

Memorable Misfits

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MJ Politis, Ph.D., D.V.M.

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 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 curding 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 Freiheit 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 Freiheit 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 funders 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.

VANCOUVER FOR SALE

The new Prime Minister got a majority of the votes. It was easy. All he had to do was put his name on the ballot. All of the other candidates decided to pull out of the race. So, 4 percent of the vote got 100 percent of the office because Harry Malcolm was unopposed. The fair haired, middle aged, real estate Wunderkind who kept flipping houses in Nelson, Terrace and Hundred Mile in the manner of his father as a realtor knew how to turn a loss into a profit. And, as his father, uncle and students in the level 100 polysci class he taught who put him on the ballot all said that when opportunity knocks, you can't say 'come around next year because I'm in the shower now'.

Harry inherited a lot when he took the oath of office to become Premier of BC. Six million people, two times that number of mountains and a whole bunch of trees. Untold reserves of minerals under the ground that, according to the geologists, were waiting for the right person to dig them up. Elements in the periodic table that were only theoretical. And chains of fast food operations that kept the population fed, satiated and overweight. Enough lumber to build two hundred British fleets of ships. AND....most importantly, the site of a special medicine wheel which the American WOKE media called the center of the universe. Or more accurately, the Centre of the Universe. And soil which was the best in Canada and the US for growing botanicals that made people forget their daily problems as well as life aspirations. But there was one problem...Malcom became Premier because no one else really wanted the job. Or was able to handle it. The province of Canada which had the most gold under the ground was in debt. In debt to all of the other provinces. To big countries abroad, like China. And to small ones like Malta. And....they all decided one fine day to call in their debt.

Malcolm could have done as his predecessors did when presented with the financial mess created by previous Premiers that were now his responsibility to fix. Resign for reasons of poor health, wanting to spend more time with family or the ET implant in his brain telling him to be a stand up comedian instead of an upstanding Premier. It was, for the newby politician who knew nothing about politics, a simple thing to do. Recalling how he once bailed himself out of bankruptcy by selling the fountain in his last mansion to the highest bidder so he could save the rest of the dwelling from going on the auction block, Harry looked at the map of the Province he was foolish enough to take charge of.

"There's gotta be something here that we can sell to pull us out of debt to everybody," Malcom told himself. "Some part of this Pacific Coast paradise we can spare, that brings in big time dollars instead of chump change Loonies. Some part of BC that we can do without. And that doesn't fit into the agendas of the 'good' people of our Province. A property that has outlived its usefulness, like that fountain in the oversized front lawn of the Hermitage in Alberta that I still call home. But....what beachfront overpriced, overbuilt and dysfunctional property in this province can we get rid of for top dollar?"

It was then that the TV in the new Premier's office in Victoria switched over to a speech from the Major of Vancouver, a seasoned old hack who was promising new things for the city. Things that he was finally able to deliver, if of course he was re-elected. Main Street and Hastings would converted from a haven for homeless people and drug addicts into a multi-ethnic community filled with arts, culture and wealth where five year olds could play on the streets day or night. A film industry which would be a center for new movies and television shows instead of a place where Vancouverites were the executive producers instead of assistants to assistants who answered to 'creative bosses' from LA, New York or Toronto. A city where a tenth rather than all of of any man or woman's monthly income would be sufficient to rent or own a real house with real plumbing and utilities. A city where it doesn't rain more than 340 days a year. A town where you can get to work and return home faster by driving than walking. A community where there are more sales of pharmacological products in the stores than on the streets.

There were of course people in the crowd who thought that those things could be delivered. They seemed to be rich, their skin color mostly non-white. A whole lot of them had American flag decals on their leisure suits.

It was then that an idea occurred to Harry Malcom. Sell Vancouver. Not as a tourist destination, but as an entity that can be owned by someone else. Someone rich. Someone who, maybe, could turn it into something else...eventually. That eventually being a long time in the future that is. While in the meantime, hard earned money by folks in the Interior or on the Island could stay with them instead of being poured into the sensation-filled cesspool that is Vancouver. Or as it was really known by those who seek Enlightenment, Blandcouver.

Harry Malcom never really liked Vancouver. It was a cold, dreary place. Pathologically clean. Even at the airport, at the reconstructed canoe that greeted you when you got off the plane from somewhere to someplace else, the sterile aroma of chlorine permeated the air. But, it was an economic issue now. Who would want to buy Vancouver? And for what purpose?

The most obvious buyer would be the US of course. Vancouver would be a 'clean Seattle' which could be corrupted in ways that the people on top wanted. A pplace where the American dollar would always be worth more than the Canadian Loonie.

China was another candidate. The term Yellow Horde and Hongcouver were already in the dictionary of descriptors voiced by podcasters free enough to say what they meant but not refined enough to get on CBC or any other legitimate, that is legally sanctioned, platform.

The Russian oligarchs could take it on as a distant vacation spot where their color coordinated yachts and mistresses dock in the harbor. Rekindling the days when the 19th century trappers and gold prospectors from Czarist Russia sought to extend their empire to America beyond Alaska, and in climates a lot warmer.

Celebs would be the next group of people who might be interested in buying Vancouver. David Letterman said so many times that Vancouver was the most beautiful city in the world. But he never said it was the most interesting, literate or artistically innovative.

The Germans....they do love their forests. But one thing about Germans is when they came to North America they sought to live in, or near, forests where the trees were not planted or growing in neatly symmetrically drawn out rows. Such was, of course, why so many Germans lived in Interior BC. And not in or any place near the Lower Mainland, or in Vancouverized communities in the interior like Kamloops where real estate developers took it upon themselves to build further and further up any mountain their eye could see, defying the laws of gravity, building anything and everything structural, which of course included driveways and roads which were impassible if any ice or snow hit them.

The Japanese....people who, so Caucasian round eyes said, had three faces. Imitators who somehow pass themselves off as innovators, and at times could be such. Yes, they had the money and the yen to take it over.

The North Koreans....Yes, bring them in for a look see on a sunny day, let them plunk down whatever money they do have, then set the Tesla weather making machines above them to make it rain on their military parade.

And of course there were the Indians...No, not the indigenous people who were here before the Palefaces bumped into land with their sailing ships. Pakistanis and East Indians who all looked alike to White folks, who already owned all of the seven elevens in town. And the hotels, the ones that were between two and 4 stars that is, but never the 5 star gala establishments, or the half star flea bag inns where each bed came with a free set of needles used by the last occupant and cockroaches that greeted you with hand waves and dances on your face when you were trying to get to sleep. Hindus, Moslems and Shiks who, at home in Asia, were killing each other over who was correct about who God was, but who when they came to North America agreed that the Almighty was the dollar, Loonie or Bitcoin.

“Ok,” Harry said to himself as the clock in his new office ticked down to the end of the business day. And the closing bell on the stock market which was about to close at an all time low. “We’ll hold the auction tomorrow,” he said to the image of the Hawk above his window. And with that, he wrote a press release that was to be read at the International Climate Change Crisis and World Hunger banquet

dinner that night, attended by delegates who flew in on their private planes, sharing opinions and strategies while dining on filet mignon, lobster and caviar. It read 'The Auction of the Century that no Visionary should miss'. Hosted by American celebrities from Hollywood who had second homes, mistresses and boytoys in North Van. Lured to becoming hosts of the event at Pacific Place by Malcom offering them exclusive ownership of a newly developed device that allows you to read the minds, and hearts, of your worse enemy, and closest friends.

The auction started with a simple prize for the highest bidder. A night with the Hollywood star of your choice, with them being your servant and slave. A love letter from Adolf Hitler to his gay lover in Bavaria along with pictures of the Fuhrer in drag, perhaps real or perhaps forged by the British Secret Service. The scientifically derived and tested formula for composing a National Anthem that would make even the most Pacifist Buddhist join the Army and indulge in a kill fest of anyone designated to become expendable. Then, finally, the City of Vancouver was put on the auction block, Malcom personally taking over the chair of the auctioneer. He tried his best to do the fast talking down home Kentucky auctioneering voice, but stumbled on his own tongue.

"Hey, it's a wise and hard working person who tries to be good at something he sucks at," he said by way of explanation to the representatives of no less than 20 countries and twice as many corporations. "So, who wants to own what we all are standing and sitting on. Without the other people standing on of course," he said.

A mild chuckle came from the audience. "So, the beautiful city of Vancouver that is currently owned by the Province of British Columbia."

"And stolen from us," came from the back of the room. A man with a brown face, long braids and a fringed leather jacket emerged from the shadows and strolled up to the podium with a confident, measured gait.

All eyes turned to the First Nations Chief who found out about the auction through means unknown to Malcom.

"Just kidding!" he said with a warm and understanding smile. "After what you Palefaces, from all over the world, did to the plot of land my ancestors thought you would do something good with was, well, self destructive. You cut down the trees, polluted the water, crammed two million people into a space that could sustain at most two thousand and introduced thousands of new species of two and four legged rats and cockroaches into what was a pristine forest. And if the satellites up in the sky that you turned into toxic smoke go out, you'll be left in the dark, unable to find your own balls or other body parts. And as for what any new owner of this place would have to deal with...."

The chief went on to describe every problem Vancouver had in its history and would encounter in its future. One by one, the delegates left the auction auditorium until there were only two people left standing. "Great strategy there, Chief," Malcom said to the unexpected visitor. "I suppose you want us to give you back Vancouver."

"For a price, which you will pay me and my people for clean up which is..." the Chief replied, handing the new Premiere a folded piece of paper.

"We pay YOU?! This amount!" Malcom scoffed. "That is ridiculous."

"As ridiculous as maybe making you our new Chief?" the Old Indian offered. "You'll be a hero to my people, yours and everyone who left here. You print some more money, pay it to us, take, say ten percent for yourself, leave the next Premiere of British Columbia with a bigger debt, which he, or she, will discover after they take office. And buy your way into becoming the first ancestor of Colonizers to put an end, at least locally, to Colonialism. Admired by everybody. With a shot at becoming...the first American born Canadian to become Premier of Canada. And its 14th province, the, as they are becoming now, dis-united states of America."

Malcom considered the offer, and the permutations of such. And, yes, only a fool would turn down the opportunity to pass the buck, bill and problems of his own administration to the next schlep to take office. And with that, Vancouver was bought back by the Indians for a dollar. Who, yes, as the first act, set up a series of casinos where the house always has the advantage. Where revenue from non-Canadian sources was shared equally by Malcom and his new buds. All of whom, as was always the case, would be nameless.

JACK'S SH-T

So why should you give a shit about this?

There are some people who find you, at a time of in your life when you need them most and sometimes don't want them most. Particularly because they cause disruptions in your life. And force you to open yourself up to different and, in application or theory, higher moralities. Different moralities which make that all important and central commandment in life of 'Just Do the Right Thing' a more complex task that you initially thought possible. Making you embrace more than avoid struggle, and bypassing bliss, happy or comfy for...something else. Heralded in by a person who knows the system, who is, or in this case was, too interesting and intelligent to present his own lesson to the world.

Recorded historical fact is that Socrates never wrote anything down, one of the theories for such being that he was dyslexic. But the reality was that it was his student Plato who was charged with and took on preserving for the world in print what Socrates said and knew. Much like the engineer in Zorba the Greek who told the tale of Zorba to us as he was being taught himself.

So, without further ado, let's see if what I tell you about Jack is the truth he wanted you to know about him, and the discoveries he made about and in the world connects with you. A 'breaking good' story about an initially 'bad' man that goes beyond the narrowed and soul limiting definitions of 'good' and 'bad'. And how, in their own ways these two extremes owe their existence to each other in the cause of something "Forward and Upward". As we attempt to use our human limbs to fly rather than desperately hold onto the ground in front of us.

As for who and what I am, and became as a result of knowing Jack, that is, for the moment anyway, irrelevant. Let's please keep it that way, for now anyway.

The Beginning

Jack was evicted from the comforts of the womb in North East Philadelphia. It was a matter of either not paying the rent to his maternal landlady there, or maybe because he got tired of listening to her rantings on about the problems of life while nestled in her belly. Or maybe he really did want to see if the stories his mother told him about the wonderful world outside were fact based fantasy or gullibly believed bullshit.

In any case, the donor for the other half of Jack's genetic program, or 'suggested life plan', was, as we will call him now anyway (as we want to avoid being sued by ghosts for slander or inaccuracies) Bob. Bob was a working class man who struggled to keep his family fed, watered and sheltered whose ability to do so was no less than a miracle. He saw, experienced and absorbed horrific atrocities in the War of the Pacific in Iwo Jima and Okinawa, some of which he passed on to Jack and some he didn't, or couldn't. But, one element about stories and lessons from father and son as they exchanged roles as student and teacher is that...the world is a hard, cruel and challenging place. And that even in the best of relationships there are more secrets we keep, and memories that get distorted than what we accurately, or openly, share. Such is...humanoid life. Maybe not so with dogs, cats and horses say to each other in their various languages while feeding their own faces with kibble, pate or grass.

But, we are at the top of the food chain. Advanced enough to, when we can, and because we can, bash the heads of everyone below us, eat their flesh and devour their entrails. Unlike the domesticated dogs that merely growl at other canines to stay away from the feed bowl or horses who kick towards, but not into, competitors for the best access to the communal hay bail. And....bashing heads in was what Jack, as he grew up, was good at.

It started in the playground sandbox when a playmate took Jack's favorite shovel, though at the time he stopped at giving his competition a bloody nose. Suppose taking out an eye or a fistful off teeth would have been too much of sanguineous red 'coolaid' treat. Then as Jack got into high school, desiring the affections and approval of girls more than the friendship of boys, along with discovering what his penile organ could do other than pass urine, he discovered that the quickest way to get to and stay on top of the food chain was to crack open skulls on the grid iron rather than compete in the classroom for who is the smartest. And, as long as you knew how to protect your own knoggin and learned how to numb the pain of getting wacked by others with toughing it out, booze or weed, sacking the quarterback or knocking him on his back after he was somehow able to get rid of the ball was...fun. Particularly if he was smaller than you, or more 'academic' than you were. And, truth be told, the 'I want YOU because you are the real winner here' from the head cheerleader and all of her girl friends, made you feel proud. Like a man. Like an American. An American who

would be expected to go into combat one day like your father did against the bad guys to prove your manhood. Be it bad guys overseas, or Niggers, Commies and other law breakers here. After all, a badge is a badge. A license to be who you want to be and do what you want to without having to pay fees for being 'expressive'.

It was the time of aspiring hippie Pacifist Einsteins and Musicians vs. Redneck Greasers. Both sides embraced the All American Credo that if you're not number one, you're number nothing. That 'we are all in this together as equals', be it in the Cause of International Peace and shared Prosperity or a WASP Pax Americana was something the teachers read out of books. And as Jack knew way too early, those who couldn't do teach. Besides, there was only ONE leader of the Peace, Love and Harmony band as well as the Lynch mob that kept America safe from Commies, Niggers and Fags. And as for the latter, being a fag, such was what was the thing that Jack's father, and most importantly mother, were constantly on guard for with regard to their only son becoming.

The quickest way to get Dad's approval and Mom's love, was to use force to make yourself heard. To be on the top of everyone's game. And if you didn't measure up to being top in everyone's game, of course what you did was to change the rules, or intimidate the maker of those rules into feeling like shit. Yes, Jack learned that it was indeed cool to be cruel to anyone, mentally and physically. And, hey, it wasn't Jack's fault, as he and his tribe considered it anyway. The poor blacks who infiltrated his neighborhood deserved to stay in their place. And the Commie leftist whites, born with silver spoons in their mouths who came in from New York City, were stuck up shitheads who would make Jack a nigger serving dog if he let them. And the long as well as short haired fags were the most dangerous of everyone else. Even if it was the new fashion for men to grow their hair like the Beatles and others did to get, so they say anyway, the attention and affection of the most beautiful women, and bearers of their sons.

It was, and maybe still is, a world where the thing that angered men most was being laughed at by women. Women feared the fist of a man more than any psychological insult that would make them destroy their own self esteem.

Yes, in Jack's world, where immediate results mattered more than excuses, two things were valued. Money and force. Labor jobs in the Blue Collar regions of Phili where you couldn't hire others to sweat for you were easy to find. And besides, like commercials for the 90 percent air and 2 percent nutrient Wonderbread promised, it built strong bodies twelve ways.

And Jack did grow strong in more than 12 ways while at Ben Franklin High. No one was more muscular in body, handsomer to look at with his always in place red hair, and manipulative with people with his chiseled WASP .mouth. He got passable enough grades to get into college with minimal effort, but didn't want to waste his time reading about life rather than living it. Peggy Blackstone, the head cheerleader during football season, and the winner in any beauty or talent pageant she decided to enter, was honored to be Jack's bride. But, to be a man's man, a good father (if he wanted to be, or if Peggy forgot to take her pills) and the kind of son his Dad and country would be proud of, Jack knew he had to make the next step upward.

Jack was a wise guy in training success story. No stranger to extorting lunch money from pansy assed spiks, coons, sand niggers, Jewboys and Commie pinkos students who...well...deserved to be skinny and underfed. And he got paid good money to beat them up when they entered the boy's bathroom, or walked rather than took the bus back home after school. Most importantly, he knew how to not get caught for his 'excesses'.

Jack told me about the day after graduation from High School when he woke up to a 'Greetings' notice from the Uncle Sam. It requested his service in Vietnam, causing him to curse his mother for not keeping him in the womb for a day or two longer so that he could be number 352 in the lottery rather than number 1. Heading to Canada was not an option because it was too fucking cold, that country having two seasons, July and winter. Enlisting in a college somewhere to major in basketweaving, taking courses in American and English literature from professors who knew less about the authors and life than he already did and having to pay out money each day rather than collecting it wasn't an option either. Asking his best bud Bruno to have his mob connected father bribe the docs at the Draft Board to get a medical or psychiatric exemption was complicated, and...would endanger any other big plans Jack had in life. Peggy, theoretically anyway, was carrying Jack's kid. Money, social status and, most importantly, the ability to keep doing what he was good at and enjoyed was required.

One of the most telling things about Jack that he confided in me decades later was that the reason for not going to Vietnam was that 'killing the enemy overseas would not be as fun as beating them up here at home.'

To protect and serve...oneself.

There were two ways to be enforcers of law, order and the status quo in Philadelphia. The first was to join the Jersey Mob. But stories from Bruno about missing uncles who sought an early retirement wasn't in line with Jack's life plan. The second was to maintain the law and be sure you were above any of it was to become a Cop.

Being a Cop was very easy after you dealt with the bullshit of having to pretend to 'protect and serve' the public under the command of overpaid idiots and fellow assholes. It required demonstrating an IQ 5 points above the general public, while hiding the fact that it was really 25 points above any of your bosses. It required physical strength, quickness of action and detachment from any kind of morality that prevents you from doing your job.

The first of those jobs found Jack living gloriously on both sides of the law as a Highway Patrol Motorcycle Cop. The uniform fit him perfectly, making him seem to some as a Knight on horseback, the horse of course being a two legged steed that obeyed every one of his commands. And there were perks far greater than all the free donuts he could eat. Supplemental money came in from other mounted enforcers of the status quo, including the Hell's Angels. Along with addresses of bombshell barbies who he caught, or said were, speeding, to supplement his deserved body needs when or if Peggy, who was aging faster than he was, wasn't available. Then there was the special duty of spotting cars driven by colored and white 'crits' (critters) on I 95, collecting the illegal valuables they had, or planting some of your own on them. Then there was the most fun game of all---inventing evidence against the innocent, or most easily to be declared guilty, wearing them down till they admit to being guilty of anything. Or telling them that their 'best buddy' is about to rat on them and that the first one to rat on his buds would be free to go home with the brand of cheese of their choice.

When looking at some pictures Jack showed me in later life of his glorious youth as a motorcycled Cop, I commented that the outfit made him look like one of the village people. Deferring all of that, he declared that the one smart thing the cowardly suits on top did when trying to recruit enforcers of their will was to give them sharp looking uniforms. Like the SS in World War 2 who knew you could trick nice people into being mean ones by putting them in the right outfits.

As for the American flag insignias on Jack's uniform, he related to me that 'it convinced some suckers that the US is a democratic country where every vote counts and every voice is heard'.

After going above and beyond the call of duty, as well as altering or omitting paperwork as a Highway Patrol Cop, Jack was promoted to be a street cop in the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city of Brotherly Love. Then very soon after, a plain clothes narcotics division officer charged with taking on 'the war on drugs', which superseded, of course, the wars on poverty, disease and violent cruelty. Finding out who the bad guys were and what they were doing was something Jack was very good at. Particularly because he had the advanced and elusive skill so necessary in any law enforcement officer---The ability to sense that 'something isn't right here' when seeing and hearing something on the street that would pass as 'normal' to the non-intuitive eye. To let the raw data enter into your always thinking brain, find its natural slot, then come up with a diagnosis of what is wrong and various options to fix it. Pattern recognition some would say, but I wouldn't. A skill that I, as a physician and aspiring Theoretical Psychologist thought I had, and tried to teach my students. But that is another set of stories

As for Jack, the time came when this working class (at least to himself) hero was granted control of the city. An interesting thing that I'd like to relate is that Philadelphia as a city was at its peak before and during the American Revolution. Ben Franklin created the town as a place of innovation and, relatively speaking, religious and political tolerance. He established there one of the first really truthful, newspapers, in which of course he ghost wrote most of the letters to the editor that kept the journal popular. Later on, Phili became the place where the Declaration of Independence was drafted, under his tutelage, which declared that 'all men are created equal', though owning property and white skin made you more equal than everyone else.

During the 19th century, the city of Philadelphia became more like a town living off its old reputation. New York was booming with money. Washington DC with power. But someone had to keep the lights on in the town where terrified upscale European immigrants lingered upon reaching America. Phili became a place where disillusioned Western pioneers who galloped westward and hit a brick wall hobbled back East to settle into something they were used to. And kept it continued as a town known more for cheese steaks, a gridiron Eagles and home for 'Rocky' than literary or scientific accomplishment. With the exception of Cold Case, no television show filmed in or portrayed its stories in Philadelphia, as its population diminished along with the quality of those people counted in the census.

A new brand of criminality took over the once hallowed cobble stone streets of Phili with its special brand of cruelty and deception. In the ritzy, and privately protected suburbs such as Cherry Hill, legal crime flourished. As for anywhere and everyone else, it was every schlep for him or herself. Having a kind heart in the inner city got you killed if you wandered into the wrong neighborhood. Everyone except those highly skilled in corruption collected two bits for every dollar of honest effort they put into their work, or labor. There were in truth more empty rumbling bellies in town than fast food filled ones. But, there was one business that was booming besides regret---dope, some of it harmless, some of it addictive, some of it deadly. Obtaining such maintained the illusion that life was ok, or perhaps better. Particularly when life in reality was a lot worse. Becoming a distributor of 'happy juice' was the most lucrative profession in Phili. And, as some might say, such was a job where you gave mentally tortured people what they really wanted. While they were alive to enjoy it anyway.

For whatever reasons, Jack didn't get happiness, or relief from mental misery (the worst kind, which is not measurable, yet should be) from drinking, toking, tripping, shooting up or inhaling white snow that allowed you to leap frog from the sweat soaked gutter to the top of a mountain into your own private Aspen ski resort. He was blessed with the strength to endure, or perhaps easily understand, the challenges that life gave you. If you were too weak, or lazy, to pull yourself up out of poverty, you deserved your fate. In his consciousness was the credo that poverty and addiction were things that YOU let happen to you. They were the natural punishments for not doing what your family assigned you to do. I am not sure if in those early days Jack pitied those 'pathetic' souls or hated them. In any case, he considered them 'expendable'. Subhuman. Nay, NOT human. Such was the prime requirement to be promoted to plain clothes Narcotics Division. Using any means available to put those 'crits' into jail, the hospital or the morgue was, after all, putting them out of their misery.

'It's a dirty job but someone has to do it'. Yes, even in the most noble of professions such is true. And the way Phili was going, the way the cancer of violence, robbery and narcotics, the upper ups in the City of Brotherly Love needed a special posse. Jack and his new buds were deemed 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocolypse', their official name, the 5 Squad. The kind of smart, strong and 'silent with regard to how we got things done' squad that is immortalized on screen and film. Of course those fictionalized Cops did nothing on the streets as front line plain clothes cops to fake evidence, intimidate witnesses and obtain bribes that any uniformed 'boys in blue' or DAs did back at the Precinct headquarters. And, of course, on their boards back at headquarters they posted pictures of suspects, victims and perps which no real smart law enforcement officer would do. And, or course, cases on the tube were solved within 24 hours.

How empty Jack's pockets were when beginning each shift, and how full they were afterwards, that was a detail that he never shared with me. As a matter of real fact, such was a situation that none of the Horsemen shared with each other. There was no shortage of favors which were obtainable from greedy, scared or so easily intimidated female perps (and witnesses). But Jack told me that he 'wanted to keep some of his karma clean'. I suspect that much of that, at the time anyway, was about not wanting to get an STD from one of the wenches who came on to him, or whose favors could be purchased very cheaply. Or maybe he really did love his wife Peggy. A woman who he told me very little about until she left him, for reasons that it took me years to figure out and weasel out of him.

The horsemen seldom went out alone to clean up the streets of their beloved, and sucker-infested city. And when they did, the leader of every 'Mission to save the city from criminals, drugs and violence' was decided by a coin toss, usually tossed in the air by Karl Steiner, whose German root back to the Hessians in 1776 as well as the Fatherland in 1933. Karl was the older brother Jack never had, constantly boasting about the superiority of the Aryan mind to his non-Aryan Brethren. Karl was smart enough to restrict his insults to those of racial profiles other than his fellow Horsemen but often gave into the temptation to crush the skulls of the 'little fish' before they could lead him to the bigger fish. Jack tried discretely to teach Karl to be a little more patient with the little fish. Of course, the promises made to little fish were seldom kept. And that Texas Ranger motto of 'we always get our man' had to be maintained, even if that man had as little to do with any drug deal or murder than the Mench in the Moon. But, as any effective enforcer of Law and Order knows, putting 4 innocent perps into the system for each one that was guilty is just collateral damage for, of course, the greater good.

Jack's smarts were biological as well as psychological. He knew where and how hard to inflict blows on the human body that produced the most pain, with the least evidence left behind. And to obtain the most information available. Such did, in reality, lead to cleaning up the drug, violence and murder situation in Phili to a far greater level than the Mayor was able to promise. The Big Fish on top were exposed. Too many of them. Most of whom lived with, and as, 'respectable citizens'.

What goes up, goes....elsewhere

It was part of the cycle, going back to the days of Kings hiring privateers to do what their regular army and aristocratic officers could not do. Getting rid of their enforcers, one at a time so they could proceed with the business of Empire building anew. With new pirates.

The Feds decided that it was time for the Four Horsemen to be put to pasture, or turned into hamburger. Morey Manelli was Jack's best friend in that hand picked and privileged squad with whom he would share more secrets than with any other human being, even Peggy. The more than dynamic duo went on a deep sea fishing weekend off Chesapeake. They caught many fish. Got great tans. Ate and drank like kings. Told great stories about their too often neglected families, and how they would make things better for them at home.

Upon Jack's presenting himself to Peggy, along with a cooler-full of fish that he would clean up after taking a long shower himself, there were two men in black suits behind him. They played tapes of Jack talking with Morey about 'business'. Along with some doctored tapes and photos featuring Jack having been pleased by no less than 5 mistresses. Evidence that shocked, and horrified Peggy. Which her two kids believe as well.

"Brilliant work," Jack told the arresting officers as they led him to their green sedan. "But, one thing I'd like to know is how you got Morey to turn on me."

"Tax evasion charges," the head Officer informed Jack.

"That got Al Capone 20 years in the slammer," the second banana sunglassesed shithead wearing a badge on his lapel and crucifix around his neck added. "And which will probably be dropped in this case."

I recall when Jack told me about Morey, that his first instinct was to kill this Judas who convicted him to a lifetime of various crucifixions. But that there was something inside of him that said Morey was....weak. And that other voice inside saying that the Feds wanted Jack to think that his best friend turned him in to save a few thousand bucks on his tax return. They wanted Jack to turn into a vicious animal who would be openly prosecuted for doing on the spot for assault on his old friend or the arresting officers. No, Jack would not give these pigs the satisfaction. He was smarter than that. And, for the moment, strong enough to use his brain rather than brawn.

Change of residence

The wheels of justice did indeed turn as they were supposed to, according to the rules of the people on top rather than the consent of those on the bottom. Or maybe, as some would say, the mandates of the have and have nots were both served. Jack was sentenced to a decade in the slammer which, for most convicted Cops, would result in a visit from the Grim Reaper within the first year due to death sentence inflicted by fellow convicts. Despite the protective measures put in place for keeping him away from convicts who he put away, or was asked to put away.

As a person who has never been incarcerated, and still lives in constant fear of being so, I wonder....With all of the money put into building prisons, keeping people locked in them and maintaining programs that claim to 'rehabilitate' whoever is released from the system, maybe, just maybe, someone would shuffle some funds into designing a penal system whereby new entry members can go 'inside' with a new name, new slate and to 'roommates' who don't know them. And when asked 'what are you in for?' perhaps the newbie prisoner should be coached in saying 'littering'. And as for the details of that littering, maybe some respect from fellow inmates could be obtained by saying that 'I shit on the governor's lawn after he passed a tax bill that put me and everyone I knew one step closer to the poor house.'

But, gods forbid, such situations didn't exist for Jack. Or...maybe they weren't designed to. Jack's initiation into the prison system involved him being stabbed on no less than 8 occasions. When I, as a resident doctor doing community service, asked who did it, Jack refused to give out any names. When I asked WHY it happened, throughout the winces and moans of me pulling together flesh that had been torn apart by blunt objects made sharp (and thankfully not too infected), his answer...'karma's a bitch, doc.' Such led me to ask more 'why' questions of this prisoner who, according to the laws of biology and physics, should be dead.

We took an interest in each other far more than our job descriptors allowed. I somehow admired him. And I think, at first, he pitied me. Most particularly because of the lack of living that I did in my comfortable upbringing. One which was non-expressive, boring, lifeless procedural and humorless. "Dull Out Disease" he called it. "Spread by being too goddamn fucking technical, or even more so by being too 'goshdarn fudgeing' technical. Thinking that

‘above all do harm’ will somehow always lead you to being effective at being good. And confusing being good and nice with being Alive big A inside.’”

I never did anything wrong, I think, but did I ever do anything right? Or Assertive? I trusted that people who said they were good were good. And that when people did bad things, they still deserved some...goodness. Such is why I volunteered to do duty as a doc in an underfunded prison rather than a ritzy suburban hospital. Doctor Sam Nielson, my supervisor, told me that veteran prisoners are manipulative and that bleeding heart docs aren't. He seemed to be more interested in getting himself promoted out of his job than doing it well. And drove a far better fleet of cars than could be afforded with the wage of a public service doc. But, that's part of another story.

As for my situation with Jack, he knew more about the recreational and addictive properties of medications than I knew about the medical fairy tales (otherwise known as mechanisms of action) regarding how they were of benefit to the patient. But there was one thing I was very interested in...the anatomy of cruelty. Jack was the most intelligent prisoner I ever met as a doctor. There wasn't any author I read who he didn't know, and understand, better than I did. And how what they wrote related to what we had to deal with most....the world today.

There was a question that haunted me that I never asked Jack. Why did he enjoy doing bad things to people as much as I got satisfaction from doing good for others? He did ask me once, if I ever experienced the rush of bashing my fist into human flesh. I related, and confessed, that I did feel 'redemption' every time my right fist hit my left arm. And as for the musical accompaniment to such, there was the 'garbage song'. 'I am garbage, I am a piece of shit, I should die'. Who taught me that musical number, I never knew. But Jack suggested a change in lyric and tempo. He recommended slowing the latter down, saying that THEY are garbage, THEY are shit. He held back on 'THEY should die.'

Reversal of Roles and Identities

So, why was Jack becoming more of a doctor than a patient? Maybe because of someone else. Groosky was his name. Black, semi-literate, poor, unemployable (for the kind of wages

I get anyway), the perfect combination to get the maximal sentence for possession of crack with, of course, intent to sell. Two decades out of the womb and he was already locked into the big house for as many more to come. Someone whose profile I recalled for when he came in with a 'twisted gut' accompanied by 'bloody trots out of the ass' that turned out to be food poisoning, the human and biological source of such I he said he couldn't identify.

"Ya gotta let me go back to my cell before Groosky is assigned a new cellmate, Doc," Jack begged of me when I sewed up his most recent laceration. "We...need each other. He opened me up to becoming something else...something that scares and sustains me both at the same time."

There was something in Jack's normally 'I can handle anything because I have to' eyes that said something about Groosky had changed him. Changed him into something that was completely different than what he was before. Something he needed to become but didn't want to become. The most logical thing for me to do was, yes, to have a long talk with Groosky. Fortunately, or maybe not fortunately, Groosky turned every conversation about him into something about me. His kind eyes lured me into trusting what was behind them, sharing every secret I had, even the ones I didn't know about.

When it comes to people in need of health care and doctors, doctors are the boss. They hold the power of life and death in their hopefully not money grubbing hands. But when there are more than one doctors, the head doc holds far more than the power of life or death over his or her subordinates. Careers as well as Callings come into the mix. I'm not saying that Sam Nielson was a bossy doc. But there wasn't a single time when in the presence of a patient that he didn't 'quiz' me on the diagnosis and treatment, making me feel small and ineffective to the patient. And if my assessment of what went wrong biologically and what can be done about it was different than his, I would be degraded to less than a janitor. Then he would assign me to that patient, who sought opinions about his condition from the nurse, his fellow hospitalized inmates and any visiting cockroach before asking mine.

In order to get Groosky's trust, and honest answers regarding his connection to Jack, I had to see this 20 something poster child recipient of life's bad luck alone, and being sure that I didn't let him deflect the conversation to things about me yet again. Having graduated from medical school five years later than 'Doctor Sam' did, I used the technology card. I informed my boss, and in some cases anyway, mentor, that there was a clinical trial going on regarding unique neurochemical imbalances in drug addicts and those with addictive personalities, and

that Groosky was randomly chosen from the prison populations in no less than five states run by 'Atlantian Pharmaceuticals'. And that I was asked by the Pharm rep to interview him.

Nielson gave his approval for such, very enthusiastically, saying that 'prisoners should be used as guinea pigs to develop and test drugs that law abiding citizens will benefit from.' The only condition he laid on me was that 'if this new company's latest drug works or their diagnostic marker is real, and it gets to market, I get told about it before you tell the company running the trial.'

Of course, there was no such entity as Atlantian Pharmaceuticals, but I do admit that I thoroughly enjoyed informing 'know it all Nielson' (as he was called behind his back by everyone) about the research I did with 'eligin 3' while I was doing independent study at Harvard and Yale. And blabbering to him about the biological basis for the mechanisms of action of the mythical drug, some of those mechanisms of action actually being real, and beyond the scope of Nielson's medical knowledge.

So, I was given permission to bring Groosky to what I considered as my medical clinic, after Neilson left for a golfing weekend. Officially it was for a medical exam and blood work. Unofficially, it was to see how Groosky and Jack looked at, and into, each other. It was Jack who shot questions at me, particularly when I asked Groosky about his addiction to crack, which I needed to fill in the fake forms Nielson would be asking for. To every question I asked Groosky, Jack interjected an answer. They included--- "That's personal, doc." "His business not yours" and the one that hit me hardest, "You were born with a silver spoon in your overfed mouth, he had to struggle to get week old bread from the fucking bakery". And finally..."Everyone's addicted to something, so tell me and Groosky what you're addicted to that pulls you back into the black hole of stagnation, non-productivity and self-destruction?"

Did I owe Jack or Groosky an explanation? Yes, and no. But I owed it to myself to come clean about it. Something that was...odd, but just as prosecutable in any professional hearing or courtroom. "It's....this," I said to Jack, picking up a pair of clippers. "Getting a hard on when I see someone, ideally a woman who doesn't want it, getting a buzz cut. Or...." I hesitated.

"Doing it on yourself?" Jack surmised, as I pushed my shaking fingers through my thick, long top knot.

“Ain’t so bad,” Groosky added running his fingers over the stubbled kinky hair atop his head. “It grows back.”

“Memories of past lifetime as an SS orderly at the concentration camps?” Jack proposed.

“Or being a Buddhist monk?” Groosky added.

Jack then asked me about other fetishes and phobias I had, Groosky riding tandem with his own remarks about them with a natural rhythm that rivalled Burns and Allen, Abbot and Costello as well as Hawkeye and BJ on MASH. It included my fear of heights, birds and clowns. I can’t say that the two life-taught uncertified shrinks got me to the inner truth of where those phobias came from. But they got me closer to untying those knots in my brain circuitry so that I could perhaps drive over bridges, visit an aviary and attend a circus without overdosing myself with Xanax. It felt right to be a patient rather than a doctor. Until Neilson came in, unexpectedly.

“What are ‘these’ doing here?” my boss sneered regarding Jack and Groosky.

“Getting healed, and healing,” I replied.

“And what is NOT in here?” Neilson said, throwing me a cardboard box missing medications. “It was full this morning. Schedule one and two medications that...”

“---Were not taken by Doctor Nick,” Jack said, in my defense.

“Or sold to any ETs who morphed their way into these walls to take back to their leader,” Groosky offered. ”

“Or sold on the streets to get gold chains they could use as rocket fuel,” Jack added. “So they could go home, or high tail it to...”

“---Guard!” Nielson shouted out.

Four behemoth COs came into the room. As they walked towards me, I self-observed every muscle in my shaking body tensing up. And as they pushed me aside, I felt my teeth clench when seeing handcuffs on my two new friends, pulling them out the door.

“They didn’t do anything!” I shouted out to Nielson. “And I didn’t do anything either!” I continued, piecing together that Nielson blamed shortages of drugs on inmates and COs he didn’t like. Both of whom were transferred to other facilities, so I heard. “And if you’re thinking what I think you are, or did what I think you did,” I put forth, boldly. “Because YOU have a habit, that’s biologically based, Sam” I advanced, attempting to be helpful.

My boss took in a deep breath, pondered a whole lot of option behind his averted eyes, then fired venom into my too wide open eyes. “I’m Doctor Nielson! Head of this hospital. And YOU are...”

“...Fired,” I surmised, taking off my stethoscope, handing it over to Sam like it was a sword at the end of a battle where I surrendered to save my own men and scalp.

“Or worse,” Nielson said. “Depending on what the investigation shows. But...” Nielson broke into a sadistic laugh, made more frightening because it was about ME this time. “Worst that can happen, you share a cell with Jack and Groosky. Write a book between the three of you that will never be published, and certainly not read by anyone who matters.”

After forfeiting my lab coat, I was allowed to walk out the door to the clinic, then the prison gates. I felt naked, or about to be naked.

Change of Venue, Job Descriptions and Callings

Weeks passed. I tried to get paying work as a doctor in no less than 10 clinics, including volunteer operations where the pay was minimal wage. Overdue bills became final notices

accumulated in the mailbox, then a subpoena to appear in court. But amongst the mail I did get was an offer from a lawyer to defend me for free. From the firm of Jack Baird and Groosky.

So, to get out of jail, I sought legal advice from those who were behind bars. It was all legal. Jack's experience as a Cop working with lawyers to put people into jail and Groosky's street experience in putting blame on people who were guilty, or who needed to be shown to be guilty, was invaluable.

Together, we got the goods on Nielson. Not enough to put him away, it was enough to make him seek work, position and power elsewhere, leaving me as the provisional doc at the prison. A position which I used to work with Jack and Groosky to help people with drug addiction rather than punish them for seeking pharmacological relief from the agonies of poverty, physical pain, learned helplessness and hopelessness.

It was a pooled endeavor, involving old drugs that I knew about and new ones I developed, along with talk therapy and, of course, Jesus from Jack and Groosky's end.. Or Buddha. Or Allah. Indeed, I started to believe and feel Jesus entering sessions with drug addicts when his name was mentioned. Or not mentioned.

As for my part of the project, I felt myself becoming one of those 'formulators of psychological theories' regarding the physiology of cruelty, the pathology of addiction and the neurochemistry of learned helplessness. Until a new warden took over. A new boss who, for reasons she never revealed, fired me from my job, released Jack on early parole and transferred Groosky to another facility. One where, so I heard from Jack, he was resolved to served out the rest of his 10 year sentence by being of service to fellow inmates, and COs in need of counseling. A situation which, as Groosky said, allowed him to be 'of more use on the inside than being a visitor from the outside.'

So, Jack and I were free. But free to do what? I was free to write books describing how prisons really worked, or didn't work, for rehabilitation along with the inalienable right to get countless numbers of rejection slips from publishers. And of course I was free to create blueprints of new biomedical devices and molecular drawings drug formulations which lacked funders. Jack was free to apply for any counseling or security job he wanted, which he went after enthusiastically. He was rewarded with a plethora of 'you don't quite fit out criteria' notices from smiling officials hiding behind large desks and secured pensions. Why each of

our attempts to earn a living legally were quenched, I did not know. But perhaps the question was not 'what' is on our records that made us un-hirable was the wrong one to ask. It was more like 'WHO' was blocking us from making money in a world where, theoretically anyway, there are a million ways to make money. The most obvious answer to that would be, for me anyway, Sam Nielson, MD, Ph.D. For Jack, well, he told me stories about dirty Cops and powerful Politicians who he knew too much about, neglecting to relate anything except their first names.

Then, one day, when we were sitting at a bar after a long day of pounding the pavement, the soles of our shoes nearly worn down to nothing, I was presented with a flask of 100 year old oozo from my Greek grandfather's home town. The bartender then delivered a large bottle of 80 year old Scotch bearing the address of his Scots-Irish bootlegger grandmother in keeping with Jack's ancestry. On the back of the labels were the same messages for both of us. "More of that to come if you consider my offer," they read, mine in Greek, Jack's in Gaelic.

I asked the bartender who it came from. He pointed to a woman at the end of the bar, a middle aged woman with long black hair, brown eyes and a face that, as I commented to Jack, 'looked familiar'. He replied, as he poured himself a glass of the whiskey, 'they all do'. After downing the better part of his shotglass, then sampling some of my oozo, Jack wrote something on a napkin, gave it to the bartender and, with as much disinterest as he could muster, requested that it be given to the mystery woman.

I asked Jack what was in the note. His reply, 'our counter offer.'

It was a strange way to bargain with a woman who reminded me of the dream mate who I let go when I was 19 and, as I saw in the few family pictures Jack showed me, was a spitting but significantly older image of his now ex-wife.

The woman read the note, smiled, then made a phone call. Approaching us from behind was a tall man dressed way too well for the establishment we were in, reeking of musk cologne, whose shadow we could feel. I could, anyway. He laid a business card in front of Jack. Upon looking at it, Jack knocked on the bar, informing him that I should get a card as well.

The name on the card was K. David Hillary in gold print that stood out from the page. His company, 'Davinos International Conglomerates' with Swiss addresses in German, Italian and French. He handed Jack a passport. Asked if I had one. I told him that I let mine lapse. He said 'no problem', handing me another one with my name on it. And picture. One in which I had a large mustache, which he gave to me from his pocket.

And on the other side of the Pond....

Davinos was one of those companies that was too rich and effective to be featured in Fortune 500. A non-offensively multifaceted company that was, of course, located in a neutral location where everything gets done but no one notices it. A place where effective business is done personally and professionally, without fanfare, emotional excess or....yes, humor. Talking here about Switzerland.

Davinos invested in many ventures, including biomedical devises, new pharmaceuticals and herbs that worked better than synthesized drugs. The company had the ability to bypass the usual regulations for testing the safety of new remedies. Such is why David was interested in me coming into the company. But one condition was that Jack would be instrumental in other aspects of Davinos. Such included a sure fire method for people to invest their life savings so their retirement could be an upscale experience rather than downsizing inflicted by life on most of those doomed and/or blessed to live past 90. My health promoting miracles would keep them alive past the big 90, Jack's assistance in them building their portfolio would insure that the later part of life was Golden years rather than Rusted decades. And...the unifying economic formula that only David knew worked. Indeed, Davinos was so efficient that the company redefined currency several times, pulling out of one form of wampum with big time winnings before the next investors who came in lost their shirts. Competition at its best! Which worked until...three retirees came into the office in Geneva.

One of them thanked me for the drug that enabled him to beat MS, or at least keep it at bay. Another was thankful for my cardiovascular detection devise to extend the triple bypass beyond the 15 year 'guarantee' offered by the surgeons. The remaining senior citizen beat cancer for the third time aided by, as she said, 'the good Lord providing her with the work I did with interleukin and applied bio-elective fields, which finally made it into press due to Davinos inventing a new University in which I was an Associate Professor.

The trio of senior citizens were thankful for good health, though they were lacking one thing--the money to use it. Each one of them were now broke, thanks to the investment program they entered with Jack's recommendation.

I confronted Jack about it. He confronted David, who was out of town, just as more investors who lost everything overnight came into the office. "It wasn't me," Jack told me regarding the reason why hard working citizens lost their money in the privacy of his office, a perceived privacy anyway. "The mathematics of David's stocks said that they couldn't fail," he said.

"And the mathematics of his own portfolio?" I asked. "And yours?" I considered asking, but didn't. Not yet anyway.

"Hmmm..." Jack said, contemplating something. "I knew this very theoretical physicist in the grey bar motel who, well...." He didn't tell me any more details. "I'll give him a call. Give HIS formula to the right people and bank accounts and..."

How and why Jack was able to extract money from David's account and relocate it into those of the people he robbed, I didn't know. And didn't ask. But as for Jack's personal account, when we went out for lunch for three weeks he kept asking me to pay the bill. And ordered less food each time for himself.

But there was one question I needed to have answered. "Groosky," I said while I filled my gullet with hamburger and Jack tried to trick his stomach into thinking it was filled with chips and taco sauce. "Is there any way we can bring him over here, or start something between the three of us somewhere else?"

"Yes to the latter," Jack said. "After we do what we have to do with, and to, the former."

A Noble Experiment

The headlines I read when returning to the US three weeks after leaving Davinos featured David in a scandal that landed him in jail. Groosky's early release from a 'three strikes and you're locked in for the duration' was facilitated by another deal Jack initiated. As for the hows, he said. 'if I told you they'd have to kill you'. Who the 'they' was, well, another explanation of that I probably didn't want to know about and couldn't understand.

There was one thing that Groosky and Jack were experts in. Groosky was a master at selling drugs. Jack had been an expert in seizing them, selling them to selected bidders, and planting them on suspects who had not yet accumulating enough misdemeanors to be arrestable for a felony or two, or three. As for me, my focus was still on finding the endorphin that made you an instrument of evil and the one that made you a channel for Enlightenment and, as only one of its expressions, kindness. So, we found a warehouse that was producing 'designed to be broken just after the warrantee ran out' computers, and converted it into a laboratory for me, and a rehab center for everyone else in the world.

When trying to solve a problem, logic says to figure out what caused it. As for drug addiction, according to Jack, for those who get 20 year sentences, the main cause of being hooked on dope is poverty. One gets more money selling crack than being a clerk at the 7/11 dispensing crackers. Or a priest selling communion crackers which, if you believe in them, lands you in a comfy portion of strawberry fields. For those with six figure bank accounts who get probation or three weekends in a county private jail cell the major reason for being a servant of the pharmaceuticals is boredom. We made money doing the right thing, till we tried to do more than the right thing which landed us with sharing canned beans from the dollar store. Such was the inevitable fate of a rehab and counseling center that only charged people what they could afford, or said they could afford anyway.

The Cost of Doing the Right Thing

I was at a loss as to how to make money, particularly while doing the right thing. So, logic dictated that the opposite might be true. How to make money doing the 'wrong' thing? Wrong being based in being clever and bad rather than wise and 'good'. Way too much 'good' did I have, the evidence of such being how I was ripped off for any medical devises or treatments I sent out to the world. With business partners who were all about business and not healing. It was a world, after all, where patients were called 'health consumers', even by

nurses, the last refuge for those who cared about people rather than being fascinated with diseases.

'Why can't we create our own Davinos here in Secaucus, New Jersey?' I proposed to Jack and Groosky after we all came out of the bank, having cashed in three years of our retirement money to keep Atlantian Rehab and Research center going. I pointed out that no one is going to take care of us if we have the misfortune of living till we are in our 90s, to which Groosky said 'God and life will,' his remark. 'Or our fellow humanoids will,' Jack's reply.

They both then gave me the 'sparrow' speech. The one where Jesus said that the sparrows keep coming back to roost every spring with what Mother Nature supplies them with, and that we are more important in the heavenly Father's heart than those birds, so, why worry about it?"

I pointed out that Mother Nature was a far distance away from Secaucus, New Jersey, industrialization even with 'eco restraints' still making it the smelliest exit on the New Jersey Turnpike. But, they laughed it off.

I somehow felt scared for my own short and long term financial picture, and intensely responsible for Jack's and Groosky's. And had to do something desperate, or at least very different, internally and externally.

At the universities I studied at, you could learn about anything if you applied yourself. Except, of course, how to make money. 'There are a million ways to make money,' Jack claimed so many times when the subject turned up. 'You just have to be in the right frame of mind to see where you can find it,' Groosky would add, in tandem with a musical rhythm that my two 'professors' sang so well together.

"Or steal it?" I finally dared to ask Jack, and Groosky at our thanksgiving dinner at an alfresco public park table over a feast of three day old bread and close to rancid turkey slices. "We live in a capitalist world where if one person gets richer, another gets poorer," I pointed out. "And, no pun intended, competition trumps cooperation in the marketplace. At least with respect to material gains and loses."

“True enough,” Jack replied. “But how much money is worth depends on how much it goes around.” With his self-taught wit and instincts to understand things about the world that didn’t get into the text books, he presented the argument that if money is not spent, it becomes worthless. And that the illusion of soon to be obtained wealth more often than not leads to such becoming a reality. After which he stated that in the interim between envisioning an upscale economy and obtaining it, one has to learn how to do more with less.

Such was a typical discussion with Jack. If you made one point, he would, for the sake of making things ‘interesting’, take the opposite position on the issue at paw. And somehow show the validity of both points of view. But, my growling belly said it was time for me to take initiative. Or Jack’s projection that we would take our innovative techniques to assist people with addictions and societal-induced poverty ‘to the streets’ would involve us living with them on those concrete slabs.

A few days later, while the lights were still working in the warehouse we had rented and were only two months behind paying rent for, I recalled tales Jack told me about the ‘bad old days’. When he was a bad-ass were loaded with stories about how those who worked outside of the law were never in want of anything. Except, of course, more money, since rich fucks were always desperately in need and want of more money. It was a game they played and became addicted to. But one thing that was most common with regard to how the money was ‘earned’---‘Sell the people what they want, and stop giving, or offering, them what they need.’

I went through the lists of blueprints in my overstuffed desk at home as well as the inventory in my head regarding medical devises and treatments that are more about giving people what they want rather than life enriching and extending things they needed. Was there something you could offer people that they wanted that was diametrically opposed to what they needed? Something they would pay top dollar for now, that would not involve their lawyer suing you about later? The initial joy of recreational pharmaceuticals was already taken, with us as well as our competitors being able to make money on opiod addicts who wanted or needed to kick the habit.

The Magic Solution

There was something else that only a neuroscientist could come up with--Composing music which would make them bob their heads to a jingle and buy whatever toxin it promoted. A specific formula of notes which would feed the ego with empty calories, leaving the brain and soul empty. And, so I told myself, if it went too far, you could always feed them Mozart or Beethoven to bring them back to normal again. AND there was something else in this scheme. The bigger or meaner the ego of the 'lab rat', the more you would inactivate their earnings in the marketplace. Yes, it would be a service to humanity. A way to make assholes and shitheads on top of the financial totem pole broke, insane or, perhaps, convertible to become one of 'us', on 'our' time table of course.

I studied the most catchy jingles for the most useless products I could find. Along with marching tunes for Armies that suffered the most losses in the most futile wars, the Russian and Nazi German marching tunes matching most closely the formula I came up with. Yes, a scientific investigation into cajoling people into doing what they least wanted or needed to do. So you could make drowning people plead with you to pay top dollar to buy more water.

But such an invention would be used eventually to get people in need to sign up for our detox programs and buy my medical devices. Both hook them in with what they want and give them what they need later. The tunes needed a voice, which was provided by Groosky after I convinced him to lend his voice to the songs. Indeed, his singing voice made Paul Robson sound like Bob Dylan on crack and quaaludes. Jack was against the idea, saying that it would fall into the wrong hands. 'The worst of the worst', he warned me.

It was then that I got a call from Morey Manelli, one of the 'Four Horsemen' who, with Jack, had 'cleaned up' the drug problem in Phili by arresting and convicting the innocent and sometimes the guilty, in the service of the rich and powerful. The rat who wore a wire so that the Feds could arrest, and convict, Jack. Of course, Morey didn't introduce himself as such to me. I believed that his real name was Pastor Orville Russell. And that he would insert lyrics into the songs that would trick people who did so many wrong things in the service of Satan into devotees who did the right thing for Jesus, and, most importantly, humanity. And...our rehab center. But, a condition of being funded for this money making endeavor was that Jack would not be told about it.

It worked. We could sell anything to anyone. Until Jack saw one of Pastor Russell's infomercials. He informed me about who Morey really was, forgiving him for wearing a wire that was used to frame him. But, Jack thanked Morey for giving him the chance to see, first

hand, what life was like at the bottom of the totem pole. And claiming what Socrates said....'Wisdom leads to compassion, ignorance inevitably produces cruelty'.

As to how to halt that cruelty....I had to take responsibility for what I did for short term monetary gain, which led to things far worse than any economic depression. Morey saw to it that I confessed my roll in arming no less than ten countries run by dictators with musical weapons that enabled them to sacrifice most of their own armies while nearly decimating the civilian populations of neighboring countries. Law suits DID come in for overuse of products people wanted, because we told them they needed them. And, I landed in jail. Visited by Jack, and, after having been pardoned for his part in the musical scam, Groosky.

What goes around...hits you in the face

Time passed in an interesting way for me in the grey bar motel. But I didn't find a Groosky. I had to find Groosky inside myself. Which I eventually did. Jack, who had obtained a law degree while I was earning other unofficial diplomas of life, arranged for my early release, which I didn't deserved. But I took it. Since, after all, redemption is possible for everyone. Except, maybe, people like Morey Manelli. And Doctor Sam Neilson. Some things, and people, you can't fix. But, you still have to try.

JOHN AND THE COKE

Why a High School reunion was scheduled in Vancouver for people who had spent their formative years in the Interior of BC was a mystery to John Denne, official Chief of his Native Band in 'cooperative' years, unofficial advisor to anyone who would listen in destructively competitive ones. And why he was named as the honored speaker, even more. Most of his classmates were White, enjoyed indoor sports more than outdoor adventures and had on more than on occasion, even when he won at one of those sporting events, referred to him as Tonto, a name that was Spanish for 'stupid'. John would call those pale faced Lone Ranger Wannabees kemosavi, saying it was an honorable name for 'the best kind of friend you can get other side of the tracks', when it actually meant "shitface" in Mohawk.

John had declined going to High School reunions before, since he was one of those people who when finished with a place never wanted to return. And, of course, he would never want to be part of a club that would have him as a member, a situation that made him an effective rather than popular Native Band leader. But this time it was Miss Norma 'Granny' Gladstone who extended the invitation. She had taught calculus to the few who could handle it, and arithmetic to the many who needed it. Way back then she looked and sounded like a spinster 19th century Oklahoma schoolmarm, her (rumor had it anyway) 3 foot long brown hair tightened neatly in a bun, complimented by a plain white blouse buttoned to her thin neck and a brown skirt that fell down to her calves. An easy target for ridicule to kids in the mid 1970s who moved their way up the 'who's the coolest' totem pole by competing with jokes and mocking act outs made about her while she was listening, and as well as when she left the room.

From an early age, John was not clever enough to be the class clown, be it in a classroom of brown or white skinned kids. And there was something about 'Miss' (who would never become a Mrs. or Ms.) Norma that demanded John's respect. Not because of her age, but because of what she knew. And because of her inner passion to spread the brilliance of her mostly self-taught mathematical mind to those bold, defiant or responsible enough to carry on the flame. The essence of that flame was in the calculus equations that fascinated John the first time he saw a differential sign. To feel and be able to predict how change will happen is extraordinary. To be able to adapt to change, or influence where that differential is going was and is...something that becomes necessary if you really wanted to be an assess rather than liability to the world.

After getting into his truck at the Merritt gas station, checking the gauges on his car, and wolfing down the better part of 'Genuine Canadian Beef Jerky' made in China, John gazed yet again at the post card Miss Gladstone had sent him along with the details about the Re-Union. The letter said "It took some time, but the assholes and idiots who put you down, after hearing about everything you did after you graduated, want to elevate you up. Why? I don't know. But I don't want those facts and embellished tall tales about how you transformed yourself and so many others to go to waste. While I go to...well..whatever happens next." It was accompanied by a picture of Miss Norma with white hair, a gaunt face and wrinkled arms, contrasted by bright blue eyes sitting in front of a chalkboard on a backwoods porch filled with mathematical equations. "My take on it so far" was scrawled on the top of it in Latin, Cree and colorfully calligraphied English. She defined some of the variables in the calculus equations as 'people', 'economy', 'stupidity', 'Defiance', 'Energy' and 'Light'.

John could understand some of the mathematical jokes, and felt the rest. He looked up at the sky, noting the bright blue sky behind him was becoming a bit grey, then felt a tinge of cold wind blowing onto the back of his neck. He sniffed the air, noting that there were no engine smells of concern. Then he looked at the clock. An Eagle hovered above him.

"I'll race ya down the hill," he said to the bird after which he rolled up the window and proceeded forward towards Vancouver. On cue, the eagle proceeded to head West, in circles and loops.

As is always the perception of drivers on roads like the Coquihalla Highway, you often don't know if you are going up in elevation or going down. The CBC broadcast of Beethoven's 6th Symphony, the Pastoral which painted a portrait of a worry free bucolic spring day, faded in and out on John's radio until it was replaced with static. Small flakes of 'sugarplums' on the windshield turned into droplets of white crystals revealing a constellation of patterns on the glass of his windshield before they were wiped away by the about to get stuck at any time wipers. The grey payment in front of John acquired a thin sheet of white, something unexpected in late April anywhere else but which he knew he should have expected here. The sheet of white turned into a blanket of slush, accompanied by waves of thick snow being blown onto the windshield faster than they could be pushed off to the side. Yes, it was time for the eagle to win the race down to Vancouver. And to pull over. And to take a nap.

The two latter tasks were done successfully. The third, to wake up to a drivable road with a refreshed mind was another matter. John found himself drifting of into the Huya Aniya, the alternative universe experienced during 'dream sleep' named such by the Yaqui Indians where,

if you are bold enough, you do things that change the events in the so called 'real' world. Events in John's life shifted in front of his closed eyes as he envisioned himself stuck on a wagon in a deep snowstorm. It was being rocked by people from his past. His biological parents who apologized for leaving the world of the living too early. His sister Caroline, who was angry at him for not protecting her as he pledged to at their parent's funeral. His wife Madeline who said she wasted the best years of her life waiting for what he said he would give her. His son Sky as a young and old man, yelling at John to get up out of the wagon and lend a hand to get it and everyone else in it moving. His new friend Bob, who sat next to him in the wagon, just as cold and helpless as John was, telling John that homeless genius Marvin would figure out a way to get us home. Gus, John's rival at the Band who came by on a skimobile offering him a ride out, but with a big time favor he'd have to pay at some time of HIS choosing. And of course, Miss Gladstone, who finally, clad as a classical music conductor, leaped onto the buckboard, tapped her baton on it, quieting everyone down, then saying 'Differential Divertimento in D Major', after which John saw musical notes leaping in front of his eye in a composition that was both contemporary and traditional at the same time. And then, he felt a push from behind. Alone in the wagon connected to a sleeping engine.

John woke up from the dream, not knowing if it was real or not. Behind him was a tow truck, pulling him out of a snowbank. The road ahead was clear, passable enough for a truck to get through anyway. "That's the Coke, alright," a bearded man in orange overalls with tattoos covering his arms said to John with a big, all is well smile. "If ya don't like the weather, wait ten minutes and it will change."

"But," John said to the tow truck company owner. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"Ya seemed preoccupied, and was telling me to fuck off every time I tried to get you up. Like you were doing something important," he said. "Or maybe preparing to do something important?" he continued, as if knowing something that John thought not possible by White men. Most of them anyway.

"Well, eh, thanks," John said as he pulled out his wallet and handed the senior member of the tow truck company a fistful of money. "Tell me when to stop," he said, paying out in individual tens and twenties till the rescuer put his hand up.

"Stop there, pay it forward to everyone else, Professor Denne," he said.

Why and how the tow truck operator knew John's name, and most beloved title, John did not know. What the tow truck operator did know was that there were more cars in the ditch that needed to be pulled out. And what John knew was that he was late to give a calculus lesson to people he went to school with, and their progeny. But one thing in the many universes John had been catapulted into in the last 24 hours was true. Indeed he was being watched for maybe the last, and most important time, by Norma 'Granny' Gladstone.'

There were certain numbers for birthdays, anniversaries, births and deaths that had significance in the White and, truth be told, Indigenous world. The reunion as the big three 0 after graduation, coinciding with the students approaching the big, and self-assessment requiring, five 0. And for teachers, particularly Norma 'Granny well before her time' Gladstone somewhere in her 80s. She no doubt had experienced teaching John's generation, and the kids spawned from his classmates, the ones who decided not leave the nest or those who retreated back to it after exploring the big, bad world beyond the town they grew up in, or, so they said anyway, to 'take better care of their aging parents'. There was no shortage of people in any of those categories.

The reception table at the Hilton Conference room was neatly arranged with pictures of John and his classmates at the time of graduation, along with the names of those who had posed for the camera with a variety of expressions. John didn't recognize any of the pictures, including his own. But he did recognize the woman dispensing them.

'Granny Norma' still proudly presented herself as an outdated 19th century schoolmarm, with a plain white blouse buttoned to the top, a brown wool midi skirt, her brilliantly open blue eyes behind wire rimmed bifocal glasses. Her once tight face had many wrinkles, the skin around her thinner than he remembered neck loose. Her hair, only a bit thinned out, was unashamably white, but it was now loose, flowing down to the small of her back. "Miss...no...Professor Gladstone," he said, promoting her to that rank which the inferiors above her at Simon Frasier High perhaps had given her. "You haven't changed a bit," he said by way of a compliment thinking about what he would look like when he hit the big eight 0.

"And you have, for better, worse and a whole lot of conditions in between, John, so I hear," she replied.

“Hear from who?” John gently pressed, feeling himself being seen, found out and lectured to, all at once. “A lot of people have different opinions about me these days,” he continued, flash-remembering his friends, enemies and rivals in the Red and White world.

“And YOUR opinion about you?” she challenged.

“An educated man, or woman, values facts over opinions,” he said. “A wise Sage said and wrote that.”

“Spinoza, Socrates, Kant or Socrates?” she asked, scratching her chin.

“You said that,” John reminded his first real mentor, and role model. The only real White one.

“Reminder appreciated,” her reply. “And,” she continued, turning to John. “Thank you for coming. Particularly this year.”

“This year being...?” John inquired.

“The first year of the rest of our lives, or maybe the last,” her reply. With that, she lifted up the picture bearing John’s likeness at 18 along with his name tag with a shaking hand, her fingers knarled into what was probably painful arthritis. “But, the last act of the opera has to be the best. And...” she broke into a wide smile. “Usually is. Now, time for you to mingle. And to remember the most important thing I tried to teach all of you.”

“That pi is a number that is never completely accurate, the inverse of infinity is not zero and that every equation on the board or in life can be reduced to three variables?” John recalled, confirming that they had always been true.

“And that everyone is everyone else’s teacher,” her reply. “Including...yes, them!” she said, pointing to a crowd of overweight Caucasian nearly 50 year olds stuffing their faces around a

table reeking of cheap mayonnaise, chocolate, rancid cold cuts and excessively sweet, most probably firewater spiked, fruit punch.

John allowed his eyes to peruse those people who, according to Miss/Professor Gladstone, all requested that he finally come to at least one re-union. No matter how much he tried to recognize the faces, they didn't register with anything in his memory. Perhaps because he didn't want to remember their faces. But he did remember their names. And his presence was requested. But for what purpose?

When John turned around to Professor, Miss or maybe now just Norma Gladstone, she was gone. Laying in front of where she had been was John's picture as an 18 year old 'something' and his nametag, which would be pinned on the chest of him now as 'something else'.

As John walked towards the crowd, he prepared to reveal with wit and economy of words how he had been educated by others and how others had educated him over the last 30 years. But, what did he really do? What fights with ignorance and cruelty had he won on his own, and which ones did life declare him as a winner because the opponent gave up or forfeited the contest? Yes, he braced himself for the 'boast fest' starting with Larry, now Lawrence Thomkins, once generously follicled with an oversized Elvis pompadour and now bald as a melon, now clad in a thousand dollar suit. He had been the leader of the 'Four Professors', the highest ranking 'Cool Club' by most anyone's metric.

"Hey, John," he boldly said with a bold, deep voice. "Glad you could make it! How are you doing?"

"Not bad," John's reply, feeling invaded by that 'how are you' greeting that was asked so commonly everywhere, the inquirer not really interested in or wanting a real answer. "You?"

Lawrence boasted about his big investment portfolio, big contacts in the stock market and government legislature providing valuable info about insider trading and big salary. As for what that money was buying—nothing. Clearly, Lawrence had no idea that making a lot of money is not a goal, but a means to getting a goal. As for that goal was, be it a big house, big car and big happy family, Lawrence said nothing when asked about it, diverting the conversation to his money making schemes and successes.

As for the second in command of the Four Professors, Eddy Klassen boasted about the popularity of his mainstream fiction books about characters he would never have the courage to actually be. With each sip and gulp of the spiked punch, he related how each of his books sucked. And how easy it was to write them. "But, better to be popular and liked than to be accomplished, innovative and right, right?" he asked John at the end of his pre-rehearsed rant.

"In some places and for some people, I suppose," John's reply to that claim, which he vehemently disagreed with. He turned to a woman with long alluringly curled blonde hair, shapely legs, big breasts and a large Adam's Apple poorly hidden by a loose scarf. "Jack Newman?" John inquired, looking at the name tag of the once superstud very male member of the Four Professor Posse, who got any girl he wanted with more ease than any of his buds, and most notably, John.

"Now Jackie," the proud reply. Jackie extended her right bear sized nail polished hand to John, pulling him into an embrace that the Indigenous Chief didn't expect. Yes, John was curious about what was between Jackie's legs.

"I traded it in for a vagina," Jackie said, anticipating his inquiry. "And...yes, I have dreamed about maybe, ya know, me coming to visit you," the once man's man who was now a woman continued. "My therapist told me that it is important for me to come here as, the new me," Jackie whispered into John's ear. "But you, I know, accept who and what I am, and always have been, right?"

"Yes, I do, of course," John said, feeling himself telling more of a white lie than the truth.

"So, you're single now I heard?" Jackie asked.

"I'm...eh...married," John said, advancing another lie.

"Too bad," Jackie lamented.

"To my work," John added, feeling the need to be truthful.

“Even worse,” Jackie replied with a ‘can’t have everything or maybe very much of anything’ sigh.. She released John from the hug she, perhaps even in High School, wanted to get lost in with him.

John asked the crowd about the whereabouts of the fourth of the Four Professors, Wesley O’Leary. Silence overtook them all. The Catholics made the sign of the cross with an open hand moving from the left to right shoulder with bowed heads. . Greek VERY Orthodox raised Theo Diamantis bowed his head even more, joining three fingers and moving them from right to left “Sorry,” John said to the crowd. “I didn’t know.”

“Because you didn’t try to find out?” John heard from a woman behind him. A real woman. Christine Halson, unlike everyone else, looked almost exactly like her the picture in the 30 year old yearbook, as well as the image John held in his mind. “But,” she told John after approaching him as he left the banquet table. “You didn’t have to know.” She related how Wesley joined the Army, acquired three medals for bravery fighting bad guys, and gals, abroad, along with cancer from chemicals he was assigned to use to fight terrorists en route to getting ‘some fresh air’ outside the meeting room. “But he rose up the ranks within four years from being a private to being a Colonel,” she continued to John, placing her arm under his elbow. “And, I heard, you rose up the ranks in YOUR world. Your home tribe. Respected and listened to by other tribes. Even White ones. Which makes us...ya know...”

“...Allies in the Cause of fighting racism and destruction of the earth by the Corporate money grubbing, people oppressing machine?” John politely interjected with a smile to the woman who had been the girl he always wanted to be with, and work with. Someone who could listen to music with, and make music with. “Comrades in the struggle for REAL Global justice and healing? Dedicated to the credo that everyone should give according to their abilities and take according to their needs?”

“Adversaries,” Christine replied. “Industrial and economic progress is change. Positive change. And it’s might not right that makes the world go round. But...I suppose without Capitalist racist, as your buds say, assholes like me, revolutionaries like you would just be sitting on your ass, listening to 60s folk songs and reminiscing about a ‘love is all you need’ world from our youth that never existed.”

“Got a point there,” John said, after a thoughtful delay, measuring his words and tone with more care than he remembered infusing into a conversation back home. “But, there has to be some common ground between us,” he proposed.

“All the cells in both of our bodies have 46 Chromosomes,” she related.

“Provided by Mother Nature and evolution,” John noted with a whimsical smile.

“The Heavenly father, and Creation that did take place in seven days!” Christine barked back, after which her phone rang. The conversation was all about stocks, dividends, and investment plans, causing her to be worried, then obsessed with turning financial setbacks into a success. Yes, indeed, the Cree word Munios was an accurate word for White folks. . ‘Those who have gone mad in the pursuit of money’. Something that John, as a Shuswap Chief, should insert into his band’s dictionary.

There was one lingering question John had. “Why the fuck did Norma Gladstone insist that he come to this reunion?” Perhaps she knew it would be her last. But what was the final thing she wanted, and needed, to teach him? A straight answer was required.

He went to the table where he first saw her upon entering the conference hall. There was an envelope there, with his name on it. ‘To open when you are alone, which I know is...always,’ it read in English, the language that John was forced to speak after being placed in the upper level White educational system by the Band as a kid because he ‘had so much potential’. And in German, which he taught himself so he could read Einstein’s mathematical, scientific and political works in their original form. And Cherokee, a language put into written form by Indigenous Visionaries in Georgia nearly two centuries ago.

Inside of the envelope was a simple equation. It was derived from complex calculus above it that John could follow with ease, and the kind of pleasure he hadn’t experienced since he had to deal only with arithmetic of the masses after his formal post secondary education.

“Intelligence times Effort equals Effective Compassion.”

John took Professor Gladstone's advise for the rest of the reunion. He politely and respectfully listened to his fellow classmates who were, because their various mistakes and virtues, his teachers, doing more listening than talking. Some of it was even practical for the tasks at hand in the immediate 'now'. Such as a prediction of when the Coquihalla highway would be passable between two incoming Spring snow storms. One that brought John back home to the Rez, and the world it connected to, or should connect to anyway.

SWIMMERS

CHAPTER 1

Once upon a distant time on a distant shore beyond the Western Horizon there was an island which was called by its inhabitants, "Conclada". Conclada was surrounded by water on all sides, few sailors knowing of such a place or existence. No one recorded how Conclada burst up from the wide, deep and warm ocean waters around it, or where the Concladans came from. But they were there, as was the island, the warm breezes, the lush forest and the many fish around the island that made it a tropical Paradise. Indeed, the islanders had no words for 'misery', 'sorrow' and 'enemy'. Pain and pleasure were the same thing to them, enjoyed equally with no judgement as to which was which. They worshipped a Great Spirit, who they called "Holkin", whose name meant 'Great and Wondrous Friend.'

Holkin provided Conclada with everything it needed, and the Concladans provided everything else for each other. They wore few clothes, and spent many hours in the water, in the activity which was both work and play. Everybody swam, to get from one place on the island to another, and to catch fish. Everyone caught fish in different ways, some with nets, some with spears, and some with calls they sang underwater. And at the end of the day, everyone shared all the fish, the hungriest getting the most, those who needed less food taking the least. And the waters never ran out of fish. Everyone always had enough of fish, and every part of the fish was used. It was said on Conclada that the only thing more valued than other Concladans was the fish, and, of course, laughing and singing for, and with Holkin. The Great Spirit who had the greatest sense of humor of all because, after all, he created laughter and people who could create more laughter

The Concladan men were a magnificent species, each one different. Tong had a grey beard and white hair, and his muscles were not as strong as they were when he was a younger man, but his mind was bright and spirit strong. Once the strongest and fastest swimmer on Conclada, he taught others how to swim and catch fish. Tong never had children of his own, but everyone on Conclada considered him their father, uncle and, of course, friend.

Blok had muscles and bones that made swim faster than any fish. His eyes were bright, and could see as well underwater as in the air above it. Tong spent much time with Blok, and Blok's family. It was important for Conclada to have a wise young man as well as a wise old one, and Blok was as eager to develop his mind as he was to keep his muscles big, firm and strong.

Vlek and Klek were brothers who looked alike when they were born. They looked alike when they were older too. They also walked, talked and swam alike, and learned to work together. Vlek and Klek could swim just as well as each other, but Klek was a little faster, so Vlek learned to talk to the fish while Klek kept silent, and swam around them. Together, they didn't catch a lot of fish, but it was enough to keep them fed, and their families very healthy. Their wives were very happy with them, and bore them many happy children, who all looked different than each other.

Ewek was a big boy who became a big man, particularly around his waist. He wasn't very tall, and sank in the water more than swam in it, but he learned how to float a lot, and spoke to the fish through a mouth that no one else used. He spoke particularly loudly after eating beans that grew on the island, the waters around him turning slightly brown in color. Some fish liked the songs he burped out of that hole, most chose to go away, into the nets set up by everyone else. It was a very good way to catch fish that didn't want to be caught, and on those days when there were few fish to be caught, Ewek's singing from his 'other mouth' underwater made the other Concladan's laugh, though mostly the men laughed. Many of the women didn't, but they did smile when the men weren't looking.

Dorak was born with one arm, an affliction some say was a curse. But he said it was a gift from Holkin. How else would he have become a one-armed swimmer, who learned to use his legs to move the nets. Dorak wasn't very fast at catching fish, and when he spoke, his lisp made him hard to understand, but no one minded that Dorak caught less fish than everyone else. He made them think about themselves in ways that even Holkan didn't, or couldn't.

Mump was born with a strong body and muscles that were well developed for swimming and fishing. But the muscle between his ears didn't work as well as the ones on his bones. Mump swam very well, but most of the time he caught rocks instead of fish. Sometimes he didn't know they were rocks, and one often cooked the rocks, thinking they were fish. But the women of the village, and even Tong himself, would often take the rocks out of his frying pan and put fish in them. Tong admitted to everyone, even Blok, that Mump wasn't a very good fisherman, but that he caught more rocks than anyone else, and that catching rocks could be as valuable as catching fish. Blok didn't quite understand what Tong meant, but accepted his wisdom and, on some days, did see that he was right.

CHAPTER 2

All seemed perfect on Conclada. Like it was for as long as anyone could remember, till one day, a ship came upon the horizon. It was a strange ship, with sails and thundersticks on its sides that only Tong could see at first. Tong's mind had the 'open disease', as he was starting to forget the way things were supposed to be, so he could see how they really were. The grey haired man described the ship to others as it approached, and gradually, everyone saw the ship as it was. The strangest thing was that the only people on board the ship were men, and that they all had frowns on their faces and an emotion that Concladan's knew little of. "Anger," Tong called it, remembering the ancient tales that stopped being told on Conclada, and didn't have to know about anymore.

A man came off the boat, with strange things on his body. "Clothes", Tong explained. "There are places where people put heavy skins on their body, and the hotter it gets, the more skins they put over them." It was a humorous story about funny people who lived far, far away. But the man coming in toward the shore in a small boat let go from the larger one had many skins on his body.

He landed, and announced his name. "I am John White," he said in a language that Concladians all understood. He seemed to be very unhappy, particularly when the ship behind him with other men like him turned around and left. He yelled at the ship, shaking his fist at the men on it and a man up in the sky who he called 'Jahovah'. Jahovah didn't answer back, as did any of the Concladians. But John White had more in his little boat than all the Concladians did in theirs. Bright shiny things, many with sharp edges and straight angles. Like when you put one finger against another. Nothing curved in it, sharp, hard and non-friendly things. One of the things was making a sound, a tick,tick,tick that never stopped.

Tong asked what it was.

“A clock,” White said, feeling very important about himself for no reason the Concladans could determine, or understand. “It measures time,” he said. “Time...time!!!” he kept screaming out, talking to the Concladans like they were less than people, or even less than fish.

Blok picked up one of the long bars in the boat. It had small markings on it, all the same distance from each other. White grabbed the bar from him. “That is a ruler. A yardstick. It measures distance!” he screamed. Blok felt confused, then insulted. Tong came along and asked White what he was doing on the island, and if he was hungry.

“Yes, I am hungry,” White said, his stomach grumbling. “What do you have to eat on this miserable, poverty-stricken, God forsaken island?”

Tong pointed to the water, and the fish swimming in it. Seeing that White was hungry, Tong motioned for everyone to join in. It was time to get more fish anyway, and White seemed like he had a large body, which needed many fish to keep it fed.

White watched the Concladans swim in the water, circling around, playing with, and finally catching the fish. He was confused because everyone was working together, and at the end of the catch, shared the fish equally. Tong gave him three fish to eat, one more than any Concladan got.

“Thank you,” White said, with a smile that made his lips move around a lot, like a snake-fish, or a snake, trying to act like a chief, one that didn’t need fish.

“You are very welcomed,” Tong said back to him, boldly showing off his mouthful of black and white teeth.

CHAPTER 3

White spent many days on the island. Or so it seemed to him. He never took off his clothes, and never let the women, or men, take them off for him. He kept looking over the horizon, waiting for another big ship to come, but it didn't. He hated talking to children most, and hated speaking the Concadan language. He yelled a lot at Jahovah, who still didn't yell, or even whisper, back to him.

Then, one day, White figured out that it would be a long time before another big ship would come back for him. He wasn't hungry in the body, but his mind was starving. He needed something.

"Purpose," Tong said to Blok during one of the sessions with him on how to be a wise chief, protector and friend. "White needs a purpose."

"But what can he give us that we don't already have?" Blok said. "He is bad at catching fish and rocks, and I don't think we need someone who yells up to the sky all the time."

"This is true," Tong said. "There has to be something he can do."

"Or something he has?" Blok said.

"Huh?" Tong said, fading into the 'other world' again.

"White has things in his boat. Like the ticking stone, and the bar with many notches on it," Blok said.

"Which can do what for us, the fish, and Holkin?" Tong asked.

Blok didn't know the answer, but thought that someone else would. "Let's ask White. He may know what to do with the ticking stone and the bar with many notches on it."

"It's called a clock, and a measuring stick!" White screamed at both of them.

“Which can do what?” Tong asked.

White thought moment, then another, then another. Blok saw that he was thinking about something new. Tong sensed that it was not something that Conclada had ever seen, or thought about, before.

“You know what you have here on this island?” White said.

“Trees, rocks, water and fish,” Blok pointed out.

“And each other,” Tong smiled.

“And something else that has been making my life a living hell for even a short time here,” White said.

“The heat?” Blok smirked, with a kind laugh, pointing to the skins still on White’s sweaty body.

“No!” White screamed out. “Boredom. Boredom. Boredom!”

The marooned visitor to the island walked up and down the beach, screaming, then thinking. “We need something to stop the boredom.”

“What is boredom?” Blok asked Tong.

“Something that is causing him much pain,” Tong said of the man who seemed to be a chief in his own land, and now had to be someone or something else here. “Maybe if we can get him to play in one of our games.”

“That’s it!” White spouted out, with a sparkle in his eye that intrigued Blok, and scared Tong. “A game! We’ll all set up a game. And the masters, the rulers of the game will be...”

Tong and Blok looked at each other. All the games they played had no rulers or masters. But White seemed determined that his game has rulers and masters. But who could they be? Jahovah never said anything and Holkin was too human a Great Spirit to be Master of anyone or anything. As for Tong, a chief was a servant of his people, and he didn’t feel like being Master of anyone, except Blok, when he thought that the best way to serve people was to rule over them, of course..

White ran to his boat, the objects in it still there. He picked up the ticking stone. “This clock will be the master,” he said. In his other hand, he grabbed the bar with the many notches in it. “And this measuring stick will be the ruler...This ruler that is ruler that can measure distances!” There was something else in the boat also. “And this scale will measure what a man is really worth!” He put a few pieces of shining rocks on one side, a rock from the beach on the other. White seemed happy for the first time since he landed on the island, but Blok and even Tong couldn’t figure out why.

“So, what is the game?” Tong asked.

White pointed to the water, and the school of fish swimming in it. Tong and Blok looked at each other again, confused. White brought both of them into his chest, his back hunched, talking in a whisper. “I’ll explain it to both of you. It will be fun! And profitable.”

Tong knew what fun meant, and had heard the word profitable, once. It was from a man who was not very happy, in his childhood. Blok seemed fascinated with White’s idea. “Go on, tell us about your game,” he said.

CHAPTER 4

White told Tong to get everyone in Conclada to come to the beach at the next rising of the sun. Tong asked them to come a little bit before. It made White feel important, more important than he felt since he came in to shore on his little ship from the big ship. But being important and

special was nothing special to anyone in Conclada. No one was more special than anyone else, so everyone felt good, and special.

White took out the ticking stone and commanded everyone to call it a 'clock' and to say 'tick, tick, tick' with it. It was a funny game, and everyone enjoyed it. Even Mump, who said his 'ticks' a little after everyone else. It sounded like music when Mump joined in to the 'tick tick' song.

Then White held up the bar with the notches on it. He said it was a measuring stick that you could use to see how much tall or short you were. He made a long rope with each knot one 'foot' long, and measured how tall or short everyone was and gave them a number. He said that number was more important than their name. "Numbers more important than names?" said Blok, who was taller than any other Concladan, even Tong. "This is very strange."

"And important," White said to Blok. "Because you have the highest number on the island. Do you know what that makes you?"

"Blok with a high number?" Blok laughed, with everyone else.

"No!" White barked back like a dog, very upset, hurt and angry. "That makes you number one Concladan. In the game of tallness." White put one of his animal skins on Blok.

Blok was confused. Tallness was never very important in Conclada. "But", he started to think. "Maybe that is why Tong talks to me so much. And why he lets me organize the fishing."

Mump scratched his head. "What is 'organize'?" he asked.

"To regulate, control, say who is on top and who is on the bottom," White said.

Everyone else scratched their heads, even Tong. "There is no top and bottom on Conclada," he said.

“There is always someone on top, and someone on the bottom,” White proclaimed. He took the rocks out of Mump’s fishing net and piled them up. “See. One rock on top of the other. The slow swimmers on the bottom, the average ones in the middle, the fastest ones on the top. And if you want to catch more fish, you have to determine who is the fastest swimmer.”

“Why?” Ewek asked with a big laugh, rubbing his big belly that shook like a jellyfish.

White marched up to Ewek, stomping his feet on the ground, very angry in his eyes. Like ‘Jahovah’s’ eyes must be when he talks back to White.

Ewek stopped laughing. Everyone else stopped smiling. Vlek and his brother Klek looked at each other, asking why the sailor from the big ship was acting so ‘small’ in the heart. With his only arm, Dornk offered White a handful of fish, spiced with the freshest papaya and mangos from the trees, but White threw it on the sand. Blok asked Tong if he had any medicine to cure the disease in White’s head, and heart. The women too looked at the sad sailor from the land of the Big Ships, as did their children. They sang a song for him but White told them to shut their mouths. It felt like Holkan also wanted to cheer White up. He asked a pelican to drop something from its back end on White’s head, a good luck charm to Conclava, but the sweaty and angry man from the land of the Big Ships and shiny toys wiped the brown ‘good luck’ pudding off his head and screamed at Jahovah again.

Everyone was worried about White, but he didn’t seem to be worried about anything else except one thing. “The game is the important thing. And the winner of the game is number one, the top rock on the pile. The losers in the game are on the bottom. But by playing the game, they will become better swimmers, and catch more fish.”

Tong spoke. “But, we have enough fish for everyone.”

White took a deep breath, and stomped on the ground some more. He stormed up to Tong, stepping up in his boots to make him look taller than the grey haired chief who was the same as everyone else. “You have enough fish, but don’t you want to have MORE fish?”

Tong took his time answering, but as the ticking stone ticked away, Blok felt the need to answer first. “Yes, more fish would be better than enough fish,” he said. Tong didn’t agree, but didn’t say anything. Blok answered first, and according to White’s new game, the person who answers the question first was the one who had the right answer. He then went on to explain the rest of the game.

All the men gathered at the Sunrise side of the Rocky Cove, and were told to swim to the Sunset side. Normally, no one swam in the Rocky Cove, but White said it was the best place for the game because he could measure the distance from the Sunrise rock to the Sunset rock very easily, and without getting wet. It seemed like a fun game, since swimming was enjoyed by everyone, even if there weren’t any fish to be had. Then, White said there was something else about the game. Everyone had to swim in a straight line from the Sunrise to the Sunset rock. This did not make sense to the Concladans. Tong swam like a flounder on the bottom of the water, Blok like a bass just below the surface. Vlek and Klek got from one place to another like two dolphins who shared the lead and surfed in each other’s wake. One-armed Dornk paddled like the one-finned Pearl fish. Ewek floated on top of the water, letting the current take him where it will, and when he had to, let go with a blast of gas from his ‘non-mouth hole’ like a whale to get where he wanted to. Mump, whose brain was ‘special’ and eyes not always opened, swam like a sea-lion, but always had to be told which way to go, or he would crash into a rock. Everyone knew that the way fish got from one rock to another was different, some faster, some slower. Some swimming on top, some on the bottom, and some on top of each other. It made sense, learning to swim like the fish. Then White said something that made Blok think, and Tong worry.

“You people catch fish. That makes you better than the fish,” the Sailor who seemed to acting like a chief said. “So, you have to swim better than the fish. And the only way to be better than the fish is to try to be better than each other.”

Mump was slow in some ways, but smart in others. He raised his hand. “Who says who is better than anyone else?” He asked. Everyone agreed, even Blok. Holkin never said anyone was better than anyone else. Maybe Jehovah did, but he was too scared or ashamed to speak to any Concladan, or even White.

“Yes,” Tong asked, respectfully, of the man who lacked respect for others, and himself. “Who says who is better and faster than anyone else?”

“This!” White said, picking up the ticking stone. “The clock! Which measures time. And time is the master of us all. Time and space measure who is the fastest swimmer.”

“And who can catch the most fish?” Blok asked, without consulting Tong.

“Yes! Number one tall man!” White said.

“What do you get for being number one tall man?” Mump asked. He took a rock from the top of the pile White had made. “This rock?”

“This STONE!” White said, making the rock more valuable than a fish, or even a person. He gave the stone to Blok, who was ‘number one tall man’ and tied it around his neck, raising his hand up in the air. He clapped, and cheered. The women and children clapped and cheered along. The other men did too, a little more slowly and with less happiness, but the game made White happy, and since he came to Concladan very sad and angry, it was a good thing to see him happy.

After the clapping and cheering was over, White told all the men to gather on the Sunrise Rock. He told them to wait till he lowered his hand till they jumped into the water, very close to the sharp coral reef below. Then, in a very loud voice that entertained the children and charmed the women he said, ‘ready, set, GO!’ He started the ticking stone. It ticked very loudly.

Blok dived into the water, his strong and tall body pushing much water behind him, very fast. Tong dived in too, trying to land in the water at the same place as Blok, but the feet of the old man weren’t as strong as the young one and he banged his shoulder against the coral reef. It hurt, but he kept swam as strong as he could anyway. His grey hair turned whiter with each stroke, and his chest hurt with pain. Still, he kept going, even though the medicine man he trained with told him it was unhealthy to swim when your chest hurt and your shoulder was bleeding. Sharks could get you, or you could stop breathing.

Vlek and Klek slid down into the water. It took them longer to get in, but they were not hurt by the rocks or coral reef, and they swam like a pair of dolphins. Vlek, being naturally a little faster than Klek at the beginning of each swim, but not at the end of it, moved ahead, and waited for

Klek to swim in his wake, but White said the clock was ticking, in a very loud voice. Vlek looked at Vanna, who was cheering. She was a woman he and Klek both liked, and found himself swimming faster than he normally did, and instead of making a wake for Klek to follow in, he swam beyond his brother, leaving his brother behind. But it wasn't too far along that Vlek got tired. He wondered what was wrong as he struggled to swim, now against the current. 'Klek!' Vlek shouted out, hoping that his brother would be in front of him, since Klek was a better swimmer at long distances than Vlek was. "Where are you? I need your wake?" But Vlek was very much behind Klek, caught in a current, washing to shore. Vanna seemed disappointed in Klek, and cheered Vlek to move on. But Vlek couldn't. He was the 'first swim' lead dolphin and without his brother, he had ran out of energy. He ran out of enthusiasm when he saw Blok take the lead, a bleeding and hurting Tong behind him. He turned to look at Vanna, but she was looking at White with the kind of affection that he thought she had for him.

Mump, being very muscular and with the kind of bones that didn't make him a tall man but a great swimmer on the surface of any waters, swam like a shark through any current. But without people to tell him where to go, the always-eyes-closed swimmer who was weak in the muscle between the ears kept banging into rocks, coral and even other swimmers. Though he swam fast, it was not in a straight line, and the game was to swim fast in straight line, a strange game which White made very popular with the women, and children who were watching.

Ewek floated around the Cove, and no matter how hard he paddled or how much he 'flatulated' from his 'non-eating hole', he remained behind. Dornk's one arm could get him where he needed to go for catching fish, but the shortest distance between two points for him was always a curve, not a straight line. Blok and Tong, and once he was screamed at, even Mump, were faster at swimming straight lines than Dornk.

White got bored with the game quickly. While the race was still on, he invented another game. He told the children that whoever threw the most papayas and Pelican brown droppings at Ewek and Dornk would get a free fish, or if they didn't want that, a shiny toy from his boat. He told Vanna and the other women it would make everyone faster swimmers, and asked them to laugh at the slow swimmers. No one ever laughed AT anyone in Conclada, but it seemed like an interesting game, and White was the master of the game, with the children really liked his shiny toys, so the women did it.

Ewek and Dornk did swim faster, with sad frowns on their faces, but they were still very behind Blok and Tong. Mump was catching up. Disguising his voice as Tong's, White told Mump to turn

out toward the ocean. He did, getting caught in a current that smashed him against a sandy beach. He wasn't hurt, but it took him a long time to get back into the race.

Blok climbed up to the Sunset rock first, feeling very good. Vanna smiled at him, as did the Children, and White. Three ticks of the ticking stone later, Tong set his feet on the rock. His legs hurt a lot, and arm was not connected to the shoulder the way it was before the race. His chest hurt, and he could barely breath. No one looked at him, and no one cheered him, even the children. "The rules of the game" White explained to the old man as he gave the 'winning fish' to the 'winning swimmer', Blok.

Vanna hugged Blok, and all the women in the village cheered him, even the wives of the other swimmers. But Vanna did wait for one other swimmer to reach the Sunset rock. "Vlek! Come here!" she said, throwing flowers his way. Somehow, Vlek made it to the Sunset rock. He was tired, and he had a bad pain in his stomach. He could barely get out of the water. Vanna gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Where's my brother Klek?" Vlek asked, looking into at the lagoon, seeing his brother washed to the shore, having never reached the Sunset rock.

"With the other losers," White said, putting a small ring of flowers over Vlek's neck. A small ring, much smaller than the big one around Blok, or the medium one just out of range of Tong's outstretched hand, as he tried to get up off the rocks, gasping for breath, alone.

Vlek called out to his brother Klek, asking him to swim to the Sunset rock, even offering him the ring of flowers around his neck, but Klek waved his hand in sorrow and shame. Vlek looked at the others in the Cove, Mump, Ewek, and Dornk. All they could do was tread water. Vlek pulled out a boat to go get them, but White put his hand on his arm.

"No...We need this boat for something else, something more important than them," he said.

"What is more important than people?" Vlek asked.

“Your victory celebration, number three!” White gave Vlek a fish. It smelled like it would be very tasty, and Vanna gave him a big smile. Children gathered around him. Blok was carried to the fire on the beach by the women and children. With all the strength he could muster, Tong crawled down from the rock, looking up to the sky, asking if Holkin was interested in a conversation with him. Ewek, Dornk, Mump and Klek eventually came to shore and ate their supper of papaya and mangos, without fish, alone.

CHAPTER 5

Such as it went every day for the next many days and nights. Every day, a new number one swimmer would be picked with another ‘game’, each game set up by White. Blok was the new number one winner every day, and though he became strong in the body, he became weak in the mind. He insisted that Tong try to beat him, and started to laugh at the old man every time he came in number two, number three, or any other number which White called ‘loser’. Tong tried his best, but became sicker and more injured with each ‘game’. He stopped talking to Cancladan’s and spoke with Holkan a lot, in that way that aging men did before they joined their Ancestors. He even tried to talk with Jahovah, since White wasn’t talking with him anymore, and even an angry god could get lonely, but Jahovah never answered. Maybe he was a loser too, and no one spoke with losers.

Vlek almost came in number one a few times, and Vanna liked that. As White predicted, Vlek became a better swimmer, faster and stronger, and learned to pace himself. Vlek asked his brother Klek to swim and fish with him, even when there wasn’t a game, but Klek stopped swimming all together, then stopped fishing. His belly went hungry, and his once-strong muscles went weak. He walked, talked and felt like an old man.

When it suited ‘the game’ Mump came in close, and was given a ‘special’ garland of flowers as his reward, made of thorns and dried Pelican pudding. He liked it, being ‘special’ between the ears, and became a stronger swimmer too, but he stopped trying to think on his own, and often swam into rocks, hurting his shoulder and losing many fish.

Dornk’s one strong arm grew weak. As he kept losing the ‘swimming game’, he was asked to not come fishing, and then stopped swimming, even though it was the thing that once gave him the most fun. Indeed, he stopped having fun doing anything. As did Ewek. The muscles around his waist which were once considered good, and the jiggle of the skin on the belly that amused the children, were now laughed at by the children, the women, and the winners of the swimming game. Indeed, there were two kinds of people in Conclada under Holkan’s big blue sky. Those

who laughed at others, and those who were laughed at. The only exception was Tong, who stopped talking to people and talked only to Holkan. The man who was considered wise was now considered foolish, and useless, particularly by Blok, number one swimmer and number one tall man and number one most everything else who Tong had chosen as his adopted son and Conclada's Chief Friend-Servant. He now had a new title, given to him by White.

"King Blok!" White would call him. Everyone else did too, even though they didn't know what a king was. But White seemed to know what a king was. The once-lonely Sailor from the land of the Big Ships was now anything but lonely. He was more powerful than King Blok, and the more popular Blok got, the more powerful White seemed to become. White decided that Conclada didn't have to listen to Holkan anymore, and he certainly didn't care about Jahovah now that everything was going well. He said that there were three new gods to worship. Gods that were 'absolute', a word he used to mean 'never changing and always there.' The first god was time, as measured by the ticking stone. The second was distance, determined by how many yardsticks and rulers there were between one place and another. The third was white rocks, a rare thing on Conclada, as most of the stones on the island were brown, red or black. Every day, the people who fished would bring in the fish, and they would exchange them in White's hut for rocks. White would then prepare the fish, and all the other fruits, and vegetables and other things people needed on the island, including animals skins from the wild beast he hunted, and give them rocks for it. The more rocks a man had, the more he could eat and bring home to his family.

Some men, like Ewek, Klek, Dornk and occasionally Mump, would not fish at all. The women and children felt sorry for them and gave them rocks to trade for fish, but they ate wild berries and mangos. They were too ashamed to go to the village to get fish, too ashamed to swim for fun, and even forgot how to swim at all, even when they needed fish to stay alive. They considered themselves better off dead, not even worthy to talk to Holkan. Jahovah was punishing them for being losers, White told them, but would forgive them, maybe one day. But the men didn't know what they did wrong. "Being born," Ewek would say. The others in the small camp that burned Pelican pudding droppings instead of wood to stay warm said the same. And White was right. The 'game' did make strong swimmers stronger, and the island did have more fish than it ever had. At least for the winners of the game and the women and children who were now with them, learning other games from the Sailor from the land of the Big Ships who seemed to be getting a bigger belly than even Ewek.

CHAPTER 6

It came to pass many moons later that another boat with a big sail came into Conclada. The boat did not have as large a sail as the one that left Captain Jack White on the island. But it was a Big Sail boat non-the-less, a single man sailing it who had white skin, just like Captain White. Tong saw him first, from the rock on which he had his talks with Holkan. Holkan had not said much lately, and Tong, his body ailing, his mind seeing things that others said were not there, thought the ship was something from 'the other side.'

The sailor had long, white hair, a wrinkled face and thin legs. Hardly a body of a swimmer, or even someone who could run very fast. The way he held onto the sail, it seemed like he was afraid of the ocean, though he seemed to love it so much. There was something around his neck, a sac-like vest that seemed to be able to float in the water. Every part of him seemed to remind Tong of the 'losers' who never won any prizes, or fish in White's games, even the ones he set the children to playing with, then against, each other.

But there was something about the man's eyes. They were sorrowful, and beaten, but he was still Alive behind them. Like Tong used to be, as he thankfully still remembered.

Tong thanked Holkan, then expressed an appreciation to Jahovah, just in case White's god who grunted but never spoke had anything to do with the visitor's arrival. "My name is Tong!" the once Chief Protector-Servant yelled out to the ship.

"Albert!" the man in the small ship with the big sail said. "Can you tell me where I am?" he asked.

"Maybe we can figure that out together," Tong said, hoping the man would understand his language. He did, thank Holkan, and perhaps Jahovah.

Tong found enough strength in his ailing body to swim in the water and catch them a supper of fresh fish. Albert helped, though with his 'life preserver', as he called it, he could not go below the surface of the water to go where the fish lived. Tong thanked Holkan for the fish, and Albert for helping him to catch it. They talked about the places they had been as young men, their experiences as older ones, and their thoughts about what lay beyond the horizon, and beyond their lives as men. Then conversation came to what was on the island. Tong didn't want to talk

about it, but Albert insisted. As soon as Tong mentioned Captain Jack White and the Big Ship that brought him to the island, Albert became worried.

“You know this man who thinks he is a god?” Tong said.

“I know of him,” Albert answered. “Where is he?”

Tong pointed to the village, the huts now all different from each other. ‘Number ones’ lived in large huts, number two and threes in smaller ones. Number ‘nothings’ lives in non at all. Behind King Blok’s hut was a house that looked nothing like anything on Conclada. It has wood walls, a roof, and sharp, right angles to it, just like Albert had seen in the land of the Big Ships from which he had fled, looking for a land of civilized people who could share his compassion and appreciate his wisdom.

“We have to do something,” Albert said with much urgency in his voice.

“What can we do?” Tong replied. “Captain White rules King Blok, King Blok rules the number twos, the number two’s rule the number threes, and the number threes think they rule the number nothings. And there is nothing we can do to change that because there are three gods who rule everything.”

“Which gods are they?” Albert challenged, taking out a book with many markings that looks like drawings, numbers and, as he called them, ‘equations’.

“The Absolute gods,” Tong sorrowfully replied. “Time, distance and money, or as we were once told, counting. They are always the same and we are always measured against them.”

Albert laughed, in a way Tong hadn’t heard in many moons. He was not laughing at anyone, or with anyone. Though maybe he was sharing a joke with Holkan.

“Time, distance and wealth are absolutes,” he said. “They don’t change and we are always measured against them.”

“Maybe in Captain White’s arithmetic, and calculations and ‘science’” Albert smiled.

“What is arithmetic, calculation and science?” Tong said.

“Things you know more about that you think you do, my friend,” Albert assured his new friend, and Comrade. “Come, we have much teaching to do,” he continued, helping Tong down from the isolated Rock that had been his home and place of banishment for as long as he could remember.

“‘Teaching’ is not a game which is played here anymore,” Tong warned the Old Man with the white hair who seemed to know everything about the world, but nothing about navigation.

“But learning is always going on,” Albert said, bringing his nap-sack of toys, and books, and courage. That courage would be needed, as Tong saw it.

“Does Captain White frighten you as much as he does me?”

“More,” Albert said.

“Where did he come from?”

“Some place you and your people are better not knowing about,” Albert said. “A place where there is too much fish and everyone is still hungry.”

Tong looked at the waters below him. His calculations were right, and finally there was someone who would believe him. “The number of fish in the water is smaller than it should be for this time of year. The fish on the island are being caught too quickly, or were going away.

Soon, the only people who can eat fish will be the number ones, and maybe the number twos. And the number threes are the ones who were doing most of the fishing, giving the fish to the number ones and twos. What are we to do?"

"Stop the games, and show the players that THEY are the masters of their OWN game, and life." Albert said.

Tong didn't understand the meaning of the words, but he trusted the sincerity behind the man who said it. But would heart beat might, and ignorance? It hadn't so far.

CHAPTER 7

When Albert walked into the village with Tong, nobody noticed them. Captain Jack, or Duke White, as he liked to be called, was organizing another game. This game was about who could tell the most sensitive story, and all the children were told by their mothers, and fathers, and number ones who became their fathers, to do whatever they could to see that all the other children's stories were loser stories. The stories were supposed to be based on fact, and each child was told another false story to tell another child, so that that child would steal it and tell a bad story.

"This used to be such a good place to live, especially for the children," Tong said.

"And it will be, very soon," Albert said. He saw a man wearing many animal skins, and called out to him.

"Captain White!" he said. "Why is it that you are not a Captain anymore?"

White turned around, angry. He asked Albert who he was and how he got to Conclada..

"I am a scientist," said the Old Man whose body was not built to be able to swim, run or lift heavy objects. "I was looking for Truth and got lost, or maybe I didn't."

Blok didn't understand what Albert was saying. Neither did Vlek, or his brother Klek. Neither did anyone else in the village, or around the village. White started to laugh, and invited Blok to laugh along with him. After 'number one' Blok laughed, the number twos did the same, then the number threes. The number 'nothings', Ewek, Dornk, and because he was not entertaining that day, Mump, felt sorry for Albert, because he was soon to be another number nothing, just like Tong. But Albert didn't feel like a number ANYthing, and he started to talk about numbers.

Albert picked up the ticking stone. It went tick tock, as it always did. And everyone who 'sang' with it, went tick tock to it at the same speed. But Albert started to tick tock slower than the clock, then faster, then added ticks between the tocks. Everyone stopped laughing when he threw the clock up into the air at very fast speed, and the clock stopped ticking. When it landed in his hand, the clock went tick tock again.

"What happened?" Blok asked.

"The magician did a trick," White sneered. "An Old Man's Old magicians trick."

"Maybe or maybe not," Albert said. "I made the clock move fast, and when it did, time went slower, or maybe faster. But it changed."

"That is not possible," Vlek said. "Time is absolute. It never changes and we have to measure ourselves against it. How else can we know who is number one, two and three?"

Everyone agreed, which made White smile with pride, and the kind of satisfaction that displeased Albert and worried Tong. Then Albert looked at the sun, setting in the direction White called West, and the Concladans called 'end of day'. Everyone knew that the sun was a long distance away, so Albert asked them a question.

"The clock here says it is 6 o'clock, the time the sun sets. Is this right?"

"Yes," White said. "The sun sets at 6 o'clock. Here on the island."

“So when does the sun set out on the coral reef, which is closer to the sun?” Albert asked.

“A little after 6 o’clock?” Vlek proposed.

“And beyond the waves, where the big fish swim in the deep water, just this side of the horizon?” he asked everyone.

“More ticks after 6 o’clock?” came out Mump’s mouth and his ‘special’ muscles between his ears. He started to count the ticks, but got confused. Albert stepped in as White got angry. People were beginning to think what Albert was trying to teach them.

“So, this means that time is different for everyone, depending on how fast they move and where they are when they are moving, or standing still. Time is not absolute, and each of us lives in our own time.”

Everyone nodded ‘yes,’ except White, whose face became very red.

Albert then walked over to the alter where Jack White had put the measuring stick, the one with the many notches. He took the stick into one hand and a large melon in the other. “The world is round, like this melon, right?” he said.

Everyone agreed. Even Captain Jack.

Albert put two dots on the melon, and tried to measure the distance between them. He did one measurement with the stick bent, the other with it not bend, and another with it twisted. Then he measured the distance between the points the ‘long way’ around the melon. Every measurement was a different number. “So, you see, distance is relative. Different depending on how you measure it.”

The Concladan’s agreed. And White was even more red in the face. “What does this mean?” he yelled out.

Albert smiled back at White, and carved out a piece of melon for him to eat. The Captain threw it on the ground and growled at the Old Man. “What all of this means is that distance is relative too” the white haired White man with the scrawny body said. “It is different for everyone.”

“Which means nothing, because here on Conclada, our games the most important thing we do, The swimming, running and climbing games, that determine who is number one.” White said.

“Which means nothing, because they measure people in relation to time and space, which are relative, so there is no number one, two, or three. And since everything is relative, number one could be number last, if you count backwards, which makes the last one to finish the first one to win.”

The Concladans nodded their heads. It made sense. They looked to Albert for more explanations about themselves and the world they thought they understood.

“And there is something else,” he continued, putting Vlek at one end of the camp, Klek at the other. He put a red pole in front of Vlek and a green one in front of Klek. He pointed to the sun. “Light comes to us from the sun and the stars at a constant rate. So does light from this red pole and the green pole. The red pole is closest to Vlek, so he sees it sooner than the green pole. The green pole is closest to Klek so he sees the it sooner than the red pole. So, Vlek and Klek live in different universes, since they see things differently. But, because of Spirit, and Faith, and connections between us, which you call Hulkin, we ‘feel’ one world that we all share. So, if we all live in different universes, we can never really measure who is number one at swimming, running, climbing or story telling.”

It made sense to everyone, even Blok. He looked at Tong and said that he was wrong and sorry with his eyes. Tong forgave him, without making him feel guilty. That was what Jahovah did, and people Jahovah made like White.

But White wasn’t finished. He stormed up to Albert, with a handful of white rocks in his hand. “He who has the money makes the rules. And these rocks say that I make the rules!”

“Only if white rocks are considered more valuable than black or red rocks,” Albert said. “What if black rocks are thought to be valuable? Then that would make you a poor man, and the number nothings who live outside the village as the rich ones.”

Again everyone nodded ‘yes’, except White. He yelled at Blok, then Vlek, then all the Concadans, even Tong.. “This rock is white! I have white rocks! We all agreed that white rocks are the most valuable rocks!”

“If that is a white rock,” Albert said. He moved closer to it, opening his eyes and putting it into the sunlight. “These rocks look more grey or brown to me than white.”

“Yes, they do,” Blok said, taking off his animal skins, and the crown White gave him to be a king with. Vlek followed, sharing his own rocks with his brother Klek. Then Mump, then, Dornk, then Ewek and even Vanna, who had learned to consider how valuable a man is worth by how many rocks he had.

White was left with a pile of rocks that bore his name, which were not worth anything. He felt very sad, angry and alone.

Tong smiled, everyone in the village looking for him for advice. “We should all go for a swim, our own way, and if we get fish, that’s good, and if we don’t, then that’s good for the fish.”

Everyone jumped into the water and swam, happy and smiling, each their own way at their own speed, as they had done before Captain White and the Big Ships came to Conclada. But two men remained on the beach.

“What are you going to do to me?” White asked Albert. “You won, and I lost, and because I lost, I have to be punished.”

“We both won,” Albert said. “I’m a winner, and you’re a winner. We’re always winners as long as we keep trying, in our own universe, helping others to win in their universes.”

“I don’t understand,” Captain Jack said to Albert.

“We both will, soon.” With that, Albert put on his life preserver and went into the water. He invited Captain Jack to come join him. They caught many fish that day, and feasted well that night.

Such were the events that happened on the island of Conclada, as reported and seen by the inhabitants there. Each living in their own world, they all told it differently. But since they shared the same world, the message of the story was the same.

SUBMULOC

The tale happened eight hundred winters ago, or eight hundred summers ago, depending on whether the Story Teller in what is now Maine, or perhaps Nova Scotia, liked the feel of snow under his feet or mud between her toes. The story never got onto the screen, but remained in the hearts of the People as deeply as the legend of King Arthur was more fact than fancy in the mind of any Anglo. His name was Submuloc, a man with strong arms, trustable eyes and, according to some, a strange mind which frustrated others almost as much as it frustrated himself.

It wasn't so much that Submuloc was disrespectful of the Elders, but that he knew in his Innermost heart that they were wrong, and that the Elder he trusted most, Dnanidref, said that the Inner Most Heart and Mind must be honored above all things. Most of his tribe loved to share stories around the campfires about the origins of the Sun. That ball of fire that rose in the East with fresh brilliance which was beyond color and set in the West with a subdued presence that let even his brother, Lazy Eyes, clearly see the many colors which it illuminated on the lands that Submuloc and his people had belonged to for as long as anyone could remember.

Year after year, Submuloc would look over the great water to where the Sun rose, while his people warmed themselves around the campfires on the beach, preparing for the day's fishing. Snails and clams could always be had in the sand. The ponds left behind by the tides were plentiful with lobsters. The larger ponds protected by the rocks from the waves always had fish in them, small stupid fish for the most part. The bigger fish swam around the rocks. The biggest ones were beyond the rocks and the place where the smooth sea yielded itself to forms of water which crashed on the rocks, sand and fishermen caught between the tides. Year after year, Submuloc wondered what was beyond the horizon. To see where the big fish were at the place where the Sun rose up.

"You know, I'd wager a pair of my best moccasins that if I take a canoe that can get through the waves, I can sail to the Sun. And that there are lands there that can be ours for the taking," he said while preparing the nets and spears for another day of lobster gathering and bass jabbing. "There is a whole other world in the place where the Sun rises."

“Which can and only should be visited by Spirits,” Lazy Eyes replied, his mind on the patch of leather he stitched onto the hole in the canoe, still ignoring the bright light in the sky which he said hurt his eyes when he looked at it. “You know what happens to people who try to find that land where the Sun rises? They get eaten by monsters, or their canoe falls down a big waterfall that leads to...”

Lazy Eyes could not say the word, which had a special bite to it in his Native language. It was the name of a bad place. A place where people who violated the rules of the Elders and the Laws of the Creator went to and never came back from. Submuloc wanted to talk with his half-brother about that place, and about the relationship he had, or should be having, with the Creator. The Great Spirit Who seemed to be able to do more than just ‘create’. But ‘Creator’ was the name everyone in the tribe gave to It, and to speak of any other function the Great Spirit did was to be considered slow, stupid or dangerous.

The last person who had spoke of the Creator in terms the Elders did not understand was banished to the woods in the West. The place where the uncivilized tribes were, the enemies of Submuloc’s People who had pushed them into the living on the coast. But there were plenty of fish in summer, and they were better fishermen than hunters. Yet, the winter winds near the big waters were hard, cold and seemed to come from that place where those who fell off the waterfall where the Sun rose, and some years the fish decided to go upriver where a Relecho hunter would more likely be prey to the Hiramuta hunters, or become their slave, then come home with fresh bear, deer or even rabbit meat.

Submuloc looked at the woods he had played in as a boy, then the canoe builders who were carving out another craft. One with room for six men, or four strong women, to paddle. The wind hit his face, reminding him again of the idea he had come up with three children and two wives ago. “If we put a large piece of leather on the canoe, the wind will take us where we need to go!” he asserted to Lazy Eyes.

“And if the wind blows in another direction?” the more-muscle-than-mind fisherman whose eyes always seemed to look in two directions at once replied.

“I have thought of that,” Submuloc countered, re-enacting the experiment he had proven to himself as effective but not the canoe makers who decided what kind of boats were used for fishing, or anything else. “You move the leather sheet with the wind and move against it. Weaving in and out of the wind like a snake.”

“And going against it, brother,” Lazy Eyes shot back, having repaired the hole in the canoe they would be responsible for during the fish ‘hunt’. “It is witchcraft.”

“And a way to get from here to...”

Lazy Eyes sang a song from his childhood. Simple words about a moth who wanted to become a butterfly but who got his wings burnt when he flew too close to the Sun. It drowned out having to hear the plans Submuloc had in his head. And to go along with them. By way of a needed reminder, Lazy Eyes drew Submuloc’s attention to a woman and three young girls repairing the nets.

“I know, my wife and what is left of my family,” Submuloc said and he smiled hello to them with eyes that were clearly elsewhere. “You will take care of them when I am gone?”

“Of course, brother,” Lazy Eyes answered. “But where are you going?”

Submuloc took a deep breath and looked at the Eastern horizon. The sun had risen, taking its rightful place in the sky. With his inner eye saw something underneath it. A place where his people would be safe from warrior raids, plagues and the ‘challenges’ the Creator provided through the natural Elements themselves.

Each year on the coast was harder than the last. “Bad years make us stronger, and we have been blessed by being very strong,” he remembered Elder Dnanidref saying each year as his hearing got worse, his skin got tougher and his walk became as slow as a crawl. But one thing Submuloc did remember from the Elder who spoke so little words but said so much. “The source of all Life comes from the Sun.” To most of the Rampapo, it was said to take their minds off the wind, wompom they lost when gambling, or the disappointing night of sex they had with their new bride, or groom, on the eve of their wedding. But to those who really listened, like Submuloc, it meant much more.

CHAPTER 2

Dnaridref sat alone on his tree stump, carving the kind of canoe no one had ever seen, at least not Submuloc. In his prime Dnardref was the best canoe builder in the tribe, and sometimes even the fastest, but others around him were offended when he built faster and bigger canoes than they could. But now, all the Old Man could do was make canoes that children could play with, or men who decided they still had childlike possibilities could admire. The Elder's hair was now pure white, and had started to fall out. He would forget at mid day what he had eaten in the morning, and sometimes the people who had spoken him that same day. But with respect to what had happened in his past, and the past of his beloved people, he was never sharper.

"Tell me about this canoe," Submuloc said of the carved gift the Elder with the shaking hands but steady Soul gave to him. "Tell me about it"

Dnaradref related the tale again, the third time that morning. Each telling seemed fresh, and perhaps was from the Old Man's perspective. And when Submuloc suggested a leather sheet to catch the wind, the blasphemous suggestion was acknowledged with a smile. "Yes, it will work. If you can keep the canoe on top of the water."

"Yes, I know, I've been practicing," Submuloc replied.

"When your wife wasn't looking?" the Elder smiled through a face which glowed Passion, but which felt immeasurable pain.

"And when my children weren't watching either," Submuloc answered, a bit shamefully. "None of them have my spirit for adventure. Is that not something that is passed down from father to son, or father to daughter?"

The Old Man laughed. "Such things are passed down by ways which are quite mystical, or accidental."

As always seemed to happen, Nature answered with a reply of its own. A burst of wind that blew the hair over Dnaradref's face, and made Submuloc face facts about the experiment, and Calling, at hand.

The ocean seemed to turn abruptly angry. The waves were as tall as one or perhaps two men. But there were times when the waves calmed down to the stillness of a windless lake, the Sun in the East shining with warm Brilliance. A temptation to those who considered the Creator a protective father to his children. An invitation to those who sought and felt a relationship with the Creator which was beyond the boundaries of human fatherhood, motherhood, or any other kind of 'hood' which limited the human mind, and the Perspectives of Spirit.

Submuloc's fading vision went into another layer of darkness. But his hands regained strength and he whittled another dimension to the boat, with the sense of urgency Submuloc had not seen before. The Old Man took in a deep breath that felt more like a rattle than Brother Wind entering the chest and handed him the carving of the canoe. "Two sheets to catch the wind, and room to bring back what you must from the land under the Sun. For the sake of our people on this side of the waters, and those on the other side, we must be the first." he said with more assurance than anything he had spoken in his sixty-winter long life. Dnararef said the Sacred Word he had practiced his entire life, then gave up his Spirit, his lifeless body dropping to the ground.

Submuloc held in his hand a model of a canoe which had never been built before. One which he knew now he had to build himself. And one which he had to take to the people on the other side of the waters. For the sake of all people. But what of 'we must be the first?' Submuloc had no concept of these words. Perhaps the answer lay in the lands under where the Sun rose, across the waters which seemed to welcome a canoer who embraced rather than feared that which was beyond definition.

CHAPTER 3

Submuloc knew he would have to sleep sometime, and that when you go to sleep, the demons can take over. Or the Earth Mother would have the Sea Spirits send you where you didn't want to go. Though he wanted to make the trop across the Waters alone, Submuloc knew he couldn't. But who to take? His wife couldn't swim, and his daughters all hated the water. Though all of them liked to eat fish. Lazy Eyes was the most trustable, but trustable to do what? To go to sleep when he got tired, and to turn around when he got scared. Besides, Lazy

Eyes was a far better husband and father than Submuloc ever could be, or was. Maybe because the brawny half brother was weak in the muscles between his legs, and the parts of his body which allowed him to have children.

Submuloc considered using the Slaves the tribe had captured in other raids in better times, now referred to as servants. But these servants valued their own lives of servitude more than the opportunity for freedom offered them if they took the journey. The children were too young, the Elders too old. But the large canoe which he now called a 'pihs' was finished, the leather sheets he now called 'slais' standing tall in the wind. .

"If this were only thirty summers ago, and Dnardref was still young, he would be the one to go on this journey with," he said to himself, drenched with exhaustion after putting the third layer of sap over the bottom of the craft. His ears could hear animals he knew were not in the woods, or the sandgrasses. His eyes saw clouds which materialized out of dark sky. The moon above split into three, the faces in each laughing at him.

"I know what I am doing!" Submuloc screamed at the sky. "There is land where the sun rises, and I will discover a way to it. The sea takes more of our sand each year, and puts it there. It is the destiny of my people to find that sand and reclaim it, as ours! Then to claim whatever else is there, for our children, their children and the Great Spirit which is greater than any image the Elders say It is! A Spirit which is..."

A Spirit materialized, one which did have very human form. Emerging from the fog, which seemed and felt real, was Dnanidref. His face still old, but his eyes now very young. "A Spirit which requires us to do what some say are transgressions, in Its service," the Elder smiled.

Submuloc reached out and found, to his delight, and terror, that he was very real. Very touchable. A man of flesh and bone. "I thought you were...dead?" he said.

"I needed everyone here to think so, too," he replied. "I thank you for honoring my 'last request'."

“Taking your body out into the woods and laying it at the head of Stone Mountain,” S replied.
“Your breath was...gone.”

“It was sleeping, my young friend?”

“As maybe I am now, my Old illusion?”

Dnanidref examined the craft. He nodded with the most complimentary of gestures at the sides, the rudder in the back, the sticks in the middle and the slais which would capture the wind. “I saw Visions of this canoe, you discovered Visions of how to capture the wind.”

“Which will take us where?”

Dnaaidref pointed to the horizon. The Sun seemed to make an appearance early. Or maybe it was a Star. Or something a young man saw when fed the wrong kind of plants by an old man who was faking his own death. Leaving his home to discover a new one, for the sake of his people, and perhaps himself.

Chapter 4

The journey across the ocean was...long. Lots of water. Lots of horizons. Lots of clouds that looked like land, some with rainbows over them. Dnanidref was always at the ‘mast’ as he called it, keeping the wind moving Submuloc and the ‘boat’ going forward. With every day, that large canoe got new names from Dnanidref’s mouth and apparently memory. It was as if Dnanidref had seen one of these ‘ships’ when he was a boy, and told no one about it. His memory of the ‘ship’ that he found on shore when he was seven, maybe eight summers of age, and perhaps experience, was a very private one that he had kept from everyone else. No one believed him, maybe because when he came back from the village to show everyone else the canoe with the dragon head at its front end, it was gone. Washed out to sea, with only some lingering ashes on the shore. A few human bones washed ashore later, but to tell anyone of it would mean being considered crazy, and in his youth, Dnanidref knew that ‘smart’ could be considered crazy very easily.

It made sense to Submuloc that Dnanidref knew how to sail the ship all those days and nights across the big waters. As many days and nights as Submiloc's three children had fingers, as he counted them. Submuloc missed his children, and even his wife. He hoped that Lazy Eyes would keep an eye, and ear, on them. Lazy Eyes was not the smartest of men, but he was the most loyal, and most importantly, he could enjoy the 'simple' pleasures with Submuloc's wife and children. Submuloc was always thinking about tomorrows and what was over the horizon and could never enjoy the day or night as it was. Better that Lazy Eyes become more than an Uncle to his daughters and a brother in law to his wife. Better that the child who was just learning to talk would use the word 'father' when identifying him for the first time in her still fresh mind that could still smile without having to know why she was or should be happy. And best to reach the other side of the horizon before the food and water ran out on the 'pihs'.

Sumbuloc asked Dnanidref on many occasions why Mother Nature would create a body of water so big which men could not drink from but fish could. Dnanidref would laugh and say that perhaps Mother Nature was a fish, and man was just something big fish ate when men fell into the water, or when fish would learn how to climb onto land. The jokes came out more boisterously the thirstier Dnanidref got. Yes, there were some fish you could catch from the water, but they left you thirsty.

Submuloc wondered what his leg would taste like. It was going numb with the cold and the heat, and seemed appetizing to his nose. It would keep his brain and eyes alive, and most importantly, keep Dnanidref going. If anyone deserved to see with his eyes what he heart felt on the Eastern Horizon it was Dnanidref. The old man seemed to have lived his entire life for that dream, putting everything off till he could make the journey. Till his obligations to the tribe at home were finished. And now that he was, at least in the minds of those at home, 'dead', he was finally Alive. More alive than he ever had been.

But today there was a sorrow in his voice. "The end of our struggles will be tomorrow," he said, somberly. "And when struggle ends, so does life, my son."

Dnanidref hugged Submuloc like a father. Like a brother. And like a friend. A tear came down his cheek, then he pulled up a blanket and went to sleep. Submuloc watched the horizon for the rest of the night, waiting till dawn. This time, it was late in coming, or so it seemed. The night felt eternal. His stomach churned, his heart ached, his eyes grew painful and tired. Finally, the sun rose, and blinded him. The first time the Light did that. It would have been easy

to hide his eyes, go back behind the shadows, and even turn the boat around for home, but there was no choice but to look up. Beneath the sun something solid. Blue, green and...brown, with a fog which had a color he had never seen before, the smell of something that offended his nose, and smelled like death.

A seagull landed aboard the pihs, its wings coated with blood of many colors. It sqwauked something that Submuloc's inner ear thought he could translate. "Land," Dnanidref smiled, picking up on the bird's significance and perhaps message. "Land!" he exclaimed with glee, his ancient and decrepit legs leaping up and down on the ship like a boy who caught his first fish. "The land beyond the horizon, my son!" he continued, hugging Dnandref like he had hugged no other human being, at least to Submuloc's knowledge and best intuition.

The gull flew away, joining a flock. The flock led the way to a pile of debris on the water leading from the shore. Food, eatable and fresh. And upon closer examination, very human. Arms, legs and heads containing eyes of those who had died terrified and confused, half of the faces bearing stubbles and tufts of hair. With shimmering jewelry around them and attached to holes punched into their pale, white skin. With a color that seemed to be between brown and yellow that shined in a way that was very unnatural.

"They these things on their bodies in preparation for death," Dnanidref said. "Just as the body of the ghost with the hair on its face seemed to say to me."

"Without words?" Submuloc inquired, trying to gleam if the old man was remembering memories from this world or the next.

"This is how ghosts talk," the reply. The Sage looked at the mutilated limbs on the water, then at the distant shore. "But where there is death, there is also life," he smiled.

"What kind of life?" Submuloc asked.

"The kind we must know about," Dnanidref affirmed. "And tell our children about, son."

There he went again, calling Submuloc 'son'. As if it was biological as well as acquired. The facts supported both being true. Submuloc always felt a kinship to Dnanidref, like they were from a different 'stock' than everyone else in their own families. Submuloc's father was a kind enough man, but he feared Dnanidref, telling his boy to learn to fish and hunt rather than to dream or to build things that had no defined use in the daily lives of just...living. Dnanidref carved things in wood that no one in the tribe had ever seen, or could understand, and to be fair, could probably not even use. But it was useful to Dnanidref to carve such things. Such as, right now, a dragon head to put on the front of the boat, along with a cross with a man laying on it.

"It will protect the boat and us," he said by way of explanations.

The landing was uneventful. Smooth sand in front of a rocky beach with cliffs above it. Effortless and undetected, so it seemed. Submuloc felt disappointed. "We just discovered, or found, the land beyond the Eastern Horizon. I thought it would feel..."

"I know," Dnanidref said, relating his disappointments. "It just feels like another day to me too. Maybe all days do, or should. But, what do I know?"

Indeed, 'what do I know?', words Dnanidref related so often when he was right, and wise enough to be humble and ever-questioning about it.

But one thing Submuloc did know. The pihs was out of food, in need of repairs, and there seemed to be woods on top of the cliff. Then he heard the sounds of people there who seemed to be those who would steal their pihs, or wood from them. "We had better hide this..."

"Yes, I know," Dnanidref said, pointing to a cave as the tide came rolling in, the surf coming up with waves that would show little mercy for a craft build only to travel two days away from shore back home over gentle waters.

Submuloc and Dnanidref carried their pihs into the cave and covered it with brush gathered from the outside. "Be sure to put these bushes around it in the way Nature says," Dnanidref related. "Not in a line with no curves or an angle that crossed itself unnaturally,"

Submuloc was confused, even when Dnanidref drew the words into the sand with a stick. "Straight line? Right angle? What was Dnanidref talking about?" Submuloc said to himself of the arrangement of lines in the sand that he had never seen in Nature, or any devise constructed by his people back home. But the newly built cross on the front of the pihs that had taken them across the Great Water, along with the painful look of the guilt-conferring man on top of the cross, drove the old man's meaning home into Submuloc's head. Along with what he remembered of the jewelry on the arms and legs, and hanging on the ears of the heads, he saw on the way into the beach.

As they made their way up the path along the cliff, they saw even more straight lines and right angles. And three sided shiny objects that seemed unnatural. Like nothing one would see in the woods, or which Nature would make. Even the spears of these people were 'straight'. "They seem stupid," Submuloc said. "Don't they know that a spear that keeps the curve of the tree will find its way to more fish?"

"Maybe they make spears like this because they are designed to kill people, and not catch fish," Dnanidref replied, directing Submuloc's attention to a row of women whose hair was being cut off by shiny sharp paired knives that left blood marks on their heads. They were tied up on stakes, men and women with right angle crosses around their necks yelling something angry their way.

"They seem like gentle women, tied to the stakes about to get burned. With eyes like....Healers," Submuloc said to Dnanidref.

"Which is why they will be burned in those fires, or cut into pieces for the birds to eat, Great Spirit help us," Dnanidref replied, sadly. "Like we used to do, in the old, ancient times when..."

"When what?" Submuloc asked.

“It was a long time ago. We were a primitive and savage people. But we are much smarter than that now,” he smiled. “Great Spirit willing.”

In the gesture of prayers for the dead, or dying, Dnanidref picked up a flick of grass from the ground and broke it up with his hands. He spread it to the wind, which was foul with excrement, burning poisons, and roasted flesh. Produced, so it seemed, by this village with teepees that had straight lines and right angles everywhere. Dwellings crammed so close together that there was barely room to walk. And when there was so much space around the village that one could live in. It seemed that the closer to the center of the village people were, the most miserable they were. The people wearing more jewelry than the others were the most miserable, and seemed to make life miserable for those around them. They chanted, moaned, and carted things around which looked like sleds with a circular piece of wood on both sides of it.

“It seems to make moving the sleds around easier,” Submuloc said.

“As long as the ground is flat,” Dnanidref commented regarding the grassless, lifeless and very hard ‘ground’ upon which the village was built. True to his word, the sled with the circular wood on either side seemed hard to move once it hit grass outside of town, and real earth. A large animal was pulled over and attached to it to take the load the rest of the way.

“Big dogs,” Submuloc noted. “With ears like small rabbits. And noble eyes,” he commented regarding the beasts that seemed capable of being ridden by a man, and when ridden, seemed to not mind it, or at least seemed broken enough to not say so. “Indeed, these are an advanced people.” Submuloc continued.

“And a dying one,” Submuloc added, as the blanket over the sled fell off, bodies of people, some with much jewelry, some with none of it, falling off of it. Their faces had holes in them. Their lips were blistered. Their eyes were vacant. And they were all still clothed.”

More people without jewelry were yelled at and they put the bodies of the dead on top of the sled again, carrying them to a large hill where there were holes dug. Dnanidref’s nose detected something. “Their sweat smells of death, fear and ignorance,” he said. “Like they purposely don’t go into the water to bath.”

“Maybe it is custom?” Submuloc added. “Or they are cold. Even though it is a hot day, everyone had their arms and legs covered. They must have thin skins,” he mused. “And thick skulls. And....” Submuloc gazed upon a young girl that looked like his own daughter. Men with crossed and much jewelry around their necks were dragging her out of her hut by her hair, other men with shiny spears being sure that they met no resistance from the villagers who looked gaunt, hungry and compassionate.

“I have to stop them!” Submuloc grunted, pulling out a stone knife from his belt.

“With that?” Dnanidref answered.

“Someone has to...I can use this as a weapon!” the man who never even struck another in anger found himself asserting.

“Better to use this!” Dnanidref replied, pointing to the muscle between his ears. With that, the old sage motioned Submuloc into the brush, a beautiful collection of trees that were still standing, around a village that seemed to ignore the shelter those tall giants could provide them. “We use the angels inside of us as demons,” Dnanidref said.

“Like you used to do to us to keep us inside on nights when the coyotes were afoot?” Submuloc answered.

“Sometimes you have to treat children like children,” Dnanidref replied. “And sometimes you need to make gifts of life seem like omens of death.” Dnanidref noted around him apples which seemed redder than normal, and softer. And mushrooms. “They sell everything except these on the sleds in town, so many if we become Spirit Animals and fart these down on them...”

It seemed like a good plan. A needed one. The only one available as the fires were being set to burn the women and girls accused of being sorcerers. Fires fueled by wood from those women’s houses, and even larger amounts of very thin shavings of white wood with marks on

them that looked learned. As Submuloc felt it, evil resided here under the where the Sun rose, not Light. But it was his duty to stop it.

The two visitors from the West side of the Great Waters climbed up the leafed trees above the village, running upon them like they were all manner of animals. Apparently, those animals were not ever seen or heard by the villagers, because their growls, barks and cockled scared them. Even the men with the spears and axes who wore shiny suits of leather that seemed to protect them. Men with bald spots on the crown of their head in the black robes with the crosses around their necks told the people who set the fires to put 'heretical books', as he called them, upon them before igniting the wood under the condemned Healers. The women and girls about to be burned seemed relieved, and thankful. Then, from the sky, Submuloc and Dnanidref threw down the mushrooms and apples which the scared crowd in front of the condemned healers called 'tomatoes', calling them 'toxic' and 'rain from the devil'.

The two First Nations explorers found the foreign tomatoes and mushrooms very tasty. But, it was more important to make 'devil rain' to scare away the villagers than to fill their empty bellies. Finally, the only people left in the village were the girls and women tied to the posts in the ground. Submuloc rushed down and untied them. The pale skinned women seemed scared of him. They ran away into the woods, too. But in another direction. Even the little girls amongst them who seemed so wise, and who, despite the paleness of her skin, seemed so much like Submuloc's daughter.

Then, Dnanidref whistled from atop one of the trees and pointed to another part of the woods. An army of hooded people were coming, very angry, and very armed. Submuloc scurried back up into the trees and looked down. Their clothes looked familiar. Like they were the same people, coming back to see what was going on, with blankets over their eyes. And behind them, rats.

"Death," Dnanidref said. "By tomorrow, everyone who returned to this place will be dead. The lifeless ones and the ones who are Alive between the ears. We had better stay up here till it passes."

Dnanidref sounded like he was right, again. Though Submuloc felt that he was talking from the Other Side, there was no other choice but to listen, and obey. Indeed he was on the other side of the Earth, the other side of the Great Waters at the very least. And a day or two in a tree

with fruit on it and shelter from the rain was a welcomed break from a rocky pih floating on every-moving water.

Two days passed, then three. The sleds with circular sides to them carried more bodies to the burying place till there was no one left to carry the carts, and no one to do the burying. All that remained were the rats, who ate the dead people and moved on into the woods. Thankfully, the women and girls who were about to be burned stayed in the woods, and hopefully they had run faster than the rats could walk. Maybe they were safe, or maybe not. Better that they were not found, anyway. Though Submuloc wanted to remain for one more task. "We should take one of them back to where we live. To where there is life instead of death. To tell us about her people here."

"You have children of your own, and a family, Submuloc," Dnanidref said with a kind, fatherly and authoritative tone. "We have seen what is on the rising side of the Sun, and it is not Light. The land here is not the Source of life. It is...primitive, savage and lacking any kind of civilization." Dnanidref wept for the people who lay dead in the wide, hard paths they called streets, and those who fled into the woods.

There was one thing that Submuloc was determined to carry back with him. The thin wood sheets containing scratches on them which the condemned women seemed so attached to and their ignorantly cruel would-be executioners were so intent on burning. "Books", he remembered them being called, putting them into a large bag to examine on another day.

It was a long sail back home, and by the time Submuloc landed the pish, Dnanidref lay dead beside him. But there was a smile on the old man's face. He had seen what was on the other side of the world, the Source of the Sun. And had proven to himself, and perhaps Submuloc, that the real discovery is to connect to Life where you are. Where his people were. On the small stretch of land which he now was determined to turn into a Paradise.

Lazy Eyes was the first to greet Submuloc. "Where were you?" he asked.

"No place worth telling anyone about," Submuloc said as he broke grass over Dnardref's smiling face, his journey to the Other Side now complete.

Submuloc kissed his wife, hugged his children and became a respectable member of the tribe. He grew old, and in ways that were possible within the limitations around him, happy. He taught wisdom to those who would listen, and learned that the wisest teacher learns more than he ever teaches. As for the books, Dnanidef learned what he could from them and finally figured out what some of them were saying to him, just before his eyes went dim. As for what lay behind at the time of his passing to the Other Side, it was mirrored into the waters in which his remains were cast. ..."Submuloc sdnif eporue" Submoluc wrote on one of the pieces of 'paper', as the books called them. The mirror image in the water reflected, ironically enough, 'Columbus finds Europe.'

THE GOOD DOCTOR

Tim saw it all in front of his bloody hands, the guts and brains of his mark, mentor and patron in front of his sweat-soaked eyes. He could here his mother's voice telling him, 'Timothy', do your job, like the nice boy and good man that I worked so hard for you to become. From his father, 'any man who does an ordinary job without making an extra-ordinary impact in the world is no man, and certainly no son of mine, 'Timmy'''. From Jennifer, the nurse whose hot tongue could resuscitate any man killed of boredom, disuse or disease back to life, "Doctor Tim, the patient is prepped, and we're ready to go."

Tim wiggled his nose under his surgical mask and looked at the face of the man whose life was now in his hands. Lance Rabinowitz had been a success story from day one. A 'cool kid' from the playground days when it was all about whose baseball cards were most valuable to being professional adults. Lance was a natural actor, showman and had one of those bodies that said 'winner' in every endeavor possible for a boy, man and everything in between. Tim...aside from working his way up the ladder to become Neurosurgeon at Bellingham General, he was always B plus material at best. And smart enough to know that not being number one was being number nothing. Maybe if he was C plus material, he would have been happy being a commoner. Or if C minus, ecstatic. The kind of guy who lived for bowling with his buds, porking his wife at home, and reaping the grand reward of a turkey dinner on Thanksgiving for busting his ass for the company every other day of the year on the factory line.

Nurse Jennifer handed Tim the scalpel. Her eyes looked squarely at the line dotted out on the skin overlying Lance's left parietal lobe.

"Guess Mister 'don't touch my cool hair, you uncool loser' let the razor slip a bit when he was shaving last night," Tim commented as he made the first incision into the scalp, consecrating the events to happen with a snide grin.

"Your orders were to shave his WHOLE head, Doc," Jennifer threw back at him. "Are you sure this operation will get rid of those seizures, and those hallucinations and delusions."

“That he’s the most innovative, reliable, sensitive, cutthroat, sexy, gentlemanly stud in Hollywood or the ‘cool to be cruel and manipulative’ Sundance festival?” Doctor Tim continued, relishing in the moment. Realizing that the witicism was both colorful and right, and if it got to the right publisher, insightful for generations to come.

No comment from Nurse Jennifer, the other handmaidens, or even the residents. Nothing from their mouths, or even their eyes. All just kept doing their job, as assigned. With the occupational hazard that comes to those who dare to play God. To take power over life and death, and divert disease from its designated victims.

“Smells like DOV in the airducts today,” Doctor Tim commented as he lifted the skull off the dura matter under it. “DOV...know what that is?” he asked his residents, whose stare remained on the monitors connected to the cameras filming the operation rather than the real life tissue itself. “Dull out virus attacks brains, and souls, that are under-expressive, overly-submissive and/or under-utilized,” Tim continued as he cut a slit in the dura matter, exposing a lumpy cerebral cortex that seemed pathological under the surface. Said surface having to be cut into to verify his intuition on the matter. “If affects this area here most.”

“The supra-visual/musical association cortex?” first year resident Patel commented on the region of Hollywood legend and New York role model Lance Rabinowitz’s parietal lobe. “Wasn’t it identified as a seat of multi-modality creativity in Brain Research last month?” the East Indian wonderchild on his way to being top dog in still very White Bellingham commented.

“Depends on how you look at the data, and if your ocular portholes are driven by hot curry or rose colored glasses, or ” Tim knew the joke would not get a laugh, and if it did, it was forced. Flattery for the man who could make or break a career for any intern, resident or, after a few phone calls, nurse.

Sensing the escalation of embarrassment, Doctor Tim did what he did best, or what the world said he did best. Once again he channeled his brains into his fingers, his emotions into the tips of those appendages, and felt inside the ‘lump’ that was either a tumor, region of infarction or perhaps an overdeveloped region of highly functional neuronal tissue. Some said that Doctor Tim could ‘feel’ brains think with his fingers. The legend seemed to be true, as his fingers were always proved correct by the EEG monitors, deoxy-glucose CAT scans and even the most ‘impersonal’ of MRIs.

But this time, Tim's medical knowledge was hampered by something else. The lump was just a lump. It didn't speak to him.

"You okay, Doctor Tim?" Jennifer asked with her Southern twanged voice, emanating the respect and sincerity of that combined title.

"Yeah, sure." Tim replied, feeling something very coarse and crude emerging from a place in his Soul he never acknowledged, a nucleus in his brain he never studied or read about.

"You and HIM okay?" Jennifer inquired delivering the solution straight between the eyes, bypassing all thalamic and pre-cortical filtering systems in Tim's troubled mind.

"Yeah...sure. He's my patient. I'm his doctor," Doctor Tim replied with assertiveness and sincerity. "The Hippocratic oath. Above all do no harm," he continued.

Under his surgical mask, another dialogue was taking place between the angels and demons who were playing high stakes poker with Tim's soul. "Above all things do no harm. Be a healer to your patient, place his life above your own," he recalled from vows he privately and publicly took when becoming a Healer of flesh, big H. A pledge that made his mother feel proud of him, despite the fact that she died of cancer a year later. Then from another part of his Mind, and Soul, "Make an impact in the world. Make your Mark. Make a difference, for the Global Good, goddamn you!" from his father. He remembered a discourse he had with his father once about if he were Hitler's doctor in WWII. Young Tim claimed that it was a doctor's duty to care for his patient, no matter who that patient was. His father's rebuttal was "a brave doctor would have killed Old Adolf with strychnine. A smarter one would have injected him with estrogen and turned him into an even bigger fag than he was so that he'd be laughed out of power."

Tim contemplated the matter at hand now. To most of the world, Lance Rabinowitz was a Hollywood success story. Producer and director extradenaire. But producer and director of WHAT? Movies that made money, and that became popular. But popular for the wrong reasons. No, not smut of the body or of the mind, but smut of the Soul. Every one of Lance's movies championed the 'cool to be cruel' credo, and his ever-so-fashionable anti-war films did more to recruit young men into becoming soldiers with urges to kill people than they did to stop

or explain any war. And as for the deals Lance made to get those movies made...The deals would make Tony Soprano look like Mother Teresa. The details revealed to Tim as 'Doctor Tim', in confidence. Something Lance perhaps intentionally did to further torture Tim for being kind rather than practical, brainy rather than ballsy.

Patel prepared the cautery to burn out the suspected lobe. Its red hot tip glowed brightly as the anesthetist motioned for the team to proceed onward, and FAST. CAT scans and all other manner of diagnoses had all been ambiguous, and reactivation of them made their assessments all the more muddy.

"To burn or not to burn?" Jennifer asked in Shakesperian manner, giving voice to the question from Tim's silent lips.

Tim needed answers, and fast. What was this unusual mass in this most unusual man? This patient with whom Tim had a personal score to settle with. The man who forced, or rather intimidated Tim into going into medicine rather than the arts, or perhaps even politics. All those one way conversations with Lance echoed in Doctor Tim's brain. The phrases. The opinions which carried the power of proclamations from Lance's know-it-all (and can convince everyone else that it was true also) big mouth. "You're a wise dude, but not a colorful one." "You're good at making people think, but don't even try to make them laugh." "Let us artists and politicians change the world. You're a doctor. We need you to keep us healthy." "We're good at what we do...You're nice at...well, you're just nice, ya know?"

Nurse Jennifer cleared her throat. She threw that 'get on with it or I'll call in the real powers that be at this hospital' stare at Tim.

Just then, in the nick of time, Patel said something in Hindi. Probably nothing he learned in medical school, far more expressive than a passage from the Gita. But something from that book, or perhaps others like it, rang true to Tim. The demons inside of Tim stood naked, exposed, and identified. "Anger, jealousy and greed", he called them by name, identifying the sources of where they came from, and the consequences of obeying there mandates. Then, a breakthrough. "Hate the disease, not the patient," he said to himself, loud enough to come out in a whisper. Audible, thankfully, to Jennifer alone.

“Amen,” she asserted.

“Amen indeed,” Tim continued, feeling the Divine Eyes seeing again through his fingers, sensing the uses and limitations of the devices in the operating room better than the manufacturers did.

The lump under the multi-modality creativity association cortex was partially malignant, and partially benign. Doctor Tim removed what he had to, leaving the rest to Lance to do what he had to with it.

Lance returned to work in two weeks. Tim turned on his television set two months later to watch the results of his work. ‘The same old crap’, said the reviewers who were paid to hate Rabinowitz productions. ‘The same brilliant genius’, proclaimed the minions in his company who sought advancement.

“Something...different between the lines,” Tim noted from what he felt was a very objective place. “It’s a start,” his conclusion as he was called out of the TV room in the doctor’s lounge and back to work.

CRYPTOSPORIDIA

There were three things that Cryptosporidia didn't 'get' about the Intelligent Life force which, by all accounts, was her Master, and friend. First, why was it that her Provider, and Protector didn't appreciate the value of a good dump, or as was called above her whenever she stopped to tried to take it, 'shit'? Second, why did the most Intelligent species consider what came out of her back so offensive, and filled with the kind of bacteria that didn't come out of 'His' ass? Third, why was she named 'Cryptosporidia', a beautiful name for a bug that probably looked very attractive under the microscope but did so many ugly things to people, and horses? Finally, why and Who decided that her Master could get to capitalize the letters that described everything about Him, and him? And why was the mare who was smarter than any other horse in any herd she found herself in named 'Cryptosporidia'?

She was a 'good girl' when she obeyed his will, a 'bitch' or worse when she didn't, 'old girl' when she was tired of feeling her real biological age. But there was a higher hand than the Master on her back, or rather a Higher Hoof's will that Leonard, her 'master' was the one who was the boss and she, as his favorite mare, was his servant. Maybe it had something to do with the number of flexible digits on his hands, the only one left for her being the third finger which when she walked kept her supported, giving a special 'salute' to any asshole or idiot behind her.

But maybe her legal owner and master Leonard, or as he now called himself, "Larry", or in the Viking season of winter 'Lars' was the one to be taken care of, and she was his provider, and caretaker. It was, as Cryptosporidia calculated it, around thirty winters since he jumped on her then young back and high-tailed it to the High Country of British Columbia, Canada, from the high-plains pastures of Washington State, U.S. of A. She was a filly barely 5 months weaned from her mama, and Leonard was a long-haired young adventurer fleeing from his homeland. She remembered that ride back in 1971, ten of the hardest and most magnificent miles they ever ran together, making sharp turns to avoid the blue and white cars with the sirens on them, running hell-bent-for-leather from the green trucks with the men in the uniforms.

But she and Leonard made it, staking out a claim in the bush where no one could find them. He made a few deals selling the kind of plants that she wasn't allowed to eat, and she gave him, and herself, 4 babies that grew up to become a herd, growing season after season in a place without electric wires, without stinky air, and without any other voice within range except that

of REAL people. No voices coming from those boxes the humans called radios in Washington. No small images on the bigger boxes she remembered as television, Leonard referring to it as 'the idiot box'.

It was strange having only one human to look after. Leonard kept away from strangers, and never told people he met his real name. He wrote his own books and often asked 'Crypto' for her opinion. He liked writing about many things, but the one he wrote about most was War, particularly the one in Vietnam, a place he swore he would not fight in, and a place where, he said, there was lots of killing, lies and oil, and no horses. Crypto couldn't imagine a forest where there were no horses, but maybe that was because it was a jungle. A place where the strong kill the weak, the clever mutilate the wise. A place like, according to Leonard, the US of A had become.

One day, Leonard, whose hair was still long, but a little thinner and a lot whiter than thirty winters ago, was riding in the woods looking for the yellow pebble and flakes prospected from the stream that sometimes was a river and sometimes a slew that he could trade in town for bread, rice, hay and any OLD books. Those yellow pebbles were most abundance after a big rain, and thunder clouds on the other side of the mountain had made big explosions that seemed to reshape the mountain on both sides of it. The creek seemed to change direction on this day, and Leonard, calling himself Lars this week as he was starting a book about Vikings who fought there way to the Pyramids in Egypt and talked to men from other planets, stopped to look at where he was. He took off his Viking helmet made from an old drinking bowl he found last Christmas with horns from a ram who got eaten by the coyotes in the Spring and listened to the wind with his ears, taking off his boots to hear the earth with his feet.

Any direction was 'Open' and his to take, except South or any direction that could lead to town, even a Canadian one. Crypto munched on some grass while she watched 'Lars' take a chunk of yellow pebble in his hand, chewing on it. He looked downstream and his eyes opened. "The yellow brick road!" he proclaimed, jumping on Crypto's back, prodding her downstream at a lope, though all she felt safe doing on the rocky riverbank was a trot. "We're off to see, and buy, the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Id!" he sang in a voice that hurt Crypto's ears. Maybe it didn't hurt Leonard's ears because there was something in the mushrooms two waterholes and three dumps back that could make him sing so badly and not hurt his own ears or rip open his own throat.

The creek seemed to go in all directions, the sun darting in and out of the clouds, making East seem like West, and North like South. The latter was confirmed when Crypto noticed a strange,

rectangular thing in the woods, a place where nothing had straight or 'right' angles in it. She jolted her head at the sign on the tree saying 'Entering the U.S', lifting her feet up at the overgrown patch of grass that seemed to have been cut close to the ground a season ago, some kind of 'buzz' coming up from the ground below it. But Lars was on a Mission, and the yellow brick road kept getting brighter in the stream that he was determined to follow. Crypto obeyed, and respected, Leonard's commands. It had been a long ride since they left home that morning and, today at least, he was younger than she was. Maybe smarter. 'It could happen,' she thought. And the rule that Leonard said was true everywhere, 'he who has the gold makes the rules'.

The rest of the stream seemed easier to ride over. The hard rocks turned into small pebbles, hoof-cushioning sand under them instead of hard dirt. And the grass seemed taller, and greener. The water tasted better too. Maybe it had something to do with the bottles floating on it, but each gulp of what she knew, and remembered, as 'Yankee water' was sweeter than the streams in Canada. She recognized one of the bottles. Coke, the kind she was given as a filly when she was a very good girl, with the kind of label she hadn't seen in thirty years.

She watched Leonard put his Viking helmet into the water, sifting out the yellow pebbles with the goat horns from its side. This time he was singing something else, in a Viking accent or course. "Oh Canada, my home and Native land...which we discovered in Newfoundland four hundred years before Columbus."

Crypto didn't know why, but when Leonard was happy, she found herself smiling too. It didn't have anything to do with the fact that when he was happiest, the rations of grain were a fistful bigger and often delivered by hand. There was something else. What other horse or human had known each other for more than thirty winters? Leonard seemed to like the gait of Fidel and Mahatma, two of Crypto's foals, now fully grown geldings, more than hers. They were faster than her, and certainly had better endurance, but Leonard rode her more than the other horses in the herd. As she watched the "Master Race" human singing "Oh Canada" while mistakenly on American soil, she imagined what it would be like to have a baby with him, the human who spoke about the US as a place to fear, for others and himself. The place where he said innocent horses are turned into dogmeat, and people who refuse to go to War are put in jail, or into uniforms and sent to places where they get shot at, or worse, have to shoot others. She then pulled back when she imagined what the baby would look like with a six-inch long beard and eyes that seemed to look in both directions, each independent of each other. Better that they remain 'Platonic' lovers.

It was one of those moments of magnificence where, as the ex-New Yorker said, 'life is good'. Leonard dreamed about buying that printing press and maybe even a computer instead of a typewriter. Crypto was thinking about the better brands of feed her children, ungrateful and loving brats they had become, could munch on for the next winter. But just as the green of summer grass gives way to brown fall pastures, and dry hay by the third snow, the magical moment was interrupted by a loud sound from the woods.

Leonard grabbed his gun, a well-crafted single-shot Hawking rifle which he used to scare away wolves, or when he had to, kill cougars. Or bears who developed a taste for horse meat. But this wasn't a wolf, or a bear. It was a creature even worse than that, according to Leonard. It approached at rapid speed, giving Leonard barely enough time to line himself up for what he hoped would be a clear shot between its eyes, which were bright, shiny and penetrating. Leonard put himself in harms way, protecting his beloved Cryptosporidia with every ounce of courage he could muster through trembling lips, the Viking Helmet squarely on his head, making him appear to be half man, half beast and all-powerful.

"Halten, dar, schnellink!" he screamed out in 'Viking', as Crypto recognized it. "Halten du azer!"

The creature stopped, its lights and roar from under its belly coming to a halt. Crypto looked at it, and remembered it as something familiar, from her youth. A 'VW' on its head, roundish body, and three familiar creatures emerging from its side.

"Hey man! Know where the Gathering is?" the human with a beard and top hair almost as long as Leonard asked with a wide all is well and getting even better smiled.

"We got lost," his friend said, wearing a fringed buckskin jacket with beads around his moccasins, that inverted Y inside a circle painted on his forehead.

Leonard was confused. He clenched his one-shot rifle and looked at the sign on the side of the creek. "Bellingham State Park, Site of Historical Battle between the Nez Perse and General Crook in..." he read, figuring out where he was. His fears seemed confirmed when another person came out of the van, wearing a green jacket and Army boots, walking with a firm step, hair cropped down to the scalp.

Leonard backed his way to Crypto, both of his eyes looking at the beast, working with the business end of the Hawkin rifle as to where the single shot could cripple it easiest. He was good at aiming without looking into the sites, something which saved Crypto, her children and even himself from countless predators, even humans. Just as she was about to get off a shot to immobilize the van, and a second later lay his boots into Cryptosporidia's flank that would take them back home to safety, yet again, the Green Coated, Boot-wearing, hair cropped 'boss' of the human entourage turned around.

"Peace, man," came from the lips, and the eyes, and the heart of a woman who looked very familiar to Leonard, her fingers flashing the directive-index finger and the 'Bronx salute' third digit in a 'V' sign which conveyed hopes and commitment to the highest form of Victory, a world where there are no victors or victims. Had it not been for her wrinkleless face, her multi-length hair long in the front and shaved in the back, and her non-arthritic fingers she could have been Laurie, the woman, and life Leonard left behind in Seattle. The woman who believed in Leonard's fight against the Vietnam War, but who still said he was running away from his responsibilities. And the woman whose cowardice or sensibility kept her South of the 49th parallel, sending Christmas cards with horse cookies to 'General Delivery, Westwold BC' that reached Leonard for the first few winters, but stopped soon afterwards.

Crypto saw the same spirit in this young woman as in Laurie, as she came up to her with a dancelike stride, petting her neck with a touch that was tender and assuring, both at the same time. The old mare missed Laurie, and felt that somehow she was back. Maybe, she imagined, this was Laurie's daughter. She seemed so, by the way she looked at Leonard with the kind of respect an seasoned horse deserved from a young one. The reunion Crypto saw in Leonard's eyes, and even in the half-bald Army Coat Hippie, whose name happened to be 'Laury, with a Y' seemed to last forever.

But 'forever' only lasted for the brief time after Leonard lower his hand-crafted, usually-accurate rifle and looked at his watch. "What year is this?" he asked Laury with a Y.

"It's...like, now!" she smiled, asking if she could get on Crypto. To ensure that Leonard would say yes, the Old Mare nuzzled the twenty-something 'ghost', or daughter of the real thing, snorting and nodding her head 'yes' in the manner she saw humans do it.

Crypto felt like she was thirty years younger with the youngster on her back, tail lifted up in the air, trotting out like she was a proud virgin mare showing off to the stallions. And indeed, the

two legged stallions were looking at 'the girls' with very open eyes. The mare gave her left ear to Laury, her right to eaves drop into what the 'men', or 'boys' were saying.

The one in the buckskin fringe jacket and Indian beats introduced himself to Leonard as 'Jackson', the other one as 'Taylor'. Leonard introduced himself by his first name, inviting them to do the same, but Jackson and Taylor said that those were their first names. Leonard stroked his sunbaked chin through his white beard wondering what had happened to names in his absence from home country, and other things like why someone with such pretty hair as Laury would shave it down to the scalp from the neck to to top of the crown, a chunk of breast-length multicolored mane just above the forehead reminding the viewer of the wonderous lockes that once were. "It's her saying who she is," Taylor smiled, taking off his hat, revealing a crew cut which Leonard feared could be done on himself if he said 'yes' to his country's call to 'duty' back in 71.

Leonard did that 'nod', which over the years, he did more and more often. That nod which said "I'm old, maybe wise, and a wise man accepts the will of Mother Nature, and the expressions of those who She makes in her image, even if I don't understand them. Like why there are mosquitoes and wasps. And why there are also horses, dogs and people. And why I have to write up in the woods because SOMEday the world will have the heart, mind, ears and courage to listen to..."

In mid rant-between the ears, Leonard's gaze froze at what he saw inside the van. Anti-War signs. "Make Love Not War", "No More Blood for Oil", "One Planet, One World", "Think Global, Act Local" and finally the one which made the tears behind Leonard's touched heart open up and stream down his face, framing a smile of Victory and Renewal. "Dollars at home NOT worth dead children's lives abroad".

"You okay, man?" straggly-long haired Jackson asked Leonard, keeping his distance.

"Yeah," short-cropped Taylor added, feeling the need, impulse to lay his outstretched hand on Leonard's shoulders. "Are you---"

"The War, which you left!" Leonard cried, noticing a 'Veterans Against the War' button on his jacket, worn like a medal. "You had the courage to leave, from the INSIDE."

"I...enlisted," Taylor related with shame, and regret. "I should have known better, but...then when I got there,"

Leonard embraced Taylor, young and old Warriors against War telling each other their innermost stories without saying a single word, Jackson looking on wanting to help, but not knowing if he could, or should. "It's alright...We'll end this War!" Leonard assured Taylor. "All of us!" he proclaimed from a face that hadn't shed a tear since the Christmas of 1973, when he stopped getting cards from Laurie and cut off all radio, television and newspaper contact with the world in protest and defiance of what it had become. He made his own confession, in words even Crypto didn't hear, at least until now.

"I thought that by making a new world up here, without having anything to do with the old one down there, something mystical would happen," the sometimes 18 and sometimes 80 year old Leonard confessed to the lads, and everyone else in his imaginations and memory. "Beethoven went deaf to the world, and that was why he wrote the kind of music that no one ever wrote before. Music we need now, and music that I tried to, maybe did, put into...words."

"Which need to be heard," came from behind the old man, and the back of the mare who was his closest friend, by necessity first, then choice later. "You seem to, ya know, know a lot,' Laury said with a smiling voice that felt real, one of Leonard's latest books-in-progress retrieved from his saddlebag. "This stuff is..."

"Real?" he asked, placing all his bets and prayers on the table.

"Cool, I think," she said as she dismounted with the leap of a dancer. "What I can read and understand of it, anyway."

Leonard smiled with delight, and victory. He yelped out a Viking scream of victory louder than any Crypto ever remembered. Even the time when he and her 'reached an agreement' and went on their first lope together, a controlled gallop that lasted four pastures worth. But Leonard was now on the ground, and Crypto's legs couldn't go much further. That bout of laminitis three seasons ago and the tendon injury last spring were taking their toll. But she knew that there would be a last ride some day. Like the one Brunhilde took on her horse Graine

as she charged the walls of Valhalla destroying the gods who had kept mankind subservient, ignorant and living within their self-created limitations. Of course, in Wagner's opera, what survived the final clash was only the music. And humanity. And horseanity. A world without War and with Passion of the Heart was worth fighting and dying for, even for the sake of her own equine children. Military assholes are also industrial pigs, who destroy pastureland to put up shopping malls and suburbs, leaving the horses left to spend 23 and a half hours a day in a 6 by 6 foot stall so their spoiled brat kids can have safe pony rides or show off how you can hurt a horse going over a jump to their father's clients. Or, if the horses were lucky, to go to the butcher's block, only good enough to be eaten by the dog, or the French or Japanese. No, what was brewing behind Leonard's eyes had to be done and done now.

Confirmation of such was heard from the other side of the hill. A gathering of cars, then trucks, then what seemed like louder trucks. Tanks, according to the memory Crypto had of television in the days when Leonard would keep it on inside his cabin with the window open to the pasture on hot summer nights.

"Let's do it!" Leonard proclaimed, putting on his Viking Helmet, placing a Peace Sign in the middle of it, grabbing his gun. He assertively inserted his foot into Crypto's stirrup, swinging his aged yet revitalized body into the saddle. "We gonna get arrested?" he asked, as he heard sirens from the other side of the mountain.

"That's the idea," Taylor said. "The Wildlife Preserve is supposed to be for ducks, not oil rigs, strip mining, or Army maneuvers."

The 'A' word rang terror into Leonard's heart. He remembered the stories about jail for those who 'faced the music' from New York Pacifists sent to Texas jails. And put in with Rednecks who would beat them until they either became 'men' and fought back, became corpses or turned into self-destructive bitches for any yahoo who wanted a piece of tail. Those that survived on the inside seldom made it more than a year or two on the outside without killing themselves or winding up in a loony bin.

A fleet of Army choppers flew above, low and very 'artistically'. Crypto spooked. Taylor and Jackson mooned them. Laury looked at Leonard, relating the obvious to him. "No one here or in Vietnam or anywhere else will hear us till we go to them." Indeed she was her mother's daughter, or idealistic progeny, though Leonard never asked for biological verification of such.. Time enough for that after the War to End the War was over.

“Down Below” was someplace mountain Mench Leonard swore he’d never return to. Cryptosporidia welcomed it when she remembered the hard ground, soul-shattering noise and horrible smells in her youth. But winter didn’t last as long ‘down below’ and the grass was, between the garbage around it, sweeter. It also had so many people in it. ‘Down Below’ was a busy place indeed, particularly when the VW Van, she and her ‘human child’ Leonard arrived into the Anti-War Camp. It felt like thirty years ago, every face that could grow a beard seeming to have one, and no one with hair that looked ‘normal’. Indeed, nothing was normal here. There were even some Indian kids who rode their horses into the Camp, one of them a stud who, maybe if she winked the right way with her ass, would be interested in conceiving another foal. Yes, she was tired, and yes, even on a good year there was barely enough hay and grain to make it through the winter, but just one more foal. That would be...magnificent, and lovely.

But before magnificent or lovely could happen for anyone who walked on two or four legs, there was ‘challenge’. The Anti-War people, who also seemed to be for saving the Earth and animals on it, gathered up in a line, someone in the middle of the crowd ahead organizing them. It was a black-skinned man, not too many white hairs on his face or head, but even though he was barely grey, he seemed wise. Or at least caring. He had this nervous look in his eye that only Crypto could see. Like a rider who wants all the people around him to think he knows his way around a horse but who barely knows the head from the ass, and who knows that his ass will be on the ground as soon as the horse moves.

Crypto and her children always took care of such men, and women, by walking slower, trotting more smoothly and never breaking out into a lope until there was soft ground and a slight incline up a hill to absorb the rider’s bouncing. But this Black Man, who everyone called Afro American for reasons she couldn’t understand, panicked after the first line of Police and then Soldiers moved in on the pasture that had been a party-town, announcing with loudspeakers that they had to disperse.

Everyone held their ground, as did the Black Man. The animal-loving humans looked at him, telling HIM what to do. They all nodded a lot, then he turned around and put up his hand in a fist. It made the Police mad, though the Soldiers seemed to accept it, laughing at him, calling him a ‘dumb Nigger’. But though he may have been dumb, he wasn’t dumb-Souled. When the White Faced Army people imitated his fist gesture with a ‘Nigger Dance’, the Cops got nervous, particularly the ones who weren’t White. The “Afro Amercian” leader of the Army against Armies held up his fist even higher, then opened it, one finger of it actually.

The 'third digit salute' to the Police and the Soldiers made most of them mad, particularly as humans on the animal-caring side of the line joined in. Crypto felt Leonard smile as he joined in and saw him smile even more when Leonard saw Laury do a dance in front of the men with the loaded cannons and thunder-sticks, giving the soldiers the finger and putting flowers into the barrels of their guns. Some of the soldiers looked at flowers with anger, some at her breasts with not so generous thoughts, and some, the ones who were in the cleanest uniforms with the spy glasses, said something else with their faces. One of them looked at his watch, another nodded, and they sent signals to each other. A soldier from the back of the ranks, whose face Crypto couldn't see because of his helmet, broke through the ranks and grabbed Laury, throwing her basket of flowers on the ground, then spitting on them, then, as Crypto and Leonard alone saw it, ripping off the buttons on her blouse. She turned around, surprised that he was bare chested.

She was grabbed by two other soldiers, then she started to scream. "What are you doing?!!!" Get your hands off me!" All the good humans wanted to help. They moved forward but then stopped when a loud sound penetrated the mountain air. The chirping of the birds stopped as a tree trunk filled with them fell to the ground.

"That's a warning shot, folks," the Head Cop said over a very loud loudspeaker in his hand, taking orders from a few head Soldiers. "You are on Federal Land. In violation of Federal Law. Disperse now, peacefully---"

"---and forever live in shame, and dishonor". Crytosporidia heard Leonard proclaim, her ears ignoring the rest of what the Cop said. It was all 'homoshit' as far as she and Leonard was concerned.

Crypto felt two firm legs on her trunk, lifted her head up, and bolted out according to the command of her friend, and ally. Together, they charged through the line of garbage left by the Pro-Environment Protesters, the fleeing crowds of the 'good' humans who seemed to well dressed to be real, the barricades of wooden sawhorses put in place by the Cops, and the over the fences of advancing barbed wire that now separated Laury from her people. Together they dodged and ignored bullets shot at their feet. Together they raced to the truck whose door opened quickly so it could take the 'exhibitionist anarchist' away without incident or without allowing her to tell HER story to the press and her comrades. Together they jumped across the barricades of modern machinery which Leonard was determined would not be used against any

Vietnamese men, women or, most importantly, children. Together they snatched Laury from the Soldiers with visors around their faces. Crypto reared up to scare off the arresting goons, Leonard firing the one and only 'warning shot' from the ornamental Hawkin rifle that the Cops and Soldiers initially thought was real, but now knew as anything but. Together, they carried Laury back toward the safe side of the line, where the 'good' people marched forward, arm in arm, toward the Cops, who then fled, then the Soldiers, who dispersed after a call came in to their Commander 'allowing' them to do so. Together, they tended to Laury's wounds in the woods, away from the Protesters inspired by Leonard's courage, and the Reporters who wanted to find out who the Hippie-Mountainman-kamakasi-Warrior who escaped being killed by skill or Divine intervention really was.

"Who are you?" Laury asked Leonard as he cleaned her wounds, ignoring his own, putting his kindled desire for a lost love into an even deeper place within his lonely heart. "Why did you, like, ya know, do that?" .

"Your mother would understand, or at least I hope she doesn't, now," Leonard's reply.

"I don't...like....get it, or you."

Leonard smiled, allowing the deepest part of his wisdom to speak the loudest. Seeing that all was well with Laury, and the world about to bring her back, he looked into Crypto's eyes, apologizing to her for the superficial cuts on her legs, thankful to Whoever that the legs under the lacerated skin were still sound and solid.

With that, Leonard rode Crypto back into the woods, back North of the 49th parallel and back home. They didn't speak to each other, each lamenting missed opportunities, Cryptosporidia still dreaming about feeling like a young mare with the doink of that hot Indian Arab-Appy stallion inside of her. But a Higher Wisdom said that it was time to go home, and forge new frontiers of the Soul beyond politics. Leonard did ask one question of the mare. "Crypto, think we should get a re-do?"

The Mare pondered the music coming out the 'sound box' in 1973, just as disco was becoming king, and gave the matter the most serious of considerations. "No" she said with her head and a snort she thought only understood by other horses but, apparently, by at least one human.

Leonard smiled at the Crypto's answer. "I agree," he replied somberly, taking five seconds to relish in his latest victory 'down below', thankful for the freedom he still had and that whoever was in charge of Canada still wasn't sending American draft dodgers down South. Such was the good news. The not so good news...another set of musical novels about the innermost human condition which, would be acted out, inevitably, on Crypto's back from the multi-voice, tone deaf "Lenny".

DOC STEW

A Baptist in Baton Rouge since birth, the family genius at Tulane University since early acceptance at 16, and a born-again cynic after trying to treat his first Cancer patient at 24, Stewart Williams, III, MD believed in two things. Results and procedure. Both were well worked into the program at the Klajburg Nursing home, the last resting place for Long Island elders who had outlived their usefulness to their 'younger', and overqualified physicians who had outlived their usefulness to themselves.

The pay was good, the hours short, the schedule reliable, and the patients were 'manageable' unless you objected to the smell of urine or had problems dealing with patients who were not themselves.

Indeed, the patients who were their 'younger' selves were, all things considered, not so bad off according to some anyway. Though the calendar said it was 2005, four years after 9/11, a decade or less away from the next and perhaps final crash on Wall Street, to most of the white haired, or no-haired, patients at Klajburg it was the Roaring Twenties, the golden homecoming months after V-J day, or those quietly-prosperous times when Elvis was King and Maryln Monroe was queen. Even to Mr. Weinstein in room 235, who found his way into Mrs. Lazanska's dresser draw again, sauntering around the common ground like Queen Marylyn. The 'whys' of it didn't matter anymore. Mr. Weinstein was probably visiting those times when his mother, wife or mistress weren't home again, thinking that the other patients in the hallway were shoppers at the mall who were actually fooled by his impersonation of the opposite gender. If he really 'passed' then, or could pass now, was immaterial. With Parkinson's disease progressing faster than expected, added to his diabetes, added to his nearly deaf ears, 'Doc Stew', as Mr. Weinstein whispered in his ear seductively, didn't mind the old man's eccentricities, or even the touch of the old geezer (or geezerette's) hand on his thigh. The main issue at hand was what was still on the night table next to his bed.

'Your pills,' Williams sighed, looking straight into Mr. Wienstien's mascara covered eyes. "We talked about your taking your pills. And you promised me that you---"

"---I DID take my pills," Weinstein interjected.

“Your Parkinson’s pills?” Williams said, looking at the bottle of medication he specially ordered and titrated, having been untaken for the third day in a row.. “The L-Dopa.”

“I’m no dopa, or dooper, Doc,” Weinstein insisted. “I read an article on where those things come from.”

Williams took in a deep breath, prepared once again to defend the pharmaceutical companies with the pre-rehearsed and repeatedly needed lecture about how the medicines from drug companies were carefully measured and researched. That while there were risks with everything, taking that little white, blue, green or no-colored pill was better than playing Russian Roulette with Nature or ‘natural’ herbal products that caused so many un-studied side effects, even when the patients could read the labels. But before he could get through the first “I know you heard many things, and that some pharmaceutical companies are out for money first” qualifier, Weinstein smiled, pulling out a vial. Empty this time. With the physician’s name on it, ‘P.D.Q., M.D.’

“What was in there?” Williams grunted as he grabbed the vial, smelling its contents.

“I don’t know,” Weinstein said, walking over to the CD player, with a gait that was better than he was supposed to have. He turned on the ‘record machine’, ‘Summer Winds’ from Sinatra gently flowing from its speakers. Lifting up a fold of Mis. Lazanska’s skirt, revealing legs he had freshly shaved last night, Mr. Weinstein extended his hand to Williams, without tremor. “Shall we dance, Doctor?” he asked.

It was all Doctor Williams could do to hold back his studder. That studder that came out of his mouth when an Intern interrogated by an Attending who demanded to know an answer he didn’t have. That studder which he learned to control when he had exhausted his source of medical knowledge. That studder that said in a helpless way ‘I don’t know’ from a man who was bred, educated and paid to know everything. Why was it that Weinstein was able to move so gracefully? Something in the music? Something stimulant creeping up from the smelly-soled pumps he stole from the lost and found? Something from the bottle from Doctor PDQ, the mystery man who had visited more than one of his patients in the last few weeks.

“Well, Doctor?” Mr. Weinstein asked again, after doing a pirouette that left him standing, and smiling. “Shall we dance?”

“Eh...eh....eh...” Williams replied, backing up towards the door as Mr. Weinstein turned more ‘Maryln’ with each step towards him.

“Later,” Williams said, seeing help just behind him.

“Yes, later, Marylyn,” Nurse Erica Freedman said, presenting Williams with a clipboard. “Doctor Williams has an emergency to deal with now.”

“Eh...yes, I do,” Williams said, grateful for the ‘save’ from Erica, yet one more time. This time, it was with a sense of humor, the ‘get out of listening to an Olt Timer’s story’ clipboard containing the fax from a Travel Agent boldly displaying the dates for a dream Hawaiian vacation affordable on a real-life Bensonhurst budget. And if that didn’t do the trick, something else.

“Dream Mate Escort Service?” Williams commented as he accompanied Erica down the hall. “Isn’t the idea of an escort service to hook onto someone who is NOT your mate, and doesn’t need to be one?” he mused.

Erica seemed disappointed. Williams knew that she had designs on him that went beyond ‘coffee’, ‘drinks’ or even ‘breakfast after a sleepover’. But this time, she was mad at something else in the Louisiana-bred Doctor who lost all traces of Southern gentility, grace and diction since moving up to the Big Apple. “That joke is old,” she slurred from the side of her mouth as she smiled to Mrs. Jackstein, Mr. Stone, and, as he preferred now to be called for reasons even the shrink couldn’t figure out, Father Rabinowitz. “Old like you’ll be some day,” she said, causing a defensive shrug from Williams. “Old and useless,” she continued, finally causing him to stop dead in his tracks.

“Useless!” he protested to her and asked of himself.

Erica put a quarter into the coffee machine, kicking it in the right place so that it would cough up two half-dollar cups of java. "Nature takes care of animals, God takes care of fools, and---"

"---Doctor PDQ is taking care of everyone in here better than either of us did," Williams muttered softly enough so as to not be heard by the patients walking, dancing and singing around the hallway like they were something more...People. Most of them were living in their own world, but those worlds were happier than seen in previous weeks, and movement within them more negotiable. Mrs. Carlson's myasthenia gravis was improving, the throat that had a hard time swallowing now able to carry a conversation, and even an off-toned show tune. Mr. Verowskoff walked with a cane now, his walker gathering dust in his room as he chased after Mrs. Carlson. And the keys to the drug cabinet kept becoming missing and re-appearing again.

"Any idea who he is?" Williams asked Erica.

"Or SHE?" Erica noted, her attention pulled away by a crash of a tray from a room in hallway B, then an indignant scream of an elderly patient, then a cry of what seemed like a baby from the same location. "Mrs. Mahony," she smiled in a concerned maternal tone, walking down the hall to treat the mother who bore the first of her nine children when she was 16, now a child herself, finally.

Williams noted the new crop of Fourth Years and Interns turning the corner, two of them having that 'terror' for the aging, most of them carrying with them the 'this is going to be the easiest rotation ever in their upstart eyes. There were many questions in Williams' mind, always on guard to snatch an answer. "Why does leukemia kill children?" "Why does a quarter of the world wake up and go to bed hungry?" "Why war?" "Why aging?" "Why death?" "Why did my ex-wife go off and have an affair with MY mistress?" But for now, one inquiry catapulted up to the top of the A list, lingering there over all others. "Doctor PDQ," he found himself thinking and saying.

A nudge came from his right, or was it his left? "PDQ?" a gravelly voice echoed into Williams' ear. Turning to see the source of the terror, 'Doctor Stew' bent his head down, noting a 5 foot 6 elderly once-gentleman who stood barely five foot with the hunch which now had become part of his bent back. "PDQ", he slurred from one side of his mouth, the other paralyzed with Bell's Palsy or some other neurological complication that came and went. "It means Fast. Doctor Fast, on the button, on the ready, on the---"

“---I know, Mister Ignitowski”, Williams slurred through eyes that hadn’t gotten a good night’s sleep in as many nights as ne could remember. “I know what PDQ means.” Doing a once-over on Mister I, or ‘Mister Me’, as he often liked to be called by the nurses, Williams sniffed the ulcers on his elbows.

“They’re getting better.” Mr. I said.

“Because you’re taking your insulin,” Williams stated, and asked, hoping that his best, and underneath it all, heartfelt, efforts were not offered in vain.

Mr. I smiled with all the effort he could exert. “You look tired, Doctor Stew. Maybe you should go home and get some sleep.”

“But who would take care of all of you?” Williams said, believing the BS which started as PR then became reality after he found himself part of the dysfunctional Klajman Hospital ‘family’.

Mr I considered the matter, stroking his chin with the hand that should have been amputated weeks ago, according to everything Williams learned as a student at Tulane, a resident at Columbia and an attending at Johns Hopkins. The assuring laugh from the on-and-off-again Mr I afterwards was certainly not in the textbooks.

As Mr I hobbled down the hallway to his room, and new box of old books delivered by his daughter, Williams felt like going home. One couldn’t say that patients at Klajman were ready to go home to their families, or the world outside the doors of the ‘Senior Living Center’, but they were doing better than expected. Someone was taking care of them with some special brand of medicine no one was talking about? Was it Erica? One of the new Interns who was a closet Einstein? Maybe God had finally woken up from His, or Her, lunch break. But whoever PDQ, MD was, he, or she, was moving fast making William’s something he feared most...useless.

Looking at the schedule for the next day, and the now excess staff available to fill it, Stewart Williams decided it was time to go home. Erica recommended it as well. Besides growing into a chronically-tired pain in the ass to the nurses, he seemed to be having lapses of judgement himself, having to be corrected on at least three occasions on miscalculating drug doses for patients. The first time he said it was because the hospital should hire nurses who can read a physician's hand writing. The second time, he blamed it on a new label from the pharmaceutical company with splotches between numbers that looked like decimal points. Thankfully, the 'three check' system was in William's protocol, read the bottle before you open the tip of the syringe, again when you load it, then again before you inject it. But it was taking three checks to catch himself now, and perhaps he would be caught by others soon. Erica was the protector he feared most. Watching his every move, thought and feeling, she could read him like a book, and it was not reading like a success story.

Forty-something on ninety Williams could see himself in every over-something overaged patient who came into the door. It was loss of function for the muscle between the ears that he feared most. It wasn't anything visible to the eye. He still had all his hair, teeth, testicals and appendages. But he saw it every time he looked in the mirror. The young man who was really old, and whose days of 'retirement' would come sooner than he thought. The stats said that 10% of all patients, and people, before 65 developed 'Altimer Dementia', and his family history was filled with forgetful, 90 year olds who started to die by their fiftieth birthday, too depressed to commit suicide. A sin in the eyes and the Lord, of course, who still haunted him, particularly on the "Come Live with Jesus" billboards he saw on his way home every night.

"Go back to Alabami!" he screamed at the happy and lifeless faces of the multi-colored congregation painted on the billboards, and the seemingly manipulative blonde, blue-eyed, bearded overseer in the long white robe and halo. "Show yourself in MY world, or go back to your own!" he screamed at the billboard that did nothing except smile back at him sadistically every night.

But this night, the Billboard had something else to say. Noting another detail on the board, another rise in the number of New Yorkers converted into Evangelism boosted by the New Life Ministry, he raised his third digit in anger, noting that with each defiant gesture expressed on behalf of a tortured humanity, his wrist shook with even less control. Then, his arm, then, this time, his foot. Two screams, yelps, and prayers to Whoever might be listening later, Williams woke up in a ditch.

The view of the South State Parkway from behind broken glass seemed psychedelic. Yellow lights. Green traffic signals. White lights from cars too distant to notice him. Red tinge on the glass, probably, he intuited, his own.

“Help?” he asked the sky. But instead of bright light, it was dark. Still dark and silent. The stars seem to laugh at him. The planets didn’t care. “Help...right,” he sighed, resigned to facing his own demise, thankfully with his sense and perspectives still intact. “Help” he muttered again, closing his eyes, offering his Soul to God, hoping that He, She or It existed, or could be brought back to life in service of humanity by his sacrifice, and/or offering.

“PDQ, Doc,” he heard from a gravelly voice. Looking up, he DID see the bright light, flecks of shining hair behind a head that moved closer in to him, revealing eyes that were bright blue, wide open, kind and...very human. More human than he ever imagined possible. In a face that he found himself recognizing.

“Mister Ignitowski, aka Mr, I?” Williams said, not believing his eyes. “How did you get out of---?”

Mister I shh’d him, taking a stethoscope out of a three-decade old, scuffed and hole-ridden medical bag bearing his name, “Ed Ignitowski, MD. PDQ Doc.” Behind him was a familiar vehicle, an ambulance from the ER, from the Klajman Medical Center. Its operators were apparently busy, with another patient, a driver on the side of the road walking around his car, smashing it to pieces with a crow bar. The person most certainly was about to become a patient, perhaps because of the bleeding left arm and limping left leg, or the way he was so boldly and effectively destroying his own vehicle, resisting help from the Paramedics.

“Who is that...?” Williams said, opening the door, pushing his way out of the car with as much strength as he could.

“Situation under control,” Doctor I said in in voice that seemed coherent, connected to medical instincts and abilities as great as any Williams had seen, or learned, at Tulane. ‘Patient’ Ignitowski’s method of pulse diagnosis, neurological exam and that touch that combined maximal proficiency and compassion made Doc Williams feel secure, and cared for, for the first time in a long time. Still, Williams needed the kind of medicine that helped him most----to be

needed. "I have to help that patient out there!" he said, noting the straight jackets being taken out, the thorazine taken from the special compartment of the Emergency Vehicle, ready to inject into the unsuspecting patient's arm, perhaps the right medicine, perhaps not. "I have to help!?"

"Physician heal thyself," the Elder PDQ said to the younger MD in an assuring, and stern tone. Mr. I, formerly Doctor Ignitowski, handed Williams a jar of medicine from his bag, simply labelled 'Two pills a day, as needed, PDQ'. Losing no time, and with the quick rhythm of a man half William's age, Doc Ignitowski's hands whipped the lacerations in William's hands and head back into shape, giving him injections of antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, and anti-psychotic drugs. Some Williams noted as being from the Klajman Hospital Pharmacy, while others weren't, writing on them faded, in red script from a time before computer print outs or perhaps even typewriters.

Willaims sniffed the special PDQ pills, then tasted them. "Sugar pills!"

"Maybe, maybe not," Ignitowski said, cutting the last remnant of excess stitching from William's forehead. "But one thing is for sure."

Williams looked into the mirror, noting the repaired scar on his forehead. "That my ex-wife will say I finally got the lobotomy I needed, and deserve?" he mused.

"No, my lad, boy...man," Ignitowski smiled. Putting his hand on Williams' shaking shoulders he leaned into the car. "All well motivated patients get better."

"People" Williams said. "All patients are people. And all people are patients. And if I forget about that tomorrow at work, I want you to---" Doctor Stew turned to Doctor Ignitowski, finding him walking back to the Emergency Vehicle, the erect six foot tall healer becoming a hunchbacked patient, losing an inch with each step.

"You okay Doc?" the Head Paramedic said to Patient Ignitowski.

“No problem,” Dr I nodded as he took his seat in the cab, strapped into place by the Assistant Paramedic.

“What were you doing out in the woods?” the Assistant asked. “We asked you to stay in here. You’d get into big trouble with your family and we’d get shit from our boss.”

“A sick animal needed my help,” Dr I replied.

“What kind of animal would that be?” The Head Paramedic asked respecting the man, ignoring his stories.

“One that is...okay now,” Doctor Ignitowski replied, turning to the car that the Paramedics didn’t even notice, the Doctor inside of it who was not cured by a patient hardly suspected of being his biggest problem, and ultimate solution.

Williams scratched his head, opened the door, and trudged through the woods that hide anything more than ten feet from the highway from the driver’s perspective. As expected, thirty cars passed him without noticing or stopping. As unexpected, he found a cell phone on the pavement, a note from PDQ saying to press ‘redial’. Following doctor, or patient’s instructions, he did so.

“Hello...hello...” came from the other end, the voice confused, then angered.

Smiling, Williams knew what the good doc wanted him to do, and the treatment he needed to follow up on for a long time. “Hello, Nurse Erica, this is Doctor Stew.”

“Doctor Stew?” she inquired. “You hate it when patients call you that.”

“Well, a lot has changed since then.” He walked down the highway, continuing the conversation. “Which I wanted to relate to you over a late supper at my place.... and breakfast.”

“Where are you?” she asked, concerned.

“A better place than I’ve ever been,” William’s reply as his 90 dollar loafers slogged through another pile of highway mud, a semi throwing ten gallons of oil-soaked rain puddle onto his suit. He felt the droplets of blood on the stitched lacerations on his arms, reminding him, for better or worse, that he was finally...alive.