

Best, Bad and Worst

Carl Gunderson worked his whole life to get out of the country that his parents said had been the worst in modern history and, after learning its lesson, the best. Germany had reinvented itself by the time the Beatles came into power and influence and kept moving forward and upward, according to the standards most wealthy countries used as metrics. It was now an eco friendly country, but too many people had populated it over the centuries, and the forests were...gardens. Each tree, even in the 'wild forests', were planted in symmetrical rows. Riding horses was still going on but each riding stable, and horse owner, insisted on the symbol of freedom to operate him or herself with order. Planned steps. Manicured pastures. Sterile stalls. Indeed, the only chaotic thing that came from horses were the turds from the back end, and even they were being filtered through diapers in the most advanced facilities as well as the lower income operations who wanted to stay legal. Going shopping for anything, even composted horse manure, for women, and men, required clean wardrobe, proper shoes and no stitch of clothing which had a stain or rip in it.

And as for the sense of smell, it was forbidden to sweat at the workplace not so much because it showed you knew how to work hard but not smart, but because it reminded others about the barbarity that the country and culture had been during the middle of the 20th century. Animals were valued more for their ability to obey their human masters than their urges to be independent and playful spirits. Laughter was something experienced between the cheeks of closed mouths rather than bellowed out into the stratosphere since, according to some, it, like methane from expressive cows, it would destroy the ozone layer.

It took a lot of courage, and applied research, for Carl to find a place to immigrate to. The middle aged, still muscular but slightly overweight and noticeably balding ace car mechanic who somehow kept up with the technology required to keep cars that had oil-covered engines under the hood as well as no-stick surface computers wanted to be free of the combustion engines, and the hybrid electric vehicles about to replace them. His first wife made him go to trade school to feed her need for new clothes every holiday so as to impress friends, neighbors and relatives. His second wife informed him after they tied the knot that he could never 'do coffee' with any human bearing a vagina. His third almost wife insisted on Carl making peace with his first two 'soul mates' before things could progress further under the sheets or in the back seat of cars he repaired and took out for test drives in the country.

Seeing as Germany and all of its neighbors had a lot of people and a little bit of land, Carl dismissed trying to re-establish himself in any country in the EU, despite the fact that there were no international restrictions inflicted on him for employment. Siberia came to mind, a place where there were still more Natives than White Colonists, but the Russian alphabet baffled Carl. And there was that small matter of the Russian government still having a dictatorial Czar in charge of everything, that everything very much including Siberia. The US, a country that didn't have the compassion or common sense to have Socialized medicine which also had a habit of electing the oldest, most demented and 'entertaining from a distance' individuals as President, scared him away from going there. South America was too hot. Australia too far away from anything. Such left, by a process of elimination, Canada, which, in some of the ways that mattered anyway, was still not the 51st American state.

There was one thing about being a mechanic. Cars always break down. And, as long as it is kept between you and the client, no certificates are required to be of service to needing to be motorized, mostly law abiding citizens. Such allowed Carl to go anywhere in Canada.

Interior British Columbia seemed to be the right choice. It was loaded with forests in which trees grew wherever the seeds fell into the ground, their extending branches following the sun, the roots maneuvering their way into the soil towards water. No straight lines or 90 degree angles for anything in such woods. As for the right town nestled in between and sustained by the woodlands, one name popped up. Frieheit. 'Freedom' in Carl's native language.

There were no obstacles, roadblocks or legal mumbo jumbo requirements encountered by Carl when buying property with livable dwelling in Frieheit, British Columbia. Nothing he had ever done was so easy, in contrast to his continued efforts to maintain a domicile in his home country. Even the airline tickets to head westward and northward were purchased at rock bottom prices. As for a job, each one of his inquiries to auto repair shops in Frieheit and every Hamlet within 20 miles of this dream town for the wild and spontaneous said they would welcome him as an employee, some of them stating that they were looking for someone who could be a new boss. Half of the invites were in translated into German, and some even had writing that was grammatically correct. As for horses to be owned by once he arrived, the owner of the feed store said there was no shortage of Frieheiters who could provide Carl a horse, or two, or three. An hour after talking to the feed store owner, during which Carl mentioned that he played the violin and was working on mastering three other instruments which would 'transform sound waves into oceans of musical oceans' with the unwanted help of rigidly trained European musicians and the invaluable inspiration from innovation obsessed ghosts of Beethoven, Bach and Bartok, he got an invitation to join three bands upon his arrival, in genres of music he never heard of.

The road to Freiheit was a journey through time, with many voices talking to Carl. The mountains sang a fugue in four parts. Each tree added harmony to the symphony blasting through his head. The fog clung to the hills, descending into the valley with a slow intension. Animals wild and domesticated grazed on the grasses. There was one thing that Carl didn't see---straight lines and 90 degree angles. Not in the tree branches. Not in the meandering course of the trickles that sought to become streams. Not in the paths hammered into the ground by cattle and horses.

Such changed when he passed a sign reading 'Entering Freiheit'. Clean, sterile and pristine characterized all of the buildings. Like they were blown up from a three D Norman Rockwell painting. The citizens on their way from point A to B on the streets wore clothing that didn't have a spot of dirt on them, nor any wet spots, despite the fact that rain was pouring down on them. Footwear was all...white. Clean white runners. Carl felt like he was catapulted back to the other side of the pond. "But," he pondered, "the lot I bought is up there!" he told himself as he looked up at the mountain, seeing a small clearing midway up the slope. A slope that seemed so easy to climb up yet, as he knew, was such only if you had wings rather than legs.

The road up to the acreage Carl purchased was in far better shape than he thought. Smooth concrete with ruffles in the middle and on the shoulder to warn anyone about to crash into an incoming car or take a leap off the cliff. But...somehow there was something else about this winding road. It did not wind. Straight lines, stop signs, then choices at the forks which were separated by 45 degrees. After taking the right forks, so he thought, Carl came to his new homestead. As promised, wild grass sprung up from the ground to greet him. Within their wild embrace, lay a cabin which looked like it was built in the last century by a woodsman, or woman, in an age before house building methods were designed to employ renovations every decade. And....fences made of wood and barbed wire dividing the property into areas big enough for horses to run around to small, cozy huts to house mother rabbits who derived their passions from staying in one protected place for their offspring.

And...goats. Carl always considered them one of the most practical and smart animals created by Mother Nature, Natural Selection and/or the Heavenly Father...or Mother. Four legged creatures who can eat anything and turn it into flesh, bones and building blocks for ocular tissue that looks at and into you. And horses of course. Who would take him into the woods around the property on trails already made and those he would create of course, transporting him to days of yore, though the exact year of 'yore' would be felt once he got there.

Before unpacking his three suitcases of worldly belongings, including no more than three changes of pants, five shirts, a coat for cool spring, ten books he hadn't read yet and a lap top computer for him to write ten times as many of his own, the newly arrived German pilgrim-immigrant went down the hill to the feed store in town.

There, he encountered Mitchell, according to his name tag anyway, behind the counter. The forty-something, ballpark hatted, chiselled chinned model of country born good health's job descriptor under his name said 'Manager and Owner'. Why he needed to identify himself as a common 'associate' without a surname, that would be another matter to deal with. Or maybe it would be the lead in Carl's first book. But, first things first.

"I spoke with you over the phone, Mitchell," Carl said, initiating the conversation over the counter of the feed and building supply store. "About buying horses. Which you said were plentiful here."

"Indeed yes," Mitchell said with a smile frozen onto his clean shaven face. "In a variety of colors."

"And breeds?" Carl asked. "I'd like to have three of them. So when I ride, the two left behind can keep each other company. I was thinking, bomb proof quarterhorses, or Morgans. Or, if they are around, Arabs, as they have the most endurance and only reach an agreement with riders who think and ask them to do things rather than command them to. But then again, Appaloosas are..."

"...Colors are more important than breeds, and it is wise of you to buy three of course," Mitchell politely interjected without any change in facial expression. "But, as you know, or should know anyway, they must be color coordinated. As predetermined by this," he continued, taking out from behind the counter a color wheel. "The color of each horse should be 120 degrees apart from the others, though the ordinance dictating such does allow for 5 degree variations. Otherwise, it would be jarring for the senses, which would be a visual and legally prosecutable offense of a significant nature."

"Ok," Carl said as he looked up at the walls, other counters and shelves, noting hue 'symmetry'. "And I'd like to get some goats as well. Five of them. To eat up the weeds on my property."

“The Jackson property?” Mitchell replied. “Which does require much work. Particularly on the foliage.”

“Which will be eaten up by the horses and goats,” Carl said. “I hate having good grass go to waste. Grass that.---”

“---you will have to trim to three inches plus or minus one centemeter in height,” Mitchell’s next interjection, still retaining his all is great and wonderful country smile. “Like everyone else does here.”

“Another ordinance?” Carl inquired.

“Hmm...”, Mitchell said, putting his hand under his chin in a professorial manner, then, finally looking up again. “Social suggestion, and requirement for optimal hospitality at the grocery store, gas station and auto repair shops.”

“The repair shops that all said they’d welcome me as an advisor, boss or most trusted associate,” Carl thought but didn’t give voice to. “Are there any repair shops you’d recommend, ones that charge fair prices for good service?” he gave voice to.

“No car or truck coming out of any of the five repair shops here leaves the garage without a simonized shine!” Mitchell boasted.

“And the engines under that shine?” Carl inquired.

“Minor details,” Mitchell said. “Better to look good than to feel good, right?” he continued imitating an old Saturday Night Live act out of Fernando Lamas done by Billy Crystal that was still stuck in Carl’s consciousness.

“Eh...yeah,” Carl said. “But for now, who can I buy some horses and goats from? Maybe some rabbits?”

Mitchell pulled out a stack of preprinted names and phone numbers from behind the counter, the heading reading ‘Frieheit Purchasing Guide’. Within the list of wares available were those who had horses, goats and rabbits for sale. But what caught Carl’s eye were the listings for those selling musical instruments. Such would lead him to people who made music who were not necessarily musicians.

With that, Carl headed to the musical instrument store that was in the boldest print. The inheritance money he had obtained from his prematurely departed sister in the car accident in Bonn would be well spent in this establishment. With those tools, Carl would compose and record a requiem to her that would immortalize her vibrant and humor infused spirit. On a continent and in a wilderness province she aspired to move to, but never got around to doing. While getting out of the car, Carl did a checklist in his always calculating head of what guitars, keyboards, and violins he would need, along with the right sound deck to record what he, or others, would do on them. But upon entering the shop, one instrument dominated, occupying all of the shelves.

“Drums?” Carl self observed himself saying. “Just...drums?” he muttered loud enough for the store owner to hear him.

“The most ancient of instruments,” Brenda Porter, a 60 year old hippie in a long ‘Melanie’ dress with the utmost reverence related in a droning monotone voice. Above her were awards from various Frieheit merchants and eateries designating her as the most innovative experimental musician in town. “Which we play like this,” she continued, grabbing hold of one of the drums, beating it in a steady cadence without any change in volume, intensity or intension. It reminded Carl about the ‘M’ thing he hated most in Europe. The Metronome, which confined you to ‘color only within the lines’ with your fingers while your soul wanted to give full expression to a song with varying beats and rhythms. “Four four time, the best time,” she said without any expression except passivity in her Zombified face. “The only time. The time that is eternal. What we all do and honor here.”

With eyes closed, Brenda then burst into what sounded like a First Nations chant with musical notes that were enwrapped in one minor ‘melody’. The kind that never, never, ends and sticks in your head like an annoying commercial jingle.

Taking advantage of the presumably most experimental musician in Freiheit not noticing him, Carl quietly left the establishment. His next stop---places of employment, or competition. The auto repair shops. Freiheit Auto as the one where the person he called said that was 'looking for a Comrade who could teach all of us to be better than we could be by ourselves.' Carl, being a Socialist of course, connected to the C word in that conversation most of all. And helping the underdog rather than feeding more meat to the top dog anywhere was Carl's Passion, and albatross.

Upon entering the client room, Carl noted that everyone was working. Three bays were operative, all of the workers moving at four four time in the same rhythm. But at a sloooowww rhythm, doing the same thing. Changing oil. Then after each car was finished, bringing it down to the ground and driving it with 'sick' noises under the hood to the parking lot outside. Or pushing it out of the garage to customers who seemed satisfied with the services rendered. All happening under a sign reading 'The Best Oil Change Anywhere.'

Carl took out the deed he had signed for his property to see if he was in the right town, right country or right universe. Yes, he could make an improvement in this town. Open up his own repair shop, adopt whatever horses needed homes most, despite their color. Use goats to clear out the wild brush that covered the 100 acre old homestead which looked and felt like no other dwelling in 'Frieiheit'. A town that advertised itself as 'Freedom' in his Native language, but was anything but that in reality.

There was still time to not solidify the deal. To look for another town that was not like his own back in the old country. Or to go back to the old country and convert it into something....new. Or....to transform Freiheit, British Columbia into a community worthy of its name.

Yes, a primal decision that would cost him big time no matter what he did. He would decide what to do when he got back 'home'. The new one that he had paid for but could sell if he needed to. As for the latter, he made a stop at a realtor's office, asking if anyone wanted to buy him out, so he could go somewhere else. The answer he got---there would be no buyers for the property. "Not in this century," Katey Wilson, a sincere enough realtor with a beautiful thin face but an oversized body with no doubt many fat folds under it told him. "But, we grow the best mellowing herbs in British Columbia," she said, offering him one of the triple fudge brownies which highlighted one of the 5 side dishes on her desk for lunch. "Lets you live in your own universe, one of your own choice," she went on with an asymmetric passively

delivered smile. “Unless of course that violates the laws of the universe we all share.” Anticipating Carl’s plans of building more structures on his property, she handed him what seemed to be a phone book. Each page contained building code laws and ordinances in small print in language that was more legaleze than mechanical.

“And if I want the money back that I paid for all of this?” Carl asked the realtor whose voice seemed to belong to someone other than who he was staring at.

“Easily refunded, with some depreciation costs,” she said, after which she opened a draw. She retrieved two coins, placing them in front of him. “I can add another lunie to these if you want. As long as, of course you don’t tell anyone else in town. I don’t want to make it seem like I’m giving you preferential treatment. That’s reserved, of course, for long term residents of Frieheit.”

“Those you have been here for five years?” Carl proposed.

“Born, or even better, conceived here,” Katey replied with a welcoming country smile. “Unless you have a specialty our community needs.”

“To be able to keep people entertained or with supplied with technical services they absolutely need,” he thought, but didn’t give voice to. Particularly because it was true. He thought about how to inform Katey that he was probably the only new citizen in this burg who could do more than one thing with above average abilities. But before he could baffle, impress or explain to her his advanced, common sense and cheaply available skills as a car, truck and tractor repair Mench, she let out a blood curdling scream, presumably at something on the floor.

Upon glancing at what had turned a contented, secure mature woman into a terrified little girl, Carl noted a familiar creature he never thought he would encounter here. It was a roach, which reared up at Katey, forcing her away from her five course ‘dessert’. It then turned to Carl, seeming to look at him.

“So, what human body did you just occupy before you got turned into a roach?” he inquired of the insect in German, recalling Metamorphosis, the short story by Kafka about a man who

wakes up one day discovering that he spouted six legs and an exoskeleton with compound eyes. Carl wondered if in his imagination, or nightmares, the same would happen to him. But, that was for another day. Surviving in the current universe he had bought himself into was now a top priority. But living there....yes, this was something he had not given up on.

One thing about a 'living' is earning such. No doubt, Carl would need some extra cash to pay the various fines he would accumulate for not keeping the wild grasses cut to required length, acquiring horses whose torsos were not color coordinated or not hanging his family pictures on the walls at a perfect 90 degree angle from the posts holding those walls up. Then there was the building according to sound physics of engineering rather than civic code of a barn for his animals and a shop to repair miscellaneous machinery from clients that were not yet ready to be retired to the scrapyard. AND, of course, to keep wifi and computers intact so he could send writings and music out to a world that needed it (though the real appreciation of such would come from those not born yet), he needed to get some paying work established in town.

This created problems, if he was to use his skills as a car, truck and tractor mechanic. Working for already established shops created problems. It wasn't that he lacked the skill to change oil, install transmissions and do tune ups. Indeed, Carl was equal to or better than anyone in town at all of those tasks. And that was the problem. He was too good at too much, something that scared owners and employees of the various specialty shops who all had their own special skills, along with no other skills. Clients didn't trust a man who advertised himself as a 'Renaissance Mench'. Especially one who claimed he could do everything required to keep an internal combustion beast going. Still, he did what he could as a mechanic, mostly for tourists who came through Freiheit. And when he did perform a miracle repair for the few residents who did come to him, for reduced pay, the customers claimed that it was Satanic Magic.

Others, most notably the Cops or those whose relatives wore other badge, asserted that Carl secretly was a human trafficker, hiding in the woods illegal immigrants who were specially trained in one area of car mechanics since, after all, NO one can be really good at more than one specific task in life. And, as Carl found out, particularly when he looked at the help wanted ads sent out by the local residents, a pre-requisite for being able to be hired in or move to Freiheit was to have ONE and ONLY one special skill which the town said it needed.

There was only one other Renaissance person in town, a woman who Carl visited when he came down with a fever, debilitating nausea and chest pains that felt like they could be preludes to a heart attack, along with excessive urination and blurry vision. Having no relatives he knew of who lived past the age he already was other than his biologically 'different' grandfather, Carl

needed to know what was off below the neck. When preparing his list of symptoms he recalled previous visits to the clinic in Frieheit where it was stated in clear bold print---'Patients are only permitted to report three symptoms, related to one disease. Violation of such will result in fines, refusal of service and/or imprisonment'.

"Imprisonment in a nuthouse for the sane, functional and respectfully assertive?" Carl asked the new thirty-something physician who finally came into the exam room regarding the sign above. "Problems with cars and people come from one place and spread to the other places, creating other problems."

"And treating the secondary problems with as much rigor as the primary one is the kind of medicine I do," the very long and shabbily haired doc said , her white lab coat with spaghetti sauce and/or blood stains on it, accompanied by mismatched by weather worn jeans and color clashing cowboy boots worn down on places only a real horse. She turned around to the sign restricting conversations about ONE body part only, attaching to it 'patients are required to relate ALL of their problems and concerns'. "My rules while I'm in this room, and while I'm still on the town's payroll," Elena Petrovitch, whose name tag designated her as an MD, Ph.D. and H.B.A.R.P. said. "So, Mister Gunderson. How can I help you?" she asked, with an openness to anything Carl wanted or needed to bring up.

"The H.B.A.R.P., Doctor Petrovitch?" he asked, suspicious of someone who had more letters in their affiliations than their surname. "What does that stand for?"

"Human being, aspiring Renaissance person," proudly replied the spitting image of Kathy Williams, the 19 year old soul mate who Carl met when he was that age who he did not fully appreciate as such at the time. The one that got away. Or he let go. And didn't have the courage or wisdom to try to keep up with as she became enlightened, somewhere else. "And you are, so I heard, one of a kind, and therefore an endangered species. Here, anyway."

"Yeah," Carl related and confessed. "Each one of my, thankfully for me and them, EX wives said that there was only one Carl Gunderson. Thankfully, anyway, since if there were any more of them, they'd kill each other.," he mused.

Elena's tired, cracked lips broke into a smile, then a chuckle that Carl felt was real. "I've got the same...hmm...situation," she replied. "Landing here in a town where there is an ongoing epidemic of, hmmm---"

"Narrow minded, OCD obsession with being unable to do more than one thing well?" Carl interjected, respectfully. "And being ignorant to the fact that everything is connected to everything else?"

"Specialization," Elena replied. "Which if you don't honor, respect and value above all things, lands you in a place where you are..." She averted her eyes, staring at multiple memories behind her bloodshot ocular portholes, which she apparently didn't want to burden anyone else with "A place where you are...alone."

"But needed," Carl said, feeling the urgency of Life pushing that thought into consciousness and speech. "I've heard that the universe wants to heal itself. And it sends those who are most needed to places where there is most...need. Like this place of...specialization."

"Yeah," replied the overworked, most probably underappreciated and certainly underpaid Doctor who dared to treat the whole person, body mind and spirit, and not just one organ in their body at a time. "Specialization, which---"

"---Is a curable disease, Doctor Petrovitch!" Carl declared, another idea sending a lightening bolt up and down his spine, in a body that, somehow felt 20 years younger and a lifetime healthier.

"It's Elena," she said. "And what do you have in mind? An essential oil you mix in with the carbtorator that enlightens every dull out disease infected driver who turns on the engine, Mister Gunderson?"

"It's Carl," he replied, completely forgetting about the now completely disappeared symptoms that brought him in for medical help. "And I'm thinking and feeling that we could, and should do what my grandfather did for, and to, me when I was an underdeveloped, and elderly soul as a kid."

“Which is, what?” Elena inquired, both angered at and empathetic of the townspeople she was forced by her own circumstances to take care of. “How can any mortal push or pull smiley, mindlessly happy Zombies out of their narrow, self-contained comfort zone?”

“By using the carrot and the stick,” Carl shot back, confidently.

The ad put in the Frieheit Forum newsletter read. “Free trip to anywhere for becoming good at what you are worst at.” Where that ‘anywhere was’ ...would be decided later by undisclosed parties. Since Elena had obtained a free round trip transferable ticket to Australia ‘or any other destination at its distance’ after being roped into being a contestant on a television game show in Vancouver rewarding people for knowing trivial facts that had no relation to useful wisdom, it was a valid reward for the contest Carl would set up in Freiheit. But, who would enter such a contest?

The ‘why’ of it was what Elena was most concerned with. “Because my grandfather said you learn how to learn more effectively if what you take on is hardest to learn,” Carl replied while sharing with her ‘the best donuts in town’ at the shop that produced only one variety of said pastry, as they viewed the citizens of Frieheit talk amongst themselves in front of the coffee shop across the street that served only coffee. “And it teaches you humility, of which I am most proud,” he continued. “But, how sure are you that the contestants in this experiment of ours---”

“----Experiment of YOURS,” Elena interjected.

“OK, experiment of MINE, and yours if it works,” Carl conceded. “How do we know that people won’t take on learning something they already know how to do?”

“Everyone in this town knows everyone else’s strength and weakness,” her reply. “And they are very competitive with each other. Winning the game is more important to them than the prize they get at the winner’s circle. And, yes, it is important for anyone to try to learn how to do

something they are least talented for, because it does develop something this town of specialists forgot or never knew about.... Humility. But in the meantime, what will happen in this town if everyone stops doing what they are best at?"

"Someone else will take their place, probably," Carl assured Elena. "Like it was when my grandfather did this experiment in my family, then my village after the first World War.

"Possibly," Elena asserted. "And this is Canada, not Germany. And, well, the second world war happened after the first one. "

"True enough," Carl said.

"But before we go through this, what are YOU worst at?" the young doctor pressed at the prematurely aging older mechanic.

"Doing right by those who love and understand me," he confessed and related.

The citizenry, then the town council of Frieheit took the wager very seriously. All citizens needed ten signatures verifying what one was worst at in order to enter the contest. And those as well as ten other signatures were required to verify that the person taking on doing what they were worst at became best at the task. Best relative to the already established specialist in Frieheit, that is. And, to avoid paying a very high fine, participation of every human life form in the town between the ages of 18 and 90 was mandated, by law. Requesting aid in becoming good at what you were bad at from others was not only allowed, but encouraged.

Services in Frieheit for the next week were...less than optimal. From everyone. Including Carl and Elena, instigators and observers of the experiment who had no choice but to become guinea pigs in their own clinical trial. If they didn't, their role in initiating the experiment would no doubt be found out, with severe consequences for them being able to live in Frieheit, or for that matter, anywhere else in Canada.

Carl's major socially recognized inability, despite his prowess at playing no less than 9 musical instruments, was singing. His lyrical auscultations of songs that, according to what was played on the local radio station, everyone loved, made the listener detest those melodies. His horses, goats and even stone deaf rabbits hid whenever he came out of the cabin to feed them. Mrs. Klinger, the town's elderly music teacher, took on trying to convince Carl that what he thought was a note in C was actually no note at all, at least in the musical scale represented by the black and white keys on the piano.

For Elena, though she was a master biochemist, able to concoct drugs and herbal remedies to cure the most horrible of biological diseases, her skills in the kitchen were less than optimal. This was despite having a Ukrainian mother and Russian grandmother who could convert weeds, rancid vegetables and meat of questionable origin into delicacies that would please all palates. The doctor who ate nothing but take out or food prewrapped in plastic did her best to learn from the owners of the six well attended restaurants in town how to boil rather than fry water. But it was indeed a slow learning curve with Elena being assigned to be in charge of feeding anyone who chose to eat out. A large share of what she cooked went to the dogs, an even bigger portion to the landfill where, it was said anyway, that the crows and racoons came down with dysentery.

Mitchell, the feed and building supply store owner who could keep ten economic spread sheets and five employee work schedules in his head, was forced by his wife, kids and employees (who he considered more his family than the one he legally had) to take on actually building something. Though his father was a master carpenter, Mitchell's main accomplishments when he took Shop Class in High School was an ash tray that couldn't hold more than three flicks of a cigarette on the bottom of it and a water pitcher that worked only if you filled and emptied it at a 37 degree angle to the axis of the glass. His mechanical drawing skills weren't much better. But, so he claimed, he could see the storage hut in back yard in his head. Yet each time he put wood, nails and metal rods together into a structure that was upright, the slightest bit of wind would blow it onto his head. Still, he was determined to figure out the laws of physics, or defy them and create his own.

Drumming specialist-virtuoso 'Musical Melanie' was assigned by all of her music students the job of learning to speak another language. . She grew up in the US , and as such had a brain which was toxified sufficiently by fast food for the belly and videos that always had English subtitles on them. Melanie, like most of her American friends back home, provided proof that 'what do you call someone who speaks two language,---bilingual, and what do you call someone who can barely speak one---an American' was a statement of fact more than witty fiction. She chose to learn German, claiming that such would finally enable her to understand the writings

of the great masters of classical music and Kafka, her favorite author when she sought to become more 'artistically depressed' so she could compose introspective percussion quartets. She chose that language because Carl was the only German speaker in Freihdiedt, ironically, a town which had a German name. She offered to pay Carl to fake conversations of jibberish from her mouth with German from his to trick the populus into thinking she became bilingual . Though Carl really did need the money, he needed enrichment of the soul even more so he took her on. It was a painful experience, mostly for the teacher, as each time Carl would say and write something in German, asking Melanie repeat it, the oral response was unrecognizable in ANY dialect. Still, she persisted. As did Carl.

Katey Wilson, the town realtor, had a visual memory so keen that once she laid eyes on a property, she could recall every bush by biological name, every building by its dimensions and every dropping of dog shit on the lawn by smell and size. She also could recall every offer from a buyer and bid from a seller down to the dollar amount, having an instinct to know what the middle ground would be so that all parties were economically satisfied, with of course a healthy commission for herself built into it. The photos of her on the for sale signs were always head shots, as any image below the neck said 'woman with a big weight problem that made her look fat rather than full figured'. Elena had recommended exercise as a solution to that problem, but every time Katey took to a bicycle, treadmill or, most notably, free form dancercise session, she fell. And it was unintentional. It was Elena's task to teach her how to not only walk and bike, but to dance. In a way that was in tune with the music and which didn't involve her falling on the floor or causing damage to her partner. It was an inability that was biologically as well as psychologically needed.

As for inabilities, or what one was worst at, there were at least two theories about its origins. Carl's was that in a past lifetime, you were really good at something. But because you abused or underused that talent, and ability, in the current lifetime you sucked at it. Elena, an actively NON-Jungian when it came to theories about how the head, mind and soul worked, proposed that it was something you learned at an early age. Being last to be picked to be on a baseball or football team when you were a kid re-enforced the idea that you would be a benchwarmer observer as an adult. Or if your father, playmates or, most notably power hungry sibling, was always better at something than you were, that hierarchy would be reinforced as an adult. Being second as a kid resulted in you being last, and ineffective, as an adult.

As predicted, every service industry, calling or outlet in Freiheit was under delivered to the public, since the 'pre-established best' were busy trying to learn to do something they were worst at and those who were trying to be best at something new were not making much progress at such. But people adjusted their expectations. No one starved, but people got

hungrier more often. 'Do you NEED it?' rather than 'Do you want it?' flowed out of the lips of parents with kids asking if they could have their favorite video game, toy or coat that would make them seem 'cooler' than their peers at school on 40 or 80 degree F days. ' Particularly when the 'anonymous' patron who set up the event upped the stakes in the 'game' of self improvement, offering the 'loser' who become BETTER than the person in town who was already 'the best' a thousand dollars a month for life as well as a trip around the world.

"This is going to make deciding who wins even harder and more complicated," Carl told Elena at his repair shop on his acreage when looking at the new ad in the Freiheit Forum she brought up to him as wrapping for the odorous, slimy collection of flour, raisins and unidentifiable lumps masquerading as raisin bread prepared by the new baker. "The new 'best at something he or she used to suck at' will piss off the one who used to be 'best', Elena!. And, as for the 'established best' citizen, he, or she, is going to have to devote time to become better than he or she was. And the once loser and at some time in the future 'new best' is going to take away the trade that the established best had. before all of this started. Which YOU complicated by putting this ad in the Forum!" the ace mechanic shot out at the genius doc. "Unless you have a secret stash of thousand dollar bills somewhere, or intend on setting up another contest to see who kills the first 'went from being the worst to being the best' winner within two weeks of getting the award!"

"I don't have any secret stash, anywhere! All I have, and hope to maybe keep for ME to use to get out of this crazy and now 'experimental' town, is a round trip ticket to Australia!" Elena blasted back at Carl. "And I certainly didn't put that ad in the newsletter. I came up here to treat you, as a friend, for being crazy enough to put that ad in the paper. Or to, yeah, like my two very EX-husbands said, trick you into marrying me without a prenub because you came here with a song in your heart, which you still can't sing to save your life. And a Vision in your mind for a Utopia that only exists after eating the mushrooms maybe growing in the back forty. AND you came here with a shoebox full of Krugers, treasure chest full of American dollars, or two truckloads of Canadian loonies!" Having exhausted her breath, availability of witticisms and ATP for inventing metaphors on the spot, Elena took in a deep breath, looked away from Carl, then let it all out, slowly, eyes closed. "There," she said. "Now, tell me, again, honestly, why is that ad in the newsletter promising the 'loser who becomes a winner the fastest' money I don't have and you MIGHT have."

"Because," Carl replied, scratching the hair on his chinny chin chin which was now more white than brown. "Fate required it to be there?" he proposed. "The kind of fate my Grandfather said was inevitable, I suppose."

“So,” Elena pressed. “Your grandfather is behind all of this? A eh,, I hope, RICH grandfather. Who can afford to pay someone a thousand dollars a month for life. Or---”

“---Yeah, yeah, I know,” Carl barked back. “Knows of a hitman or gypsy curse that can kill the winner before he, or she, can collect the money. Or that ticket to Australia which...” Another thought occurred to Carl, seeing something in Elena’s eyes that caused him pain as much as her. “You wanted to use yourself one day. To leave all of this place, and us, behind?”

“‘Us’ being who specifically?” Elena wanted to inquire, but didn’t. She was clearly, even to Carl, not sure if the moderately muscled, large headed, too well read for his own good slightly balding German pilgrim was referring to himself, or the still non-color coordinated horses, goats and rabbits who she had developed an affinity for. “So,” she let flow from her quivering lips, feeling a fluctuations of emotions she recalled burying and some she didn’t recognize shooting up and down her spine, saying ‘howdy, let me in’ to each of the shakra stations. “We were the ones who started this experiment. Who just took the reins away from us, and made us his, or her, special laboratory lab rats?”

“I don’t know,” Carl replied. “But,” he continued, allowing a chuckle to emerge from behind a gentle smile. “When we find out who it is, we can invite him into the contest. The reward would be him, or her, keeping his, or her, money, and, if you want, that trip to Australia of yours. And things could go back to a colorfully dysfunctional ‘normal’ here with everyone learning something new about themselves and others. And maybe that mystery patron teaching himself, or herself, something new.”

“That is, if we find out who that him and/or her, is,” Elena asserted. “Before it’s too late!” With that, she walked pensively to the car she had driven up to Carl’s shop, turned on the engine he had brought back to health and drove away. Leaving dust in the air, and a dangerous uncertainty in the ethers around Carl as he put his own brain into gear. He allowed thoughts of many natures and origins to intersect and, hopefully, merge into something resembling a solution to an ever increasing problem.

As weeks merged into months, the anonymous funder of the contest to become the 'most winning loser' added more money to the pot. The \$1k a month for life to now be awarded every week was bumped up to \$2k, then \$3k with the provision that the winner would have to be a resident of Frieheit. All of the 'established best' in Frieheit secretly got better at their established specialty at doing A with some of their daily labours and nightly endeavors, the lion's share of their time, energy, and money, at becoming the 'the best at task B'. Maintaining status as the 'established best' was personal. Becoming the 'new best' was about money. As such, NO 'loser' had become a 'winner' yet, as each 'established best' citizen kept claiming to be an expert and/or master at his, or her, specific skill.

In the meantime, the quality of services rendered to the citizenry of Frieheit kept getting worse. Those who wanted, or needed, anything to go with their still present dollars going to towns. Most of the merchants and service providers outside of Frieheit thought that the temporary 'refugees' seeking goods elsewhere were more in need of psychiatric counselling and anti-anxiety medications than mercantile goods.

The only thing preventing the 'peasantry' in Interior British towns who couldn't afford to move into any of its cities from entering the contest as 'new Frieheaters' was the risk of their forged documents being found out by a committee of real Frieheaters, as named by the elusive new organizer and now prime funder of the contest. Carl and Elena were not nominated by the City Council to be on the list of 6 judges for the contest. As such, the more dynamic than deadbeat duo took on the task of trying to figure out who had amplified their original design for the most complicated, mind bending and destructive competition to take place in Frieheit since a poker game in 1889. In that game of clever mathematical calculations and/or change, Chief Malcolm, one of the last surviving full blooded members of his tribe, won ownership of the town after his half-breed wife gave him hand signals while serving drinks to the rich White Munioses (those who have gone mad in the search for money) spiked with cannabis. The assimilated in some but not important ways Chief then changed the currency for all business to silver, copper then pine cones, resulting in the town finally figuring out that barter was the best means of currency to use. It was a lesson that the Chief Malcolm took credit for teaching which allowed the economy to be sustainable. His reward was a hangman's noose. Such was demanded by majority vote from citizens of three races who were dis-satisfied with the equality afforded by 'everyone gives according to their ability and takes according to their needs' cooperation, choosing instead All American competition in which you had the inalienable right to become richer, better and more respected than anyone else. With a license of course to exploit those on the bottom of the totem pole, who, of course deserved to be there. Democracy at work. At

the gallows, Chief Malcom vowed to return to Frieheit one day to 'continue the town's education'. His pregnant half-breed wife was sentenced to exile, put on a train going East.

A photograph of Chief Malcolm, in full regalia with a confident yet kind smile, hung over the Capuchino machine at the Frieheit coffee shop. The building had been the saloon where the crafty yet compassionate in ways only those with intellect could understand Old Indian had turned a card game of 'chance' into one where, for a while, he was calling all of the shots. It was one of the only establishments Carl had never visited since arriving in town. Upon ambling into the establishment, to request a cup of coffee that he knew would taste more like black mud than Brazilian roast brew, his stare was caught by Malcom's Face. It was a face that Carl remembered seeing before he had grown a beard. And, more frighteningly, the mug of his grandfather Hans in Bavaria, whose favorite hobby other than getting drunk on his own beer or rounds that he cajoled others to buy at the tavern, was... 'social experimentation'. Such included, as Carl recalled, assigning each of his grandkids a task they didn't want to do or said they were bad at when it came to a communal family project. Ace mechanic, carpenter and horsemench Hans Gunderson was good at many legal crafts as well as disappearing when the law was after him for stealing what, in his mind, was his. Or items that the owners of such didn't deserve. Sometimes he would give those 'wandered into my pasture from somewhere I can't identify' cows, collector coins or jewels to more deserving people in other towns. He was particularly skilled at talking his way out of being put in jail for life by the police, even more so than lawyers. Indeed, during brief periods when he was incarcerated, Hans Gunderson's council to fellow inmates for their early release was more effective than anything their lawyer provided. And when the guards had problems with their spouses, creditors, or their sons were about to be put behind bars, it was Lawyer Hans who provided sound and effective advise that, most of the time anyway, didn't involve doing harm to someone else so that good be done for those you cared about.

But there was something else Hans was very, very good at. Staying alive, and negotiating with the Grim Reaper for more time on the sunny side of the dirt. Indeed, when Hans did his last disappearance from the family, including Carl, he was in his 90s. An easy trick to hit 100 or more.

A light flashed in Carl's head, his eyes still on the sepia hued photo of Chief Malcolm. His inner Vision was fixed on his grandfather Hans. The old fart who would be flatulating long after everyone else's bullshit lives were finished was the most interesting man he ever met who, theoretically, chose to pass on his special skills to his favorite grandson, skipping of course Carl's father.

"I knew there was a resemblance," Carl heard from behind him. Doc Elena helped herself to a seat, placing a cup of hot water in front of her, dipping the tea bag into it herself, hoping it was not mislabelled. "You in a past lifetime?"

"And my grandfather in this one, maybe..." Carl replied, in his native tongue which, according to his research, Elena did understand. He hoped that no one else in Frieheit other than her could understand the conversation which was to follow, most particularly when he said, "Yes my grandfather who is, maybe, on this side of the veil."

"Your rich or pretend to be rich Grandad?" Elena inquired.

"That, we'll have to find out," Carl's answer and new Mission.

Though the mere existence of such were blockaded from entering Carl's consciousness, he did have family in the old country, most notably his brother Fritz and his two now very ex-wives. Whereas Carl, even before he read novels about the North American West by Karl Mae (a skilled writer who never set foot West of England), always felt that his future was somewhere else. Carl's sojourn to his self-declared 'destiny' away from Europe was delayed during his youth and young adulthood by feeling 'responsible' for the welfare of his brother and those wives. "Next year, I'm make my big move," he kept telling his friends at the tavern and the doctors who became his shrinks, until 'next year' finally happened after the big 50 wacked him in the face. It was Inge Bergen, his almost (but thankfully for her and everyone else) third wife who convinced him to heed the Horace Greenly battlecry of "Go West, still Possibly Young Man".

In some ways, Carl Gunderson was still young, but not in the ways of a typical bold pioneer. He had been sheltered from all of the family secrets that brother Fritz, as well as his two ex wives, knew about Carl's father, and grandfather. The first wall between Carl and the history of the men whose sperm made his life possible came when he asked that inquiry so many German pre-teens and teenagers had presented to their elders. "What did you do during the War?"

"I'll tell you when the time is right," came out of Carl's emotionally-inhibited Dad and overly expressive GrandDad again and again. The next question Carl asked his father about growing up during the poverty stricken years after the War was, regarding the pictures of him as a

happy, well clothed, healthfully fed and overweight child, "Why did we have so much money, food and clothing when so many had a lot less?"

"Your grandfather was a great mechanic, who could fix anything," was the reply.

"Mechanic of what or who, and how did he fix things? And where does he go when he takes those business trips that he says he may not come back from? And what does Grandpa mean when he says that when you live outside of the law you have to be honest?" Carl would press at the dinner table.

"He who asks too many questions gets undesired answers," came from younger yet more trusted and life experienced brother Fritz. And when Carl turned to his older, smarter and no doubt more informed brother the press the issue, the answer came as a wack across the face, Fritz stepping on Carl's feet under the table so he would shut his yapper, or a 'pass the potatoes, please'. All was agreed to by Carl's father in the silent conversations he had Fritz.

There was one route to find out where Grandpa was, or what 'social experimenting' was being carried out posthumously by his favorite progeny. That progeny was of course Fritz. Even while trying to make a living in Hamburg, Bonn or Berlin, Carl's conversations with Fritz in Bavaria were brief, and one sided. It would begin with Carl ask 'wie gehts?' with two open ears and an even more hungry mind to absorb what the answer was. That answer to how things were going would be 'fine', 'not bad', 'ok' and only on rare occasions 'still not sure'. Then, Fritz would trick his brother into talking about himself, revealing more information than Carl was planning on sharing, all of it leading of course to advice from his older brother about how to fix things, his way. That deflection of conversations could easily change the focus of attention to Carl, like so many times he asked Fritz about his 'again away on a business trip somewhere' 75 going on 40 grandfather. But this time, it would be CARL who would ask the questions, not so much about where Grandpa was and what he was doing, but why and how Grandpa found out where he was, and what he had set in motion in Frieheit, British Columbia.

As usual, Fritz's answers were brief and elusive. Except for the one that Carl needed answering most. "Grandpa is particularly proud of you, especially now!" came back from Fritz.

“For working my way out of two defective marriages, making a go of it in a different country, or for trying to make the world a more Alive place?” Carl inquired regarding his Grandfather, despite the fact that the old man who refused to become elderly said that ‘what other people think of you is none of your business’ again and again.

“All of the above, but what you’re doing now, and what has been set in motion needs some more....uncertainty,” Fritz replied. Immediately afterwards he, of course, hung up without saying who set what in motion and what kind of uncertainty awaited Carl as someone who loved spontaneity as long as he could control where it went.

There was a lot about the loser to winner contest the citizenry of Frieheit didn’t know. But there was one thing that they soon would found out. It was Amber, Realtor Katey Wilson’s daughter who first flashed on it. The thing Amber sucked most at was following chain of evidence on ‘who done it’ detective novels. She was far worse at writing them, EVERYONE either figuring out ‘who done it’ after page three or raising the objection that the murderer named on the last page never had motive, opportunity or presence at the crime scene at the time of the killing. It was a faded but still readable piece of paper that Amber found while dumpster diving behind the Frieheit Forum ----the anonymous original submission for the contest. The slopes and slides of the letters revealed a control freak who was afraid of change, shifted between thinking of himself as a superman and the bottom mench on any totem pole. An insecure attention seeker who was terrified of rejection.

“INTJ, according to the Myers Briggs classification of personalities, the rarest and most endangered type of humanoic,” Amber told Carl, who happened to be there when she found the note. “And I do know now who the secret Santa or slimy Satan who set into motion this ‘most winning loser’ contest is that’s turning this once pleasant town into a passion infused and painful circus,” she continued, practicing alliteration that she would use when appearing at the town hall meeting in two days. Where she would reveal the identity of the asshole and/or visionary, and collect a round the world airline ticket and salary for life to stay in five stars hotels at every port. “It’s a matter of time, on MY timetable, till I figure out who this is, particularly because INTJ people are very rare. And, to be sure about his or her identity, I’ve secured the ballot box, which does have each voter’s name on it, for the referendum about putting in the roundabout that has hand written notes from everyone in town regarding their vote on it and why.”

Carl felt himself being identified by Myers Briggs category as well as, in Amber's time of course, his handwriting. And that timetable would be very, very soon.

Carl wondered what a lynching in Frieheit would be like, particularly when it was revealed that he and Elena started it all. Or, more accurately, he started all of this. He had neither a valid airline ticket for round the world travel or a thousand dollars for even the first month of the lifetime pay off. And there was the matter as well that he recalled, when visiting with Elena, that the ticket had expired. And one of the things Carl was bad at was forging anything to update the ticket. He was a slow learner of faking documentation, even under the tutelage of Igor Ivanov in High School, who coached him in forging doctor's 'get out of gym class' notes that were always found out as fake.

And...there were fewer and fewer customers from outside of Frieheit who came around to frequent the stores, shops and services it usually offered. And...there were always two signs advertising anything, each of them saying 'the best in town'. The 'established best' specialist was busy trying to become best at what he or she was worst at, and the new 'potentially new best' was still, for the most part, inconsistent at a new skill and did more boasting than doing. The town was losing more money each day. No doubt, the bill would have to be paid by Carl and Elena when they were found out, enforcement of such done by both the 'established best' and 'new best' lawyers in town, McMaster University grad Darryl Young and U of Toronto drop out Gary Oldman.

Another meeting with Doctor Elena was in order. Somehow, Carl could think more clearly in her presence. She could read his mind, and had the ability to see things he didn't. Or didn't want to. One of those things was the ghost of Chief Malcolm, the apparition coming to her in her dreams then, after having breakfast at the Frieheit Fryery, noticing him on the other side of a foggy window. "OK, Chief Malcolm," she said to the apparition, recalling the taste of the mushrooms in her omelet still lingering on her tongue. "Either I'm just as crazy as five of my patients who said they saw you mulling around town, or you're some White prankster doing some creative cultural appropriation doing a pre-Halloween trick visitation from Sundances past, present or future."

“Or...he’s really here,” Carl said, looking up, being unable to see the apparition. “My grandfather, that is.”

“And you say that because...?” Elena asked.

“He always wants me to feel his presence but never to see it,” Carl’s reply. “Another one of his...’teaching tools’, so he told me, the last time I saw him in the flesh.”

“But...how did he get here?” Elena asked. “And why does he resemble Chief Malcolm?”

“It’s a mask,” Carl replied. “He can make himself look like anybody, even...hmmm,” Carl said, staring at and into Elena.

“Even me?” Elena replied with an all knowing ‘I gottcha everywhere you live’ smile.

Carl self observed himself pull back from her.

The Doctor who, unlike her colleague, and teachers, dispensed wit, humor and vitality along with medications came back with “Just fucking around with your ‘have to be in control of everything all the time’ head. “

“Which, if translated to German, is exactly what Grandpa said so many times,” Carl’s reply. He looked out the window once again to see if HIS eyes could see the ghost of Chief Malcolm like Elena did. “What is he up to? Besides, putting more anonymous ads into the Forum upping the amount of prize money for the first Frieheiter to go from becoming the worst at something to becoming the best at it? And...why?”

“Because our idea of showing people who really CAN’T become great at something learn a lot by putting every ounce of energy into becoming barely adequate at it,” Elena said. “And our pushing people who can be great at something, even what they think they are bad at, empowers their soul to be great at other things. And our bondship is forged in the proposition

and reality that our efforts to make everyone in this town a recognizable and personal best WILL succeed, somehow.“

Elena’s clarifying Carl’s original idea for the Mission at hand put order back into his confused cranial vault, but it was the ‘our’s’ and ‘we’s’ that she used to state it that fulfilled his soul and awakened his heart. He allowed himself to consider that maybe Cathy Williams, the woman who should have been his third and final wife, had somehow cohabitated the soul of this free thinking Doctor whose face, eyes and presence bore so much resemblance to his former flame in his youth in Bavaria. But that moment lasted a precious 3 seconds, afterwhich he was catapulted into the reality of the situation. “Soon, one of the ‘established bests’ is going to acknowledge that the ‘new best’ is better than her or she is, in voice as well as by demonstration of such,” he reminded himself and her. “We both were at the Town Council hall witnessing the painting, dancing, singing, piano playing, gardening, building an engine from scratch and winning a political argument contests as spectators, where the establish bests still won, but by a slimmer margin each time.”

“Yeah,” Elena said. “But best at what? Getting the specific task done correctly, fastest or with more applause from the audience” She pointed out that the underdog’s painting on the spot of the new dump of snow on mountains on the other side of the winder were just as good or, in her opinion anyway, better in color design than the established best’s with oils and a paint brush, but just took a bit more time to put on the canvas. “And as for your singing,” she pointed out to Carl. “When I closed my eyes, I thought I was hearing Bob Dylan’s off key voice, which appeals to me a lot more than, as I recall, Joan Baez’s operatic always precisely in tune vocalizations.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Carl admitted, recalling that in his attempt to sound like Pavorati, maybe something more earthy and humanistic came from his vocal chords. “But, the crowd liked Pastor James’ rendition of Blowing in the Wind, Ava Maria and Ripple better than mine. And as for building an engine from scratch! Which I’m the established best at!” he asserted. “Mine, unlike Vinny Lombardi’s, worked according to industry standards, and was more powerful!”

“But his was prettier, and made less noise,” Elena replied.

“But the aim of the contest was to make an engine that could move a truck!” Carl declared, holding his fingers in a defiant fist. “Which I did, with more torque!”

“So, who is best at a game is decided by the goal or the game and its rules,” Elena said, pondering something beyond the current problem. “Which....we...overlooked.”

“NO!” Carl asserted. “Which I overlooked. ”That defining who and what is best according to...yeah...I know, ‘industry standard’ metrics. In world that has many industries, and some which don’t need or want industries.”

“Yeah?” Elena challenged. “The first ‘loser’ has to beat the established winner according to industry standards, utility AND popular opinion. The three metrics that had devolved into needing to be met for every one of these ‘competitions’. ”

“Competitions which are unwinnable by all three of those criteria,” Carl advanced, that idea finally coming to him through the third brain that evolved between him and Elena. And WITHOUT the ghost of Chief Malcolm or the real world presence of Grandpa Gunderson masquerading as such in a town that Carl wanted to serve, and transform, on his own. Which he fucked up economically and psychologically, the latter resulting in more competition between Frieheiterers than cooperation. In a town that, for better or worse, had one undisputed established best for every task. The only problem being that being best at something made you do that task again and again and again, resulting in over specialization.

BUT...Carl, and others in town, learned that ‘best’ is a subjective metric. The one who comes in first in a running race is best at being a fast runner. The last one to come over the finish line is a best at slow running. The one, or ones, who decided to get off the track to rest their weary bones in a race they never wanted to be in are best at ‘living well’.

It was then that Carl’s eyes did see Chief Malcolm and Grandpa Gunderson through the window. Yes, perhaps the old Chief did reincarnate into Carl’s most elusive, brilliant and, according to some anyway, most compassionate blood relation. “The contest is over, here anyway,” Carl heard, in German. It was followed by TWO airline tickets to go around the world, with a thick stack of traveler’s checks delivered to Carl and Elena’s table by Ashley Johnston, one of the five ‘wackos’ who Elena almost referred to psychiatric counselling as a semi-voluntary patient. “His treat,” she said, pointing to the real man and envisioned ghost on the other side of the window. “And mine,” Taylor Newman, the formerly worse baker in town continued, after which she put in front of Carl and Elena a gourmet spread that smelled, and yes, even tasted, like it was

prepared by a world famous chef in a five star eatery. Containing, yes, more mushrooms. "And, hot off the presses," she continued, laying on the table a post-dated copy of the Freiheit Forum. In a full page ad in the boldest print possible was the announcement of the winner in the 'worst to become best' contest. 'Everybody' it read. The prize---'Each Other'.

Carl looked out the window again, noting that the real or imagined visitor was gone. It didn't matter, as he certainly was there. And always would be. Around the world, or perhaps the town where he now decided to settle down, at least for a little while, or...maybe longer. Doing his...or maybe someone else's now and then.....best.