in the sea of life. Lovemaking, not sex, was a revolutionary act. Having a passion for someone was an anomaly. Fulfilling one's desire without consuming resources was an act of devotion to Mother Earth.

Such was his state of mind, ethereal and deep, when he went to his new room to meet Angelina after work. For the first time since they met, she was not early. In fact, she was nearly an hour late. Winston was very anxious, afraid even, and consumed with the thought that she was not ever going to show herself again. He replayed the previous evening's events, searching for a clue as to why she would bolt like this. He breathed a huge sigh of relief as he heard light steps on the stairs outside the room, and jumped to the door to open it for her.

She was holding her left arm, very gingerly across her abdomen. Winston could see some blood soaking through the makeshift bandage on her forearm and hand. She had a few bruises on her face; her left eye was slightly swollen and turning dark colors. "Oh my God! What happened?" he inquired, even as he reached out to shepherd her inside the room.

"I had a small disagreement with two guys who thought they deserved something that I had." Angelina flinched as he touched her right arm.

"Are you OK?" Winston probed, quickly letting go of her.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Nothing that time won't heal."

Winston leaned in close to her as they moved close to the only chair in the room, examining the bandages on her arm. As she sat down, he said, "I've some antiseptic in my room, and we can stop at a store on the way there and get some real bandages, OK?"

"How far away is all of this? I'm not feeling up to walking a lot tonight."

"Oh, probably fifteen blocks from here, not even half an hour."

Angelina thought about that for several seconds, as Winston fretted. Standing once again, she agreed, "OK. It's best to get these scrapes taken care of, I suppose."

Winston quickly got ready to lock up, as Angelina gingerly worked her way back down to the street. Watching her move, it seemed to Winston that her back was also hurt, though no blood showed through her clothing. He led the way, careful not to get too close, to a store near his apartment that sold the supplies he wanted. That taken care of, they were soon inside his apartment. Winston

was glad that he kept his place tidy all the time; he hadn't thought to bring Angelina here when he left to meet her, but his quick glance around as they entered satisfied him that she would not think he was a bachelor slob.

"Nice place," she commented as they moved through the living room and into the bathroom.

"It's small, of course, since I live alone. But I'm afraid it will soon be sold as a condo, and I won't be able to afford to stay here." Winston lowered the lid on the toilet and motioned for Angelina to have a seat. "Can I unwrap this, or would you rather?"

Angelina began unwrapping the bandages on her arm, as Winston opened up the bottle of antiseptic and the package of bandages. She had several abrasions, and Winston quickly became concerned about her wrist. It was swelling, and he was afraid it might be broken. "How's your wrist?" he asked.

Angelina looked up at him. "It'll be fine. I don't think it's broken, although it's surely sprained. I fell back onto it at one point."

"I had a broken wrist, once. I didn't think it was broken first, either. It happened when I was playing football, and same as you, I fell backwards onto it. On the very next play I was making a tackle, and I thought I was going to die, my wrist hurt so much."

"What did you do?"

"Got a cast put on it, of course. But back in those days, this was decades ago, it wasn't expensive to go to the doctor. I didn't have insurance, but I could still afford it just fine. Not like today..."

They were able to quickly dress her arm, and apply antiseptic to her face. Angelina begged forgiveness and asked to head on home; she was exhausted mentally and physically, and just wanted to rest. Winston escorted her back to the wall, but she insisted that she be allowed to go the rest of the way alone. She patted the pocket below her knee, "I won't be very forgiving tonight. I'll shoot first, ask questions later" she said before turning and leaving Winston to watch her enter the building with the tunnel in the basement.

Winston's heart went out to her. So small, and yet such a big spirit. He couldn't imagine what fortitude it took for her to go alone outside the wall, to face those streets by herself, with just a gun as her backup plan. He wished he could be that brave, someday, too.

\* \* \*

The next day she didn't answer her phone. Winston hoped that was because she was sleeping, but it worried him nonetheless. After work, he took his time eating dinner at the local Thai restaurant, an extravagance that he normally reserved for special occasions. When Angelina still didn't answer, he wandered the streets, heading in the general direction of his room. As he approached, he caught a glimpse of blonde hair out of the corner of his eye, but when he whirled and looked more closely, he saw no one. His paranoia began to rise; was she spying on him? Was she playing with him? He tried her phone again, and again,

each time with no answer. He climbed the stairs slowly, watching carefully, trying to see if it had been Angelina, and if she was still watching him.

Sitting alone in the dark, he wondered if he should go to her room, or wait for her to answer his calls. She could be hurt worse than they thought; maybe internal bleeding or a concussion was about to kill her. Maybe she had found some bad drugs, thinking they were pain pills, and even now was lying in her own vomit, dying like those rock stars of old. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. Paranoia soaring, but hoping to find Angelina on his doorstep, he ran to the door. He opened it just a crack while bracing the door with his foot. Mr. Jones stood there, smiling.

"I see you have come back to enjoy the room. I'm glad you like it." Winston swung the door open.

"Please come in." Winston stepped away from the door, and offered the chair to Mr. Jones with a wave of his hand.

"Care to join me downstairs for a bit of conversation? I think we might be a tad bit more comfortable there, as you are still preparing your room." Mr. Jones didn't move to enter the room.

"OK." Thinking he might not come back to the room tonight, Winston pulled the key from his pocket, fit it into the door, and locked the door on his way out. They made small talk as they moved inside the shop and settled into comfortable, old stuffed chairs. Mr. Jones offered to pour brandy, but Winston politely declined.

"So what is it that you want, Winston?"

"I don't want anything. Angelina is the shopper."

"No, I don't mean in the shop; I mean, what do you want in life? In the next year, the next five?"

Winston was quiet. He was beginning to trust this man; their last conversation had reminded so much of the dilemma his parents faced concerning credit. He didn't believe that anyone who was deeply invested in the system would have been so blatant about scorning the way things worked. He took a deep breath, and then answered.

"I can't see how I can get out of debt. I owe a few years' worth of salary. I only make the minimum payments, which they say, means it will take a decade or more to pay off the loan, even if I don't add more debt. And how can I avoid adding more? I don't make enough as it is, and I don't go out to eat much, I don't drive the car much, I just work and come home and eat and sleep. I even hated giving Angelina that dollar for the globe; you might have noticed."

Mr. Jones nodded. Winston continued, "I suppose I want some way out of debt that makes sense; and after what you told me the other night, I get the idea that by continuing to make my payments, I just prolong the pain. A year from now? I want to have a plan; and maybe even be outside. Five years from now? I hope that I can find a way to bring this system down." *There, he thought, I've finally said it out loud to someone, this rebellion that has been percolating up through my soul these last few weeks.*

Mr. Jones was silent, eyes closed, his hands with palms together in a prayer position, fingertips pressed under his chin and appearing deep in thought. Just as

Winston began to worry that he had told the wrong person about his innermost feelings, Mr. Jones opened his eyes and looked right at him, and smiled.

“You know, you’re not alone. Lots of people have already had these thoughts, and they are leaving the city in droves. The whole system is on the verge of collapse because of this very idea: that we’ve just become slaves to debt.”

“But, how can I know that? There’s no mention of it in the news. I feel like I’m the only person who thinks this way. There’s no visible *movement* that I can see.”

“Take my word for it. I see it all the time. People go past the window, you can tell. They carry bags; and who would carry bags in this part of the city if they weren’t already headed towards the wall and life outside?”

Winston wasn’t ready to believe that he was joining a mass movement. No one had left Truth Network voluntarily, that he knew of. He didn’t see lots of people carrying bags. He wavered, thinking that maybe, just maybe, this was a crazy dream and that he would wake up in his bed, drenched in sweat. Maybe he could find a part-time job, and then be able to pay off his debts the accepted way.

Winston thanked him, promised to return soon, and took his leave of Mr. Jones.

Diary entry:

20 April I don’t know where this goes, but I spoke of my desire to bring the system down tonight to someone I’ve only just met. He is encouraging me, he told me I’m not alone. I don’t know that I believe that. I still act alone. How can one person make a difference? I’m clueless about how things work, how can I see the levers to pull? Look at how the videos failed to raise a ruckus. Right now, just like with Angelina, I’m all desire, no action.

\* \* \*

Winston tried calling Angelina while walking to work the next morning, and she finally answered her phone. “I’ve been worried sick about you, are you OK?” he tried to sound reassuring, not desperate.

“I’m fine. I had to sleep, I was just exhausted by the whole thing, and it hurt too much to move. I have some old painkillers, they helped me sleep, and I put the phone on vibrate. Sorry you worried too much.”

Winston wasn’t totally confident she was ‘fine’, and asked to see her that evening. She begged off for one more day, and then shyly asked, “Tomorrow’s my birthday. Can we go somewhere special? Not to eat, just to talk.”

“Of course! Have any place in mind?”

“The shoreline?”

Winston wasn’t sure if she was referring to any shoreline, or the place in particular that used to be a park along the edge of the San Francisco Bay. But either way, he was happy to oblige. “Let’s meet at the room above the shop. I’ll bring my car, and we can decide tomorrow where to go.”

He continued on to work, and redoubled his efforts, seeking out overtime (there wasn’t any) and trying his best to do what his boss required of him. That evening, at home, he searched the Internet for a part-time job that could help him pay off his accounts quickly, to no avail either. Apparently, no one was hiring.

\* \* \*

Winston hurried home from work the next day, and spent long minutes washing his car. He hadn't driven it for a very long time, months actually. He had gone down to the street where it was parked, alongside the apartment building, a few times to start it and let it idle to recharge the battery. But he hadn't actually purchased gas for it since about two months following the chaos of the flares.

If they decided to go to that place called Shoreline, he would have to park and leave the car close to the wall. There were only a few places along the water actually inside the wall. Before the flares, government regulations protecting the wetlands along this section of the bay caused most buildings along the ocean to be abandoned. Therefore, there was little reason for the police to protect those areas. He worried about leaving the car in an unsafe part of town, but would do anything Angelina requested. He only had eleven more car payments left; he hoped he wouldn't be paying for nothing after tonight's little adventure.

He saw her hair first, that flash of blonde as she shook the lock of hair out of her face, as he rolled up in front of the shop. The thought struck him; she always dresses so as to not attract attention. The attraction he feels towards her has nothing to do with physical beauty; it's her inner being, her poise and strength and purity that draws him to her so strongly. He rolled down the passenger-side window and called out, "Happy Birthday!" as the car came to a stop.

Her smile was thanks enough for the effort and gas money he would spend for this evening. It lit her face, and his heart, like a thousand sparkling jewels. "Sorry I don't have presents..." he reached across the seat and opened her door.

She carefully took her seat, treating her back gingerly, and asked, "Where are you taking me, kind sir?"

"You did say 'shoreline', right?"

"That would be wonderful. I so love the water; you can't know how much this will mean to me to be able to see the shore again. So much has happened, so much is different, since the last time I went anywhere like this."

They made small talk as Winston drove. He noticed too, there were moments of silence, when they both just felt comfortable with each other, and didn't feel the need to fill the silence. Shoreline was only fifteen minutes away, they were able to quickly park and walk the last several hundred yards to what used to be the park entrance. Now it was a vandalized guard shack, and asphalt beginning to show potholes and cracks that would never be repaired. The cracked and faded wooden sign on the shack noted the \$5 admission fee; of course, no one was collecting any money now. They slowly walked the road, a gently rolling pavement that led a meandering path towards the water of the Bay. There were many birds flitting about, and even an occasional butterfly. The sky was overcast, so it seemed darker than Winston had expected for this early in the evening. It felt like the temperature had dropped several degrees just from the time Winston had picked up Angelina, but that might have been because there was more wind out here, this close to the water.

Out of respect for the occasion, Winston allowed the conversation to drift and didn't mention his meeting with Mr. Jones. Angelina told him several stories of

her youth; she seemed to be in a reminiscent mood because it was her birthday. Winston enjoyed hearing her tales of growing up in Colorado; he himself had never been fond of snow. Angelina was the opposite: her family had moved to snow country when she was eight. She loved being in snow, and to hear her tell it, she was quite an accomplished skier. She ridiculed him, completely in fun, when he complained about how cold it was getting as the sun sank below the mountains.

Too soon, it was time to return home. Winston didn't want Angelina to have to use her gun to protect them, not on her birthday. She was disappointed that there weren't more water birds along the shore; she listed more than a dozen birds she was expecting to see, but could only point out three to Winston as they had walked along the paths. The car was unmolested when they got back to it. Winston breathed a long sigh of relief. "Where to?" he asked once they were back inside the vehicle.

Angelina flashed him another smile, and in her low, sexy, phone voice, asked if they could possibly stop by a store to get something to drink, and then park the car and go to her room. Winston was only too pleased, and quickly steered the car to the nearest grocery. Angelina didn't ask for much, just a bottle of red wine and some cheese and crackers. Winston wasn't too worried, but the cheese was a local, unpasteurized goat cheese. He was never sure that he should be eating stuff made locally; who knows if there is adequate concern for food safety in every single new, small dairy?

He parked the car outside Mr. Jones' shop, and they slowly walked (and crawled through the tunnel) to Angelina's room. Winston noticed that, as they got near to her room, she was maintaining a conversation with him but her senses were all on high alert. She seemed to be looking for someone following them, or hiding outside her building. He felt his own paranoia begin to rise again, watching her be so conscious of danger.

Once they were safely inside, Angelina laid out the cheese and crackers on the plastic bag she had used to carry them home. She motioned for Winston to have a seat, and then whipped out a multi-tool knife that conveniently had a corkscrew. Using it, she was able to remove the cork from the wine bottle quickly. "Unfortunately, since I don't drink much, and then alone, I don't have glasses. We'll have to share from the bottle, OK?"

Winston nodded, and then he asked, "Do you think you're being watched?"

"Just wanting to be sure I don't miss an obvious sign. They found me once already; I can't hope I will remain hidden forever." She held up the wine bottle in a salute to him, then took a small sip and handed him the bottle.

"But the videos never made much of a splash" Winston countered. He took a sip of the dry wine and nodded his approval, though he would have approved of any wine; he had only tasted wine once before, and it had been white, not red.

"All the same, once you put something like that on the 'net, you can't take it back." Angelina sat on the bed, on the other side of the food from Winston.

Winston thought about that. It was true; there are websites that provide an archive of everything that has been on the web. He remembered, when the social media sites were taking the 'net by storm several years ago, hearing of instances

where people had posted videos taken at parties, only to lose jobs years later when those videos resurfaced. Angelina put some cheese on a cracker, and munched happily.

“What do you plan to do?” Winston asked.

“Do? What can I do? I can move far away; do you want me to do that?”

Winston couldn't bring himself to answer that question, just yet.

Angelina continued, after giving him a chance to answer, “I just have to stay alert, and not get caught out.”

Winston still said nothing. He thought of Angelina's encounter the other night, and wondered if it was connected to this and she had downplayed it, not wanting him to know. “Do *you* want to move?” he countered.

“I honestly don't know what I want.” They sat in silence, eating and thinking, for several minutes. Winston waited to hear what would help her decide her future, Angelina waited to see if Winston would offer any suggestions that included him.

Angelina finally broke the silence with a story about meeting her first boyfriend. He was two years her senior, she was 15. He had come upon a car accident just after it happened, and was helping to direct traffic until police arrived. Angelina had been in the back seat of the car that had been hit. She was unhurt, had gotten out of the car, and noticed him helping. She had gone over to talk with this Good Samaritan, and by the time police finally arrived, they had made plans for their first date. Winston wondered if this had been the reason Angelina had tried to join the police, but decided not to probe. He didn't want to spend the whole evening talking about her past lovers.

After they had finished the food and the wine, Angelina moved a little closer to Winston and reached over to take his hand. He turned to look at her, and she whispered, “I love to be touched. Will you touch me, please?”

Winston hesitated. He could see where this was going, and he felt this was happening much too fast. But he was afraid that if he let this moment pass unsatisfied, he might not get another chance. He took his hand from hers, and gently laid his palm on the side of her face. With a slow, light movement, he swept it over her hair, above her ear, and all the way back to the back of her neck. Then with both hands, he began to massage her neck and knead the muscles above her collarbone. After a few moments, he again took her face in both hands, and then leaned in and kissed her. Angelina responded to his kiss like she was starving for affection. You can guess what happened over the next few hours, as Angelina enjoyed celebrating her birthday with Winston.

\* \* \*

Winston dozed for a few minutes, when Angelina finally lay exhausted beside him. When he awoke, he watched her sleep. The evening had been amazing. He had no idea that making love could involve such passion, such desire, and so much love. He watched her chest rise and fall with her breathing, and marveled at her beautiful body. The skin that felt so soft, the toned muscles that lay just underneath, her small, pert nose; all of her thrilled him. She had taken the lead, and obviously had more experience than he. She obviously enjoyed their

lovemaking, something he had hardly expected. Knowing that her body was just as awesome as her poise and confidence, Winston was smitten.

He lay there observing, but at the same time, deep in thought. How would this relationship progress? He fell back into habitual thinking and planning, thoughts of rebelling and leaving system far from his awareness. He wondered how to increase his income so that he could help support her while she melded back into society. He thought about finding a new, larger apartment, so that they could live together. He told himself that having a deep, abiding, and passionate love was rebellion enough. He could only see them together with himself fulfilling the traditional, husband-as-breadwinner role. His thoughts focused on how to get more money, so that he could provide for her, as she would expect.

When she woke a short time later, he said nothing about these plans. They made small talk, and at one point he asked about her anonymous tethering. She explained how to get the cable so that he could use a pay-as-you-go phone to link his laptop to the 'net. She showed him the solar charger she uses to keep her laptop and phone powered, explaining that she had purchased it before losing her job in order to be more environmentally friendly. She hadn't known then, how useful it would become.

She insisted on walking him at least as far as the wall, where he finally took his leave of her. They make plans to meet two nights hence, at his room above the shop. Angelina intends to keep her part of the bargain, and to visit Mr. Jones again. They kiss lovingly as he says goodbye and enters the tunnel to return. He feels light, buoyed by the joy that fills his heart, as if he could float home. He is so lost in thought as he drives his car to its parking spot near his building, that it isn't until he slides his key into the apartment door lock that he realizes where he is. The half-hour trip was just a blur.

# The Fall

Winston throws himself into work like a man possessed. Twice, over the next two days, he rings up his boss and asks if there is anything more he can be doing, offering to stay late if necessary. His boss declines the offer both times, but sounds appreciative of Winston's eagerness to work. Winston doesn't get out his diary at night; he is uncertain now if he has the motivation to rebel. His thoughts are consumed by his desire to cherish Angelina, to provide her with a real home. He calculates how much credit he has left (not much) and what expenses he needs to save for in order to provide her the living quarters he believes will win her heart. He estimates he will be able to ask her into a new apartment within four months. It will take every bit of money and credit he has, lots of peanut butter sandwiches, and no additional, unexpected expenses. But he is relieved to find that it will soon be possible for them to live together, inside the wall.

On the evening of their next date, he went straight to the room after work. He heard voices from inside the shop as he skirted the building to the stairs at the rear; perhaps Mr. Jones would be able to sell more of his knickknacks. He thought about where he might be able to get the cable that Angelina had told him about, so that he could begin to use his laptop here. He had lost the fire for bringing down the system, but he was still curious to learn more about how the system had become so corrupted.

He heard Angelina coming up the steps; at least, he thought it was her, the footfalls were light and brisk. She burst into the room, a broad smile on her face. Winston stared at her; she was dressed in a very short, sexy skirt, and low-cut blouse. Her hair was drawn into a ponytail, and it wagged back and forth with each movement of her head. Winston found it all quite attractive. He had never seen her dress like this, and was quite surprised.

"I'm so happy to see you, Winston," she crowed.

"Uh, yeah, I'm happy too...to see you, that is," he fumbled, cheeks red as he caught himself staring at her breasts.

"Let's go down and visit with Mr. Jones. That way, we can have the rest of the evening to ourselves." She had made no move to close the door behind her.

"Yeah, that sounds good," Winston managed to mumble. He was having trouble getting used to her sudden change in demeanor and appearance. As he moved towards the door, she reached out a hand and grasped his. She led the way down the stairs, and around to the entrance to the shop. Winston looked up and down the street, slightly embarrassed to be seen holding her hand. This open display of affection was entirely new to him. Again he felt his paranoia rising: who might see them together, and what would they think? Would they judge him by the company he was keeping? Would they think that he was also living with one foot outside the wall? Would this jeopardize his job?

They spent close to an hour with Mr. Jones, making small talk and exploring the items on his shelves. Angelina found a few things she adored, but made no

purchases. She succeeded in putting Mr. Jones' mind at ease about the snow globe, assuring him it would be well cared for.

When they returned to the room, Angelina took a seat on the floor in front of the chair. She appeared to be very comfortable as she looked up into Winston's eyes.

"I haven't seen you act like this before," Winston began. "Usually you dress so different, less, what can I say, flamboyant?"

"Don't you like it when I dress like this? I thought you'd find me attractive." Angelina began to pout, but didn't take her eyes off his.

"Oh, believe me, I do. But it worries me when I see you like this. I guess I'm a bit jealous. I wonder why you think it's a good idea to attract attention from other guys."

Angelina was silent for a few moments. "I just feel like dressing up, I want to appear as sexy as I feel. I love you, Winston, and I don't mind if the whole world understands that."

Now it was Winston's turn to be silent. It is true, he knows very little about Angelina; there are bound to be surprises like this frequently, at least in the beginning of their relationship. Still, he was too deep into the idea of living together, to let something like his paranoia ruin things now. "I love you too, Angelina. I guess that's why I don't want other guys looking at you like I do."

"I'll take that as a compliment, since you haven't managed to tell me I look good tonight." She chastised him, all the while smiling like the Cheshire Cat. He could only grunt in reply; he honestly didn't know what to say. Her beauty had him tongue-tied.

\* \* \*

Over the next week, they managed to find an abandoned futon in a house near Angelina's room. They dragged and carried the mattress all the way to Winston's room. He found a place that sold phones near his apartment, and purchased a disposable phone and the cable needed to tether it to his laptop. He also got a bag for the laptop, something he hadn't needed when the computer lived only on his sister's desk. He began to spend every evening in the room above Mr. Jones' shop, getting familiar with websites that he found following links from the first sites he came across describing the money system. Angelina didn't come by every night; she would tell him that she had business to take care of. He couldn't imagine what could be so important that she couldn't spend the few free hours he had from work with him each evening, but instinct told him not to pry too much. He was getting to know her better, and finding he was becoming more comfortable with her manner of dress. Every time he saw her, she was in a new, daring, *hot* outfit. He was beginning to enjoy having an attractive girlfriend, and the looks they got as they walked along the sidewalks.

\* \* \*

The night after they brought the mattress to the apartment, he stopped by the video rental store near work and picked out a couple of movies. Taking his laptop to the room, he showed Angelina what he had brought. She clapped her hands and squealed with glee when she saw the second movie. "I always wanted to see that one!" she exclaimed. They set up the computer and got comfortable on the mattress, and began to watch. Near the end of the movie, the hero was struggling to swim across a lake to get away from his pursuers. Exhausted, he began to flail about in the water, as his girlfriend watched in horror from the shoreline. Winston felt his paranoia grow full force; drowning was his worst fear. Why had he picked this movie? Why did Angelina appear to be enjoying it so much? He clenched his eyes shut, and covered one ear with the hand that was not encircling Angelina's shoulders. As the hero sank beneath the surface, and it appeared he was about to die, Winston leapt to his feet, and ran towards the door. He stopped before he got there, embarrassed by his display of fear.

"What's wrong, Winston," Angelina asked.

"I... I just don't like to see people drown, that's all. I'm fine, really." His quivering voice belied his words.

Angelina sat up, reached over to the computer and clicked on the pause button. "We don't have to watch the rest, it's fine."

Winston took a few deep breaths, and felt his heart rate start to come back down. He intentionally thought of a peaceful sunset seen from a mountaintop, as a way to forget about the water. He returned to the mattress beside Angelina.

"That scene scared you... want to talk about it?" she asked.

"No. Let's talk about something else."

"I've been thinking... maybe we could leave the area together, go find some place where we can grow our own food, maybe even hunt for game, build a community with neighbors who get it, who care about each other and help each other, and live outside this whole controlling, exploiting society. What do you think?"

Winston's mind was racing. She was asking him to live with her, just not here in what remained of the city. He would need to summon courage not only to take on the relationship he wanted, but also to walk away from his debts, his job, and the security of tomorrow being so much like today. She obviously thinks that living outside the wall is preferable to holding a real job; how could he convince himself that she is right? And what skills or tools does he have that would be of any use outside? His ego tells him, "None! Forget about it!"

"That's a big step. I was going to ask you to move in with me, once I can save enough to get a larger apartment."

Angelina's smile faded. "I don't think that's a good idea. I doubt I can ever be happy back inside. I thought you wanted to get away from this system, from your debts." Her voice began rising in pitch, her stress rising with it. "I thought you wanted to live outside. Why don't you want to live with me?"

"No, it's not that. I do want to live with you. I just thought we would be living here, inside, not out there somewhere."

The entire evening soured, they let the matter drop. Winston felt drained and emotionally exhausted, first from the near-drowning in the movie, then from the

fight with Angelina. He wasn't even sure it had been a fight, but it felt like he had lost nonetheless. He pleaded for more time to think about her request as they got ready to return to their apartments. She was sullen, but agreed. Winston worried, as he walked home, that they had not set their next date to meet. He could always call her, he knew, but it was somehow nicer when they made plans before separating. He hoped he hadn't screwed things up by not being eager to leave the city.

\* \* \*

Winston had been at his desk, trying hard to look busy, for over two hours when the in-house security team came and dragged the man in the next cubicle away. As usual, there was no explanation, only rumor and gossip around the lunchroom later about why he was taken away. Winston wondered again, if the target had actually been him, and not the other man. The rest of the day dragged on. His mind was racing with speculation about the morning's incident, and his constant worry and inability to decide whether to join Angelina outside the wall or not. Even if he had work to do, it would not have been able to soothe his psyche.

After work he went to his room above the shop, as had become his habit. He was deep into his explorations of the web when Angelina arrived, timidly knocking on the door and waiting for him to open it for her. He was not ready to agree to leave the city with her, and was thankful that she didn't bring up the subject. She sat on the edge of the mattress on the floor, and made small talk. Winston sat in his chair, then after a few minutes moved to sit beside her.

"Tell me about your parents," she asked.

"My Dad died when I was 3. Mom remarried soon after. I hate my stepdad. I don't know where he is now. Mom died when I was 17." Winston gave every hint he could that he didn't want to talk about this anymore, but Angelina persisted.

"How did your parents die?"

"Dad had a heart attack. Mom..." Winston's voice cracked. "Mom died when she and my sister were home alone and a marauding gang broke into the house."

Angelina patted his knee. "I'm so sorry. My parents died in a car crash: they slid off the icy road during a bad storm in Colorado nearly three years ago. I know what it's like to miss your parents."

Winston swallowed hard, and then told a bit of his own story. "My stepdad had begun to disappear for days, even weeks, at a time. My sister and I never knew why or when he would come back, but we both were glad he was gone. Mom stressed about it a lot; she didn't have enough money to get by on her own." His voice was soft and low; it was hard for him to talk about this, and he felt very sad.

"One time he had been gone for two weeks and we had little food. Mom came back from foraging in dumpsters for dinner with a chocolate bar. I heard her tell my sister about it as she entered the house, and she said we would share the snack when I returned. I waited in my hiding place for several minutes, and then I jumped out, grabbed the bar off the table, and ran out of the house. My sister screaming was the last thing I heard her say. I looked back, and saw my Mother

holding my sister close, comforting her. I ran for several blocks, then hid under a bush and devoured the whole thing. When I returned home several hours later, the place was torn apart. Mom and my sister were dead. The police questioned me, but let me go. I've never forgiven myself for being so selfish, and for not being there when Mom needed me the most." He fell silent, head bowed, tears running down his cheeks.

Angelina put her arm around his shoulders, pulling him close to her. She whispered in his ear, "You couldn't have done much, against a gang like that. You just would have died, too. Let go of the guilt; this was not your fault."

He wasn't comforted by her words. After a few quiet moments, he announced he had to prepare something for work tomorrow, and needed to leave. Angelina suspected he just wanted out of the conversation, but nevertheless, she graciously excused herself and left. He felt oddly afraid of what his Mother would say to him in his next dream, and he mulled that idea throughout his walk home. He even stopped at a small store on the way, and bought a bottle of wine. It was not at all like him, to want to drown sorrows in alcohol, but he felt a need to use something to help him sleep that night.

It didn't work.

\* \* \*

The next day at work, Winston ran into his boss in the hallway, on the way to lunch. "Winston, come by my office after lunch, OK?" Mr. Jenkins said. He smiled at Winston, but Winston's paranoia suspected the smile was more like that of the spider, inviting the fly to land on the web.

"Of course." Winston didn't pause as he walked past Mr. Jenkins and on to the lunchroom. He fretted about the meeting and it put him off his lunch. Time crawled by, as he waited for the lunch hour to end. Finally, it was time to head to his appointment, if he managed to walk slowly.

He approached the office door, and knocked gently. The door immediately swung open, and Mr. Jenkins waved his hand inviting Winston to enter. Winston was struck that it seemed that his boss had been waiting by the door. He was unable to decide if that was a good or bad sign about what was to come.

"Please have a seat, Winston." Mr. Jenkins moved around Winston to take his own seat behind the desk. "I'm happy you have come."

Winston wondered if he had any choice in the matter, actually. Doesn't every good employee answer the call of his boss? "Of course I am happy to come. Can I be of service in some way?" He tried to hide his rampant paranoia, and hoped his voice sounded strong, not as weak as his knees were feeling when he took his seat.

"I won't keep you from your work, Winston. I am extremely pleased with what you do, and would like to invite you to dinner at my home soon. I would like to get to know more about you. I have a special project in mind, one that can't be done by just anyone; I'd like to see if it would be something you could do for me, and for our society."

Winston's heart beat as if it were trying to leap out of his chest and run away. His forehead broke out in sweat, his mouth was suddenly dry as a desert. He wiped his forehead with the back of his left hand, and stammered, "Wha... when, would you l-l-like me to c-c-come?" His cheeks flushed with the embarrassment of not being glib.

"Is this Friday convenient for you?" Winston had no plans, so of course Friday would be fine.

"What time?"

"Is 7 p.m. enough time for you to refresh after work? And, do bring a guest, your wife or girlfriend."

Winston paused, before answering, "7 p.m. is fine. I'm not sure if my girlfriend will be available, can I let you know by Thursday?" He would decide if he even wanted to invite Angelina, before their next meeting.

"Of course. I look forward to seeing you Friday evening. Here's a map to my home, and I've added my phone number if you get lost. I'm sure you are the man for the job, Winston."

He took the hint and rose from his seat. "Thank you", he managed to croak before spinning on his heels and hurrying from the room. After closing the office door behind him, he reached out and placed his right hand on the wall, leaning into it for support. His breath came in gasps; he didn't know what to make of this encounter. Surely his boss would not invite him to dinner if he were about to be fired, but what project could be so special that it demanded a dinnertime discussion? He mulled these questions the rest of the afternoon, without coming to any real conclusions.

\* \* \*

When Angelina joined him in the room above the shop, he hardly gave her time to get situated on the mattress before telling her about a decision he had made. "I think we should stop seeing each other. I'm not ready to leave the city, and my boss has asked me to come to his house to discuss a special project, and he invited you along too. I'm not convinced that he means well; I don't want to be responsible if something awkward should happen and you were there with me."

Angelina looked away, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. In her low, sultry voice, she said, "Why do you send me away? If you're not ready to live outside, I can wait, I can give you time to change your mind. I can show you how life can be exciting and happy outside. If you want to go alone on Friday, you can. I understand you might be ashamed of me. I could dress more conservatively, if that would make you feel better."

"It's more than just Friday evening's dinner: I don't want to betray what we have found, our love for each other, a love that transcends economics, by involving you in situations that may easily turn out badly. I don't want to do something that causes you to leave me."

Bitterly, Angelina spat, "And so you leave first, is that the idea? I don't believe that solves much of anything!" Mellowing her tone a little, she continued. "Besides, we can always confess, that doesn't mean we betray our love by doing

something expedient. I know you love me. You can say anything, to anyone, and I won't lose that belief. And I know I love you. Whatever I may say, nothing can alter that fact." She rose to her feet as if to leave.

"Please, I've been an ass. I'm scared. I don't know if I can trust my boss. I can't imagine why he would invite me to his home, if he knows about us and wants to turn us in. If that were the case, he wouldn't invite us to his house; we'd be dragged out of our rooms in the middle of the night. I even have thoughts that he understands about us, and supports what we are trying to do with our lives. But am I willing to risk everything on this *feeling*? No, I'm not, unless you have some idea I haven't thought of yet."

Angelina slowly sat back down. "Are you ashamed to take me to his house?" she asked quietly.

Winston jumped as if shocked by a bare wire. "No!" he nearly shouted. Then more softly, "No, of course not. I only worry that by associating with someone who lives outside the wall, my own integrity will be called into question by the Network. I do take a risk, by being with you. Not that I worry about that..." his voice trailed off, indicating the lie in what he had just said.

"But if your boss knows about me, and invites me anyway, isn't that another indication that he is on *your* side?"

Winston thought about this for long moments before giving in. "Convince me you are concerned about going along, and I won't go either. But otherwise, let's go together."

Angelina leaned forward and placed her head in his lap. Putting her right arm around his waist, as far as it would reach, she patted the small of his back. "Winston, I love and trust you. Of course we will go together. You said Friday, right?"

With great turmoil disturbing his guts, Winston confirmed the time and day of the dinner. All signs pointed towards a great evening, but there was a feeling of doom settling over him that he could not shake; not this evening, nor in the days leading up to the meeting. He could only hope this would turn out well.

\* \* \*

Angelina dressed like she had when she first met Winston. Her clothes were clean and utilitarian, and did nothing to emphasize her femininity. Winston also dressed in a suit; rather ill fitting, since it had been purchased years and many extra pounds ago. They arrived at Mr. Jenkins's home in plenty of time; the map had been extremely helpful.

Mr. Jenkins offered them drinks, which were served by a butler. They made small talk in a room that was dominated by a brick fireplace. Being far too warm for a fire, they turned the chairs slightly so as to face each other during their conversation. A maid served dinner; it became clear in the conversation that Mr. Jenkins had never married. To have this much hired help, he was obviously paid well by Truth Network. Winston assumed this much wealth also meant he was highly placed among those who control economics and politics in the local area, if not on a larger scale.

After dinner, they moved into a small library. The walls were entirely covered with books. A small table sat to one side of the room, with two chairs tucked under it, several books in a pile, and a small lamp on one side. The lamp gave off a soft yellow glow, the only light in the room at the moment. In the center of the room, a sofa and love seat faced each other with a small table in between. A beautiful bouquet of flowers filled a vase on the table, adding a splash of color to an otherwise dark, austere room.

The waiter brought a tray filled with sniffers and a bottle of brandy, which he placed on the table. Winston and Angelina took places on the sofa; Mr. Jenkins sat on the love seat and poured the drinks. They made a toast, to some undefined future success.

"I want to assure you, before we discuss anything that might be important, that this room is not bugged. I regularly have my security agency sweep it to be sure. I often entertain business associates and must be certain that our conversations do not leave this room. Do you understand?"

Winston nodded, Angelina didn't appear to move a muscle. She suddenly seemed tense, and Winston couldn't decide if it was because of the mention of a security company, or just the whole idea that Mr. Jenkins was clearing the way for a frank, and probably seditious, discussion.

"What is it that you want?" Mr. Jenkins asked.

Winston turned his head and looked at Angelina. Sensing the motion, she turned and looked back at him. Looking again at Mr. Jenkins, Winston answered, "We came because of your gracious invitation. I don't know that we want anything."

"I see that I have not made myself clear. What do you want to be doing, a year, or five years, from now? Surely you don't want to be a debt slave at Truth Network forever?"

Winston had an eerie sense of *déjà vu*; he recalled this identical question being asked by Mr. Jones not so long ago. He and Angelina again made eye contact, and then Winston took a deep breath and said, "I don't. Want to be a slave, that is. I am learning how this economic system needs me to borrow and consume in order for it to function, but that it leaves me no room to do what I want to do. It doesn't support building relationships, or offering compassion and assistance to those less fortunate. It's rooted in the idea that there is great scarcity in the world, and that I must fight and claw to get ahead. I see that it perpetuates itself by keeping me in debt, and making it necessary for me to go further into debt with every passing year. But I have also seen its Achilles Heel: if enough people stop making their debt payments, if enough just walk away, enough money will fall out of the system that it can no longer function and will have to be replaced. So I suppose, what I want is the courage to live outside the wall, outside the system, until we can create a new system founded on justice and freedom, not credit and exploitation."

"Nice speech, Winston. Been working on it long?" Mr. Jenkins was smiling. He turned to Angelina, and asked, "Do you love Winston?"

She nodded. "And he loves me, too."

Mr. Jenkins addressed Winston again, "Is that right? Do you love her as she says?"

"I do." Winston was aware, even as the words left his mouth, that he was saying the magic words that Angelina longed to hear. He glanced at her quickly, and saw that she, too, was smiling.

"Well, now." Mr. Jenkins folded his hands on his lap. "Your answers to my questions are very satisfactory. But I'm afraid, Ms. Angelina, that what I have to say next is for Winston alone. Might I impose upon you, and ask that you give us just a few minutes alone? There is a powder room down the hall, second door on the left, and if you continue to the end of the hall, you will find the maid's quarters should you get impatient or have any questions before we finish here."

Angelina stood. "Of course, I'd be happy to do what you ask." She turned to leave.

"One more item before you go," Mr. Jenkins added. "I need to hear you both state that you understand that everything we discuss here tonight, even the fact that we have met here for dinner, must remain a secret. It's for the safety of us all. Do you agree to keep our secret?"

In unison, they both said, "Of course!" Angelina continued out of the room, leaving a small smile for Winston with her last glance before closing the door.

"Winston. You have done great work at Truth Network. It is impossible to tell from what you do that you are so against the system. I wish I had hundreds of employees just like you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now I need you to tell me the truth. I know that you have gone outside the wall recently. I know that you have taken to spending time in a room near the wall that is not on the grid. I know that you access the Internet from that room, as well as meet with Angelina on a regular basis. I know that she has stepped out of the system, leaving behind her debts. Tonight I just want to be sure you understand that I can have you arrested in a heartbeat, because I know all of these things."

Winston swallowed hard. How had he been so naïve, to think that he was slipping through the cracks and not being observed? How had his boss found out these things? And most importantly, how could he come to believe that his boss was on his side, and wouldn't turn him in? "I understand."

"Do you have any questions for me?" Mr. Jenkins offered.

"Is there actually a special project?" Winston asked.

"There is, but you will find out more about it soon. Tonight was really just to establish whether or not I could trust you. I believe I can. In fact..." Mr. Jenkins rose from the love seat and walked to the table. He picked up the top two books on the pile there, and handed the third book to Winston. As he set the two books back onto the pile, Winston read the title of the book he had been given: '*How to Win Friends and Influence People*'. "...read this. It is very old, but it has some good advice about how to manipulate a situation. This may help open your eyes to how the economic system oppresses you, other than through debt."

"OK. And I have one other question..." Winston paused, awaiting a signal to continue. When Mr. Jenkins nodded his head, he continued, "During my first

week at work, I heard someone say, quietly, behind me, 'Together we will bring our light to the world.' I have always wondered: was that you?"

Mr. Jenkins only smiled in response. He moved to the door, opening it and saying, "It's been a real pleasure having you and Angelina here this evening. You will find out more soon; please be patient. I can tell you, you passed all the tests with flying colors. Find Angelina and take her home. You have a bright future, Winston."

Winston thanked him, and did what he was told.

\* \* \*

At work, Winston suddenly found himself with more work than ever before. It seemed as if his boss was taking his own statement that Winston's work was exemplary to heart, and directing more work his way. Each workday, Winston found himself having to stay late to meet his deadlines; time with Angelina became scarce. Exhausted after working late, he spent most evenings in his apartment, reading the book Mr. Jenkins had given him. He was getting some valuable insights into how the culture dominated and controlled citizens, despite the book being decades old. He realized that maintaining constant war somewhere around the globe kept everyone in constant fear. And what do people do when they are afraid? They seek distraction: using drugs, watching TV, surfing the 'net, playing video games, even just going shopping; anything to self-medicate and avoid facing their fear. And he could see that these activities kept them docile, and easy to manipulate with a few sound bites, and even outright lies.

Near the end of that first week, while anxiously awaiting news about what his special project would be, he managed to find the time and energy to visit his room over Mr. Jones' shop. Angelina was there waiting for him. They had spoken daily on the phone, but had not made plans to meet this evening. Winston's heart soared when he saw her approach; he hadn't realized how much he had been missing her until this moment. Once they had settled into the room, she asked him to tell her about the book he was reading. Since he had brought it along, he began to read parts of the book to her. They lay close together on the futon mattress, enjoying the closeness and the touch of the other's body. As he finished reading the fourth passage, Winston glanced at her and realized she had fallen asleep. He wondered if she was just that tired, or if the topic that so excited him was truly boring to her. He loved watching her as she slept, though. The slight rise and fall of her chest from her breathing, the soft tone of her face, the full lips slightly parted, he found every aspect of her fascinatingly beautiful.

After many minutes, she woke with a start, seeming disoriented. She sat up quickly, then as if she realized just where she was, she turned to catch Winston's gaze and lay back down. She turned onto her side and stretched her arm across his chest, and whispered, "I love you" into his ear.

They were both startled when the door was flung open, and men holding bright flashlights burst inside. One shouted, "Freeze! Police!" Despite the command, Angelina leapt to her feet. The man closest to her slammed her shoulder with the

butt of his rifle as Winston watched, frozen in horror. She yelped in pain, but charged at him. He withstood her charge easily however, and another man stepped out from behind him and wrapped his arms around Angelina, lifting her feet off the ground. The man who had hit her with the rifle slapped her soundly across the face; the smack of his leather glove against her skin seemed to echo inside Winston's head. He was devastated that she was being hurt like this and he couldn't muster any response to help. He lay still as directed, and watched.

The man continued to slap and punch Angelina, until she was gasping, unable to breathe, and bleeding from several cuts on her face. With the lights shining in his eyes, Winston was unable to see how many men were in the room. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the beating stopped. Angelina's attacker stepped back, and for the first time, the lights were turned away from Winston's face. As his eyes adjusted to the lower light, he could make out 5 men just inside the door of the room. One stepped forward, and in the flickering light of the candle, Winston was stunned to recognize Mr. Jones.

"Take them both to the station," he said, apparently to the other policemen. He alone was not in uniform. The man holding Angelina set her feet back onto the floor, and began to handcuff her. She whimpered from the pain as her left shoulder was pulled back. She turned her head towards Winston, and was slapped once again for her efforts. The man who slapped her grabbed a handful of her hair and tipped her face up to his. "Eyes on the ground!" he growled. She obeyed as she was taken from the room. The other two men stepped forward, slinging their rifles over their shoulders, and after reaching down to help Winston stand, began to handcuff him. Winston managed to ask, "Why?"

Mr. Jones smiled. "It is often effective to place a snare near to where the rodents travel. If you are hunting those inclined to step outside the wall, what better place to set a trap than right near their goal?" Winston felt bitterness flood through his body, tensing his muscles, roiling his stomach, and bringing a metallic taste to his mouth. He realized the depth of the betrayal: Mr. Jones betrayed him, and he had betrayed Angelina. And all because he had not found the courage to step away from the system, to run somewhere else, somewhere free, as Angelina had asked.

\* \* \*

Winston was driven to the station in the back seat of an old patrol car. Apparently Angelina had already been taken; he couldn't see any other vehicles where she might be held. At the station, he was immediately thrown into a cell, alone. It was just bare concrete with iron bars across the opening, not even a mattress on the cold floor. A small bucket sat in the far left corner, apparently that was to be his toilet. The cell was tiny, and judging by the fact that his head could touch the wall as his feet touched the bars when he laid down on the floor, Winston guessed its size to be four feet by six.

No one visited him for an interminable amount of time. The guards did not respond to his questions when they brought his meals, if hard, stale bread and two spoons of gruel can be called a meal. If he was being fed three times a day,

and Winston was hard pressed to know that for sure, then he was in the cell for four days before it came time to question him.

The guards cuffed his hands behind his back and linked his ankles together with a short length of heavy chain before removing him from the cell. The chain meant he couldn't take a full step forward; he could only shuffle his feet in a slow, painful movement. This allowed the guard following to prod him regularly, usually with the butt of his rifle in the small of Winston's back. Winston passed many empty cells as he was moved along the hallways of the jail. The few cells that were occupied held prisoners who sat against the wall, eyes down, appearing as dejected as Winston felt. It took many minutes of shuffling before Winston was pushed through a door and into a small room.

The only furniture in the room that Winston could see was a chair and a bright lamp. The lamp prevented Winston from being able to see anything behind it; he felt like he was in a spotlight on stage. The guard shoved him towards the chair, saying, "Sit!" and Winston did as he was told. The door closed behind him, and he sat in silence. His eyes began to water from the brightness of the light on his face; he looked down and kept his eyes closed, but nothing seemed to help.

He began to feel a headache, building just behind his eyes, as he waited in silence. The room was warm, probably from the intense light that continued to beat on his face. After what seemed like hours, Winston heard a door open behind the light, then close. Moments passed, and then a voice began to ask basic questions: his name, address, employer, birthdate. Winston opened his eyes once, but unable to see who was behind the light and interrogating him, he shut them again. He answered the questions in a monotone. Then there was silence once again.

Now, a different voice asks, "Why do you travel outside the Wall?"

Winston is silent. He doesn't know if he should admit to this crime or if his admission is even necessary. The voice asks again, and he finally replies, "I don't."

He is startled by a slap to the back of his head. Jerking his head around, despite the flare of pain, he sees that a guard stands behind him, arm raised as if about to strike him again. The blow does not fall however, and the voice asks again, "Why do you travel outside the Wall?"

Winston turns back towards the light, closing his eyes once more. "I am curious, that's all."

"How do you know how to pass through the Wall?" Winston remains silent.

The voice speaks again, "Angelina has told us everything. You can save yourself more pain by telling us what we ask. We already know the answers but it is part of your rehabilitation to admit your errors and misdeeds. Tell us how you came to leave the city, how you came to believe in rebellion. How do you know how to pass through the Wall?"

The interrogation went on in this manner; questions followed by silence, until such a time when the blows raining down on Winston from behind would cause him to answer. The focus seemed to be on how Winston had arrived at the point of believing the system was corrupt and dysfunctional. He was asked what books he had read, who he had spoken with, whether people at work had anything to

do with his sudden aberration of thought. There were many questions about had happened in the room over Mr. Jones' shop: specifically, what did he do when he was alone there? He mentioned using his laptop, and was grilled for several more hours about the many websites he had visited. He began to make up stories about websites, fantasies about ideas he had never actually seen posted or described, solely as a way to keep the blows from falling on his head once more.

Finally, his interrogator sighed. "You are lying to me. If you are lying now, what else have you lied about? For this re-education to work, you must be truthful with us. You will be returned to your cell now. I suggest you think about why you are here, and what you need to understand so that you can return to being a productive member of society. Unless you can convince us that you are worth saving, you will die. Do you understand?"

Winston felt shame as the desire to live at any cost bubbled up through his heart. He hadn't betrayed Angelina, at least not yet. But he worried that his betrayal of her was closer than he would like. He could not bear to feel his love for her, not here in this situation. He tried desperately to keep her from his thoughts, with the usual result: she was all he could think of.

The guards took him to a new cell, very close to this interrogation room. It was larger, though there was still no mattress for him to sleep on. As the day passed, he could hear the sound of water splashing somewhere close by. A prisoner was brought and thrown into the cell across the hall from his own. His clothes were drenched, as if he had been swimming. His face was battered and swollen; Winston doubted he could see from his left eye due to the cut above it and the blood and swelling that covered that side of his face. Winston made a sound of sympathy, and was startled by an electronic screech that seemed to come from the walls of his cell. A voice spoke, "Do not speak with other prisoners". Winston was unable to determine where the voice came from.

He waited several minutes then asked, "What happened?"

Again, there was a loud electronic screech, this time so harsh that it hurt his ears. He covered them with his hands, trying to dampen the pain. Once the sound stopped, a guard appeared at the cell door, and yelled at Winston not to speak. Winston looked at him with a blank expression, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, merely silent. The guard left.

Every fifteen minutes or so, at least that was Winston's best guess, the screech would sound again. The pitch would vary, but the volume was always loud enough to hurt, and it was loud enough to keep Winston from sleeping. This pattern continued and Winston lost track of time. Unable to sleep, hungry, thirsty and lonely, he sat propped against the wall of his cell and waited. As he grew ever more delirious, he tried telling himself stories from his childhood, from a time when he felt secure and loved and happy. But he soon ran out of tales he could remember and so he began to make up stories about when he was young just to pass the time. He imagined grand tales about his best friend Angelina, who lived next door, and the many adventures they had after school exploring in the woods and along the shorelines near his home. He imagined their fairytale romance

when they were older, their famous engagement, their popular wedding, and their many loving and adorable children.

He was startled back to reality when the guards came for the man in the cell across from his. The man began to scream, "No! I'll tell you anything; please don't take me back there! No! What can I do? I'll do anything!"

The man fought the guards as they grabbed and dragged him away, screaming the entire time. As they neared the end of the hall, the man stopped making coherent words, and just shrieked instead. Winston was appalled, and worried that he too, might become so afraid of what was about to happen that he would crack from the strain and shriek uncontrollably.

The noise had hardly stopped echoing down the hall, when Winston heard the door open at the other end of the hall. He couldn't see of course, but he could hear the sound of feet shuffling and chains dragging; obviously another prisoner was being escorted along the hallway. The sounds grew close, and then as Winston watched in horror, Angelina shuffled past his cell. She kept her eyes down, not looking into cells as she passed, so she did not see him. He was frozen in fear as he watched, and didn't manage to cry out or draw her attention. She was heavily bandaged; every area of her body appeared to have been hurt. Her hair had been shorn down to stubble, at least where there were no bandages and Winston could see her scalp. A thick, heavy scab covered a slash that stretched from above her eyebrow, along her cheek and under her jaw. She was dressed in shorts, and despite several bandages, Winston could see abrasions and bruises all down her legs. Her left shoulder was lower than her right, he was unsure if her collarbone had been broken, or she was just trying to accommodate some back pain. She was obviously paying a heavy, painful price for having been captured in Winston's room.

Winston sat in stunned silence, feeling deep shame and self-recrimination, wondering what he could or should say in order to make things easier for Angelina. He would have said anything, pled to any crime, in that moment; if only it could save her further abuse. A movement caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to look into the hallway again.

Standing in the hallway, looking at Winston with a sad look on his face, was Mr. Jenkins. Winston's boss shook his head, then turned and followed in Angelina's footsteps. Winston leapt to his feet, ran to the bars, and taking hold of them with both hands, shouted, "How could you?"

Realizing that shouting at his boss was probably not useful, Winston sagged against the bars. He slipped to the floor and within seconds of hearing the door close behind his boss, the screech once again jolted him and forced him to cover his ears. He rolled on the floor in agony; both the physical pain in skull and limb, and the emotional pain that wracked his mind and heart. He sobbed and curled into a ball once the screeching stopped, but found no relief.

\* \* \*

If you could ask, Winston would answer that he lost track of time after this heart-rending experience. He didn't care anymore; he lost hope of ever getting

back to a normal happy life. Certainly he knew that he would never be with Angelina again, or any woman, in any meaningful way. That being the case, did it matter how quickly time was passing? All that mattered was that he hurt and he wanted the pain to stop. If he had been offered a gun, he would have used it on himself.

Instead, he began to be harshly and painfully punished in his interrogations. At one point, he realized that Mr. Jenkins was in charge of his questioning, and that he couldn't remember when the change had taken place or how long it had been this way. He was beaten as he walked to interrogation, and again as he returned to his cell. He cooperated as much as he could, with the sole exception that he never said anything that could be construed as betraying Angelina. Mr. Jenkins told him repeatedly that the goal was to re-educate him, to cure his mental delusions about money and society, and to make him into a model consumer once again. And still the blows rained down, on his arms and legs and head and stomach, with hands and sticks and metal bars. Winston was sure that bones were broken, in his hands and feet, but he was required to walk from cell to interrogation room and back nonetheless. He lost the ability to hold a spoon, so it was no great loss that he was no longer being fed. He was able to grasp cups of water between his wrists to drink and get some of the water into his mouth, since he couldn't hold the cup with either swollen hand due to the pain.

Mr. Jenkins insisted that Winston had it all wrong; indeed Winston needed credit in order to survive, but credit was just one way that Winston could contribute to the wellbeing of everyone in society. It was not a curse, and Winston was not a slave, just because he had large debts. Eventually the economy would improve, wages would rise, and Winston would pay off everything he owed and be able to save for the future. And as long as Winston refused to agree the blows continued.

Mr. Jenkins would often tell Winston that Angelina had broken, had given up and confessed her wrong thinking, and converted back to being a good consumer. Winston refused to believe it and said so. One day, Mr. Jenkins made his usual pronouncement and when Winston launched his usual denial, Mr. Jenkins said, "I can prove that what I say is true. Watch this."

He pointed to a screen imbedded in the wall that had never been on while Winston was in the room. It flickered to life, and Winston watched in horror as a camera followed Angelina, who was walking slowly along an aisle in a large retail outlet, picking up items from the shelves and placing them in the shopping cart she pushed along ahead of her. He could see the scab that ran along the right side of her face when she turned towards that side of the aisle, proof that the video had been recently made. Winston's heart sank as Angelina moved to the checkout stand, and made smiling, happy small talk with the cashier, pulled a wallet from a purse slung over her shoulder, and pulled cash from it to pay for the pile of goods on the counter. Mr. Jenkins nodded his head and the screen went dark. Turning to Winston, he said, "See? She has become a model consumer. She has learned what is right and natural, and has even managed to earn some spending money by changing her attitude. Why can't you learn from her, and return to being a good consumer?"

Winston could only close his eyes, feeling tears run down his cheeks. He bowed his head and remained silent until Mr. Jenkins gave up on getting a response and ordered that he be returned to his cell. Winston couldn't believe what he had seen; surely Angelina would not have caved in like this?

As he sat in his cell and tried to shut out the images in his mind of Angelina shopping, he remembered what she had said:

**“Besides, we can always confess, that doesn't mean we betray our love by doing something expedient. I know you love me. You can say anything, to anyone, and I won't lose that belief. And I know I love you. Whatever I may say, nothing can alter that fact.”**

He felt such a relief wash over him, remembering how he had felt so *loved* when she spoke these words. He tried to banish the shame of getting her caught, of putting her into a situation where she had to betray the values at the very core of her being, but he couldn't. Still, he was so comforted by the memory that he managed to doze off for the few seconds remaining before the next screech jolted him awake, and he fell back to sleep as soon as it was over. He dreamed that Angelina came to him, telling him that it was all okay, that they would forever love each other no matter what they might be forced to say or do. Then, in the illogical ways of dreaming, she leaned forward and slapped him across the face. “Wake up!” she shouted. She turned on her heel and stalked away. Winston felt deep in his heart that he would not be able to serve both masters; he could not be part of this dominant system and love Angelina at the same time. He would have to choose, and that this is what Angelina meant by her command. Would he awaken to his role as consumer? Would he awaken to his love for her? Which path would he take?

Mr. Jenkins did not come for him right away. Winston wrestled over and over in his mind about whether to concede defeat and confess, or to hold out for his love of Angelina. Still not being fed and still prevented from getting any deep, restorative sleep, his mind found it more and more difficult to focus on any particular thought or decision. Winston's paranoia was also in evidence; he wondered if Angelina had been part of the plot to capture him all along. Maybe she was acting hurt, maybe the bandages and bruises and scabs were fake. He really didn't know that much about her, after all. He believed her stories, but maybe that's all they were, fictions meant to reel him in. Had he just fallen for her beauty and been led down a path to this cell? When did his boss first find out about his treasonous behavior? Why the whole charade of having the two of them over for dinner, soliciting his rebellious statement, and then excusing Angelina from the room as the evening drew to a close? It was more than Winston's fevered brain could comprehend or make sense of.

For this last trip down the hall, the guards did not put chains between his ankles. They merely cuffed his hands behind his back. Winston thought maybe this was a sign of kindness; Mr. Jenkins might want Winston to feel a sense of

freedom before this next interrogation, hoping it would liberate Winston's tongue. He made a mental note-to-self not to let such displays of friendship go unpunished. He would not break, he would not give up Angelina, he would not go back to being a model consumer.

At least that was the determination he set forth in his mind as the door opened into the interrogation room. Winston took one step inside and froze. There in the middle of the room, where the chair and light usually stood, was a large tub of water. Nearly three feet across and two feet deep, the fluid that filled the tub was calm and inviting, at least to someone who hadn't had a chance to bathe in a very long time. But Winston didn't have thoughts of cleaning his body; instead, he remembered the prisoner who was returned to his cell with his clothes drenched. Winston's heart leapt into his throat, his breath came in ragged gasps, and his pulse began to race. He imagined being thrown into the tub, and drowning in two feet of water. His mind screamed, "NO!" and the word seemed to echo right down into his toes. Without conscious thought, he took a step backwards, away from the tub. But the guard behind him anticipated this, and whacked the back of Winston's knees with his rifle. Winston fell to the floor as his legs buckled underneath him.

Two guards stepped up and grabbed Winston's arms. They dragged him forward, pulling his arms painfully far from his back. Pain stabbed through his shoulders, his arms felt like they were being pulled from their sockets. The guards dropped him face down on the floor just in front of the tub of water, and stood in place on either side. Winston heard Mr. Jenkins voice, calm and slow, each word precisely enunciated.

"This is your last chance, Winston. Today you confess. Today you declare that your professed love of Angelina was all a lie made up for your own benefit. Today you vow to return to your job a new man, having renounced forever your misguided fantasies of rebellion and freedom. You will take your place in society as a good worker or you will drown in this tub and be left outside so the dogs can pick your bones clean. You may begin now. This cannot take long."

Winston did not move. He lay face down on the floor, tears forming two small pools on the tile as he quietly wept. He could not, he would not, betray Angelina. But even as he reminded himself of this vow, her words came back to haunt him. Could he believe her? Had she confessed, renounced him as thoroughly as he was being told to renounce her? Did she only say what they wanted to hear, knowing deep in her heart that Winston loved her? Did he have the courage to see this through, to live out his love for her despite his own imminent death?

The guards each grabbed an arm and lifted Winston's head and chest over the tub. They lowered his head quickly under the water, and as the terror rose inside his mind and heart, they held his body down. He frantically kicked and tried to gain enough of a foothold on the tiled floor to be able to lever his upper body out of the water, but to no avail. He held his breath until one of the guards placed a hand on the small of his back and pushed his belly hard onto the rim of the tub. Air pushed out of his mouth against his will; his lungs emptied, he became even more frantic. He felt the spreading warm, wet spot on his trousers as he peed on himself, his body reacting instinctually to this life-threatening situation and

mobilizing all potential resources in an attempt to escape. He fought the urge to gasp; knowing that to take in water was to die. He began to see little pinpricks of light even though his eyes were closed, and he worried that cells were dying from lack of air. His knees ached from thrashing the ground, his wrists from trying to pull free of the handcuffs, but these sufferings were minor compared to the need to take another breath and the will he had to exert not to give in to that desire. And then he felt the darkness close in. He lost all feeling in his legs, then his arms, and finally the sounds of his thrashing in the water receded as his entire consciousness focused on his last thought, "Angelina!"

He came to lying on his back beside the tub, with Mr. Jenkins looking down upon his drenched body. Mr. Jenkins smiled, and asked, "Shall we do that again?"

Winston coughed, and found that he could not stop. Snot ran down the back of his throat, and his coughing was bringing up water and phlegm that he must have swallowed. He remained silent, more because he was trying to sort out what had just happened, and to decide if he was strong enough to resist this torture, than any vain attempt to anger his interrogator. Mr. Jenkins looked up and to the right, nodded once, and stepped back. The guards grabbed Winston's arms again and began to lift. Winston's courage broke. Thinking, "Angelina, I love you", Winston began to beg to be released. He said anything and everything he could think of to convince Mr. Jenkins to let him go. He denounced Angelina as the instigator of his madness. He swore he would never touch her again. He promised never to write another seditious word as long as he lived. He offered to work for free, if Mr. Jenkins would only give him worthy work and ensure he had food to eat and a place to sleep. Through it all, Mr. Jenkins stood silently, unmoving, at Winston's feet, a bare smile the only indication that he was listening. As Winston ran out of ideas of things to say, promises to make, and others to accuse, Mr. Jenkins nodded once again. The guards stood Winston up and removed the handcuffs.

"You will undergo a procedure that will prevent you from enjoying sex ever again. It will be both physical and psychological. You will not have to work for free, but rest assured you will die in debt. You will have a monitor placed on your ankle and your movements will be monitored every moment from now on. If I desire, you will inform on any and all conversations you have with anyone, co-worker, family or friend. Do you understand and agree?"

Winston had been looking at the floor during this litany of conditions. He now looked up and nodded. "I need to hear you say you agree," Mr. Jenkins said in a low voice.

"I... I understand and agree." Winston's knees gave way and he fell to the floor, barely catching himself with his hands and avoiding smashing his face on the tile. He broke down in sobs, sobs that recognized his betrayal of Angelina, his betrayal of his own morals and ideals. He would never look at his face in the mirror again with anything remotely like love.

## ***The End***

Winston had needed several months to recover from the physical and emotional trauma of his time in jail. But the day came soon enough when he was back at work. Thankfully, though he returned to work at the Truth Network, he was assigned the meaningless job of handling parking permits for the employees who drove to work. He rarely saw people he knew from his previous assignment and none asked about the cause of his long absence or the reason for his transfer to such a lowly position. He never saw Mr. Jenkins again, a fact for which he was forever grateful.

He was not allowed to read a book or use a computer to help pass the time. On the second afternoon, he pushed his chair back to the wall and began to doze, as he was terribly bored. But a voice barked at him from a speaker mounted near the ceiling, "Wake up, Mr. Smith! You are not to sleep on the job!" He was constantly aware that someone might be watching him, and he didn't want to give them any reason to shout again.

Mr. Jenkins had been right, all desire Winston had for sex, even masturbation, had vanished like the wind. Seeing women at work, or on the street, seemed to disturb him rather than excite him. His wages were cut to the minimum, and so Winston knew that another prophecy, the one that he would die in debt, was also bound to be true. His credit limit was fast approaching, and Winston had no idea how he would manage to live once he reached it. He spent many hours worrying and trying to find ways to save money. He began to buy less food, cut off all utilities but the heat and gas for the stove, and tried to go to bed as soon as it was dark so he wouldn't need candles for light.

Emotionally, he was in even worse shape. He had no motivation to live, no hope that he would ever be happy, and was carrying the immense guilt and shame he felt from having renounced Angelina in order to stop the water torture. When he thought of her, it felt more and more like a dream with every passing day. He began to question whether there had been any real love between them, at all. He had no idea what had happened to her, and couldn't imagine that he would ever know.

He had been back to work for just over a week when he looked up while on his way to the lunchroom and froze in his tracks. There walking towards him, was his beloved. She had seen him before he saw her, but had resolutely kept her course in his direction. They drew close, and he stuttered, "Why are y-y-y-ou here?" in a barely-audible whisper.

She closed her eyes for the briefest moment, and then answered, "I work here now. That was part of my deal. I have to have a job to be able to pay what I owe, from before and now both." Tears began to run down her cheeks.

Winston was quiet for a moment. He would have expected to cry too, but he found his heart was exceedingly cold and he just couldn't bring himself to feel anything for Angelina. The break between them was complete, at least in his heart. "I couldn't do it; I broke. I told them what they wanted, just to stop the drowning," he confessed.

“I know. I didn’t believe it when they told me, but I knew you were so afraid of water, it had to be true. It’s okay. I went shopping once just to make the beatings stop for a little while. I didn’t enjoy spending, but it was better than hurting all the time. And I know you still love me. It’s just the human condition, right? We’ll do or say anything to stop the pain?” She tried to look deep into his eyes, to see the love he felt for her reflected there, but he quickly looked away.

They stood in the hallway, silent for a moment more. Winston finally looked back at her, “Is this even living? I wonder, every moment, if I did the right thing. But I can’t change it. And I can’t keep seeing you.” He stepped around her to continue on his way.

He muttered, “I hope you understand” as he passed her. He didn’t look back, or he would have seen a small, pretty woman with very short blonde hair and a scar on the right side of her face, sobbing quietly and falling to her knees, watching him as he walked away.

Other books by Derek Joe Tennant include:

### ***Unfuck Our Future: The End of the First Great American Experiment***

What we need now is a fundamental rethinking of economics in general, and capitalism in particular, with its desire to become a value-neutral “science” that controls everything. Despite the economic crisis of 2008, and the specter of an even-greater collapse impending, we hold many assumptions that ensure dysfunction and that we have yet to challenge. Deep questions that bear scrutiny include, “What role should markets play in family life, in social programs, in how we provide health care and education? What are the limits to growth, and can this system function during any prolonged contraction? How do we value (and therefore price under the capitalist model) freedom, democracy, or love?”

It should be no surprise that we have difficulty finding happiness today. Rather than living in the present, we spend our lives either rehashing the past, suffering from the loss of people or things we once cherished, or anticipating future rewards, the value of which depends upon an economy that is detached from reality, yet attempting to place a monetary value upon every aspect of life. As we lose sight of intrinsic value, we struggle to value life itself. If you are like most of us, you find it difficult to embed your core values into this economic system. You want to save the whales, but feel powerless to bring that about. You want to live sustainably, but your choices in transportation are severely limited. In a world comprised mostly of gasoline-powered vehicles and poor or non-existent mass transit, we even find it unimaginable that we might construct a way of living that doesn’t require us to travel further than we can walk. We discuss the impending extinction of Mankind, but cannot even mention the end of capitalism. What would it look like, to change this state of mind? Please join our examination of these issues, and more.

### ***Walking Buddha’s Path***

Derek returns to Thailand to finalize a divorce from his Thai wife. She takes him to a police station instead, where she has bribed officers to put him in jail for 20 years for child molestation, an untrue charge. He tries to call for help and is beaten and severely injured.

A few days later he is placed in a prison outside Bangkok. Derek tries to find the benefit in every situation, and sees the opportunity to grow spiritually from this adversity. Each day he recalls what he has learned about one of the ten paramitas (virtues) of the Bodhisattva Path. He tries to put them into action, even within the confines of his prison life.

A friend from America, a neighbor from Thailand, and US Embassy staff try to locate the missing American. His relationship with Neung, a teenager tasked by the warden with caring for the American while he is imprisoned, deepens quickly before a crisis in Neung’s life affects Derek in profound ways.

The spiritual teachings here are useful to any who follow them. *Walking Buddha’s Path* is an introduction to a way of being that permeates everyday life and fills it with spiritual energy and delight. One doesn’t have to be Buddhist to understand and benefit from this approach to life. These virtues help all who utilize them.

### ***Breaking Trail***

As our worldview changes, as our growth in consciousness brings new awareness that we are not separate from each other or our Universe, the old paradigm will be replaced by a new spirituality that recognizes this reality. Not a religion per se, this new spirituality will complement the consciousness that recognizes our connection with all that is. It will guide us to find our purpose, our heart’s goal, and to grow into this new paradigm of consciousness.

*Breaking Trail* is designed as a 43-day course presenting a spiritual topic each day that you give your attention to on a minute-by-minute basis. You may take each chapter a day at a time,

or spend as long as you need with the ideas of one before moving onto the next. Search your heart for answers that are true for you, not what you think others want to hear. It may be helpful to journal about the questions being posed, or you may find that having a trusted partner who is open and willing to discuss these questions with you will help you clarify your thinking and feelings.

*Breaking Trail* asks that you manifest the change you want to see, that you be a role model, a change agent. New solutions to our problems are required, and that can only come from a new way of thinking and a new understanding of reality. In turn, this leads to a new paradigm, one that speaks to inclusion and awakening to Truth.

*Breaking Trail* challenges you to begin to sense your connection with all that is. It is filled with questions for you to explore, asking you to pay attention to your world and to awaken to your true nature. Please open your heart and enjoy the journey!

### ***What Color Is Your Sky?***

We dance with the Universe, our spirits free to touch the Earth and one another lightly and with loving attention. We learned that attempting to dominate and exploit others, that pushing against the Universe, triggers a fundamental law of physics: for every action, there is an equal reaction. If we want to avoid being slapped by the world, we must keep our touch light and free. Can we blend our energies and begin to move together, rather than in competition?

In "*What Color Is Your Sky?*" we question some of the assumptions that underlie our current, modern, technological society. I offer some solutions as a way to open a discussion, a brainstorming session, an inquiry that hopefully will lead to changes that get us through these troubling times. There is abundant energy in our world for life and for love, if we can but share. Will we pull together in cooperation, or pull apart in conflict? We, the people must speak to this. Change will not come from outside, politicians and corporations will not instigate this change themselves. If we desire a world as we have just pictured it, it falls to us to speak up, to inspire our family and friends, and to begin to take the steps we can to bring it into existence. Change begins when we let go of the old to make room for the new. All around us now, today, the old ways of living are cracking and beginning to crumble. What new vision will succeed in oozing through the cracks and into manifestation? Can you add your voice to shaping our future?

All of these books and more are available as free PDF downloads (donations appreciated) on Derek's website: [www.derekjoetennant.net](http://www.derekjoetennant.net)

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