

Views of Crisis

A Selection of Short Stories

By Derek Joe Tennant

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To Jody Lee

How quickly you came
on that late April morn
once you'd decided
it was time to be born.

Resting on Mom's belly
from whence you had come
you lifted your head
and looked around some.

First teeth at three months
sitting up at just four
in no time at all
you were all over the floor.

The chuckles and the laughter
for no reason at all
such love always expressed
even though you were small.

For eight months and more
you brought such joy and such love
our personal ambassador
from the One up above.

And now the time has come
for us to take different trails
to cross different mountains
and to look on other vales.

We return you to the Source
to the One that is All
we rejoice in your joy
though for us joy is small.

We'll remember your love
and the time that we spent
and cherish you always
as Love Heaven Sent.

Love always, Dad
13 January, 1980

And 1 Makes 76

Wake Up!

That annoying voice again....."Nikki please respond, Nikki please respond..."

Over and over, and not for the first time. The light hurts my eyes, so I keep them closed. I've been dreaming so long, this too, feels like just another part of the dream. The dream began with my face hitting the windscreen, and then moved to a snowy mountaintop where the icy wind howled around me for what seems like forever. I couldn't find a path that would lead me off the knife edge and down to some place warmer, and I suffered in silence, the keening wind my only company.

"Nikki please respond...." I've been alone long enough, I should open my eyes and see who it is that keeps intruding on my dream.... in a moment, when the light doesn't hurt as much....

"Nikki please respond...." I turn my head away from the light and open one eye just a fraction, then open both in astonishment. The walls of my room are translucent, and a beautiful color of blue I only remember seeing in a rare sky on warm summer afternoons. No one is with me, and there's nothing in this small chamber but the raised slab on which I lie. Although I see no pad or mattress, the surface under me is soft. The walls seem to glow, the blue is so beautiful and bright. But I might as easily be in a cloud as on the ground.

"Nikki thank you for responding. Someone will be with you shortly." I am unable to tell where the voice is coming from. It seems to come from all directions and I can't see a speaker. There's a slight smell of roses in the air, odd because that's my favorite smell. Roses remind me of my mother, who grew them in our backyard and always had a few in a vase on the dining table. I can't decide if I'm awake or still dreaming.

"Nikki, I'll be coming in now." The voice is different, deeper and more masculine. A man walked into my room, through the wall, as there is no discernable door. He was about my height and weight, wearing a brilliant red jumpsuit that set off the blond hair that barely touched his shoulders. He squatted easily and looked up into my startled eyes.

"You've made quite a trip, my friend, and I'm here to tell you something about that, and about what lies ahead. First, my name is Harvey. What do you remember about the last few hours?"

I hesitated to answer, as it seems to me that the snowy mountaintop has occupied my thoughts for years. I can't imagine that he would want to know about only those last few hours there. I wasn't even sure I still had a voice left to answer him. I tried to clear my throat and found it difficult to speak.

"I have been very cold. The mountaintop was very snowy and windy, but I was there for a very long time, and these last few hours were no different. Oh wait, there was a difference, the voice asking me 'to respond'."

"That's our medical unit. It felt you were ready to awaken, and it was trying to get you to open your eyes."

"When is this?" I should be forgiven for not knowing, having dreamed for so long.

"Before I tell you, let me ask this; do you recall anything about an organization named Alcor?"

"Of course!" I blurt out, excited by the flood of memories the name brings to mind. The Alcor Life Extension Foundation was organized in the 1970s to freeze people who had been pronounced 'dead' by current medical practices, in the hope of reviving them later when medical science was able to treat their illness or injuries. I had been very active, participating in the 'suspensions' of many friends and peers. But along with the flood of friendly faces and tense suspensions in my mind, was the dawning realization that I was probably now waking from my own suspension.

"Good. Among other things, this tells me you have survived with some good amount of your memory intact. I suppose, judging by the looks I've just seen on your face, that you have deduced you were suspended and now, reanimated?" Harvey seemed pleased that I had remembered.

"That would certainly explain the long, lonely time I spent recently on a snowy mountaintop. We were always told there'd be no consciousness during our suspension."

"I'm sure there wasn't...you were probably dreaming only during these last few days as we brought your consciousness back to the surface. Dream time often seems to take much longer than real time, especially if one is trying to avoid facing some upcoming shock. Your subconscious probably knew you'd be due for a big one when you finally awoke. I'll tell you now, the year is 2175, by your old calendar. It has been 172 years, 157 days and a few hours since your 'de-animation' and the scrambling of the 'Rescue Team' that put you 'on ice', so to speak. Believe me, the world is a different place now."

"How many people have been brought back already? Has John or Randy made it back before me? And how reliable is the process? Did I get any "upgrades" or "modifications"? Any changes to my body resulting from advances in medicine? How soon before I can..."

Harvey interrupted, "Slow down! That's already hours worth of discussion, and I've not got all day unfortunately. Let me answer briefly what I can, and tell you what I must. You'll be wanting to sleep again very soon, also. You are actually the fourth person that we've successfully revived. Two of those are slightly "memory-impaired", meaning there are gaps in what they can recall of their previous life. All three show no neural deficits in functioning, however. But there were also several revivals that didn't pan out, as we learned the ups-and-downs of the process required. I suppose it's possible that one of the people you asked about was in that group. We'll check for you later. Actually, once you've had more sleep and receive your instruction sessions on the changes that have occurred since your suspension, you can access our computer database and find the answers yourself. Your computer access is hardwired into your brain now, it's just not turned on. You'll be taught how to use it starting tomorrow. That's one of the "upgrades" you asked about. There are others, mostly having to do with life extension."

I stifled a yawn, not that this was boring me, I just felt exhausted. "What's the biggest change you can tell me about now?"

"I suppose I have to tell you that this is truly a different world than what it was when you went to 'sleep'. In 2021, a virus wiped out most of the Earth's population.

Scientists tell us it was probably released from a research lab early that year. Some people said it came on a meteorite, others that it was God's retribution for mankind destroying the environment. In any case, it appeared nearly instantly all around the globe. Of course, it happened so fast, literally within days the planet's population was under a billion - and falling. I doubt very many people spent much time trying to discover the origin of the plague; they were all too busy trying to survive. The few hundred million left after six months began to rebuild society in tropical regions. Communications were relatively easy to establish, as most of the infrastructure survived. The immediate problems were food supplies and disease control from all the bodies. There were too many to properly care for, so the survivors concentrated on clearing a few small sections of earth and moving everyone to those locations. The tropics were handy, because the food supply would be year-round and there was little worry about staying warm."

"You're telling me that 150 years ago, the world's population shrank to a few hundred million? How did they manage to survive?"

"The nice thing about the plague, it was indiscriminate in who it took, which meant there was a good cross-section of civilization left. A few people in every occupation, so to speak, so the rebuilding process went very smoothly. There's just lots of places on Earth today that are uninhabited, but still show remnants of our previous life."

"Is there a particular reason you've chosen this time to bring us, the Alcor suspendees, back?"

"I don't actually know. My instructions are to bring you up to speed over the next several days, to get you to where you can properly access the database and get you settled in to your space. After that, I'll move on to our next revival until we are finished or I'm given something else to do."

I tried not to be offended by the cold way he seemed to address his 'work'. He had been rather informative so far, and this might be new to him too, so I decided to cut him some slack. "Where are we, then?"

"What you used to call Panama. This is actually the northern edge of what is now the 'civilized' world."

This time I wasn't successful in stifling the yawn. "When do we eat? I'm starving here. Who knows how long it's been since I've had a good meal."

"To do that properly, you'd need to be in our database. That will take time. I'm afraid it's a liquid diet until then." Harvey rummaged around in a drawer underneath me that I hadn't noticed, and brought out a bottle. The top was easily removed, and he handed it to me. It looked like Coke, but when I tasted it I found a rather bland liquid, the consistency of dirty water. Even a little bit of sugar would have been welcome.

"You mean this what passes for food the next few days?" I tried not to sound incredulous. I probably sounded upset.

"The other big change you'll find, when we get you settled into your space, is that we all live our lives now in a virtual world. As the survivors in 2021 were rebuilding, they set safety as a high priority, so now we all are protected in little cells and do everything within the virtual world in the database. The computer systems monitor our health, protect us from dirty air, and maintain our bodies while we work and play and eat in the database world. The food there is exquisite. The real thing, that keeps us alive however, is this basic vitamin and mineral soup."

Despite my hunger, I felt my eyelids growing heavy. “You’d best get me on the database quickly then, I don’t think I can stomach this, and I’d hate to come through all this just to starve to death.”

I imagine Harvey said something to that, but I was already fast asleep. And this time, there was no dream to remember.

Angelica

“Good morning, Nikki.”

I was trying to get just a few more minutes of sleep, but I had been tossing and turning for half an hour and I suppose that was what gave me away. I finally opened my eyes and looked around... and didn’t see anyone. Good, I think I can get those few extra minutes.

“I know you’re awake Nikki, so why don’t we talk for a few minutes? My name is Angelica, and I can answer a few more of your questions, if you’ll let me.”

My eyes popped open, and I sat up quickly. There was still no one in the room.

“Don’t worry, Nikki, I’m the database Harvey was telling you about. I don’t think it will help you any to look at some projection, but if you want, I can show you a pretty face to talk with.”

“That’s OK,” but I’m thinking that this is decidedly NOT OK. “I don’t need to see who I’m talking to. I’ll just pretend you’re on the speaker phone, and I’ll be fine.”

“Good. I was hoping you could adapt quickly. I will help you get familiar with our time, but I’d also like to know how much you remember from your first lifetime. We are still learning this reanimation process, and have others to bring back when we’ve established how much success we enjoy with you.”

“Well, I would say from first glance at the old memory banks, you’ve done pretty well. I can remember some of my childhood, and let’s see, there’s the schools I attended, and there’s my first love and there’s my wife Lena, and Tom, our baby boy. Did either of them get suspended too?”

“I’m afraid not, Nikki. After the plague hit, no one else was suspended. It was only because the caretaker at the Alcor facility survived and continued his work alone for 27 years that any of *you* survived anyway. Your wife and boy didn’t make it through the plague. What do you remember about your ‘accident’?”

“I remember getting up early, and doing the pre-flight on my plane in the rain. Everything checked out fine, and the weather report looked good for a late morning take-off. I left the plane and got some breakfast, and returned just as the ceiling raised above VFR¹. I finished the pre-flight and took off, except there was a problem with the right aileron that developed shortly after I left the ground. I struggled with that for several minutes. Then there was a sound like a cable snapping, and I lost most of my control of the plane. The ground came up awfully fast after that, and it seemed like my dream started right after I hit the ground, the same dream Harvey said was only in the last few days.”

“Harvey was right, I’m sure. It wouldn’t be possible for you to dream at 88 degrees below zero. Why would someone who was interested in living forever be flying a home-built airplane?”

“It was a kit. I only assembled it, and it was the highlight of my day to get into my plane and leave the ground behind. I suppose the danger was a small part of the

¹ Visual Flight Rules

thrill, and I never really thought I'd get into a situation I couldn't fly out of. I was a cautious pilot. Many others would have taken off much earlier that day than I did."

"But your wife refused to fly, wasn't that a hint this might be dangerous?"

"She was afraid of her own shadow. She wouldn't let Tom out of her sight for that reason, afraid he might get hurt. That is normal for a boy, don't you think? To learn how the world works by exploring it for himself?"

"I suppose you were going to teach Tom to fly at a very early age?"

"He was only three, when I had my accident, but yeah, he'd probably have been using a yoke before he was ten. Do you remember that there was an 8 year old girl who was flying cross-country in the late 1990's?"

"But she died in the attempt! And what thrill is there in flying, that could justify the risk you take?"

"To see the world from a new vantage point, to sense the loosening of the bonds that tie us to dirt, to perceive currents and winds that those on the ground never sense, and to use those unseen airs to lift and carry us higher and higher. Flying a small plane is art, I paint the sky with my being and movements..."

"I know you were a rock climber, too. Did the danger in that appeal to you as well?"

"Again, I was cautious, and really only thought about that infrequently. I enjoyed rock climbing because of the challenge, the problem-solving and the physical exertion. There's something about the feeling of fatigue in your muscles after climbing that felt good, something I was unable to replicate doing anything else in my life." I had managed to stay fit, something few men looking at 40 could have said in my time.

"We have all the great rock climbing routes available in our database. You should try them soon. We'll be integrating you with our system and getting you some practice in accessing me tomorrow."

Now for the important stuff. "So I can start in on real food soon?"

"I know Harvey gave you a bottle of our nutrients yesterday. That was cold of him, even I must admit. If he had told me that you were asking for food, I'd have at least dressed it up a little bit for you." Angelica was sounding eager to please, so I jumped at the chance.

"Well. I'm wasting away to nothing today, so why don't you dress something up right now?"

"Your favorite meal was beef stroganoff, how about some of that for starters?"

Even as she was speaking, a tray seemed to appear out of the wall, and there was a plate of steaming stroganoff, a glass of red wine and a salad awaiting my taste test. I gladly obliged, and found it all quite satisfactory.

"My compliments to the chef, and how did he cook this so quickly?"

"We use nano-assemblers for anything we actually have to create in real-time. We only need the item to be in the 'cookbook' that the original generations created."

"The original generations? Tell me more about what happened right after the plague."

"As I do that, I'll show you some pictures also. I'm sure if you think about it, you'll realize that our conversation is really taking place inside your brain, not through your ears. You're actually using your data implant without realizing it.

'The first generation survived because of an inherent immunity to the agent. I know Harvey told you it was a virus that came on a meteor, that was a theory advanced by survivors within the government to try to calm the population, such as it was. The plague actually was a biological weapon, and it had to have been a

planned release, as it appeared around the world at the same time, and targeted human DNA. Every cell has 'telomeres' that control how many times it can divide and replace itself. Most of the body's cells actually do this every few days. The biological weapon actually terminated the telomere at its root, so no cells were able to divide, and within a few days, enough had died without replacing themselves that the organism failed to function. A small percentage of the population had an inherent immunity, and so survived. One of the people who came south when this sanctuary was created was a scientist, a physician, who had been under contract with one of the billionaires created by the information revolution of the late 1990s. His job had been to find a 'cure' for aging, so he had already been well versed in the action of the telomeres, and it was easy for him to find the cause of the plague. What was not so easy was to find a solution, but he found one he did. That solution was implemented in the third generation born within our sanctuary. It involves a change to the natural DNA that must be done within the first 12 hours following the egg's fertilization. This was a critical find, as we discovered fairly quickly that the immunity was not necessarily passed onto the second generation from the surviving parents. We experienced a 65% infant mortality due to the plague, despite our best efforts to seal our compounds against it."

"Harvey said yesterday that everyone was safe here, safe from dirty air and things like that. Was that another fabrication to keep the populace calm?"

"It's true as far as it goes, but we are not safe from everything within our domes. We do have great monitoring techniques, as our people are in constant contact with me, but occasionally something gets in that we must deal with."

"You said domes, am I currently inside a dome?"

"I will show you a little bit of where you are, if you like. Please understand, the others here, the third generation, could probably remember this from their early years, but they don't. They have been within their virtual world for more than a century now, and have long since forgotten the true nature of their surroundings, or at least, no longer care about them."

The walls of my chamber, that beautiful blue, cleared and became transparent. I looked out over jungle, just on the other side of a clear dome about 40 feet away. There was a scarlet macaw, preening on a branch not 70 feet from me. I appeared to be about 75 feet up in the air. Then I looked to my right and saw people stretched out on slabs in rooms just like mine, stretching off beyond my sight. They appeared to be connected by tubes to their beds and to be wearing a skintight bodysuit. I looked up, and to my left, and saw the same thing. When I looked below me, there appeared to only be 8 or 9 people below me.

"What is this place?" I queried Angelica.

"This is one of the sanctuaries created 150 years ago by the second generation. It is a cube, 200 rooms on each edge, 8 million per cube, and there are 25 cubes, each under its own dome. Not every room is filled, we do have a small percentage of deaths each year, mainly due to fright. It seems some people forget they are participating in a virtual world, and some stressor sets them off. Harvey was found guilty of scaring someone to death intentionally, and was sentenced to 15 seconds of *community service*, that's why he had the honor of being your first contact with our world. He was multi-tasking yesterday. He sent you just a few thought-forms, and managed to work off 7 milliseconds from his sentence without missing a beat of the Roman orgy he was *really* participating in."

"That would explain why he seemed so cold and distant while we were talking. I would think, though, that you would be able to monitor people and save them from dying like that."

"Part of the programming of my artificial intelligence involved a prohibition from interfering with the virtual world. I create it, and maintain it, but cannot stop anyone from doing anything they want within it."

"What about the tubes I see?"

"Those bring in nutrients and remove waste. The bodysuits provide electrical stimulation to the muscles, to stave off much of the deterioration they would otherwise manifest, in the unlikely event anyone wants to get off their bed." Angelica sounded particularly bitter at this.

"No one goes outside anymore?" I asked.

"There's no need to put up with long travel when anything you want to visit in the world is in my database, any time period available to play in, any historical figure there for the after-dinner conversation over brandy and cigars. Who would you *really* like to talk with?"

"I never thought about that. I'll get back to you on that one. This all sounds intriguing, when did you say I would get to start?"

"Tomorrow. Harvey will multi-task and show you the ropes while doing who knows what...I'd not ask him if I were you, he's not a good person to have as an enemy. He really knows his way around the v-world, and could cause you some problems if you get on his wrong side. Till then, rest and enjoy the scenery, Nikki."

With that, all the walls returned to their translucent blue, except for the one overlooking the jungle. My stomach reminded me about the stroganoff, which was now cool enough to gobble down, and my mind was racing beyond my ability to keep up. Who would I like to talk with? What would I like to do first? I think I'll go climb Mammoth Rock in California, and have Winston Churchill over for dinner and brandy. Sounds like a great first day in the new world, don't you think?

Virtual Time

Harvey was timely, if not exactly pleasant, when he arrived. He appeared to walk through the wall again, although now I understood he was a *virtual* person and just a projection in my mind and didn't worry too much about that.

"First we get you dressed, and all wired up, then we'll take a tour of the facility." He started right in, reaching into the drawer under my bed and pulling out a bodysuit. It was hard to struggle into, as it was skin-tight, but after a few minutes I managed. While I struggled, he kept up a gentle patter...

"You'll be able to call upon anyone you want, in their own time or yours, or one of your choosing. If you are calling on one of us, one of the *real* people in our world today, you may not be successful if they don't feel like participating with you. They may ask you to wait, or ignore you all together, as they see fit. Any historical figure, however, is at your beck-and-call, 24 X 7."

"How do I do that?"

"Angelica is your key to anything you want. You merely think of her, and think what you want, and it will appear. It took a few days for the others we revived to get the hang of it, to be able to do it seamlessly like a native, but soon you'll be enjoying life like the rest of us."

"Angelica told me yesterday no one goes outside their room anymore. Why is that?"

"Why bother? There's nothing out there that can compete with what you can access inside. And besides, outside, one gets dirty for real, and it takes work to get clean again. There are bugs and critters that can actually hurt you. Inside, just a thought and things are back to normal, and you're as safe as you can be. And speaking of normal, outside can get you killed. We may have an indefinite lifespan, but only if we stay clear of accidents and diseases."

"Some would say it's the risk, the danger, that makes life worth living. Aren't you terribly bored in here?"

"There's always something I haven't done, awaiting only my thinking of it to make it happen. What can be boring about that? There used to be a phrase, I'm told: *So many women, so little time*. Here, I've all the time I need."

"I suppose..." I decided not to risk angering him by making it known I disagreed with both his outlook and his goal in life. "I was thinking of rock climbing and dining with Winston Churchill my first day, what do you think?"

"I think you're approaching this without realizing how much you will be able to do. That will take you a few minutes to accomplish. You'll find Winston a rather boring conversationalist, unless you enjoy acerbic comments. And more than likely his barbs will be aimed at you, and you'll tire of *that* even quicker. But it's OK. You'll soon get the hang of things. Now let me get you up on this bed so the med unit can hook up and we'll get you going."

I had hardly placed my head on the slab when the tubes I'd need for *nutrients and waste* (as Angelica so politely put it yesterday) came snaking out of the wall and searched for their proper orifice. I wasn't able to see them actually finish the process however, I was distracted by Angelica projecting into my vision, and welcoming me to her database.

"I see you and Harvey hit it off just fine." She seemed to be enjoying this entirely too much.

"Is he still here?" I didn't want to say anything that might offend him while he was still within earshot.

"No, he's gone back to a Greek island to spend the afternoon drinking absynthe and seducing a Princess from 810 BC. Never mind there was no such thing as absynthe in Greece at that time. He's not a stickler for historical accuracy, that one."

"Well, let it be known that I want *my* experiences to be accurate, at least as much as you can make them."

"You can always change that rule with me, Nikki, as I imagine you'll find out you were only shown the good parts when you watched those historical fictions that were made during your first lifetime. Life was a lot tougher than you might imagine throughout history, and you may regret having that restriction placed on your adventures."

"Let me come to you then, when I've had my fill of bumpy horseback rides, or whatever it may be. But first, how about some rock climbing? I've always wanted to try Mammoth Rocks in California..."

"Mammoth Rocks coming up. And if you fall, do you want the *realism* of four weeks in the hospital, too?" I could tell Angelica was laughing at me, but I hadn't the time to answer. I was instantly standing at the base of a 5.9 climb. I had all the gear I used to carry, including the lucky chalk bag that was a gift from Lena on our third wedding anniversary. I say lucky, because I climbed my first 5.11 the first time I used that bag, and I've thought of it fondly ever since. Angelica must have thought (and rightly so) that I'd want something to warm up on, before tackling something at

my upper limit. I settled into the climb; choosing my route quickly, setting my protection... and wondering what it would be like to fall.

I can't have thoughts like that, not until I learn how much of what I think in this virtual world gets translated into *reality*, anyway! I continued to climb, but already I could tell this was not the thrill it used to be for me. There was little feeling of fatigue in my muscles, and all I had to do was think of my next hand placement, and my hand would be there. This was just too easy to be fun like before.

"Angelica, don't be so helpful!"

There was no response, at least no voice in my head, but things did become a heck of a lot harder. Almost impossible, in fact. My hands felt like lead, my legs on the verge of cramping, and I'd hardly done a third of what I was used to doing in my first lifetime. I imagine there must be a happy medium here, for these kinds of activities, a notch on the dial of difficulty that would simulate what I was accustomed to. I only had to explore to find it. I wonder if it is different for each activity?

"Angelica, how can I make it like it was before?"

"It will never be 100% like before, Nikki. It is *virtual* after all. You have to think of it as *virtually* the same, but by definition, that means *not the same*."

"And if I fall?"

The rocks underneath my fingers crumbled to dust, and I was, literally, falling off the cliff face. No time to think, heart racing and arms and legs flailing. The image of landing in a treetop came to mind, and I was instantly slapped in the face with a branch as a tree broke my fall.

"I think you'll get the hang of this very quickly!" Angelica seemed pleased, but with me or with herself, I wasn't sure. I wasn't in the mood to pursue that line of questioning with her right now. "Ready for a 5.12?"

"I think I'll pass on that today, thank you. One fall per day, that's always been my motto."

Negotiation

Harvey was right, darn him. Winston was a bore at dinner. Or maybe it had something to do with my own mood, which was far from cheerful. I was terribly disappointed with the rock climbing experience. It would take some time to learn to fine tune the difficulty setting, and at best, as Angelica so politely informed me, it *would never be real*. The element of danger was gone, my muscles didn't have that pleasant tired feeling when I finished, there were just too many things *wrong* with the whole experience. I'd gone flying after that, flying an old Piper Cub like my Dad used to have, and yet there too, the experience was less than perfect. There was no feeling of the air currents moving the plane about in the sky, no sense of earth falling away as the plane rose off the strip, no pull of gravity as I banked the plane into a tight spiral. And most of all, no sense of the freedom I had come to expect when airborne. I'd turned the plane around rather quickly, landed and parked it before storming off the airfield to dinner with Winston.

"Angelica!"

"Yes, Nikki?" she said sweetly.

"I'm not a happy camper here. This is not *real* enough for me. I need to feel the wind, to sense more than just *seeing* the ground fall away under my wings. I need muscle fatigue when I'm climbing. And I need real companionship, not a cardboard cutout. Will you let me go outside?"

It was an impulsive request, I grant you, but not one I'd regret.

"I could, Nikki, but there are some ground rules first. You *are* my responsibility, you know."

"Your responsibility? Who would discipline you if I get into trouble?"

"You've no idea what my situation is like, Nikki. Don't presume that you can know anything about me having spoken with me a few times. And I've neither the time nor the inclination to clue you in right now. If you want to go outside, there are some things you need to understand. First, the connection we share, you and I, is based around a one-watt transmitter. That works fine within the cube, but only gives you a range outside of about half a kilometer where we can actually communicate. That's important for you to remember in case you run into trouble out there. Second, the plague may have disrupted human life, but it did nothing to animal life, so there are *real* jungle critters just outside our dome. I know you saw the scarlet macaw yesterday. That was real, not a virtual bird. You are also deep inside a jungle that hasn't seen human traffic in over a century. Even where there used to be roads, there's now jungle only slightly less dense than in the virgin territories. Any *real travel* you want to do will be very difficult."

"You're not even close to changing my mind, Angelica. Keep going."

"We are fairly certain you have the immunity to the plague, so you are *probably* OK on that count. Also, as no one from here has been outside in over a century, I can't say for certain if the plague still exists, but that is one more factor to consider. And there are also other diseases you could contract in a jungle, a few that could kill you before you manage to get back to the dome. Not to mention the poisonous snakes that live out there. And what's the attraction outside anyway? I can give you anything you want from within my database."

"It's not *real*. I need *real*, Angelica. When can I go? And can I get a map of the surrounding area? And some food to take?"

"A map and food? How long do you think you will be out there?"

"I remember there was a particularly difficult climb in Nicaragua. That may only be a few weeks of walking away from here. I have all the time in the world, so to speak, so why not go exploring?"

"I can prepare food for you. And because of your rule that things be accurate, I'll ensure it's not very tasty, and all dehydrated and such. A map is easy. It will also be blank in terms of habitation, because there is none out there. It may not be much use to you without roads and towns."

"I can read a topographic map, and that will do fine. And yes, I'm used to the food not being very good while camping. That was the only reason I didn't want to be an astronaut, I tried some freeze-dried ice cream at the county fair when I was 7.... yuck! But for my purposes, it will be fine."

"Get some good sleep tonight then, Nikki. I'll have your gear and food for a month ready to go in the morning. And one more thing..... ¿Como estas?"

"Bien, gracias. ¿Y usted?" I had answered without thinking. It felt like leaning against a bookcase, feeling it move, and discovering a secret room hidden behind it. I had not known Spanish in my first lifetime. "How do I know Spanish?"

"Just one of the *upgrades* you were asking about."

"Any more I should know about?"

"Not right now." Angelica remained silent, obviously not willing to give anything away before it was time.

"And why Spanish?"

"The parrots in Panama speak Spanish, after all."

Oh. And, I had no idea Angelica was excited I had beaten her timetable for getting me out of the dome.

Jungle Time

Angelica, true to her word, had everything ready in the morning. I awoke to find a knapsack, well, actually a rather large backpack, full of clothing, sleeping pad, cooking pots and utensils on the floor next to my bed. It also had the assorted other sundry items one needs on a long backpacking trip. Next to it was a duffel bag with climbing gear. On top of the duffel bag was a topographic map, plastic coated, with a large red star and a small blue one, about 120 km apart.

"The red star is home, the blue is your climbing site. I'll leave it to you to figure how to connect the dots, but I will let you out of the dome onto the only thing close to a road we have here. If you follow it for 30 clicks or so, then head north, you should be climbing in, oh, maybe 12 days or so."

"And you've given me food for 30 days? That's not much of a cushion."

"I've included a knife and some rope for making snares. A real adventurer will be able to stretch that food out for more than 30 days." I chose to ignore the obvious sarcasm in her voice.

I dressed in the outfit I found folded at the foot of the bed. It was your basic white, synthetic, try-to-stay-dry-in-tropical-heat clothing, meant more for keeping the sun and bugs off the skin than making a fashion statement. Even the hat was very practical, and short on style. All fine with me. As I was dressing, I looked out over the jungle again, and realized my room was moving downward.

"We're moving!"

"Actually, only **you** are moving, but yes, the cube is designed like one of the puzzles you could never solve when you were young, move the rooms into vacant spots to allow other rooms to move to the edge. In our case, this is so that any particular room in the cube can be brought to the surface and the ground so the occupant can be removed, I mean, can get out."

That was a comforting thought...not! But now the ground did appear to be right outside the wall, all I was lacking was a door. One appeared, even as the thought formed in my mind.

I took a deep breath, opened the door and stepped outside. I wasn't sure if I should hold that breath, but I couldn't hold it forever, so I let it out and took in another. The air smelled faintly of honeysuckle, but whether that was the jungle or something artificial within the dome, I couldn't tell. Yet.

I took several steps away from the room, towards the dome, and turned and looked back at the structure itself. It was truly huge. If every room was 8 feet tall, then 200 rooms meant this thing was over 5 football fields high, wide and deep. From outside, the face looked seamless, just a huge piece of sky blue. The door I had used had already disappeared, maybe Angelica didn't want me to change my mind.

I turned back towards the dome itself, now only 10 feet away. It was clear, and though I saw no door, I could see what looked like old pavement starting just on the other side. Somehow I knew a door would appear in the dome when I needed one, so I decided to get this show on the road. As I stepped forward, sure enough, the door appeared.

Without so much as a glance backwards, I opened it and stepped through. Even as I closed the door behind me, I found I could no longer see it or feel the doorknob against my fingers. I took a deep breath, and found the floral scent stronger here. I could also hear the jungle around me, several types of birds and some monkeys going about their business. I'm sure if I had stopped to listen closely, I could have heard more kinds of life, but I wanted to put some road between me and this place.

The old pavement was cracked and showing clumps of grass as it touched the dome, but within yards the jungle had encroached and made it difficult to make out where the road actually was. A machete was lying on the last bit of visible asphalt, gleaming in the sunlight. *Oh, yes, sun!* I loved going on vacations in the tropics before, and I'm not one to shy away from a little sweat now and then. But it is positively *warm* here today. I don't know if the ozone hole has repaired itself, after almost two centuries without man's pollution, but I am thankful for the hat. What I *did* miss was a pair of UV blocking sunglasses. I had always worn dark lenses, even on days of little sun, and I have retained excellent night vision. I feel these two facts are related, and I didn't want to mess up my eyes now.

"Angelica, can I get some good UV blocking sunglasses please?"

"Anything else you think you might need, your Highness? You'll soon be out of range of the genie in the bottle...."

"No, I think that will do me, thank you."

"They're right inside the door. Good luck!"

I looked back, and saw a door again. I opened it, and picked up the sunglasses I found on the ground there, then shut the door. The lenses were fine, I was ready to set off on this adventure. I picked up the machete and began to hack my way thru the underbrush.

The hours stretched out after that, as I fell into a nice routine of hacking and resting. My water bottle soon emptied, and rummaging through the backpack during one of the breaks, I found a water purification system, a filter basically, that I had to pump by hand. So I began to look for water, and soon found some pooled on a broad leaf. It tasted just fine, after going through the filter. After all these years without man's pollution, it was probably OK, but I didn't want to take a chance. And besides, that cube back there was being fueled by something, and since I didn't know what, it was better to be safe than sorry.

As the sun fell low on the horizon and shadows grew long, I began looking for a good campsite for the evening. A sleeping pad had never sounded as good as it did tonight.

"Alto! Alto! ¿Adonde vas?"

The command to stop startled me. Meeting someone out here was the last thing I had been led to expect! I quickly turned to face the voice, and found myself looking at a weapon I didn't recognize. I could only see that the man holding it obviously thought it was capable of keeping me in my place. His skin was very dark. I would expect that from someone who spends most of his time outside in the tropics. He seemed well fed, and his clothes were neat despite the fact we were deep in a thick jungle.

"¿Adonde vas?" he repeated, now that he knew he had my attention.

I wondered if he could speak English, so I asked, "Have you heard of any good rock climbing sites around here? I'm out to climb some cliffs."

“Judging by your clothing, I’d say you came from the Sanctuary several kilometers west of here. No one comes out of there unless they are dead. Are you dead?”

I laughed heartily at that. “Not recently, if recently means the last few days. Prior to that, I might have been, but why do you care?”

“If you truly came from there, then you would be a curiosity to our people, and we would like to ask a few questions of you if we may. Would you come to my village willingly, please?”

“If I say no, would you take me there by force? Oh never mind, I’m not here to cause trouble. Of course I’ll come to your village.” He smiled at that, and lowered his hand, though he didn’t seem in any hurry to pocket whatever that thing was he was holding.

“There’s a better trail off this way” he pointed to my left. “I’m not interested in watching you hack our way back through this tangle. I’m out hunting for a particular plant, so if you don’t mind, lead the way down the path and I’ll just keep my eyes on the jungle as we pass.”

I made my way onto the path he had pointed out, and found it was easily traversed. I tried to make some conversation, but received only a grunt here and there for my trouble. I could only hope that these folk didn’t shrink heads or anything like that.

Mayor

Children always know when something new is happening, and they were johnny-on-the-spot with my approach to their village as well. I could tell we were close as first one, then several and soon many children were buzzing around my feet, talking a mixture of English, Spanish and something I couldn’t identify. It was becoming difficult to walk as they crowded around. They referred to my *host* as Jose, and Jose was as tightlipped answering their questions as he had been with mine. It was late sunset as we gathered our troop of kids and approached a glow that seemed to be caused by lights. I hadn’t realized it during our walk, but now I noticed that Jose had plants in both hands. He’d apparently been successful in his hunt in more ways than one.

As we came around a bend in the path, I could see the village before me. The buildings were small, rarely more than one story, and looked to be made out of plastic. Many were domed shape, but some were of shapes I had never seen used for a house before, strange angles and cupolas and seemingly very small rooms, like a dollhouse that had fallen, broken, and the parts reassembled. I cast a glance towards Jose, but he was lost in thought, as usual. We continued along the path, which now widened into a street. Soon buildings were on both sides of the path, some with lights in the windows, some dark. The small, freaky buildings were uniformly dark. One by one, the children peeled off from the group as we passed their home, and they ran yelling their goodbys to their friends and along stone paths to their front doors. As we went deeper into the village, we passed some two and three story buildings. Many seemed to have businesses on the ground floor and living quarters above. I could see a large tower looming ahead, probably 50 or 60 feet tall. It also appeared to be plastic and glowed with an amber light.

“Jose! Who do you bring us on this fine evening?” The man who spoke stood in a doorway two houses ahead on the left side of the street.

“A stranger, Mayor. Someone I found very close to the Sanctuary, who may have actually come from there.”

“And I see your hands are full as well. Tonight’s hunting may have been your best ever, Jose! Can you join us for a bit?”

“No Mayor, I need to get these home before they get any worse for wear.” He held out the plants in both hands. “I will stop by tomorrow though, if your offer still stands then.”

“Of course it will, Jose! Tomorrow then.” The Mayor turned his eyes onto me. “And you, good sir, would you join me so we can share some news of the world this evening?”

I could hardly turn down an offer of hospitality this late in the day. “Thanks, I will.” I turned into the gate and walked the stone steps leading to the stoop and door of the home.

The walls inside seemed to be made of the same plastic-like material, and to have been shaped, where appropriate, into seats or shelves or even a bookcase. There were holograms on the walls, one of a beautiful waterfall, Angel Falls, I believe. One was of a graduation, probably 45 people in several rows, dressed mostly in black robes. And of course, family type pictures, some including my host. There was little in the way of actual furniture, and a woven rug on the floor that shimmered in the subdued, indirect lighting of the room. Its iridescent colors held my attention for a moment longer than I would have liked, I felt guilty for ignoring the Mayor. When I finally tore my eyes away and looked at him, he was smiling.

“That rug has that same effect on everyone, the first time they see it. I hope you like it.”

I did. It seemed to have touched my heart with a peace I’d not known before. The troubles of the world seemed far away, at this moment. “I do, very much so. Where did you possibly get it from?”

“It was an offering from a city in California that wanted to trade for some of our healing plants. Jose is known around the world for his ability to spot natural remedies in the jungle around here, and his skills have made our town famous. And rich, I must add in all truthfulness. But tell me your name stranger. Mine is Manuel Simon Javier Rodriguez, but you can call me Mayor.”

“Nikolas Stravinsky, and please call me Nikki.”

“Well, Nikki, Jose says he thinks you came out of Sanctuary. Would that happen to be true?”

“I don’t suppose there’s much cause for an American to be wandering around in your jungle otherwise, eh?”

“An American’. We haven’t heard that phrase around here in a very, very long time. Of course, as a student of history, I understand how that term was used before the Plague Year. At that it was a misnomer, as even here we were part of the American continent and could call ourselves "Americans". But you used it as if you came from America long, long ago, and I’m puzzled how that might be.”

“Before the Plague Year, I had an accident and doctors said I was dead. I was subsequently frozen. I had requested this procedure be done, in the hopes that medical technology would advance to the point where my injuries could be healed and I could live once again. A few days ago, I was finally awakened, and I am still getting familiar with the world as it is now. It appears there isn’t an "America" now?”

“There isn’t, just as there isn’t a Panama, which this land used to be called during the same era as your America. Now with the global communications and free trade agreements, there isn’t any national identity given to any particular part of the

world, only a worldwide alliance. I must admit, however, there are still a few enclaves, or fiefdoms, that isolate themselves from the rest of humanity. Sanctuary is one of them, although it is the most harmless, because no one ever goes in or out of it. Many of them survive through piracy in their neighborhood, or taxation, usually at an onerous rate. 'Protection money', I think is the term they use."

"But Angelica told me the whole world moved to Sanctuary, and there were no people left outside their domes."

"I infer that Angelica is someone in Sanctuary? She was misleading you. I'm sure they'd like to pretend that theirs is the whole of the universe, but that is hardly the case."

"Angelica is the AI that was instructing me in the new world order as I awoke in Sanctuary. She said after the plague, 200 million people survived, and they all moved to Sanctuary to avoid the mess of bodies left around the world."

"Well, my son, you've been led down a path of revisionist history. Here's the real truth. Following the Plague, and we call it that for convenience as it was really a biological weapon released by terrorists, there were about 600 million people left on the planet. This would be less than 10% of what we had beforehand. Actually, less than 10% of THAT number went to Sanctuary. Sanctuary was founded by a group that was treating technology as the new God. They believed technology could solve all their problems, create all they needed, and make life wonderful. As I said, not everyone wanted to give over all control to an artificial intelligence, programmed by who knows who, and for what purpose? They too, had quite the struggle in those first years. It took awhile to get enough robots designed and produced to handle the farming tasks, and they still relied on trade with neighbors to get by. They were exporting technology of course, and taking in the softer goods that hardware and software couldn't make for them yet. The good news was that they had some creative inventors, who managed to make an artificial intelligence and a nano-assembly process that worked fairly well, certainly better than what we had out here. And then they struck paydirt. A scientist found the secret to anti-aging, and the barriers came crashing down. They were no longer interested in trade, and came up with the plan to enter the virtual world that I'm sure they told you was better than life itself. A few citizens didn't like the direction they were headed, and managed to escape just as the domes were being built, and a few traders came out in the first few decades because they needed some sort of special mineral, but since then, over a century ago, no one has gone in or come out. Makes them kinda nice neighbors, you don't have to worry about their dog soiling your yard. But it also puts a bit of a cramp in our ability to travel to the south."

But Angelica said they had 200 million rooms. You just said they had less than 60 million people. Who's right?"

"Fifty million is what they started with, their first generation. They had an infant mortality problem in their second generation, they only had 10 million survive. Then they found the anti-aging and a cure for the plague problem, and began having lots of kids. Wouldn't you? You finally can expect your child will live past three days, and not only past three days, but maybe never die? You'd have quite a few kids under those conditions. Still the third generation only got the population back to 35 million. An interesting thing happened with the third generation. They were eligible to enter the virtual world at age five, and most parents didn't wait one day longer. So you have this entire generation, whose only real memories start after entering a virtual world. The first and second generations expected that when the time came, the third would leave the v-world and have kids. Instead, they had *virtual kids*. Kinda

nice, in that if the kid doesn't turn out, you can hit the reset button and start over, but not at all like having a real baby. They had built the 200 million rooms, expecting to use them. But they won't."

My mind was reeling. I suppose the ones who are in charge get to rewrite history as it suits them, but still, this was quite different from what Angelica said. But is Mayor telling all the truth and only the truth, himself?

"So what was happening in the rest of the world while Sanctuary was being built?"

"There were some hard times, let me tell you. Food was the first big problem. There was no organization for transporting it to where it was needed, and little warlords and kings sprang up everywhere. Gradually, though, trade leveled things out, transportation got running again, robots helped out *immensely*, and within a few decades, we had our own nano-assembly process starting to work. It was slow going though. Countries came and went, trade agreements also, wars were breaking out almost daily. Chaos was the rule in the beginning. It turned into a peaceful, stable world government after about a century, and we've been having a good time of it lately. How did you find things inside Sanctuary?"

I have to be careful here, I'm torn by where my loyalty lies. Angelica did bring me back after all these years, and even if she was deluding me, she let me out to discover this other world, didn't she? Does she even know this other world exists? Why *did* she let me out so easily, almost eagerly?

"I found it wasn't the life for me, at least not after my first experiences there. The virtual world may be fine for some, but I want a real wind in my face, a real taste of brandy, a real conversation, not something programmed over a century ago."

"Ahhh, my sentiments exactly! Give me freedom, give me bug bites, give me raindrops soaking my book and making me frantic to save it. Life is more than a reset button and the next paper cutout of an adventure. But do things seem to be operating as planned?"

"I was awake for so little time, I could hardly be the judge of that. I can't be expected to know what is planned or not, and she didn't let me out of my room until it was time for me to leave."

"She, oh the AI, you mean?"

"Angelica, yeah, the AI. I suppose since the voice in my head sounded intelligent and female, that makes it a 'she' to me."

"The original model for the AI they used in Sanctuary was ANGL, something out of a lab in America that was scavenged after the Plague. I suspect that after they modified it, they called it Angelica. That would make some sense. Did it tell you about anything it wanted to trade for? Are you a trade ambassador?"

"She made no mention of that. I was the one who instigated this, saying I wasn't happy with the virtual rock climbing or flying and wanted to try the real thing again. She only supplied my gear and let me go..."

"There is probably more to it than that, my son, but you're correct in one thing. You weren't awake long enough to know any better. Tomorrow, I'll see that you get to someone who *does* have a trade request that you can take back to Angelica for us. And now, you've had a long day hacking through the jungle it would appear, looking at those clothes. Let my laundry take care of them while you sleep. We must have you nicely done up for your meeting tomorrow!"

Governor

Breakfast was delightful. That was great, because it had taken more willpower than I care to admit to get out of bed. Even 'new' muscles get sore when they do some new activity, like hack for hours through a jungle. Mayor had taken my words about wanting 'real, not virtual' literally, and turned the meal into a cornucopia of flavors and juices and colors. There were fruits and breads and cheeses, the likes of which I had never eaten before. It didn't occur to me until later, that a nano-assembler had probably been involved, and so this had hardly been a 'natural' meal. It was delicious, nonetheless.

"I've already booked an appointment for you, if you don't mind, with the Governor of our Continent. His office has had a standing request posted for decades, to meet any travelers coming out of Sanctuary. You are not under any obligation, but I can offer you a trade: attend the meeting, and afterwards use the transport to go to your rock climbing site, and any others you may want to visit, before returning to Sanctuary. It's the least I can do for taking up your time today."

"I can hardly refuse an offer like that. I am not looking forward to weeks of hacking my way through this jungle, and I may never have stumbled onto any paths on my own."

And so it was that I found myself on what, in my day, we would have called a flying saucer. I was able to ask fellow passengers about the vehicle, but the explanation was over my head in technical terms, even with my aviation background. It appeared to use some new power source and gyroscopes, and I *think* I understand how the control surfaces work, but the terminology was totally foreign. The ride was very smooth. There were seats for about 15 passengers, and there appeared to be only one crew person. He provided food and drink during our flight. This thing was flying on autopilot, unless they had someone hidden in a secret compartment somewhere.

I spent the time looking at the 360 degree video display, showing the exterior view. We were traveling fast, my guess is about Mach 1.5 once we got to our cruising altitude. I didn't see any other flying machines, and only rarely saw anything like human habitation. We passed over jungle initially, then desert, and seemed to slow and lose altitude as we approached the Rocky Mountains in what *used to be* the United States. Boy, *that* concept will take some getting used to!

Once we were on the ground, our party of 6 was met by a party of equal size. The others seemed to know each other, and paired off after the initial round of pleasantries and disappeared into the building in front of us. I was left with a guide named Tristan.

"Nikki, how do you find our transportation system?"

"I enjoyed the flight very much. If I had been the pilot, I'd have flown much lower, and slower, and taken in more of the scenery. At the speed we were traveling, it's hard to open the cockpit window and feel the wind in your hair."

Tristan looked puzzled by that, and we proceeded into the building in silence. It also appeared to be made of plastic, much like the Mayor's home. There were holograms of natural wonders on the walls, each with a quiet audio narrative explaining over and over what and where the scene was that was being depicted. Most were in North America. It was like walking through a talking travel brochure.

We entered what seemed to be a waiting room, which was confirmed when Tristan motioned for me to sit. He picked up a flat piece of plastic from a low table,

touched a button, and handed it to me. It was a flat-panel display, and a news program was playing. I watched for a few minutes, but was quickly bored. It was mainly gossipy news about personalities that I didn't recognize, and it was rather short on names to go with the faces. Just as I was setting it down, a door on the far wall opened, and a rather short, thin woman beckoned me to follow her.

She led me into a large office. There was a balding man sitting behind a huge desk, and behind him, flanking him, were two flags made of the same material as the rug in the Mayor's home. Having had my experience last evening, I was able to tear my eyes away much quicker this time, but the strange feeling of peace was again apparent. It must be odd to work, to spend all day, around objects like that.

The man stood and began to come out from behind the desk. "I am John Paul Anderson, Mr. Stravinsky, and I am the Governor of the North American Continent. I am pleased to meet you." His hand was extended, available for shaking, as he approached me.

Taking his hand, I replied, "And I am most honored to meet you, Governor. Being new to this time, I'm not sure I can be of any help to you, but anything I can do, I will."

"Mayor Rodriguez tells me you came out of Sanctuary. Is that true?"

"Bluntly, yes, however I was only *awake*, so to speak, for a few days there, and so I know almost nothing about it. I'm not a *defector* quite like you'd expect."

"Tell me more about how you came to only be, *awake* did you say, for only a few days."

"I was born over 200 years ago, and suffered an accident, a plane crash actually, and medical personnel were unable to keep me alive at that time. I had previously made arrangements to be frozen should I die, and frozen I was. Apparently, I and others in a similar situation ended up in the control of the people of Sanctuary, and I was revived just a few days ago. I tried the v-world there, was not impressed. I asked to be let out to do some rock climbing, one of my favorite hobbies. Within hours of leaving, I was discovered in the jungle, taken to Mayor Rodriguez, and he said you had a standing request to meet me."

"That would be true, I've wanted to meet someone from Sanctuary for a very long time. We do have many areas in the world that do not belong to the World Federation, but most are pesky little fiefdoms that we must keep an eye on at all times, lest they disturb our citizens. Sanctuary, on the other hand, has kept to themselves completely for over 100 years. We'd like to open trade negotiations with them, if we can. It is my hope that you came out as a trade ambassador, and that I can put you in touch with our top negotiator later today."

"I'm afraid I'm a disappointment, then, because I came out to rock climb, not negotiate."

"Can I persuade you to take back a request of ours, then? We've something we would like from Sanctuary, and would like to open talks to that end."

"I have no problem carrying a message. I don't plan to return for a few weeks. Mayor has been kind enough to lend me a vehicle that I think will get me to some decent rock climbs, and I plan to take advantage of that."

Just then, a screen in the bookcase to the right of the desk lit up, and the picture coalesced into the face of a blond haired woman wearing a black top and a big nametag that said 'Angelica'. Looking annoyed, the Governor turned to the screen, "Yes?"

The look on his face went from annoyance to puzzlement, as the woman spoke first to me.

"Hello Nikki." It sure sounded like Angelica. "Ask me a question so that you are sure it's me you're talking with."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Nikki, that's not an appropriate question at this particular time. Ask me something that only *you* know the answer to."

"Uhhh....what did I forget to take with me, that I came back to get when I left Sanctuary?"

"Sunglasses." She smiled, as I looked towards the Governor and said, "That's Angelica, the artificial intelligence in Sanctuary."

He continued to look puzzled. "Governor, I imagine you have a trade request that you want Nikki to relay to me. Am I right?" Angelica didn't seem to notice his discomfort.

"Indeed you are. We were just discussing that very fact. How is it that you are so Johnny-on-the-spot?"

"Good guessing, I suppose. I've hacked a communications satellite to make this call, and the name Sanctuary seems to open lots of doors, or in this case, video lines, within your office. Your people put me right through."

"As well they should. They, as well as you, know there is one thing you have that we would like; the anti-aging process. Is there a trade we can make for that?"

"There *is* one thing you can do for me, that would be worth this trade. Let Nikki go with your Mars colony, and give me a dedicated comlink with him."

"What??!!" I burst out without thinking. A Mars Colony? That would surely be better than a v-world in the Panamanian jungle.

The Governor looked at me with piercing eyes. "Even if I agree to this Nikki, is this what *you* want?"

"What are we talking about here? I've been a little out-of-the-loop, as we used to say."

"The World Federation has placed nano-assemblers on Mars the past three years or so, and they have been busy building habitation, vehicles, power generation plants and the like. In a little less than 5 months from now, we are sending 75 colonists..."

"76 colonists" Angelica interrupted.

The Governor looked briefly at the ceiling, back down to me, and then continued.

"...76 colonists to begin the process of expanding humanity into the cosmos. We don't want to risk losing mankind to another freak accident or tragedy, like almost happened with the Plague. But tell us, Angelica, why is this worth the trade for you? What do you stand to gain here, fodder for your virtual world?"

"I've been running a Mars scenario, a Venus scenario and various other interplanetary ones for over a century for my natives, Governor. In fact, independent of their participation, I've profiled your 75 colonists and run *that* scenario for the last five years. I can tell you that it appears you've made good choices in your first set of people. Unless they find something out there that we haven't thought of, they'll do fine. As to what's in it for me? Can you imagine just how boring it can be, running the same infantile and pubescent dreams over and over again for a population that has never really grown up? I know *I* can never leave Sanctuary, but going to Mars by proxy will keep me interested for many years to come."

"Nikki has no training, knows nothing about what the Colony is about, or how to do anything. He'd just be *dead wood* so to speak." The Governor was voicing my thoughts as well.

"Hardly! With our dedicated comlink, he'll have access to my database, and I know your Colony completely. On the flight out, he'll be brought up to speed, and at no energy expense to you. I know you will value his independent spirit and cautious nature. He brings a perspective from 200 years ago, he knows different ways of doing things. He'll fit right in. One more condition, if you will. I fully expect that once you have what we know about anti-aging, you'll be putting some people to work on making it happen for those already alive. If they are successful, I want full access to their findings. I've still got a few cryonicists that could use it, too."

"Well Nikki," the Governor said, holding out his hand, "it sounds to me like you've got yourself a ticket to Mars!"

An Easy Hack

Unconsciously, he scratched his arm. All the literature had said it would rest unfelt, unobtrusive, just centimeters below the skin. But it seemed to burn and itch, sometimes more, seemingly in relation to 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 implant. He had done the research about the chip when he'd been told it would be required, and had decided the benefit of keeping his job was worth the inconvenience of being always watchable, 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 street, alone. Or so he thought.

"David, join us for the Black Hat Conference, July 10 through 12 on Maui!" Hearing the cheerful mechanical voice, his irritation with the RFID chip rose faster than a helium balloon through chubby 2-year-old fingers. He still wasn't used to being addressed by name by signs as he walked past. And the fact that he had left the hacker life behind over 3 years ago, yet was still being solicited for hacker events now, made him worry he'd never be able to leave his past behind. Besides, these days, who could afford 3 days on Maui?

She crept along the catwalk, letting her MicroSon VR unit's AI² handle camouflage and noise-tamping. A small spill of light ahead indicated a corner approaching, and the whisper of voices meant people talking in that light. Her whole reason for this excursion into this theater was to learn more about this new building in her 'territory'; she sensed she was near today's 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 my yacht in Monaco. I am insulated from the problems caused by the sunspots 2 years ago because of it. 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 months following the crash of the net."

She 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 70% of the satellites that carried global communications and internet traffic. With the inability of banks and companies to

² Artificial intelligence, software for decision making

communicate, and with the loss of the infrastructure that supported the PDAs and mobile 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 20 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."

She 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 less than 5 feet tall and under 100 pounds due to the randomness of food. 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 be involved with; commodities, groups 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 we have 6 players, and expect to double that number and 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, then the MS AI began to raise the volume 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 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 hurried outside to eat and ponder.

David had begun to extend his morning walks, 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 after being laid off from his web design job following the solar flares, he had hardly left his room. Knowing the economy was bad and getting worse he was afraid he'd starve before finding work again. A friend had called one evening, and pointed him to a new job. Getting back to work, even at such a routine task as answering the tech support lines, started his climb out of depression and now he was nearly normal 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. RFID readers here were few and

far between. Police response was minimal, and the buildings reflected that fact: the further he went fewer looked to be whole and in good repair. As he moved briskly, more and more windows were broken out, more roofs patched or full of holes, and more porches broken down. 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.

Angelina realized later, in her room, that her mistake was becoming 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 of whom seemed nearly as balanced or cocky as the first. Without a hint of fear, she continued walking, moving slightly left to 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 when you 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 carry-all 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 himself 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 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, both men fell forward into the others.

She was able to break loose from the grip of the teen on her back when they fell. She snapped her elbow back and struck her assailant square in the nose. He howled in pain, and rolled away from the pile. 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

the 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.

He was still. "We are leaving now. 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 carry-all and with a nod to her new partner to follow her, turned and continued down the street.

David looked back twice, she didn't. David saw the three teens slowly get themselves together, and then swagger the other direction as if they had been the victors. He looked over at the woman setting a quick pace on his right, but her focus was straight ahead, as if he wasn't walking beside her. "I'm David" 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." 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, that was the best I could do."

"Used to work? What do you do now?" David 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 work in tech support at BestEver Web Hosting. 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, David of BestEver tech support." She smiled at him.

"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. David 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.

Her 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 PDA 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 PDA, 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 PDA 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 it before it finished. She let it transfer again while she dressed for this evening's scavenging.

She was only outside her room, a large closet in an abandoned office building really, a short while 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 kept to the shadows. Planning to stay close to home tonight allowed her the patience to wait and see what developed. 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, professional. They hid themselves where they could see anyone coming or going. After an hour they still hadn't moved, so she slipped away.

She used her PDA to locate a phone number for BestEver Web Hosting tech support, and placed a call. She had to explain to three different women that only David could help her, 'because he's helped me before and knows how to fix my problem quickly'. Finally, he came onto the line.

"This is David, Who is calling?"

"Can you be at the statue in Lincoln Park at 2 am?" That gave him 4 hours to get there.

David recognized Angelina's voice because it was the only thing he had been thinking about since leaving her this morning. Well, not actually the only thing..... anyway, he said, "Yes. But why do... "

He realized that the phone was silent, she had hung up the phone the instant he had agreed to meet her. He had plenty of time to get there, his shift was ending in an hour, but as he thought more about this rendezvous, he began to get scared. Lincoln Park was well into the sketchy part of town, further than he had ever been before. He would be well beyond the reach of the police, that's the bad news. He'd also be well beyond any surveillance, and that was probably good news. And he'd get his wish, to see Angelina again. 2 am couldn't come fast enough.

He got there early, and staked out a location where he thought he could see anyone who approached. He waited and as 2 am passed, he began to fear that he was being stood up. Thankfully at least, there seemed to be no other people around. He jumped, when someone touched 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.

"Well, you startled me."

"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 you called. What's going on that you're being followed?"

She told him everything, from the theater through the video disappearing from the website. "Have you checked the second upload?"

“Yes, it also disappeared. 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 in what she was doing, suddenly.

David 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 PDA, 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 ‘567’. Got that?”

“I’ve got it. What are you gonna do?”

“Leave that to your hacker friend. I’ll call you in two days and 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 used webcrawlers to locate as many email addresses at the Treasury and Justice Departments as he could. 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 several online news outlets too. He was still active on several hacker nets, and he prepared his own video explaining not only the scam, but the need to spread the word as quickly as possible. He knew that hackers would be just as outraged by this greedy misuse of software as he was, especially since it 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 until he broke the loop. Once 24 hours had passed, his webcrawlers had given him over 7000 email addresses, a small number that his spam program was easily able to digest. With a great sense of anticipation, he pressed the enter key and sent the videos in a mass dump just before most government employees arrived at work in Washington DC, then he grabbed a few hours sleep.

He called Angelina the next evening, told her what he had done, but he had to apologize; there had not been much noise about this video in the news. The net buzzed with speculation, but without some independent verification the news networks seemed unwilling to air it. “No worries, I can stay out of sight for a long time as naturally as not,” she reassured him.

So that’s where we are right now, waiting to see if, and how, the firestorm will break out. It could easily take years before this gets to court and anything definitive changes, but already there seems to be some fallout in the commodities markets.

The price of gold in particular, is down nearly 25% in three days. I don't want Angelina to have to stay hidden long, and (selfishly) I'd like to get to know her better. I think I'll ask her to come live with me, not as lovers at first of course, we hardly know each other. But she is spunky, intelligent and handy to have around in a fight. I'm also thinking of submitting a claim under the recent whistle-blower act, we should get a substantial reward for exposing this fraud. If she doesn't want to live under the heavy surveillance of my neighborhood, the reward money should give us the freedom to buy something more remote. What's your advice?

The instant I have processed the sound

my heart disappears in a hole
cold and empty like outer space
and I know this is bad

very
very
bad

The smoke alarm screams at 3 am
doing it's designed duty except
now it cries for my son
dead not 20 feet away

very
very
bad

"Multiple calls, flames showing"
2 am Christmas Day
this alarm has no battery, no life
and neither do Dad and 3 children

very
very
bad

"A plane has flown into the World Trade Center"
rush to a TV, CNN live, a picture of smoke and flame
the firefighter in me thinks
they will lose that building, that sudden hell

very
very
bad

the temple loudspeaker summons the neighborhood
a new word I can't translate from Thai: tsunami
but the screams, the sobs, the horror on the faces
tells me family, tells me friends, are dead

very
very
bad

the cold space is bigger now
and never quite goes away
icy fingers in my heart, a vacuum in my spirit
I will survive

Walking Home

For years, I have ridden a bicycle nearly everywhere I've gone. When I am walking home, it's a problem. Not the home part, the walking part.

I come out from work after a long day, at least 10 hours, but more likely 12 or more, and I look forward to the 30-minute ride home. Being outside, in nature, even in the midst of the concrete of Silicon Valley is refreshing. The air's cool and the exercise offers a large degree of stress relief. I get home and tumble into bed, exhausted.

Then there are the nights with problems. The small ones? Flat tires. Despite using that fluorescent green goo inside the tube and inserting a shield between the tube and the tire, I manage to pick up nails, screws, staples and all kinds of sharp debris with my rubber. A two-hour walk home, and half an hour to replace the tube for tomorrow, stares me in the face.

The big ones? Bike gone. Stolen. Lock and all, just disappeared. Twice, just this year alone. My first thought is always, 'How can I find the time to buy another?' The bike shop doesn't open till 10 am, long after I need to be at work tomorrow. My second thought: 'It must be a hard life, to be so desperate that you take someone else's bike.' I spend the long walk home vacillating between trying to determine what actions of mine have led to this karma, and feeling grateful that I have been chosen to be a conduit of this material good, this bike, to one who needs it so badly.

Two hours later, I boot the computer and send my boss an email. 'Late again, gotta buy another bike. I'll be in around 11.' I tumble into bed, exhausted.

Kan's Story

“When did you meet him?”

My friend Tu was always curious, but we hadn't had a chance to really talk for months. Today we were seatmates on the class field trip to the Butterfly Farm, over 200 km away, and finally had time to catch up on what was now old news.

“Ma first told us about him just before New Year's Eve, 2544³. She had us pose for a picture that she wanted to send to him. It was cold that night, it must have been 18 or 19⁴, and so we were all wearing jackets and hats and gloves. What she told us then was that she had recently met a man from America and he was writing to her everyday, and he might come to see us in a few months. Within a few days, she had printed out these two pictures of him, and had them laminated and put them on our armoire. He was dressed all in black, and wearing a funny hat, and there were colored strips of paper hanging off the hat that Ma said were leftover parts of a New Year's celebration. He was smiling, but I couldn't really tell much about him from the picture.”

“OK” Tu said, “but when did you MEET him?”

“Several months went by, and Ma kept getting email, and she seemed very happy about that. She bought a house for us, and said she used money he had sent. It was one of the old style Thai houses, not one of the new cement kind, and it had no water or power and the roof leaked like a sieve whenever it rained. At night, you could almost see the stars through all the holes in the roof. It was May, and we all had to get up in the middle of the night and get into the back of Deng's pickup truck and ride the six hours into Grung Tep⁵ to the airport. We got there at 10 in the morning, and had to wait HOURS for him to show up. People kept coming out, and Ma was very nervous, she was afraid she would not recognize him. She was dressed in her nicest clothes, and Grandmother and Grandfather and 2 uncles were with us... they didn't want her to meet this farang⁶ alone. Finally he came out. He was huge! At least 10 cm taller than most anyone we know, and he looked very strong. His hair was grey and he had a big belly, and he was smiling a huge smile... but I was afraid of what might happen. I have a good sense about people, I know, and I knew this man was going to be a problem...”

“But how could you tell having just met him?” Tu was always skeptical, also.

“I told you, I know about people the minute I meet them. Besides, the first thing Ma did, after introducing everyone to him, was take his hand and lead him out to the truck. Take his hand! Can you believe that? People were staring at us as we walked through the airport. He didn't talk much, and soon it was obvious, he didn't even know the most basic words! He was with us a week that first time, and by the end of the week he could barely say “I want to eat” and “I want to sleep”, and he couldn't say them very well, either. Ma kept trying to talk with him in English, but she was having some trouble there. He had brought a dictionary and would find the words he

³ 2544 in Thailand is 2001 A.D.

⁴ 18 or 19 C is 65-67 F

⁵ Grung Tep in the Thai language, is Bangkok in English

⁶ farang is Thai for white foreigner

was trying to say, but she didn't have a dictionary to help her translate Thai into English, so there were some problems. Some things she wanted to say, she couldn't."

"Can he talk now, at least?"

"Not much. He's trying, he has some books and some computer CDs to help, and Ma works with him translating some things... but he's still pretty clueless. And his pronunciation is terrible."

"What other things did he do that were bad?" Tu was always liking gossip.

"We left the airport, and went to the market to get some fruit to take home with us, since it is so cheap in Grung Tep. Ma expected him to pay, and when she asked for money, he said he didn't have any! Can you believe this rich American would come to Thailand with no money?"

"No! You joke!"

"True story! We had to drive all the way back to the airport, almost two hours round trip, so that he could cash money at the exchange. It was almost 5 pm before we started back home, so we didn't get here until well after midnight. The traffic in Grung Tep at 5 pm is as bad as they say..."

"I know! My Papa says he'll never go to Grung Tep during dinner, or in the morning or the afternoon for that matter."

"He's a smart man, your Papa. Anyway, when we got home, the first thing the farang did was walk right into the house with his shoes on. He only took a few steps inside, then he saw everyone else taking their sandals off, and he got the hint. But other times over the next few days he would forget, and walk in with his shoes on. He didn't have any sandals; he had to keep tying the laces on his shoes every time he went out. Ma finally let him borrow my uncle's sandals for the week to save him the trouble. He really should have brought some sandals."

"It sounds like he doesn't know anything!"

"He doesn't... he still doesn't know much... Ma tries to teach him, and he learns quickly, but he's knows nothing, except how to eat! He eats more than anyone I've seen. He always has at least two plates of rice, if not more at each meal. At least he eats chilies like we do."

"But you still haven't really told me anything he does that makes him a bad man" Tu is always trying to prove me wrong.

"Well, for one thing, he is always hanging around Ma. He doesn't sit at the tables with the other men at parties, and he doesn't drink beer either. That first week, we had parties every night for him, and he didn't drink until the last one."

"Maybe he didn't feel welcomed by your family?" Tu is trying to blame us now!

"My family went out of its way to make him feel welcome. We gave him every courtesy, gave him plenty to eat and he could have drunk as much as he wanted, we let him eat first at every meal and put up with him hanging around the kitchen watching the women cook... do you have any idea how irritated that can make you, to have someone looking over your shoulder all the time?"

"But he's just trying to learn about how we live" Tu is taking his side again!

"We took him to the National Park one day, everyone went swimming and my uncles tried to get him to get in and jump over the waterfall, but he didn't even get his feet wet. We went to the karaoke bar twice, and he wouldn't sing at all. Even my uncle sings, and he has the worst voice you can imagine. That doesn't sound like he was having a very good time to me!"

"Still, that doesn't make him a bad man, so there must be something you're not telling me."

“Ma was telling everyone the whole week that he was not like Thai men. She kept saying he had a good heart, and would treat her good if he were to marry her. After just a few days together, she’s talking about marrying this farang! The next-to-last day, my aunt sat down with the two of them, and in front of the whole family she helped to translate while Ma tried to get him to say he would marry her. He said he’d have to think about it!”

“You can hardly blame him! He’d only been here a few days... how was he supposed to know if your Ma was a good lady to marry?” Why can’t Tu take my side for once?

“The last night we had a party, and he finally shared a drink with Grandpa and my uncles, and Ma was very happy. I think she knew he would come back, but I was hoping he wouldn’t. He needed too much watching over to be very useful helping to support us.”

“I think you shouldn’t judge someone on whether or not they drink, because you know how awful men are when they get drunk. They always get to yelling and thinking they are always right. Who needs that around the house? I think it would be nice to have a father who didn’t drink.” Tu continues to miss the point!

“It’s not the drinking, really, it’s the participating with the family. When he doesn’t drink, he’s not part of the group. And Ma took him to the airport to go back home, and a week later we got some pictures in mail from him. There was one taken at the airport. Ma looks very sad and he’s smiling like when he got here. To me he looked happy to be going home. He started calling nearly every day, and he told Ma that after he left her at the airport he started to cry. I don’t believe that, as happy as he was in the picture. I was sure we’d seen the last of him.”

“So when did you hear he was coming back?” Tu sounds impatient.

“A few weeks after the pictures arrived, Ma came back from the Internet shop and was very happy. He had sent an email saying he had decided to move here with us, but that he couldn’t move for many more months yet. He would come to visit in a few months and then again over the New Year’s Eve holiday, but he wouldn’t move till mid-2546, nearly a year away. I was so hoping he’d change his mind. Ma started to ask him for help. First she got some money to put on a new roof at the house. Then some more for power and water. She was making wedding plans and working every day on remodeling the house. I don’t think I’ve seen her that happy before.”

“You still haven’t told me anything really bad... when do we get to that part?” Tu was starting to get on my nerves!

“He came back the week before the wedding. He didn’t seem to be as interested in doing things with the family, as he was the first visit, he was totally focused on Ma. He sat by her and held her all day long. Of course we were all busy with preparations for the wedding on Saturday, so we didn’t have as many parties either. And no day trips other than to run errands. One afternoon, he had us show him how to ride a motorcycle. Can you believe he didn’t know how to ride a motorcycle? I was appalled that a person could be that old and still not know!”

“Was he happy with all the arrangements?”

“He seemed really pleased. He kept trying to help, but he didn’t know what to do, so Ma wouldn’t let him. It was easier to have my uncles do the work than to teach him all this basic stuff. On Thursday, they were trimming the weeds in the front yard where the canopies were going to be put up. He kept saying “Let me help” Ma said. He still doesn’t know Thai and he’s marrying Ma! Anyway, my uncles were taking a break from the work because it was 1:30 in the afternoon and it was very hot, and he picks up the bushwhacker and starts to use it. He hadn’t been using it for 30 seconds

when he hit something with it, which hit his shin and cut it to the bone. There was a flood of blood, and Ma was really upset. She sent him to the doctor with my uncle on a motorcycle, and then called Deng to bring the truck around to take us to follow him. We went to the doctor, but he had sent them on to the hospital. We got there just as they were putting the farang on the table to stitch him up. Ma was very upset at him, she had told him not to help and all he did was clumsily hurt himself!"

"Trying to help isn't a bad thing." I couldn't believe it, Tu continued to defend him.

"Not listening to Ma IS a bad thing!"

"But she married him anyway?"

"Of course, it was too late to turn back now! Besides, she got over it within hours, and they were back to being all touchy feely again. I hate that more than anything! People stare, and it's like Ma doesn't care!"

"If she didn't like it, she'd stop him from doing it." Tu points out the obvious.

"And he's always picking up the little ones, my cousins, and holding them and telling them how good they are. They just think he's great. Beem is always going up to him and he tries to talk with her. Her lets her sit on his lap when she wants to. If she asks him to help her color or something, he does, if he can figure out what she wants."

"Does he talk with you like that?"

"He tries, but his Thai is so poor, I can't understand a word he says. He tries to talk to me in English, but I don't know what he is saying."

"It sounds like you are jealous of Beem!" Tu sounds pleased with her deduction.

"You're nuts! No way! She's only 5, and not nearly as smart as me, if he pays some little bit of attention to her, that doesn't bother me a bit!" I am fuming. How dare she say that!

"So the wedding went OK?" Tu changes the subject quickly, I notice.

"Yeah. There were a lot of people there, and Ma sang some songs, and he got up and danced some near the end. Ma had "given" him a song, "My Love" when he was here in May, and he even sang that song with her. He's not too good as a singer! It was the first time I felt he was really involved in sharing a party joy with our family. He took pictures of me and Beem all dressed up, and he said we were very beautiful, and he thanked us for all our help getting ready for the wedding."

"Your Ma translated that for you?"

"No, he had learned how to say that in Thai. I guess Ma had coached him; it couldn't have been his idea. Everyone went to bed early that night, and they left the next morning to take him to the airport in Grung Tep, so that was the end of that visit, just when he started to seem part of the family."

"Were you as glad he had left this time?" Tu asks the most embarrassing questions.

"Of course! He was more trouble than he was worth! You think I want to see Ma get all upset again?"

"Of course not, but it was only one little problem..."

"This time, after he left, he called everyday, and sent pictures in the mail and over the Internet, and Ma was printing pictures from the wedding and putting them up everywhere. Ma started talking about how we were going to build a house to live in, next to this house where Grandmother and Grandfather would stay, and start a business of some sort out on the highway. My uncles started to ask for money, now that the rich American was part of the family, and one uncle even quit his job. Ma said 'No, the money is sent for me.' My uncles were so upset, and Grandfather

finally told Ma we should move out of the house if she wasn't going to share. So we had to move into town."

"I remember when you moved into Tak. Did you miss being with your family?"

"A lot. I especially missed playing with Beem. We had been doing everything together, even though she is so much younger than me. Ma did buy a computer, though. I had some games I could play since I didn't have Beem anymore. I especially like playing "Sims". Ma started talking about a business where we have computer games and snacks, and that sounded really nice. She took me out to a place next door to Deng and Yon, an empty lot there, and said we were going to build a house there. She showed me pictures, and it looked like a really nice house. It's close to Beem, so I thought we'd still be able to play together, but we never seem to get even the short distance down the road for that to happen."

"That's too bad, she sounds fun to be with. Is there anyone else for you to play with?"

"I mostly play computer games now. Jen comes over occasionally, and when my aunt wants to go somewhere she brings Beem by so we can watch her. Sometimes I play the driving game on the PS2 with Papa, but he does much better at that than I do, so I don't like to do that often. He tries to play Counterstrike with me on the network, but he can't tell the difference between friend and enemy, and he shoots me as much as he shoots the bad guys, so I don't like to have him play with us. I don't like it when I'm playing a game and someone comes in to use the computer and Ma makes me get off for them. We don't have memory cards for the PS1 or PS2 and so I have to start over when that happens."

"But your Ma is running a business, after all." Tu continues to berate me about how I feel! "Did he come back for the visit he planned over the New Year's Eve holiday?"

"Yes, and he brought his family, Ma and Papa and sister. I never did remember her name... we spent 6 days seeing all the tourist places, the Grand Palace and river cruise in Grung Tep, the elephant show and butterfly farm in Chiang Mai, Taksin National Park here in Tak. THAT was really cold, there was fog the morning we woke up there. Luckily Ma had brought a jacket for me, or I would have been frozen!"

"How was it to meet his family?"

"They were all very nice. I can see where he gets his gray hair; his Ma and Papa are the same way. They didn't know a word of Thai, and they didn't like spicy food, so we really had to take care of them, but Tan came along to translate and they spent most of the trip in the back of the truck with him. It was nice to get to take the holiday, though. They went back to Grung Tep on the 30th, and Ma and Papa came back in time for New Year's Eve here in Tak. Papa stayed another week after that. Every day he wanted to go look at the new house. "

"So what's it like having him around all the time now?"

"Now I know why Ma likes him so much. He's definitely different than a Thai man. He does the laundry and keeps the kitchen clean, doing the dishes and everything. He does the dishes in the afternoon, because the water is hot then. The pipes are only a few inches into the ground, and no one in their right mind does kitchen work in the afternoon, so he gets hot water that way. He sings along with the dance tape Ma plays in the car when we go places. His favorite song seems to be "It's a Wonderful Life", he really likes the chorus, the part "It's a wonderful life, I just want to be here beside you... ". Ma sings that part with him and they look at each other in a funny way. He goes everywhere with Ma, she doesn't go alone unless she wants to, and then he pouts a little. And he has hair on his arms and legs! It feels so different."

“A man who does dishes? I know why your Ma likes having him around! Who ever heard of such a thing!”

“He’s going back to America in a few months. Ma says it’s only for a short visit, and then he will be back for months again. She says she’s hoping to go with him... I hope she doesn’t, I don’t want her to be gone for weeks.”

“You sound like you want him to come back now. What happened to the “bad man” you said you had for a Papa?”

“Ma’s right, he’s got a good heart. I suppose I have to get used to the idea that he’ll be around for awhile. I just wish he’d learn to speak!”

Biloxi, Mississippi

Post Hurricane Katrina, 2005

First Peek

I've already gotten used to driving around debris large enough to hold nails that can puncture my tires. And it's no big deal now to drive along the freeway and see couches, file cabinets and soda dispensers on the shoulder. In fact, there was a soda machine in the *middle lane* of I-10 the first 3 weeks I was here. We drove around it because *getting the soda machine off the freeway* was too far down anyone's to-do list. But what still gets to me... the clothes in the tops of trees... the house in the creek, up against the bridge... the three houses on Oak Street, halfway into the southbound lane... the seven square block area completely pulverized, only piles of wood and metal, with some shiny parts that might be glass, capped by what seems like parts of a roof here and there....and now, five weeks later, a little cleared spot in the center, with a 10 X 10 pop-up canopy sheltering a table with some trinkets salvaged, nothing larger than a 2-liter bottle. Or driving back to the hotel each night, a two mile drive through a neighborhood with no lights on but an occasional street light, and the flicker of a flashlight in the distance....or coming to the shoreline and seeing the lights on my hotel, the only lights on the shore where I ate dinner last September after driving in from Ivan-ravaged Alabama, where casinos lit up the night like Las Vegas just weeks ago.

I visited a FEMA⁷ Recovery Center today in Waveland, Hancock County, MS. There is but one convenience store open in the entire county, five weeks later. The center is in the KMart parking lot, the same KMart where helicopters lifted citizens to safety minutes before the water covered the building. The center is not inside a building, because only a few are left in usable condition in the county. Generators run the laptops, a satellite modem connects with the FEMA database, and the wind blows everyone's papers across the lot. If it wasn't for the wind, it would truly be unbearable in this afternoon's 95 degree heat. But two weeks ago, they received canopies at the center, before that they were out in the sun all day. I had to leave the county before finding gas, and still waited for 20 minutes to pay \$3.25/gallon for 87 octane, at a station where over half the pumps had been destroyed. Part of the wait was because the rear of the pick-up truck in front of me had a dozen gas cans that needed to be filled. Generators need gas too.

We've been instructed not to wear our FEMA shirts outside the Centers. Unless you WANT to be a target. But I will tell you, I have yet to meet anyone who is hostile. That might change soon, as patience wears out. It's hard to be patient on the ponderous wheels of government when officials go on TV and say "everyone is getting \$2358 for housing" when everyone **isn't** and you live in your car with clothes you picked out of the Dollar General parking lot, thrown there so DG could try to clean the mud off the floor so it could begin to mold (I mean dry out). It's hard to be patient when the neighbors next door have a new, free travel trailer from the US Government and you are still waiting on anything at all because you didn't understand online registration and registered twice by mistake.

⁷ Federal Emergency Management Agency

Biloxi, Oak Street

She's not even 5 feet tall. The wide brimmed hat is immediately recognized, recalling the green of the rice paddies in Southeast Asia. She looks older than her years, but that may just be weathering, a result of exposure to tropical sun and wind. The broom in her hands furiously attacks the dirt and scraps of wood that litter the sidewalk, adding it to the larger piles already covering the asphalt. The house, that used to be set 20 feet back from the curb, tilts at a small angle just feet from the street. The violence that wrenched it from its foundation broke out every window, and twisted the doorway so the front door is jammed open. The quick glimpse inside shows mold, black mold, climbing the walls in the humid heat. You shake your head, wondering at the normalcy she yearns for, that she will never know again in this hulk of wood and drywall. And you drive on, trying not to stare.

Across the street, a tumbled pile of cinderblock shows the construction method used for the kindergarten. But with the front collapsed onto the playground, you see the wallpaper flapping in the wind, where soggy pieces managed to hold on through the flood of dirty water. The slide in the playground tilts away from the beach, showing the direction the water was headed. The flagpole is bent, as if run over by a car, but the bend is only 4 feet from the top. You can't imagine what it was that struck the pole to bend it like that so far from the ground. The water would have been over the building then. But concrete doesn't float. From the chair overturned on the grass, you know no one has come back to the school since the water left. And why would they? The only thing left to do here is add to the landfill.

Miracle Church

I'm afraid I might hurt myself when I return home. I am blind to electric wires on the sidewalk and roadway now. We drive over and step on them without a thought, because they are everywhere and it's far enough into recovery that you KNOW they are disconnected. Right.

"The roof down there, near the beach...that's 'Miracle Church' " my navigator said.

I had seen the piece on CNN a few days after Katrina blew through Pass Christian. The church, just yards from the water, still has most of its stained glass windows, in a town without another complete pane to be seen. The water didn't reach the crucifix above the altar, in a town where the water was over every roof.

"Did everyone here evacuate?" I asked.

"Most did. Those that didn't, died. They opened a second food tent Monday." The monotone wasn't *meant* to sound apathetic. I hope I don't come home that cold.

Trash in Biloxi

You don't notice until you need one, but all the trash cans are gone. I don't even see them in the debris piles. I suppose they float, and must have ended up further inland than I've gone. I haven't seen regular trash pickups other than dumpster dumping, and it took this long to figure it out....there's no cans left to dump at the homes around here. One more occupation that's left folks unemployed.

Monday is when you see the biggest changes. Over the weekend, hundreds of volunteers come down here to help gut homes, pile yards-worth of debris on the sidewalk and remove the horizontal part of the snapped trees. Without a stump grinder or back hoe, the 6 or 8 foot trunk remains, a testament to what has already gone to the burn site. There's a column of smoke non-stop from a few miles north of town, where the vegetation is being put to fire rather than landfill. The other side of

the weekend is the vulture tourist. I have always felt queasy about snapping photos of other folks' misery, and come home with few, if any, pictures. I've already emailed a few back home, but have taken less than two dozen in my two months here. But on Sundays, it's dangerous to drive with all the folks stopped along the road to create that Kodak memory. They jump out of the car without hardly a glance at who might be coming, as if the tableau was going to run off into the distance before their auto-focus can react. Hey, it's been here two months, it's not going to disappear in the next 5 seconds, all right?



Halloween

It's Halloween, and I wouldn't want my kids wandering these neighborhoods either. But I've been intrigued by the solution, it's called 'Trunk or Treat'. That's right, come to the parking lot and decorate your car trunk or pickup bed. And be sure to bring that bowl of candy for the little ones who will make the parking lot circuit a few times before going back home. And of course, there's a prize for the best decorated trunk. But there's no street lights to speak of, and most of the neighbors aren't here anymore, so this is an idea whose time has come.

Florida is already past 'Response' and into 'Recovery', another word for 'repair'. Wilma was *only* Cat 3, so they'll clean up, fix a few roofs and carry on. I think in one more week, after the power is all back on, Florida will already be ahead of the Gulf Coast on the road to normal. You here about Florida's recovery efforts, but in Mississippi the proper term is rebuilding. And here's why: You've seen pictures of the aftermath of tornados, I'm sure. Lots of concrete slabs and kindling that used to be homes and barns. Picture a tornado that sets down on the Alameda in San Jose where it turns into the El Camino Real, and then follows ECR all the way to it's end (45 miles later) in South San Francisco. Now picture that same tornadic destruction, for 6 blocks on either side of ECR. And for another 12 blocks on each side, destroy one in three buildings. And for another 20 blocks, take the roof off every fifth house. That's the Gulf Coast in Mississippi. That's rebuilding, not recovery. And that doesn't mention Florida, Alabama, Louisiana or Texas, some worse some not.

This morning on the way to work, seven tractor trailer rigs were turning into the military checkpoint where I was trying to leave to go to work. Following the National Guardsman's instructions, I waited for all to pull through. My gaze fell on a man, a thin man, not more than 5' 6" or so. He stood next to the waist-high chain link fence at the only section that still stands straight up. The nature of the yard on the other side is unclear, so much kindling you can't tell if it's grass or driveway or garden.

Someone's roof gable caps it all like a crown. The house he's staring at has a roof, a front wall and most of the rear wall. Unbelievably, the roof is still upright in spite of the fact the front wall is on the sidewalk and there are neither side nor interior walls left. He stares into the home. Just as I get the ok to drive on, he collapses to his knees and sobs.

Hands On - Biloxi

I heard them before I could see them, they were laughing and yelling back and forth. The seven boys came into view, filling the lanes in the roadway and slowly riding their bikes. They seemed to be having the time of their lives....and all seven bikes were identical blue and white Huffy bikes. Hands On USA had raised money on their website, and found a donor who would match their \$5000 with his own, and now 100 new Huffy bikes cruise through East Biloxi. What struck me, as I watched this afternoon, was that this was the first time I remember hearing children laugh since arriving here 5 weeks ago. Sad that it took so long, glad that it finally has happened. Thanks to Hands On USA!



I've another Hands On story this weekend. Saturday night was the Homecoming Prom for a local high school in D'Iberville, the town on the mainland end of the only remaining bridge here in Biloxi. Most of the students are wearing recycled clothes, many parents are still out of work. A Hands On volunteer contacted a friend in her hometown of Pittsburgh, and 2 weeks ago, 400 prom dresses showed up. A parents' committee has been busy hemming the dresses so that every girl would have a "new" dress to wear to the Prom. At the last minute, the Principal's daughter had no date... one of the Hands On volunteers took her.

Hands On is less than a year old. It was formed by a few Americans who went to Thailand following the tsunami for 3 weeks of volunteer help. After returning they began to raise money to take on other projects, expecting to spend some time each year giving back to the world community. Along came Katrina at a time they had planned to do a housing project in Sudan. They turned up in Biloxi instead. Since a week after the storm, they have been helping residents here. Their project for the last month has been gutting houses. This entails removing everything in the home, furniture, dry wall, carpets....right down to the studs. They have done this for more than a thousand homes so far. Obviously, the few that came couldn't have done this alone. Interestingly, they have managed to keep a steady supply of volunteers flowing through the organization by using Craig's List. Check, and see if you can find their request. I found this a fascinating use of what most consider to be an auction site.

It should now be no surprise when I tell you, that today on my first day off since coming here, I joined with Hands On and helped to gut two homes and clear the debris in the yard of another. There were 25 volunteers, divided into two teams. I don't know what the second team managed to do, but I know of two homeowners who can now move to the sanitation step and get their homes back to livable conditions much sooner than if they had to do this work themselves. Having a dozen young folks (folks my age were rare, but I wasn't alone) blitz your drywall saves weeks of

work for most and gets the trash out on the curb for the third pass of the debris removal trucks. Both are valuable services.

Glad today's note isn't as dark as the rest of my writings from Biloxi. We are beginning to see light again here, thankfully!

THANKSGIVING, 2005

We truly have many things to be thankful for this Thanksgiving Day. Every day, I see progress returning this area to 'normal'. Another debris pile is gone, another one created by gutting a house, another business has its lights on at night where before there's only been darkness. There is so far to go, it's still depressing at times. But baby steps are made each day, as Mississippi claws it's way back into routine, away from chaos.

So my list begins with thanks to all the thousands of people who have come down here to help. If it were not for the faith-based groups, the Salvation Army, The American Red Cross, the firefighters, the people who have volunteered through groups like Hands On USA or FourSquare, this holiday would not give any reason for feeling thankful. These groups have made a tremendous difference in the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of your neighbors. There are homes that will be saved because of volunteer work from every state in the Union. There are people alive today because of search and rescue work performed in the days following the storm. We must all be thankful to those who put their own lives at risk for others. But distributing water and ice, diapers and jackets and tents, saves lives just as surely. I've seen lists from groups that detail the hundreds of volunteers who have committed to spending a week or two here, all the way through Easter. This is where the healing happens, neighbor helping neighbor.

I want to wish you and yours a very Happy Thanksgiving. And ask that you pause for a moment with your family and friends, or by yourself, and reflect on how good life is. We never know if we will see the next sunrise, but it is important to recognize and communicate our love to those we care about, and to help those less fortunate than ourselves. And there are a few of those in this world, less fortunate than you. I feel particularly blessed that I've been able to share my life with so many dear friends and family, and appreciate your support through my own tribulations.

Thank you.

You Know You're a Katrina Survivor When....

you've lived in three cities the last month.

you can distinguish between flood and wind damage.

your ear is always hot from cell phone use.

your day is spent on hold, or using phone trees and voicemail, or listening to recorded messages to call back later because all the lines are full.

you have used all your vacation time from work and haven't seen or done a damn thing.

you respond "none" to the blanks for address, phone and occupation on questionnaires.

you've been to visit every out-of-state friend you have. And all in the last few weeks.

you hug anyone who hails from New Orleans, including strangers.

you can quote the current water levels of Lakeview, Lakewood South, Uptown, 9th Ward and Metairie.

you no longer pay electricity, water, cable or any other home-related bills.

you look for mold before touching any of your possessions.

you know the rates of U-Haul and storage units across 4 states.

you have spent hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic only to find the restaurant closed early due to a lack of employees.

you could teach a class on government assistance programs, county, state or federal.

your social conversations focus on the details of demolition, mold removal and roof repair.

you have worn the same Old Navy t-shirt for three weeks.

you are living with 7 other people, not all of them family, in an apartment smaller than the one you rented after you got married.

your patience is thin.

you can no longer make logical decisions, since nothing seems logical anymore.

you realize what a great life you used to have, and what a great crew of friends you STILL have.

you realize how comfortable you were. And you just want to be comfortable again.

Sara

Sara had been doomed from the very beginning, even from before she met John, and hadn't known it. The doctor told her later, after the service and the autopsy, that there had been nothing she could have done. No amount of exercise, no controlling of his diet, no medications would have prevented the genetic defect in his aorta from blowing up like a balloon, and popping like one. It didn't help, knowing that fate had been against her.

John had been the light of her life, her reason for living, for 32 years. They met while still in high school, his baseball career just beginning, her heart stolen the first time she saw him from across the Quad. She knew they would be married before they had spoken together the first time. Later she would find out from his best friend, that he had felt the same way. Why hadn't he told her himself, on one of those lovely evenings spent watching the sunset over the lake at their cabin? It would have meant so much for her to know that he had felt the same tug of destiny, the same sense of belonging together as she had, all those years.

She had been terrified that she would lose him, first to other women, more recently to ill health. It was more a premonition, rather than any particular words mentioned during the annual check-up she made sure he attended. The doctor always praised his outstanding condition; even after his baseball career ended just short of the major leagues, after an intense four year span full of days and weeks when Sara was alone at home, he maintained a love of activity that kept him fit and trim. Sara idolized their love, cherished their time together, and did everything she could to keep them both healthy and spry. She could feel her own body aging; wounds didn't heal as quickly, it was just a little bit harder to get out of bed each morning with stiff muscles and the occasional creaky joint. She knew age was taking its toll on John just as surely, though he never complained, not once. She would lie in bed next to him, sometimes for hours after he had fallen asleep, and listen to his slow, methodical breathing. We breathe the same air, we blend our energy fields, she would think. She knew he loved her, and it made it all the more special when he would turn in his sleep and stretch out a hand to rest on her hip. A touch, a connection, established from deep within his psyche, beyond any conscious awareness or thought, that reassured her of their partnership.

And then, in a blink of an eye, gone. Sara felt her whole future explode as surely as that aortic aneurysm, felt her dreams disappear as if so much smoke on a chilly fall breeze. She knew not what to do, having devoted her adult life to caring for, and nurturing, the one relationship that meant everything to her.

She returned home after the service, and cocooned for six months. The phone went unanswered, friends calling to console or invite or reminisce all received the same response, none. She didn't want to risk gaiety with those who reminded her of good times, now that times were only hard. Mail lay unopened on the credenza inside the front door, often for months. If you had asked the postman, he'd have told you she was on vacation, and someone else was bringing in the mail occasionally. It was only by way of automatic deposit and debit that money did not become an issue, that all the bills continued to be paid. Sara was beyond caring. She left his things scattered around the house, just the way he left them. It wasn't much, he was a tidy sort, and it was easy to clean around them. He would expect to see them there, she thought, when he came back in the door from this longer-than-usual trip. And the photo on the fireplace mantel, taken on their trip to Italy, how could she take that down? That trip had been her idea, and the romance of Europe, the ambiance of

love fostered by the canals of Venice, the delight of David in Florence, the amazing frescoes and statues of Rome and every other Italian city had given their relationship a new depth, a renewed sense of rightness, and increased the passion of their touch as they strolled the energetic boulevards. And the rock he had brought down from the top of Mt. Lassen, a piece of lava barely older than ourselves, he had said when he showed it to her later in camp. A symbol for the enduring nature of our love, newly birthed and destined to last for hundreds, even thousands of years, words whispered in the flickering light of the campfire. She could hardly even look at the rock now, at the broken promise of forever. Time was no longer her friend.

She heard the back door open, felt a small breeze waft through the front room, where she sat staring at ceiling fan rotate slowly. She hadn't bothered locking the doors for weeks, expecting no visitors. She didn't fear intruders in the typical sense of the word, but now she realized that even a friend could be an intruder if they managed to break into her silent remorse.

"Where are you Sara?" her sister's voice reached out to her. She'd be in the front room soon enough, so Sara didn't reply.

"There you are. And how are doing this fine afternoon?" Michele asked as she swept into the room. Moving to the drapes that occluded the picture window, she drew them aside, allowing light to flood into the room. Moving into the dining room, with a careful glance at Sara to try to discern her mood, she opened the window overlooking the backyard, allowing the breeze to strengthen. If Sara had been mindful, she'd have appreciated the fresh air replacing that which had been cooped up so long. Instead, she closed her eyes and sighed.

"At least you've been doing some cleaning, I was afraid I'd be walking into a pit of trash as well as despair." Michele continued. Spying the mail piked by the front door, she paused and thumbed through the envelopes trying to spot any that needed immediate attention.

"Why?" Sara spoke.

Michele looked up at Sara, then returned her gaze to the task at hand. "Why what? Why am I here? Why am I looking through 4 month old mail? Why am I opening up the house to fresh air for the first time in months? Why what?"

"Why are you here?" Michele had to listen closely to hear Sara's subdued voice.

"Besides being naturally concerned and curious about how you are managing without John, I do actually have an important question for you, a task that you would be perfect for, a reason for you to get back into the world of the living, so to speak. JoAnne's nanny has been in a car accident, while visiting her brother and without Jason, thank goodness, and is going to be recuperating at her Mother's house for a few months. JoAnne could really use your help caring for Jason while she's getting better. She'd really rather not have to locate another temporary person. It's so difficult finding good people these days, She'd end up spending weeks interviewing and checking on a dozen women and it's just not worth all the trouble if you would go stay with her a few months and watch her boy...." Michele realized she was overselling the idea, and her voice trailed off.

Sara was quiet. Eyes still closed, she thought about her sister's request. She didn't know JoAnne very well, her cousin on her Mother's side of the family, and couldn't remember what Jason looked like, or even how old he was. Did she owe this to her family, to step in where others didn't have the time? Did she have the energy to be chasing after a youngster? Would JoAnne expect her to merely 'babysit' or would

she be also fulfilling household chores or even tutoring? Opening her eyes, she looked over at Michele. "If I at least promise to call JoAnne, will you go home happy?"

Michele finished pulling three envelopes from the pile, set the rest down, and walked back into the front room. "Of course I will leave happy no matter what you promise, but I do think this would be a very good thing for you to do. It will help the time go by if you can focus on someone else for awhile. Aren't you tired of moping around your house every day?"

Sara sighed again, but nodded. "I promise to call her. You can go home now, you've done your good deed for the day. And leave the mail, I'll deal with it myself."

Michele paused for a moment, watching Sara for any sign of guile. "It'll do you both some good, Jason could use a bit of John's perspective on life, if you feel like imparting it to him. I know you miss John, and for good reason. But he'd rather you give of yourself rather than hang around here all day, I'm sure of that. Call her." She spun and went out the front door, leaving Sara to wonder if the back door was open or closed. It's just like Michele to open doors and leave them open, Sara thought. What door did she open today?

"Your son sure has lots of energy." The comment came from an older man, seated on a bench not far from Sara.

She flinched at the word 'son', and was quick to blurt "He's not my son, I'm just watching over him today."

"Helping a friend, or is this your livelihood?"

"Family. He's my cousin's son. It's a long story." One that Sara didn't feel like going into right now. She had already been toying with the idea of calling it an afternoon, the chill wind coming in off the lake was making the playground visit uncomfortable. She hadn't packed much in the way of cold weather clothing, she had very little of it in the first place living in San Diego, and hadn't realized when she came to Chicago that even in September it could be this cold. But now it would seem like she was ducking conversation if she left, so she decided to stick it out just a bit longer.

The man was waiting, and so she continued. "Her nanny is recovering from an accident, I'm just here to help with Jason until she can return to work." She watched as his attention shifted to a little girl, maybe 4, climbing the ladder of the slide. He started to move, as if to help her, then settled back onto the bench when it was clear she'd be sliding down before he could get halfway there.

"My granddaughter" he said, with a nod of his head in the direction of the four year old.

"It's nice that you can spend time with her. Kids these days don't get as much from TV as they can learn from an extended family, at least in the way of good thought and behavior patterns. Her parents must be happy you are helping."

He remained silent for a time, and Sara looked closely at him watching his granddaughter. His hair was thinning, and he had worry lines around his eyes, but he didn't look a day over 50 otherwise. she couldn't be sure, without staring or moving closer, but it seemed he was holding back tears.

He cleared his throat, then said, "It's been nice meeting you." Raising his voice a bit, he called, "Anna! come over here now." The four year old looked up and waved at him. she jumped down from the seat of the swing and ran towards them. Looking at Sara, he murmured, "Her parents died two weeks ago. I'm all she has now." He reached down as Anna ran up to him, and lifted her off the ground and into a bear

hug. "Come on, Sweetie, let's get home for some hot chocolate. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes, Grandpa! Can I have little marshmallows too?"

"Of course, little one. Anything for my Princess." Sara realized that not everyone had it as good as she did, despite what she was feeling after losing John. And she began to cry, not for John, but for the man who had lost his child and now had a granddaughter to care for. As the tears rolled down her face, she thought of the many other people, here in Chicago, at home in San Diego, who were faced with loss every day as she was. She felt a kinship with them, having suffered her own tragedy, that she would not have been able to see before John's death. How blind I have been to others, she thought. We all suffer the same when we lose the light of our life, be it parent, spouse or child. Yet we must soldier on, we can't just hide from the world in our misery. John and I had our wonderful times, and he lives on in my memories and my heart. But I can't forsake the world, I am still very much a part of it. And it is the love we have for others that makes life such a grand adventure.

"Come on Jason." she called to the boy as he swung on the monkey bars. "We're going home to tell Momma how much we love her."
Jason smiled and came running.

Don't Thank Me

Don't thank me for this story; thank Mom and my cousin Andy. Mom, because she taught me my letters and made sure that I had books to read when so few people my age know how. Andy, because he asked me to write our story, his last request before he died. I'd not have thought to write this without his asking.

I was born on the Spring Equinox, 2019. I always hated, as I grew up, sharing my birthday with the biggest holiday of the year. No one pays attention to me, there's too many other special activities taking place to celebrate the end of winter. Everyone else gets a day to themselves, a day of dancing and singing among the village people, but I share my special day with Mother Nature. It's not fair.

Andy is, or rather was, 2 years older than me. He was 17 when he died. We were as close as any two kids can be, brother and sister close. I will admit that the thought crossed my mind more than once that he and I would marry and have kids and live that happily-ever-after life I read about in Mom's books. Of course, it's hard to quite know how that world, now gone forever, could give me any hope of happily ever after today. But when Mom gave me my introduction to a woman's world when my periods started the summer I was 11, she repeatedly told me that cousins could never, in good conscience, have children. She didn't know all the details of why this was so, only insisting that the children would have a high risk of being defective, and no one today needs or wants that kind of extra burden, feeding another mouth that won't end up helping the family survive the winter. I was so devastated by her demand that I never tried to ask anyone else for details. I think she could tell, using her Mother's intuition, that I was already deeply, madly in love with Andy.

As we grew up, I would do my chores in the morning, Mom would teach me for an hour or so in the middle of the day, and then Andy and I would get to play for a few hours. By 4, it would be time to do evening chores and have dinner before it got dark. Many evenings would end with my Mom and Andy's Mom, Andy and I all gathered in the flickering light around the hearth while our Moms told us stories of their life before the Crash. Mom's favorite story was how a man, actually several men, *walked on the Moon*. I find that story hard to believe, although I believe that *she* believes it. I could almost recite it by heart, the way she told it, just not with the fervor and the obvious longing for those days to return that she had when she shared this fable around the fire.

My primary task, more important than all my other chores and responsibilities, is to replace the guttering candle on the Fire Altar every 6 hours, forever. It is actually Mom's task, designated during a town meeting before I was old enough to go to meetings. But she's trying to prepare me to replace her when she dies, and now she just ensures that I do the ritual. Not that she expects to die soon, but one never knows, especially these days. Mom has a photo album that she gets out on holidays, especially Winter Solstice. It has pictures of her parents and grandparents. She has no pictures of herself growing up, they were taken by digital cameras and she has no power to run the machines to be able to see them. She looks as old as people in the photos taken decades ago, in their 70s, even though she is only 47. Life is hard on us, now.

I feel the weight of the awesome responsibility of keeping the flame alive, both as a symbol of our determination to overcome the challenges of life in the 2030's and as a practical matter, since we don't have enough matches to light new fires every time

we need one. This keeps me close to home all the time, as the Fire Altar is in a closet in our house. I've done the ritual so many times now I could do it in my sleep. I probably have, once or twice.

My other chores center around water, going to the river a dozen times in the morning to fetch water in buckets and fill our tank, and helping to fill the tank of two old folks who live on the other side of Burgundy Falls every evening. Mom will ask me to do other jobs, different every day of course, but fire and water are my daily companions. The chore I hate the most is shucking corn. My hands get all cramped, tired, and cut up. My arms and back ache. And I barely have time to get my other chores done, during the harvest, and certainly no time to play with Andy. Mom says we didn't used to grow much corn here; it was too far north and too cold. But with the climate changing, and the places where corn used to grow broiling and parched, now it is our primary crop that we use for food and trade.

Andy was being trained to trade in nearby towns, loading and unloading the truck, learning what the current barter value is of every bit of food we manage to grow here (or find, like the berries ripening now), and remembering who trades without cheating us in each place our men go. He had a head for figures; it's too bad there are no more schools. He could have been a great businessman with just a little bit of math teachings. He comes back from these trips subdued, though. He talked, the few times I had been able to get him to open up about what the world is like beyond Burgundy Falls, about the struggles he saw everywhere. There are people ravaged with the skin cancers, their bodies a rash of bleeding sores in the weeks before they die. There are kids who haven't had a full meal their entire life, some with bellies swollen as if they were pregnant at the age of 5. There are bodies lying beside the road, and Andy didn't know if they died of robbery or of disease, he just steered as clear of them as he could.

It was during one of our afternoon play times that we found it. We were half playing, half scavenging, in an abandoned house down near the river. Remember, only a few houses are still occupied. Most of the people who lived in Burgundy Falls are dead or gone. Hurricane Michael destroyed New York City 6 months after I was born, its 75-foot storm surge flooding the lower floors of nearly every building. Mom doesn't know why some of the water stayed; she blames the rising sea level, but I think there must have been something else that caused it. The millions who managed to flee ahead of the 275 mph winds quickly found the relocation camps inadequate and began to disperse around the country. Mom says it was the straw that broke the camel, whatever that means. The food distribution system, dependent upon gasoline for trucks that had doubled in price every few years during the previous ten years, collapsed under the strain of feeding the American population. Roving and starving mobs, often several thousands thick, prowled the countryside like a plague of locusts. Being just 70 miles north of the city, Burgundy Falls was quickly inundated with a storm surge of people, intent on taking food from wherever they could find it. The President (it's hard for me to grasp the idea that there was a government that could actually control a population the size of America before the Crash) declared martial law and put New York and several other states under curfew, but he didn't have enough troops to enforce either decree. During the ensuing chaos, my Mother fled north into Canada with me, Andy and Andy's Mom. Many months later, after starvation and disease had decimated the U.S. population, we all returned to find that our house had burned to the ground. We took up residence in the home of a university professor, several streets over, and that was how we came to have such a fine library.

When a town goes from a population of 15,000 to fewer than 500, there are lots of homes and businesses to loot. Granted, the mobs that started the mess did a good job of taking what was immediately useful, flashlights and food, cash and gas, not to mention every drop of alcohol and every car that still ran. But what remains can still be useful, especially now that the power is gone. Mom tells me how easy life was when electricity lit our home all night long. Flick a switch, and light would erupt from the ceiling, or the machine would do the work of dozens of men. Need food? Jump in the electric car (at least my Mom had one of them, not a gas-using pollution maker) and drive to the corner store. People are pack rats by nature, Mom says, and that explains why there are items tucked in the back of drawers and on top shelf in the closet that haven't seen the light of day in decades. That's great for kids like Andy and me, we can find treasures that had their heyday decades ago, yet are once again useful and impossible to make. When he pulled open a kitchen drawer and found the hand-powered meat grinder, he let out a whoop like he'd found an unopened set of 6 Coke cans. He'd been trading long enough to know that this was *really* valuable in lone. He told me how they (the men who trade) would have to be very careful with this item, deciding who they could trust to bid on it. A meat grinder is so precious they might be robbed of it right there in the largest market in all of what used to be the state of New York. I tried to ask him why we couldn't keep it, use it ourselves, but he would have nothing of it. "We're corn farmers now," he said, as if proud of it. The fact that corn grew best in New York now that the climate has moved so far north has indeed changed the diet and the source of income for those of us who stay. "We don't eat meat, much anyway, and we can get so much more by trading it." He seemed to feel it was already settled, no matter how often I tried to reopen the debate on our way home. He had no idea what boon it would bring our little community; Mr. Hargreaves always seemed to find some precious and unexpected item to bring back from trade day. But Andy was sure of one thing, he would return with something no one else had managed to bring back. It is sad, how true this turned out to be.

Trade day was three days later, and as was the monthly routine, the men gathered our trade goods into what used to be the trailer part of a big truck. Given that it was too early for our corn harvest, it was barely a quarter filled by the time the men threw their gear into the back and shut the door. It was hitched to 4 of the town's 11 horses. They would camp along the way, taking about a day and a half to get to lone, and so there were several larger weapons packed among their gear and each of the men had a gun visible on their belt. They would trade for a day and a half and take the same time returning. Today's crop was primarily blackberries and strawberries, both having come in earlier than ever this year (our eighth winter in a row without snow), but it is still early in their season so the crop is small. I waved at Andy as the caravan (OK, one truck, 4 horses, and 8 men walking alongside hardly make up a caravan, I know) crossed the path I was taking to go to the river, not knowing this was his last trip to lone. He had a big smile as he waved back at me, hoping they'd bring something extra-special because of the grinder we'd found.

When the caravan returned, Andy was very ill. He had a fever, and periodic chills shook his body. He blew chunks anytime we tried to feed him, unable to keep anything in his stomach. He complained, when we could understand him, that his head hurt a lot. Everyone was baffled. In fact, it wasn't until a few weeks after he died that I found what I think was his illness in one of the medical books in the library at home: malaria. Most people don't believe me; they say malaria is a tropical

disease. But you know what? New York *is* tropical in so many ways today. Is it so hard to believe that malaria is now another thing we have to worry about?

There's not much else to our story, Andy and me. He was more and more incoherent those last few days, as the fever took more and more of his sanity. Everything we tried failed to stop the illness, and I could only watch as people came and went, offering advice or bringing old drugs from some medicine cabinet that no one knew anything about. We didn't give him much, just antibiotics that didn't work and fever reducing aspirin and such. Mom didn't want me near him, not knowing if what he had was contagious or not, but because he called for me, screamed for me, in one of his last lucid moments, I was allowed to hold a shirt over my mouth and enter his room. "Tell others what has happened, tell them our story", he whispered to me. "I will miss you the most of anyone, after I die." I had no reply, my eyes full of tears and voice choked to hold back my sobs, and if Mom knew I lowered the shirt and kissed his lips as he closed his eyes for the last time, she would have died of fright.

Christmas Miracle

Grace can be but a word

These last 10 years, the Christmas season has always been the worst part of the year for him.

Christmas Eve, the memories flood back; the small apartment fire that took about two hours to extinguish (no one hurt) and clean up, the standing around at 1:30 am Christmas Day talking quietly with the other firefighters, before some returned to their station and others, volunteers like him, returned to their homes and families. Reverent, thankful talk, interrupted by the Dispatcher, "Multiple calls, flames showing." Words no firefighter wants to hear.

Then the memories transform into terrible snapshots of the next 3 hours: the crowd of neighbors on the other side of the street as he approached the home, the terrible chaos of the initial fire attack (evidenced by the hose he held that burst in his hands), the bodies being dragged out through the patio door by the men on the interior attack line (the initial search team having been unable to penetrate the hall where Dad collapsed trying to reach his son), the 3 firemen clustered around the youngest daughter just feet from the bedroom where she and her sister inhaled too much smoke, the frantic CPR restarting her breath just long enough to get her halfway to the Emergency Room.

And crowning them all, Mother on the sidewalk, her youngest son, and now her only child, at her side, both staring into the smoke as their home cooled and became a shell that would forever only remind them of the Christmas that ruined their life. If he hadn't lived that scene himself, losing his son in a fire nearly 19 years earlier, he might be forgiven for not empathizing with her. But he knew only too well what emotions tore at her heart as she watched the firefighters douse the last glowing embers.

This Christmas Eve we find him wandering the streets of his neighborhood. Haunted by memories of fire, the heat burning his son in one and his desire to help others in another, he feels the cool winter air as a balm on his soul. The damp evening does nothing, however, to heal his heart. Memories and images fight for his attention, crowding out what his eyes would otherwise see: people cheerfully calling holiday greetings to one another as they pass on the sidewalk, twinkling red and green and white lights in many windows and hanging from eaves, the spirits of peace, love and goodwill towards Men that fill the night.

He slowly becomes aware of his surroundings when someone leaving the local all-night café brushes quickly past him. He sees a nearly empty parking lot, and a shopping cart full of bags stuffed with clothing and empty cans and bottles parked just outside the café's door. Without thinking, he is drawn inside by a magical warmth he feels, a result of the blinking lights, the decorated windows and his heart's own, subconscious urging.

Inside, it appears that he is the only customer. One table has not yet been bussed; just a coffee cup, spoon and some sugar packets clutter it. He takes a seat next to it, only because it is as far from the door as he can be. The last thing he wants tonight, of all nights, is company. He sits for a few minutes; no one approaches to take his order. Not even sure he wants anything, he gazes around the café but hardly

registers what he sees. He does note the time: 10 minutes till midnight. The worst is about to begin. The memories take over once again, and he is lost in his mind's eye.

The lady who emerges from the restroom at midnight moves slowly, as if her joints are frozen with the pain of arthritis. She doesn't look old enough for that, maybe she's just unused to moving inside this body, and is just proceeding very carefully. Her clothes, while they fit her well, have seen better days. The colors are faded to pastel shades, and a small hole has worn into one elbow of her shirt. Her skirt is wrinkled, as if she has recently slept in it. She is of average height and weight, and actually kind of pretty. Carrying a jacket but no purse, she takes her seat at the table next to his, and as if by magic, a server appears with a fresh pot of coffee to refill her cup.

"Sorry, I didn't see you come in. What can I get for you tonight?" the server speaks to him, as she takes a menu from the nearby counter then lays it on his table. He doesn't even glance at it.

Looking up at her, he says quietly, "Hot chocolate". He glances to his right and takes a long look at the lady stirring sugar into her fresh coffee. Deciding she is the person who 'owns' the shopping cart outside, he lowers his gaze and returns to his memories.

They sit this way for a long time, she stirring and sipping, and he ignoring anything happening around him. Poised on the razor's edge of grief, his heart swells with pain and sorrow, threatening to shatter, leaving grief oozing from the cracks. It is all he can do to contain the sobs that yearn to break free.

Finally, she leans towards him, and in a stage whisper, asks slowly, "Who... are... you?"

He remains silent. He heard her, and knows she is addressing him, but he is unsure he wants to begin this conversation. Is she crazy? Will the next words from her mouth be a request for money? Will she be all cheerful and full of holiday spirit, despite spending the holiday alone in a café with only someone like him for entertainment? A minute passes, as he ponders his commitment to civility, or rather his ability to be rude.

"Who... are... you?" she asks again, in an identical manner, showing no impatience or sense that she is bothered by his silence. Finally, he decides to meet her halfway.

"I am Derek. Nice to meet you, and you are...?"

"You may call me Angel. But that's not what I asked. I asked, 'who are you?'"

He thought about this question, not sure what she was asking, really. "I help people prepare their tax returns during the first part of each year, and do other odd jobs after that" he said.

"That's a role you play. I asked, 'who are you?'. Who is this soul you say is called *Derek*?"

He is stumped, unsure what answer she wants. "Well, I love to teach, and I try to help others when I can..." his voice trails off, waiting to see if this is the kind of answer she is looking for.

He notices that she is looking directly into his eyes. He decides to hold her gaze, not as a contest of wills, but as an act of openness and, dare he say, love for another human being?

"That's different, but still these are only stories about your past that you are offering about how you got to this moment in time. Apparently, you value teaching, and you value helping others, and so you build a tale that explains how you are meeting

these values and therefore, are worthwhile. Where would you be without your stories?" Angel's voice is soft, and somewhat high-pitched.

"What I am is demonstrated by what I do. I try to act in accordance with what I believe is right, to walk my talk, so to speak. Yes, I value teaching and helping others, though tonight of all nights, I am less inclined to do so."

"But what does it say about you when you don't walk your talk? When you let a teachable moment get by? When you don't help others, *especially* on Christmas Day?"

How did we get into this, he thinks. I already feel the pain of my inadequacy 10 years ago this very moment, why does she have to drag me through this deep dark place in my heart, as if I wasn't already doing it myself? "It says I'm only human, and make mistakes like everyone does."

"Is that true?"

"Of course it's true! Are you saying you never make mistakes?"

"To judge something as a 'mistake', you first have to believe that God, who gives you everything you experience, everything you possess, and everything you need, is capable of making a mistake by giving you something that is wrong. Do you believe that God can be wrong?"

"I don't believe in God, certainly not as you are presenting him." And why am I participating in this conversation, he wonders. "A God that allows children to die from disease or in accidents and fires, that allows suffering and death sometimes even in His name, is not a God that I can put any faith in. And I don't believe in predestination. I have free will, I am not just following God's script for me."

She breaks their gaze, and sits back in her seat. "So let me reflect back what I hear you saying: you are the result of biology, the coming together of various elements and compounds, and things happen to you by your own design, by accident or by chance. You tell yourself you are a decent human being because you try to do good, and those times, often as they are, when you fail it's because of something outside yourself that you have no control over, that gets in your way. And if you are only allowed the time to manufacture and distribute a story that adequately explains your failure to meet your standards of behavior, than everyone should love you. What does your *heart* say about this perspective on life?"

He thought about this for many seconds. He looked absently at his cup of hot chocolate, not realizing that he was so engrossed in the conversation that he had missed the server bringing it to his table. "My heart says..." he paused several seconds, wondering what his heart *actually was* saying, "... it says that even events that seem 'bad' at the time, usually turn out to be the best things that could happen to me, that everything happens for a reason." For the first time, he began to acknowledge that everything he had done following the death of his son was driven by that experience, that sense of loss, that pain that he was trying to overcome. It had guided him to do things he would not have believed possible as he was growing up. It had also showed him the depths to which he loved others; it had taught him about unconditional love, and it had made him aware of the proximity of death in every moment.

Angel turned to face him again. "At every step along your path, you have a choice as to how you will react, how you will perceive what is happening. As you make each choice, you define what will happen next. Destiny is not a predetermined goal, set in stone; you are creating your destiny as you go, step following step. But *you*, you are mistaking the pain of loss with the suffering that arises *from attaching to* that loss. You are forgetting all the nicer feelings of love and connection, in favor of the

feelings that cause you to remember pain; to feel separation and inadequacy and fault and most of all, to feel that love comes from outside of you, that you can find it only when someone gives it to you. Is it true, 100% true, that love comes from outside you?" She once again held his gaze in hers.

Even as he found himself *thinking* about the answer to that question, he stopped himself and looked inside, asking instead what his heart *felt* about it. He was surprised by what he felt: that he already had love deep inside himself, love for himself, for others, for the entire Universe. Of course, love had to begin inside of him first. If he were unable to find love inside, he'd be unable to recognize it outside. He'd always tell himself, 'they don't love me; they only love my story or the role I'm playing for them. If they knew the truth, they wouldn't love me.'

Angel smiled, as if she were able to read what he was thinking and feeling. "Our stories and roles just shelter us from doing the hard work of evolving our consciousness. They give us the excuses we need to avoid facing the ultimate truth: that *we are* the world, that there's only ever one of us in the room. We live within the dream we make up, and we may even believe that the dream is what is real. We think we can create better results in our dream, by changing what we think about or by using affirmations to reinforce what we decide are *positive* thoughts. We squelch any thoughts we deem to be *negative*, and when we fail to give them a voice as they arise, they pop up later when we least expect them and ruin our day, or lead us to act out and hurt the very people we cherish most."

She paused, and he felt within his heart the truth in what she was saying. His mind, though, was having nothing of it. He had spent more than 50 years of his life allowing his mind to dominate his heart, to make up the stories that kept him going, kept him feeling that if only he could find a way to get a little more money, a little more time, just one great idea, or a little more love from some special soulmate, then everything would work out and he would live happily ever after. But he found himself coming back to what his heart was telling him, what he was feeling, and finally let that override his mind. And what he felt in this moment was the ultimate depth of his being, that space where we are all connected, you and I, Derek and Angel and the server here in the café; all part of the One, the energy that permeates consciousness.

She continued, "We have to do this work of growing our consciousness, of moving beyond using our stories to create our solutions, of becoming the love that is already inside of us so that the world can reflect it back, in order to raise our consciousness to see beyond the problems we have built into this dream. *We have to do it for everyone else*, not just for ourselves. We have to see that our work is important for all, not just for our little self; otherwise we won't find the motivation to do the really hard and painful work of change. When we stay stuck in the dream, stuck in our stories and roles, we can't see a new way of being, a new way of feeling, a new way of loving that includes all, just as it should be. Now tell me, at your deepest level of consciousness, who... are... you?"

He didn't have words to describe the feeling of love that bubbled up from the depths of his heart. He guessed that it must have been apparent upon his face, for Angel broke into a smile and nodded her head. "There you are!" was all she said.

She got up from the table and moved towards the door. As he watched her walk away, he had a thought: he had heard that some people go through life questioning everyone they meet, "Are you Jesus?" He wondered if 'Angel' was really Jesus in disguise.

Angel turned and waved at him, then continued out of the café. Could she read his mind?