

THE SIMPLE LIFE



# The Simple Life

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# Part I

## Brother Tom Macpherson



# 1 Homeless

When Tom Macpherson left Chicago, a blizzard had just arrived from Calgary. Despite the occasional lack of visibility, the driver had not only loaded the bus, but he had been positively anxious to load the bus. It was fear of what lay ahead which had driven him on. When the eastern wing of that Calgary Clipper passed over the Great Lakes, it would be enriched with water vapor from the relatively warm lake waters; upstate New York might well be buried before the night passed.

Right that driver was to have feared the snowstorms ahead, though he should perhaps have given greater respect to the blowing snow and frigid winds in Chicago. But he made it safely out of the city of butchers and even passed through a period of heavy snowfall on the New York Thruway near Syracuse before much could accumulate on the ground.

Tom Macpherson could appreciate the dangers which lay behind in Sandburg's city. He'd attended business school at the University of Chicago and had lived in the area for periods of time while handling large consulting projects during his ensuing career. He had also spent some winter months in upstate New York and could understand the worries about two foot snowfalls near the lakes and even as far east as Syracuse. Sitting near the driver, he could hear the driver's radio and, as they approached Albany—were they not safe?—he heard that a far larger and more dangerous storm was about to hit New England. Not a straight-ahead blast from the Canadian polar regions, this was a spinning tropical storm which had left warm waters and was opening up from a late season hurricane to become an early season nor'easter. It was Halloween

Eve and he felt sorry for the children when the bus pulled up to the eastern side of the town square. There was already a slippery inch on the ground at no later than 7, and it was likely the older children were heading home early. The young children might not have had a chance to so much as visit the house next door.

As Tom expected, there was no one to meet him as he stepped off the local bus from Springfield to New Quincy. He would have to make his own way to his mother's house. He hadn't really expected the red-carpet treatment. It had been nearly ten years since he'd been home and that had been just a long weekend. His mother had maintained her car and kept it on the road; she had even kept up her license but rarely drove and never at night and there was no one at the house or she would have managed to get down and meet him. His sister lived down in Jenkesville and had two young children and a husband who wasn't home most evenings; it was beer and not other women that kept him out, but Tom didn't think that made Bella feel any better. He'd also contacted a couple old friends a few weeks ago and told them when he'd be coming. The response had been, more or less, "Great, man. We'll see you down at *Finnegan's Pub* when you get in."

Tom looked up the road and saw the signs proclaiming that the very same *Finnegan's Pub* was open for business. Slippery roads or not, the parking lot for the biggest bar in town was nearly full. It was probably always full, certainly on a Saturday. New Quincy wasn't Birmingham or Atlanta where, for all the materialism and moral corruption, the churches gave the bars a good run for the money when it came to evening socializing. Not that the bars were quite empty, but there was a choice of crowds.

There was a man who ran a modest taxi service in town and Tom looked over at the public phone in front of the hardware store for just a second before slinging his knapsack over his shoulder and heading down the road toward his mother's house. It was only about a mile and Tom was not at all reluctant to walk through the cold, snowy air of a nor'easter. Just so long as he could see well enough to set one foot in front of the other, he would be okay. It was

only a mile to his mother's house. Back when he was running cross country in high school, Tom used to head out for five mile runs along these very same roads. From his mother's house to the public square wasn't even half way out. Of course, he'd been in his teens and most of those running days were in the spring or summer.

Five minutes down the road, Tom found himself letting his pack down. He swung it in rhythm as he sang as many words as he could remember of *The Queen of Argyle*, a song he'd heard at a Scottish folk music festival in Edinburgh a few years back. Another fifteen minutes and Tom found himself at the bottom of the snow covered driveway which led fifty yards up into a small patch of woods containing the cedar-sided house his parents had called home for the twenty years of their marriage; his mother had remained there for the fifteen years since his father had died.

Several years played through his head rapidly as he stood there at the bottom of that driveway, snow piling up on his shoulders and upon his bare head. It was not the years he had spent in this house, nor even the few years he'd spent at UMass a short ways to the north that suddenly pushed him into a contemplative state. It was the years he'd spent getting his MBA at the University of Chicago, the years he'd spent as a consultant to the food storage industry, the horrible hour he'd once spent in an airport as a farmer-poet told him of the unspeakable cruelty involved in the way that modern food animals were raised. Tom had bailed out of his job with a month's notice, not so much because of moral indignation but rather because of his lack of moral indignation; the farmer had not told Tom anything he didn't already knew. Why had it not upset him? "Why," asked the man with no tears in his eyes, "does it not upset me still?"

Unable to diagnose his own hardheartedness, Tom trudged upward, toward an unknown fate. He had no job, little chance of getting back on the fast-track after dropping out before he'd quite made it to the top. His money was pretty much shot; it really hadn't lasted long. He'd spent six months bumming around the national parks of the west, to see if he could bring his insides back

to life if he got in contact with nature. He'd gotten sunburned, chased by a swarm of bees coming from a hive which had been torn apart. A short while down the road, he had run into a grizzly bear which was likely the culprit and the honey thief had then threatened Tom. From nature, he'd gone to San Francisco where he'd living on his remaining money—what was left of it—while he worked without pay for a group helping illegal immigrants who were being persecuted, or at least hunted down, by the immigration cops. Tom still wasn't sure if he'd rather face an enraged grizzly or a Federali with a gun and serious reasons to be ready to shoot quickly.

On the front stoop, Tom was still moving slowly. He didn't wish to frighten his mother and so he rang the bell though he'd been told the locks hadn't been changed and his old key would work. His cousin Alice had told him his mother had aged a lot and was easily frightened. She'd always kept her doors open when he was young; why not? There hadn't been much of a chance of a worse invasion than one mounted by his friend Ricky who could empty a refrigerator of pickles or fried chicken before someone could walk in from the living-room to investigate. Tom looked around but couldn't see the neighborhood for all the flying snow. He suspected it didn't look much different than it had when he was young. Maybe Herbert Chan and his wife had painted their house gray instead of white; maybe the Chan's didn't even live next door any longer.

Changes had come, no matter how well masked by a certain amount of surface sameness. At least, Tom was pretty sure the changes were not just inside him. If something inside him had died, he was pretty sure there was a similar rot inside of most people; a disease that had spread just as fast as those memes that so interested sociologists and advertising executives. Maybe the disease that killed what was most sensitive to moral truths had traveled along with the ideas of Darwin and Huxley. Maybe it would be hard to separate scientific thinking from a disease that rotted out man's moral nature.

When a couple minutes had passed and no one had come to the door, Tom reached into the pouch on his belt and pulled out the two keys that were all that was left of the large collection he'd once carried. No more car keys, no

house keys, not even a key to the executive washroom, nor even one to the storeroom of a food bank. Just a key to his mother's front door and one to a newly rented storage locker in the Springfield bus station. Once inside, he turned on the hallway light and called in a quiet voice, "Mom? Are you awake?" There was still no answer and he moved down the hall and then up the stairs toward the light flickering off the walls on the upstairs hall. Likely it was that his mother had fallen asleep watching television.

Halfway up the stairs, he noticed a bad smell, one he associated with visits to even the cleanest of nursing homes. At first he thought that it was just an overflow in the bathroom or something like that, but when he reached the top of the stairway, he ran down the hall toward his mother's bedroom. He was about to throw up by the time he saw his mother's body, her face disturbed and her body contorted by an effort to rise... To go down the hallway to the toilet?

Tom went back out into the hallway where he put down his pack and then went into the bathroom to grab a washcloth which he wet down. Holding it over his face, he walked back into his mother's room, tears welling up in his eyes.

Tom sat on the edge of his mother's bed for a minute or two—enduring the smell to keep company with a lonely dead woman. He looked at her, wondering if he was crying because of the smell or because his mother had died while he was on his way back to see her after all these years. Or maybe he was just upset because his mother died without someone there to handle matters in a respectable manner. Maybe he could have been with her and helped her down the hallway that last time. If not, he would have called the police right away, the undertaker would have then been summoned to pick up the body and clean it properly before most saw, or smelled, her.

"Mom, this must have been horrible for you. You were always so ladylike and so clean."

Heading down the stairs to the kitchen, Tom wondered why he still felt no emotions strong enough for the occasion. Was it really a disease of all modern

men or was there something wrong with him as an individual? Did he have some psychopathic tendencies, an emotional thermometer set dangerously low? It was easy enough to feel a little sadness watching people dying of AIDS in Uganda or watching gorillas in that same country being blown to pieces by bored mercenaries or by soldiers wanting to pick up a few extra bucks for the skins. A few days earlier, tears had flowed from Tom's eyes as the grayish hero's wife was killed early in the movie before he set out to get his revenge on all the bad guys. Mostly, there was a feeling of disgust when faced with the real thing, a beggar on the streets of New York City who showed merely dirt and pimples on his face. How strong would the repulsion have been if the beggar had running sores or leprosy damaged skin and extremities? How strong if he'd had the running sores of an active pox? Should he have felt more than self-righteousness that night he had rushed by the teenaged girl who'd asked him if he wanted a 'date'? She'd looked hungry and dirty. He'd had cash to give her but was afraid of being spotted handing money to an underage streetwalker.

Tom dialed 911 and gave the address and his mother's name to the dispatcher who promised the ambulance would be there very shortly. He wondered if he would be under suspicion for the flatness, the lack of true sadness in his voice. And then he grabbed a phone-book and looked up Alice's number. He wanted someone in the family to be with him and Alice was a short drive away, unlike his sister Bella. And Bella had a barstool husband who was likely gone with their one car. He found himself in front of the refrigerator and opened it with his right hand while the phone-book remained unopened in his left hand. There was a six-pack of beer and a quart of milk. Six eggs in the egg-rack and a few condiments. The beer was not Mom's for sure. If she had started to drink seriously, it would have been extra dry martinis.

It was maybe for Uncle Will if he was still around. He'd had a heart attack a year back and then Tom had heard nothing more. Alice hadn't mentioned Uncle Will when he'd talked to her on the phone a few nights before. Maybe Mom had a boyfriend. That would have been good. She'd been lonely too

long, but it added a complication. Tom didn't even know what to say to Alice and all he had to do was relate a simple fact. She'd understand he wouldn't want to talk and wouldn't have expected a long conversation. Tom grabbed a beer and walked over to the kitchen table. Setting down the phone-book, he opened the beer and then set it down untouched. When he sat down, his hand was shaking noticeably as he opened the phone-book and pulled his mother's ancient Princess phone toward him.

Two times did Tom try to dial Alice's number, and two times he got cannot-connect messages from a computer-generated voice; his fingers just weren't doing what he was telling them to do. The third time he made it, and Alice's husband answered on the second ring. Tom said something, though he couldn't remember what it was he'd said by the time that Alice spoke breathlessly into the phone, asking, "What's wrong, Tom?"

In a flat voice, he said merely, "She's dead."

"Dead? How..."

Over the next minute or so, he circumambulated about the facts, eventually drawing forth the promise, "I'll be there in ten minutes." After responding, "The ambulance is on its way," Tom hung up and went back to the kitchen table to stare at his open can of American beer containing stuff which wouldn't have allowed it to be labeled as beer in Germany. A drink seemed desirable, but a good stiff double-shot of scotch seemed more appropriate. He rose, taking the beer to the sink where he poured it out, hoping the kitchen wouldn't smell of the stuff. A quick check of the kitchen cabinets revealed nothing but a mess of disorganized Tupperware and old cookware, some old-looking boxes and bags of cereal and pasta and similar processed foodstuff. And a bottle of basil vinegar.

Tom was about to head into the dining-room to check the china cabinet when the doorbell rang. He walked straight down the hallway and opened the door to two men wearing fire-department uniforms. Both were carrying cases, presumably filled with medical equipment. He let them in and, in a weary voice, said, "She's upstairs." As they walked up the stairway, he added, "The

smell is pretty bad. I think she was trying to get up to go to the bathroom.” As they reached the upstairs hallway, Tom added, “I haven’t been home in a number of years and I’ve only talked to her a few times on the phone.”

After clearing his throat as if the smell had just reached him, one of the firemen asked, “She’s your mother?” Tom nodded and led the way into her bedroom. Going to the bedside, the short blonde man opened the case he was carrying. He reached over to see if he could feel any breath and looked back at Tom before quickly setting to work with a blood-pressure monitor. He shook his head and looked back at Tom. “It looks as if she is dead, but we’ll check further. You should leave while we do that.”

As he walked down the stairs, Tom wondered if they were checking for murder wounds or... what?

Alice was just coming in the door when Tom’s foot touched the dulled and scuffed up oak of the first floor. She took one look at him and came over to give him a strong hug. As she held on to him and patted him on the back, his eyes met those of Alice’s husband, Sriram, as he stood in front of the closed door, looking a bit sheepish. After Alice released him, Tom took Sriram’s hand, “Thank you for coming over.”

It all seemed like a dream, and once more was Tom struck by the apparent inappropriateness of his feelings. It seemed as if he should feel far more grief, to the point of breaking down. Maybe it was just that he didn’t know how to behave. If he had been raised to tear his clothes and hair, to go sit on an ash-pile, maybe the intense feelings would have followed those actions. Or was it that the inner response and the external actions came together? Without an ash-pile response, maybe inner grief was naturally weakened? The proper hormones couldn’t flow?

Tom emerged from a fog of sorts while he was sitting at the kitchen table. Down the hallway, he saw Sriram talking to one of the firemen, and, then, the two men walked up the stairs. He wondered if Sriram, a cardiologist, was going up to sign a death certificate so his mother’s body could be moved. Still not sure what his response was supposed to be, Tom was suddenly worried,

deeply worried about his mental and emotional health. Was his concern over his inability to respond itself a sign of how deeply damaged he was? He had not produced an instinctive and largely unconscious response, and that might be a sign that his insides had been reshaped by a culture that was concerned that a person be oriented toward the public life, the marketplace and the political sphere, at the expense of his more immediate connections to family and community and household. Of course, he had let his family ties weaken. His community for years had been nothing but collections of migrant business professionals and then migrant farm-workers and their families, and he really hadn't even held on to any of his hermitages for longer than a couple years, even when he was a prosperous young business consultant.

Before long, Tom was wondering why in the world he was sipping on the cup of tea prepared for him by Alice. He imagined Alice and his mother had drunk many a cup o' tea at this very table, with Granny and with Aunt Jean in earlier years. He never drank tea, except for trying herbal teas a few times with friends in San Francisco who were also all agog about candles and organic foods and homeopathic cures. But here he was, sipping on tea with lots of cream and sugar in it.

The cream was fresh? "How long has it been since you've seen her, Alice?"  
"Thursday evening."

So, she'd been dead at most for two days. And how many days had Tom wasted getting back East. Not that he didn't feel a little bit of relief, increasing his guilt greatly, since he had not been sure what condition his mother would be in nor had he known what he would have said to her. After several minutes of silence, Sriram came in, placing his hand upon Tom's shoulder and giving him a half-second massage of condolence before taking a seat on the opposite side of the table. There wasn't much to be said, and it wasn't. Soon after that, Alice asked if Tom needed anything, explaining, "I hate to leave you like this but Sriram has some early morning tests scheduled for people who likely need bypasses." Tom expressed and felt no objections to their departure. He needed to be alone to work things out, though he was still afraid that his very

solitude, his separation from community and from ritual was his real problem.

Sentimentality, not grief, might be the result of probing one's soul, of applying the standards of a therapeutic society to a creature awash in hormones, to a biped even more social than featherless, though perhaps not so political as some might have thought in a situation where society and polity were pretty much one. And shortly, Tom was in the situation he had sought, the situation he feared was so unhealthy, for him and for most people. He was alone, abusing his inner self which seemed so hard and so resistant to grief; he was trying to get a rise of bloodied and bruised love out of himself. Was that the problem? he wondered. "Did I not love my mother enough to feel real grief? Am I a deformed and defective man?"

And then his eyes lit upon the car keys hanging near the backdoor. He remembered a little bar near the Amherst line. It was a quiet place, some would have called it a hole-in-the-wall or just a hole. During his college years, he had sometimes gone there to listen to some of the local country-rock bands, but mostly they had no music but the stuff in the jukebox. Though it was Saturday, he was hoping it would be a quiet night.

After standing guard as the firemen took away the bodily remains of his mother, Tom went out and started her car, relieved to see the gauge register a little more than half a tank of gas. Four wrong turns and twenty-five minutes later, he had covered the ten minute path that he would have sworn was etched into his brain. He drove into the parking lot and found himself in front of a Chinese restaurant. The front walls were no longer solid and covered with barn board. Through two large windows, he could see a scattering of small tables with four chairs each. There were also a few plastic booths which looked to be quite uncomfortable. A red and green dragon flashed on and off above the doorway. Inside, he could see only three tables occupied. There was a middle-aged couple at one table, three young women at another, and a thirtiesh woman eating alone.

Sighing, Tom got out of his car. Didn't look promising, but he was feeling a bit hungry. Remembering his bad experiences with Chinese restaurants before

he reached Chicago, he didn't have much hope for a Chinese restaurant in New Quincy, but the country was changing a lot. Once people not of western European descent had tended to cluster in a few traditional communities—San Francisco and Los Angeles and New York being pretty famous for that. Now, the immigrants from the most exotically non-European cultures were spreading even to the lands of the Yankees and those of the Scandinavian Lutherans. Soon he was inside the door of the restaurant where he hesitated, not sure if he wanted to take food out or eat in. Then he remembered that his mother's body had just been removed from her house. He walked up to the counter to order before taking a seat in one of those orange booths, and it was as uncomfortable to sit in as he'd suspected. The woman who was by herself seemed to be observing his reflection, though he wondered if it was merely some sort of self-serving illusion on his part. Was his ego so damaged by loss of social ties that it was now looking for some strokes even if they came only from the imaginative self? Tom shook his head to try to clear it of the therapeutic recursions which were doing no good and, so far as he could tell, could do naught but harm to any human being. The woman smiled in a pleasant but somewhat condescending manner. Tom wondered if she was maybe a psychologist studying him, categorizing his expressions and his slowed gait as being signs of a depressed person. Maybe she spotted him as being a man who longed to be more depressed than he was?

When his number was called Tom walked up to pick up his order, wondering why he hadn't noticed that the man and woman working at the counter looked to be Italian rather than Chinese? He paid and turned but, instead of walking to his own booth, he stopped next to the woman who was by herself. "Would you like some company?" She looked surprised, but not unpleasantly so. With her smile fading to a neutral expression, with her eyes seeming to probe his soul, she waved him into the seat across from her. He'd not even settled before she announced, "Jennie Syzmanski."

He responded, "Tom Macpherson."

"Son of a priest?" Her eyebrows were raised in a gesture of feigned shock

and perhaps not so feigned interest.

“Not many would know that.” Tom found himself apologizing, “I’m sorry if I’m a bit gloomy, but I was returning home to see my mother for the first time in ten years and she was lying dead in her bed when I walked into her house.” Her expression broke and he wondered if it took something so grotesque to do it.

“Pardon me for asking, but shouldn’t you be with your relatives...” She waved her hands as if searching the air for some sort of description of what a man should really be doing the night he’d found his mother dead in her bed, after not seeing her for ten years. Maybe the length of time made it a little easier to coldbloodedly go out for Chinese food? Or to come on to a woman he’d never seen before?

“My cousin was the last one in the area who was close to my mother. My sister, only sibling, lives a bit of a drive from here and she has some children and a husband who’s probably at some bar. Anyway, Alice... She’s my cousin. Alice came right over and stayed with me for a while, but she had to go home. Her husband’s a cardiologist and some of his patients are scheduled for early-morning tests. The real reason I’m here is I needed to get out of the house.” He breathed deep and then confessed, “It smelled a little.” He found himself saying, “It was a little musty from being closed up for winter and she was older and not up to cleaning so much.” And then he found himself pondering his answer, a little elaborate for a statement meant to avoid a delicate matter. At least to a lady of the old school, as his mother had been.

Jennie was looking strangely at him, and he wondered if she was thinking this to be the weirdest pickup scheme she’d yet seen. He heard himself mutter, “Take me home, Babe, my mother just died and her house still smells.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I was just wondering if you were thinking that was what I’m up to.”

“The thought passed quickly through my mind.” After a pause, her voice hardened a little and she asked, “As long as this is already so weird, I’m going

to ask why you were away so long.”

“A lot of things. For years I was helping conglomerates to fill everybody’s freezers with all sorts of junk food that’s bad for us and bad for our environment, in the process subsidizing animal factories where chickens and cows are never even allowed to so much as spend a sunny day in a field of grass. Then I jumped out of the corporate jet and did various things. Ended up for a while working with some groups helping migrant workers and it turned out that one of the groups was really a slaving operation that was supplying some sweatshops in Dallas and Detroit. I think I’m now on some lists maintained by the Federal government that decent people don’t like to be on.”

Jennie’s eyebrows were moving toward her hairline but she didn’t say anything for a few seconds and then all that came out was, “Aren’t you going to eat your food?”

“I don’t think I’m hungry.”



## 2 Jennie Syzmanski

Tom woke up when it was still dark in the bedroom. He listened to Jennie's soft breathing but he didn't feel her body. She hadn't exactly been reluctant in any way but she hadn't seemed to be inclined to cuddle afterwards. Well, if any one had told him to go out and find a babe after his mother had just died, he would have considered it a grotesque joke, but it had turned out to be a very American idea. That is—it had worked. He hadn't been trying to do it, at least not consciously, but he had gone over to her table, and it had been that forthright act that had apparently broken down the barriers. All those guys who wrote books about apes in bluejeans would have said it was his selfish genes that had dictated his behavior. Never miss a chance, sang those little bastards, though Tom had certainly missed more opportunities than he'd ever enjoyed. Maybe his genes were inefficient or maybe he was just a stupid or rebellious slave. Of course, it had helped that they'd left the restaurant to find four inches of snow on the ground. Then, they'd exchanged phone numbers before parting. He had been just driving out of the parking lot when he saw that her car lights had not gone on. Her ancient BMW had stalled with the cold.

When next Tom awoke, a grayish light was coming through the window. Jennie was gone. He savored the thought that Jennie was glowing with joy from the prior night and now she was off to make breakfast for him. He doubted it was true, but he still wasn't sure if he were some sort of stunted or deformed creature. If he were, maybe he needed special care from women attracted to such creatures.

When Jennie had not returned a half-hour later or so, Tom rose from the bed and washed quickly in the bathroom down the hall before putting his dirty travel jeans back on. He hadn't had a chance to look around much the night before, and so, at the risk of violating Jennie's privacy, he poked his head into each room of the house. It had four rooms plus the bathroom. He walked out of Jennie's bedroom at what he thought to be the east end of the small house of four rooms plus a bathroom.

He reached the bathroom, which he'd seen a couple times and turned to look in the facing door to see a room with a bed and neat piles of boxes and plastic storage bins. He continued down the hallway into the kitchen. It was simple but neatly filled with things ranging from a row of postcards on the refrigerator to a lot of canisters and small bottles. The small bottles were filled with green and brown leaves and seeds.

There was a door between the refrigerator and a small wall of counter and cabinets. He had gone into the living-room the night before but only for a few minutes and he walked in and almost passed a small rack for holding CDs but turned sharply and stooped to check out the titles. There were some of the old classics by Joni Mitchell and Peter, Paul & Mary, Joan Baez, and, of course, Judi Collins. There were a few Arlo Guthries and some Patti Larkin recordings. One by someone named Rosie Sorrels and another by a Tish Hinojosha. Two guitars hung from the wall. Below the guitars, there was a bookcase assembled from pine planks and simple brackets and it occupied the space best-suited for a television set. Tom sighed and pondered the concept of 'irony' for just a few seconds before realizing he wasn't able to call to mind the definition of irony.

Feeling strangely agitated of a sudden, he took a step forward and crouched in front of the bookcase. He pulled out a few thin, paperbacks to find they were sheet music collections—one was titled: *A Collection of Songs Performed by Peter, Paul, & Mary*, one titled: *Celtic Airs for Solo Guitar*, and one titled: *Bach for Piano, Guitar, and Recorder*. There were another ten or so collections and also what might have been sheet-music of individual pieces but he dropped his eyes to examine the bindings of a small collection of books: *Collected Poems*

by Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* by W H Auden, and a couple of those ice-age novels by Jean Auel. There were also library copies of *Wise Blood* by Flannery O'Connor and *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn. He was confused and looked at the stereo set on the same level as his eyes. It looked to be a good ten years old, having a radio tuner and a CD player and an old-fashioned cassette tape player and two small speakers.

Maybe Jennie was his kind of woman, maybe more than he was his kind of himself. And maybe he had no more than a clue who Jennie was. And less understanding of who he himself was.

He looked to the rear of the house, expecting at first to see a window with blinds pulled but saw a wall and a door. Thinking it must lead to the backyard, he walked over and opened the backdoor and was immediately hit by a burst of steam. While he was trying to orient himself, he heard her say softly but firmly, "If you're coming in, then get in and close the door. But whatever else you do, close the door."

He obeyed and then removed his glasses and held them out and away as he let them adjust to the heat. After he was able to put his glasses back on, silence still reigned as Jennie continued to harvest and trim and cultivate her pots and then he saw it was a larger greenhouse than he would have guessed. It probably measured thirty feet long though only about ten feet wide. There were pipes on the roof which occasionally gave forth mist of some sort and there were rubber tubes running along the metal basins which held the many pots of plants. Tom recognized mint plants and he smelled what appeared to be basil and licorice. Maybe coming from the same plant for all he knew.

"You sell this stuff?"

"Not enough of it to make a good living."

"Then how do you survive?"

She looked up from her work of mixing some green stuff into a watering can and said, "I don't live fancy and I sometimes work as a secretary or filing clerk for a temp agency." Tom said, "Oh," in a voice he immediately feared to be condescending, and she laughed before turning her attention back to her task.

“Don’t feel sorry for me. It’s about all a music education degree qualified me to do in a world where people think the purpose of schools is to teach children how to play soccer and how to play games on computers.” After a pause just short of uncomfortable, she asked, “How about you? I hope you aren’t insulted by my attitude toward computers.”

“No. I’ve only used them as pure tools. I was, am, an MBA, but I’ve shot my career to hell, I guess.”

“By collaborating with slavers? Or was it the fact that you were trying to help immigrants get a better life that did you in?”

“Neither. I felt I was dying inside and I, more or less, walked away from a good career. It was a little while after my career suicide that I hooked up with the immigration aid groups and found one of them trafficked in human beings.”

## 3 A Short Good-bye

A couple days later, a second early winter storm caught the area by surprise. It disrupted the plans of some people to attend Mrs Macpherson's funeral. Her own daughter, Bella Phelps, was not able to make it up from Jenkesville over the icy roads, though Tom thought it unlikely the driving conditions would keep her husband from the package store or from the Blue Moose Lodge—if that was where he were currently doing his out-of-house drinking. The undertaker lived next door to his parlor; he told Tom he couldn't guarantee many spots would be shoveled clear, but the services could go on so long as the Reverend William Berkeley could make it. Alice called the minister and, as it turned out, she and Sriram picked him up in their Outback. So it was Tom and Jennie—who felt uncomfortable since she'd known Tom so short a time, Alice and Sriram, the undertaker, and the minister to lead the prayers in front of the urn of ashes, all that was left of some chemicals once organized in such a complex and lovely way.

The service was short. It began with a few words of welcome by the Reverend Berkeley and then Alice read a short passage from the *Gospel of St John* which was followed by the Reverend Berkeley praying for the dead woman and for her grieving friends and relatives. After a communal recitation of *Psalm 23* which had been printed on her funeral card, the minister gave a short talk, aided by the fact that he'd actually known Mrs Macpherson, though he presided over First Church Congregationalist and she had attended Trinity Methodist.

After the funeral service ended, Tom and Alice talked to Phil Roget, the

undertaker, about the arrangements for the interment. He had told them the urn could be buried at almost any time since the cemetery custodian could put a kerosene heater on the ground and no more than a shaft would be needed, but Tom decided to wait until late winter or so—maybe March. Phil told them that Mrs Macpherson's name could not be chiseled into the Macpherson family headstone until it was warm enough that the stone not crack at the blows. After promising that he would make arrangements with the cemetery and with the stone-cutter, he said, "I can't offer full service here, but Nancy is in the back and she's made a pot of coffee if anyone would like a hot drink before heading back into the ice." As the look of dismay crossed over Tom's face as he turned his eyes toward the iced windows and confirmed, "Yes, it's turned completely to freezing rain."

Everyone was following Phil into the back parlor when they heard someone stomping snow off their feet at the front entrance of the funeral home. Wondering who would be coming, since no one else was expected—and Tom was hoping that Bella had not driven up, certainly not with her children—they were all looking over when the door opened to reveal a stooped-over, grayish man of perhaps 80 years, but perhaps 70 or 90 depending upon his genes and upon the course his life had taken. Tom turned to Alice but she shook her head, though she whispered, "That might be Aunt Maggie's boyfriend."

Tom was surprised. "You never met him."

"No, and the way she talked and acted so secretly, I'm afraid he might be married."

It was the Reverend Berkeley who marched forward, right hand thrust out. "Al, I didn't realize you were a friend of Mrs Macpherson."

The man took the minister's hand but avoided looking at anyone else. Realizing the focus was upon him, he looked down at his slowly shuffling feet and hemmed and hawed a couple times before saying, "We'd only become friends a few months back. And I don't even know anyone from her family."

Tom knew he should go over and introduce himself, but he froze. It was Jennie who nudged him after a short bit of stalled conversation between the

minister and the man named ‘Al’. Tom was about at the side of the Reverend Berkeley when he heard him ask, “And Mrs Thompson? Is she still...”

Al sighed deeply and said, “She was pleasant and cooperative, so they kept her in the main part of Pleasant Valley Nursing Home as long as they could, but, a few weeks back, they had to move her to the Alzheimer unit. I can only pray the end is coming. She’s starting to suffer now that her memory’s completely gone and...” Al’s voice came to a gasping halt of sort and Tom saw some tears dropping down his cheeks as he added, “The psychologist doesn’t think she even knows who she is any...” His voice dwindled into a sob of sorts which had the odd effect of drawing Tom toward him. The minister had detected his presence, perhaps because Al had looked up, almost in shock, at the approach of another human being. He looked as if he were an animal, a beaver, or perhaps a rat, anxious to get out of the trap and just run away.

“Tom, I don’t imagine you’ve ever met Al Thompson, since you’ve been gone so long.”

It was the ‘so long’ that wiped out the image Tom had of the small pile of a man’s underwear and sports shirts that rested in a drawer in his mother’s bureau, the shaving cream and razor in her bathroom. Not himself sinless, Tom didn’t want to cast any stones and, though he was starting again to wish he weren’t there in the presence of this other sinner, he was there.

He took the man’s hand and shook it in a manner he hoped to be friendly. “Tom Macpherson...”

With his eyes casting about in a manner shy and not devious, the man managed to mumble out, “I’ve seen your pictures many times. Your mom was quite proud of you.”



## 4 Founding a Community by Accident

Six months after his return, Tom was able to sell his mother's house and liquidate her IRAs and other investments. Mom and Dad had been real savers and Mom had lived frugally in her widowhood, though Tom suspected and hoped she had been generous to Bella and her children. As executor of the estate and coheir, he bent the will's terms a little and gave Bella about three-quarters of the money. That still left enough to buy a disused farm down the road in the neighboring town of Jefferson; it had been a working farm no more than forty years ago, but that was a lot of time for weeds to grow thick, some of those weeds were oaks or maples and were better than thirty feet tall and 18 inches in diameter. As he stood on the patio looking out over the property the very day he'd closed on the farm, Tom grew far more depressed looking at all the conifers. He'd helped his father take some down a long time ago and remembered what a goopy, messy experience it was to deal with the sap-filled trunks. And that was after fighting through the prickly needles to get to the trunk of the damned evergreens.

While he was standing there getting depressed, he heard a car pull into the driveway. Tom was wondering if it was Jennie returning from her interview at the *Creative Child Center*, already affectionately known to Jennie's friends as the CCC camp. Turning, he passed through the door into the living room with its green industrial carpeting and its orange naugahyde furniture set. Into the kitchen with its 1960s appliances and then on through the hallway which smelled as if a few tomcats had held a marking contest, Tom came to the front door, a green metallic object that might have been bought used from

an old motel which was closing. Wondering if the 12 acres and this decaying farmhouse were a good trade for his mother's comfortable house, Tom stepped out onto the front stoop. It was Bruce Phillips who'd driven up in his four-wheel drive pickup. Shiny black with flames painted along the side, gun-rack mounted prominently—though currently empty, the truck contrasted strangely with the timid fellow who had dismounted from the high cab and was now coming around the front. With a head half-bald and half covered with out-of-control curly hair—always about a month past a trimming—Bruce was one of several intellectually or artistically inclined men who found Jennie's company to be comfortable. Or maybe comforting.

It was an odd group. Bruce, who was a high school math and science teacher, had once dreamed of being the next Einstein and now dreamed of finding the next Einstein in his classroom. There was Evan Wilson who wrote poetry that was so awful as it rhymed that it almost reconciled Tom to the wrongly formatted prose so often published as poetry in the 20th century. Del Marcus was a man with some talent, a graduate of Eastman in piano, he was one of many serious performers who'd not arrived at the right time; the right time was apparently just when someone in a good orchestra was dying, if not a symphony orchestra at least a good studio orchestra with relatively high salaries and benefits. The unemployment lines and, far worse, many wedding bands, were filled with people possessing degrees, or at least some serious training, from good music schools. Bruce had a number of friends of a similar sort who had indicated some interest in the community but were starting to look south, toward warmer regions.

And then there was a nurse, Mindy Sklodowska, a distant cousin to Jennie and a woman annoying only because of her humble but fanatic desire to be of service to the sick and disabled who came near her. She had become close friends with Bruce, partly because of a shared liking for Leonard Cohen music and all things nautical—especially the novels of Patrick O'Brian and C S Forester and biographies of the sorts of naval commanders who were the models for the main characters in those novels.

Tom was visited by the humorous image of those two, Bruce and Mindy, helpless and hopeless on a real sailing vessel, but he thought instead of a morally courageous man and woman striking out into the wilderness. As was so common at the time, Tom had fallen into a pessimistic line of contemplation and was cultivating a deeper sort of hope, however artificial and abstract it seemed alongside the easily painted images of despair or cynicism. His attention returned to the present to see that, as was usually true, Bruce had a smile on his face. Tom wasn't sure it that was the man's habit with all people. Maybe he had taken a particular liking to Tom. Or maybe he felt obligated to like any man chosen by Jennie. After shaking hands, Tom led Bruce to the right side of the house. After they stood for a few seconds looking out at the forest which had taken over the farmland, which had once been carved out of forest, Tom asked, "You think we can do it?"

Bruce rocked his upper-body back and forth a few times before saying, "The pioneers did it with no more than hand-tools and some horses and oxen. And that was primeval woodland with huge trees and thickets that would have been too much for a herd of goats."

Bruce's shrill voice hadn't really done much to assure Tom but the words made sense. Andy they would likely have better than hand-tools and draft animals. "When Jennie is able to sell her place, we might be able to buy some serious equipment. A tractor and a good truck... Good chainsaws and maybe even a chipper."

Bruce cleared his throat and then suggested, "I've got a pickup."

"I know, and I know you're going to help us like a good friend, but I certainly can't just take your truck to use it all day. And I don't want to ruin it pulling out stumps or hauling heavy loads on a steady basis."

"That's what it's made for, and..." Tom looked over to see Bruce looking sheepishly down at a hunk of ice that had still not melted though the last snow-storm had been in late March, nearly three weeks prior. "Well... Ummm... Jennie was telling me you two are thinking about founding a community of some sort." Bruce's face turned red before he assured Tom, "Not a hippie

commune or anything communist. I know that, and I wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea about what you and Jennie are doing."

"I don't know what we're up to myself, Bruce. All I know is that we no longer know how to live as human beings and we don't know how to form human societies. We inhabit ephemeral gathering places where the mercenary exchange of goods and services is still possible. Barely."

"I know, Tom, and that's how I feel as well. I mean I never heard it put quite that way. It sounds pretty radical. But not bad. Not like Karl Marx would've said. I mean, some of my friends in the Adam Smith Society wouldn't like that kind of language, but..." After Bruce had nervously walked away from Tom for a few feet, he turned right back and said, "I want to be part of it." Bruce had spoken in earnest and with a voice as firm as any Tom had ever heard him use. Tom wasn't quite sure what to think or say when Bruce took another determined step forward, almost slipping on the patch of ice, and, after recovering, said, "Evan and Del and Mindy want in as well."

"I'm not sure there's anything to get into."

"Jennie has a lot of confidence in you. And she said Al Thompson was going to be living in your spare bedroom and... Well, I know Al's a nice guy and he gave you all his carpentry tools and he's able to run errands and tell you how to do things, but he can't help much himself. Not with his bad back and his knees that won't bend. Not that I'm talking down Al. He'd be a great guy to have around, and he knows everything about building houses and he told me he can also build furniture and cabinets and stuff, but Evan and I can do a lot more actual work. And Del isn't too used to physical work, but he's got a real good attitude and having Mindy around would be like having a live-in medical staff."

Tom shook his head gently, though not meaning to push Bruce off in any way. "Let's take things one step at a time, Bruce. And, I guess the first step is to clear some of these trees so we can maybe get some crops in next year. Maybe we can even put up a log cabin or two for other people who want to join us here." Bruce nearly split his face with a grin and Tom put his hand on

the man's shoulder before saying, "I'm not making any promises because I'm not in a position to make any promises."

"I've got some money set aside. I was thinking about buying a house so it would certainly be enough to put up a cabin on this property. And Mindy has a lot of money put aside. She's been a nurse for fifteen years now and she just doesn't spend money. Except when she sees a child in need."

Tom's thoughts passed quickly to Mindy, one of the gentlest and most unselfish creatures Tom had ever known. She fought her way through childhood heart problems; she'd had a bout with rheumatic fever when she was a young child. More recently, she'd begun to hunch over with a back problem. It was Mindy who'd reacted so strongly when she'd joined Tom and Jennie for lunch a few weeks back and had heard them talk about building a real community, a place where people lived and not one where they rested before going back to their lives in a brutally politicized and commercialized world. She'd gotten all excited and had talked about a place to shelter children from a world which hated them and only tolerated them so long as they could be profitably exploited. She was so gentle and yet...

There was something about the times that drove even such a person to intense, though usually suppressed, feelings of frustration and hatred. That was the day that Tom realized he was about to embark on a dangerous course of action. And now that he saw Bruce was placing serious hopes on this phantom community, already banking his emotions and prepared to bank all his money in it, Tom realized that it was the sort of good and moral activity that could destroy many people and bring as much misery as it sought to ease.

He turned back toward the front of the house with Bruce following close behind. "I hope Jennie got that job." Tom could only nod. "That would go a long ways to keeping food on your table while you work on clearing the fields and rebuilding the house." A shudder went up Tom's back. He'd helped his father a lot around the house when he was very young, but that had mostly ended before Tom had been old enough to work the power equipment or even solder a water pipe connection. Having Al looking over his shoulders

would help a lot, but it wouldn't keep him from having to acquire the skills by practice, practice that might be expensive in time and materials. When it came to outdoor activities, he couldn't even rely on Al, not on that rugged, sloped ground behind the house, at least not until it had been partly cleared. Tom had never dropped a tree and had no idea how to go about removing stumps short of pointing a bulldozer operator in the right direction. He'd had nightmares of ripping the transmission or drive-shaft right out of a pickup truck.

In a position that seemed worse with each passing day, Tom felt a responsibility to cheer up, or at least seem cheerful in front of these people who had somehow come to place their hopes on him. He had no idea how that had happened, but he forced a smile and a confident wave as Bruce turned his truck around and drove toward the street. He honked his horn near the bottom of the driveway and Tom turned away from the door with the knob in his hand. It was Jennie returning from her interview at the daycare center oriented toward the budding genius, though a number of education systems, and even entertainment empires, had been promising since at least the early seventies to turn children into geniuses, or at least raise their effective thinking abilities and creative energies. So far as Tom could ascertain, society wasn't yet overburdened with all these intellectual and creative powerhouses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nigh onto August, the contractor had built the forms and his trucks were rolling up the driveway to pour the foundations of Bruce's log-cabin. The first cement-mixer was being directed into position when Jennie said in her most matter-of-fact voice, "Mindy will be moving in with us about November or so."

Tom digested that for a few seconds before protesting, "We don't know if the house will be finished by then. Even Al is planning on staying with his brother until March or so, and I need his advice. I might have to start off my days by driving down to Jenkesville to pick him up. I need his instruction,

and it might not be enough. I'm no expert, and I don't even have all the most basic skills. So far, it's been hard work but it doesn't take a lot of brains or skills to rip everything out. Soon, the real work of reconstructing this house begins, and I don't know how it's going to go."

"I'll be learning with you."

"Two half-ignorant people don't add up to a competent construction worker."

"That's true, but two will make a more interesting class for Al. Besides that, students have more fun misbehaving in pairs." She barely cracked a smile before going on, "And Mindy can help with the finishing work so long as the bathrooms are working and the walls are up. If there's an unpainted wall or an uninstalled window-shade, you wouldn't be able to keep her still even if she's just come home from another twelve hour day of dealing with crippled or burned children. Maybe Al will move in at that point and help with the finishing work, so long as he doesn't have to lift heavy things or bend down."

"That doesn't make me feel particularly good about the situation. And besides, legally, I own the place, which is less important to me than the fact that everyone, including you, keeps telling me I'm the leader of this disorganized mess which might someday become a community, but everyone seems to be assuming I'll make the decisions they would like me to make."

The clatter of chutes being let down followed by the rumble of the concrete being poured distracted Tom from Jennie's tender smile. While he was staring at the concrete workers poking the glop to make sure there were no air bubbles, Jennie moved up close to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "You're our leader but remember that everyone including you want this to be some sort of democracy and democracies are always messy. Anyway, I doubt that even powerful kings really were able to impose their wills upon messy human societies the way we sometimes assume."

Gently did Tom pull away, so as not to make Jennie feel he was rejecting her apology, if that was what it was. He turned and walked back to the main house, passing between the two large dumpsters, one of which was already full. As he entered the gutted kitchen, he felt an odd mixture of depression

and exhilaration radiate from someplace not quite his gut nor quite his mind. Some parts of the work were turning out to be easier than he had feared. Workarounds in an old house were problems; Tom had learned that when working with his father on his parents' house. It was a lot easier with the two of them staying in Jennie's house for a while, small but neither of them was there much anyway. Tom had spent a few weeks stripping this house to the studs, tearing off wallboard and plaster, ripping out wiring and plumbing. It was all gone but the structure and siding of the house. Room by room, working from the back and then coming up to the kitchen, the floors were to be torn out, even the subflooring. Soon, he'd be walking about on floor-joists with the basement open between his feet. Well, he'd have to lay some loose plywood anyway, if he wanted Al to be able to get around to tell him how to do things.

It could've been worse if he'd had to work piece by piece on an occupied house instead of doing it this easier way: emptying the house and tearing everything out and rebuilding it from scratch other than the bare frame. No working around old wiring or amateurish plumbing jobs. Rip it out and put in new. If only he could decide what to do with the heating system. He'd gotten a quote for a new heating system, from furnace up through the house. \$14,000. That included a nice oil-burning water heater to be sure. All the pipes. Nice, shiny new radiators. The works, but Tom didn't have the \$14,000 unless he diverted it from other things that needed done on the property. Maybe he'd be able to afford the new heating system after they sold Jennie's house, but they couldn't really sell it until they were ready to move in. Unless they were willing to camp out.

Tom knew that he and Jennie could sell her house and live in Bruce's log-cabin for a short while, but that might be uncomfortable for all three of them. And Evan had given notice on his apartment for three months away. There were also two young men on their way down from Canada. Evan's nephew, Trey Waters, and Trey's friend from Canada, Pierre Boucher. Worst of all, he didn't want to do much until he decided whether to have the heating system

replaced or to live with the old system and maybe replace the furnace after Jennie's house sold.

The door opened and closed and soft footsteps told of Jennie drawing near. "You look depressed." Tom didn't speak at first, and she came over and gave him a gentle squeeze on his tired and sore biceps and he reminded her of his fears. Jennie made a simple suggestion, "Let's borrow the money from Mindy. She doesn't even spend much more than half the money she makes. She's never touched her inheritance, and she offered all her savings and inheritance to me for our work here."

After deciding not to ask about this 'inheritance' business, Tom let several other questions mix about in his consciousness. First, he wondered what would be their 'work'. He and Jennie had talked vaguely about making a refuge of sorts for young people, not the traditional troubled sort but rather those who didn't quite fit in to an industrialized, corporatized, and politicized society. There might be some who were dreamers, maybe some who would never produce worthwhile dreams, and others who wished to make beautiful music of the sort not right for mass-marketing. There might be some who might want to create art or useful tools with their hands rather than allowing themselves to be enslaved to corporations wishing to sell mass-produced junk. But there were a lot of potential problems with that, beginning with the government monopoly on helping anyone not your own child. One's of Tom's friends from business school had told him about a Nobel Laureate economist, a fellow named Buchanan, who had argued that government employees were no different than other employees. They had children to feed, mortgages to meet, and they would act no differently than corporate employees when it came to expanding their percentage of the market and fighting off competition. But government bureaucracies could call on their regulatory and police powers. That seemed pretty obvious stuff to have won a Nobel Prize, but Tom did know a lot of people who seemed to think that corruption resulted when power or money was concentrated in the hands of private citizens or corporations, but somehow they thought that a government could gather up arbitrary amounts of money

and power without being diverted at all from its supposed mission to better the lives of its citizens, or at least its contributors.

As he meditated more and more upon the problem, Tom felt more strongly that this was the problem: too many people had signed their lives over to government and corporate bureaucrats in return for financial security. Illusions of financial security would be more like it. Neither nature nor that stream of activities called human history were kind to those who thought themselves so prosperous and powerful as to have overcome the problems and uncertainties of a violently developing world. When push came to shove, when there was a shortage of resources—as happened even to the mightiest of worldly powers, who was going to be shorted: the citizens or the corporate and governmental bureaucrats who controlled those resources? In the meantime, the structures of family and community would have been liquidated that each person could stand isolated in front of the central powers. A truly naked ape, and defenseless at that.

“I don’t know if we should take that much money from her.”

Jennie rubbed his lower back as she reassured him, “Even with all the money she’s given away, she has almost a million and a half in her investment accounts.”

“How the hell did she save that much on a nurse’s salary?”

“She didn’t. She had two aunts each of whom had owned chunks of land that developers wanted. She was an only child, and didn’t have any first cousins on that side of her family. She got it all.”

## 5 Summer Grows Short

“Damned corn isn’t ripening.” With disgust distorting his face, Brother Tom threw down the fistful of dirt. Sister Jennie looked on calmly, offering no more than, “We’ve plenty of tomatoes on the vine.” They both looked in the direction of the plum tomatoes, intended to be put up for a winter’s supply of sauce and ketchup and stewed tomatoes. The vines were magnificent, growing well above the six foot stakes. They were also loaded with green tomatoes. Brother Tom snorted and said, “Second week of August and we’ve harvested exactly two ripe tomatoes. They’ll ripen if we take off the clusters and hang them somewhere, but they sure the hell don’t taste as good as the backyard tomatoes I remember.”

After hitching up the overalls that were hanging more loosely every day, he looked up the hill at the farmhouse where he and Jennie and Mindy and Al had lived for three years. Al still lived there along with an elderly couple, two single elderly women, and a man who’d been born with a bad hip nearly 40 years ago. These others had been left behind when their families and friends had moved south. Tom shook his head, less in disgust and more in sympathy for those who’d left behind the vulnerable, parents and grandparents and guardians struggling to feed and educate their children in a country which had hit a streak of bad weather and other problems just as it had nearly finished destroying its human and financial capital through discretionary and stupid wars—both military and financial.

Brother Bruce was directing a group of six young men who were framing a large greenhouse. Was that to be their salvation? Would that allow them

to stay when everyone else in Jefferson seemed to be heading at least as far south as Pennsylvania? Abe had closed his general store, the last one in town, and was heading farther south than that—Argentina; his brother and one of his cousins had some sort of a meat wholesaling company and they'd invited him into the business.

Brother Tom was happy for Abe, but he had been hoping at least one general merchant in the area would stick out the streak of bad winters. As he headed down to help the men and women turning the giant compost pile, he wondered if that was all it was... A streak of bad winters? Or was it true that the greenhouse gases had somehow pushed the Earth into an ice age? Some called the 16th and 17th centuries a little ice age because of its streak of cold and, mostly, dry winters. The Thames had frozen over several times, at least once so solidly that a number of London residents had roasted cattle in the middle of the river, probably dancing and singing and drinking hot grog of some sort while the meat blackened. Boston Harbor had even frozen over so that large wagons drawn by full teams of horses had been able to cross over from Boston to the Cape Cod side.

Picking up a heavy fork, Brother Tom set to work turning leaves and grass and blackened remains of garbage composted fast. Soon enough, the sweat on that cool, damp August day had driven out the doubts and the odd bits of uncollated and unstructured historical knowledge, the trivia that passes for knowledge among barbaric children as well as that poorly formed, but substantial, wisdom which remains in the habits and customs of the abandoned grandchildren of civilization.

Soon enough, Tom had worked out a little bit of his lingering anger; he'd found his anger often replaced by more constructive emotions when he was working hard with the other members of the Community. He too, though nominally leader, moved slowly and tentatively into the future, adjusting to what was coming into being and not forcing the world into an ideal image formed in the isolation of his mind, an isolation that proved no more than madness for even such great men as Napoleon and Lenin and Mao. No philosopher

was Brother Tom, but of this much he was sure: his mind was not something existing independently of the world outside of him, including the society in which he was embedded.

Having done some good by turning the compost pile, though Brother Del told him they were turning it over too often. "Turn it over enough that the anaerobic bacteria not take over, but not enough to disrupt the life-cycle of the desirable bacteria and yeast." Between his writing of jingles and tunes for advertising, even for firms which had moved down south, Brother Del had read a library of *Organic Gardening* books and magazines and pamphlets. His love was Schubert's piano music, but he'd disciplined himself to excel at lesser activities for the sake of the Community. His earnings from songs about toilet paper and background music for pizza restaurant come-ons provided a much needed source of cash for the Community. And, each Thursday evening—sometimes Sunday afternoons as well, he played Schubert as well as works from a variety of other composers, even going off into the music he approved of from Broadway and folk music—both American and Breton.



## 6 A Certain Reputation

The chainsaw wielded by Brother Bruce was nearly through the tall ash; Pierre and Trey had pulled the rope firm but not tight as they waited for a signal from Brother Bruce. All of them, especially Brother Bruce, were getting pretty good at directing the fall of the trees, but they were concerned to get the ash down intact because they wanted the hard wood for making a variety of articles, from railings to mixing bowls. Brother Tom was standing back, no more than twenty feet or so away from where the top of the tree would hit. He had come out to help fell some trees but had started to ponder the Community's problems even as he watched Brother Bruce at work. The still reluctant leader nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a tapping on his right shoulder. His reaction was strong enough that Connie Artanian had herself jumped back a couple feet when he turned around. Quickly, he moved forward to assure the woman that all was okay, she'd just startled him.

"It was just the noise from the saw that kept me from hearing you come up." He was pretty sure she didn't hear him over the noise of the chainsaw, but she smiled anyway. And then the chainsaw shut off and the tree must have started to fall within seconds of Brother Bruce stepping back. Connie's face froze with fear as the tree started to fall their way. Brother Tom grabbed her as gently as possible and moved her back, though it was unnecessary. He wasn't sure about Connie; she and her husband Alex had just come to live at the Community a couple weeks ago and hadn't decided if they wished to join it. They'd also brought Helga and Beret, two women who'd come over from Norway as part of a mission to the newly heathen regions of North America, but the others

in that mission had returned to Europe after a couple of confrontations with young men returned to nomadic tribal life. Helga and Beret had been made of tougher stuff but had been a little lost until they hooked up with the Artanians and made their way to New Quincy, which had a healthy population at the time—before the store-owners had all shut down to move to greener pastures. It had been Abe, the owner of the general store, who had directed them to Jefferson and the Community. There was little doubt those two from Norway would stay, not since they saw the clinic with its sick and abandoned children. It was still possible the Artanians would head south.

“Brother Tom?” she managed to squeak out through a constricted throat.

“There was no danger. I was standing far enough back. We’re starting to get good at this logging business, at least on this small scale to bring in firewood and enough wood for our own building.” He felt his lips curl up in a smile of pride and Connie tried to return the smile, but she seemed lost for a few seconds as if she’d forgotten why she was out there.

“Do you have a message for one of us?” Brother Tom was looking at the folded slip of paper in her hand which she thrust in his direction.

It was a note written in Sister Jennie’s hand, probably as she took the information down from an email. Ink cartridges being in short supply, they only had a couple of printers and those were restricted to use only with permission of Brother Tom or Brother Bruce.

Fr Francis will be by later this day. He’ll try to make it by supper, and said, with a laugh (LOL), that he expected a hearty meal. He’ll be bringing a child with leukemia who’d been living with an older brother up in New Hampshire. The child’s needs were too much for the brother. He’ll also be bringing another child he purchased from a slaver for a couple hundred dollars, though I think it sad to say he could have paid just \$25 or so. That child is suffering from malnutrition and various parasites of the skin and intestinal tract. Sister Mindy is preparing and will put the child with the parasites

in isolation. Fr Francis asked if it would be possible for us to make another donation for his child-purchase fund which is nearly dry. He also is bringing a girl with measles and a boy who's healthy.

"Could you tell Sister Jennie I'll be up in a while? It seems that Sister Mindy is the one with the immediate responsibilities and a shortage of isolation facilities."

Connie started to say something but kept her mouth closed and turned to head back up to the settlement. He figured she was thinking about the money. It was known that Brother Tom had set aside some money to buy an updated computer to use as a communication center and also as an administrative tool for the Community. Most probably didn't know he also had some money set aside for buying some metalworking machinery; he was planning for the days when they would have trouble scrounging up spare parts for their engines or even simple metal brackets to make construction easier and safer.

How much of the community's precious funds could he divert to Father Francis? It was certainly worthwhile to buy freedom for a child in the captivity of a slaver, or even in the hands of abusive parents. But the Community needed to survive and to prosper over the long-term or else it would be no more than a temporary refuge for anyone.

An hour later, the two downed trees had been stripped of their branches, and Brother Tom left the rest of the work-party to finish loading the trunks onto the trailer which would be hauled up by the half-track they'd bought from a military surplus dealer. Some members of the community didn't like to have anything on the property which was painted in military camouflage patterns, but they'd stopped complaining when they first saw the thing move, slowly to be sure, through six-inch thick mud with a load of logs. But it really drank diesel fuel.

As soon as he entered the settlement area, he turned his steps toward the clinic to see how Sister Mindy was doing with her preparations and with the two children currently under her care—one a child with a broken collar-bone

healing nicely and one with measles not suffering too much except for the loneliness of being isolated in a room off-limits to all other children and most adults.

The smell of beef broth hit Brother Tom's nostrils as he entered the clinic. Sister Mindy was sitting down at the table near the administrator's desk. 'Administrator' was an open position, though either Sister Mindy or Sister Jennie carried out the functions most of the time. There really weren't too many responsibilities other than keeping track of the flow of supplies and bugging Brother Tom and the other adults in the community to give the clinic proper support. In a sense, Sister Mindy was always doing both of those tasks, even when she was carrying out her nursing responsibilities.

"Got everything ready?" When Sister Mindy put down her spoon and made ready to rise, he commanded, "Continue eating. I'm just passing through on my way to get ready for Father Francis."

Sister Mindy left her spoon down and picked up a piece of buttered bread, but she didn't take a bite. Instead, she looked at Brother Tom and asked, "Will you be able to give Father Francis any money?"

"Some. Don't know how much yet. That's what I'm going to check."

"Well, we can probably do without some of the luxuries we're planning on getting. The children must be taken care of, and that means freeing as many as possible from slavery or other states of abuse."

"We'll do what we can. What I wanted to ask you is... Well, are we in a position to handle abused children who probably have psychological problems? It's not that I'm trying to push children like that away. I just want to be sure that everyone realizes that caring for a child who might have serious mental or emotional problems is different than caring for children with measles or even children who are dying of cancer."

"Someone has to care for them, to give them some sort of a chance." After taking a nibble of buttered bread, she remained silent for a few chews before swallowing and asserting, "We'll do the best we can, and the best we can do has been pretty damned good so far."

Brother Tom couldn't suppress his smile when she used the word 'damned'. It was pretty rare for the gentle woman to be even that vulgar, but there was no vulgarity showing in the soft brown eyes she lifted in a plea to Brother Tom. It bothered him since she'd contributed more money to the Community than anyone. Even the property he'd given had been worth less than a quarter the value of her portfolio of investments, nearly all of which was liquidated to buy farming and woodworking equipment, to build and furnish the clinic, and to build the orphans' dormitory.

But she was in the community the same he was and some individual freedom and rights had to be given up for the sake of survival and—they could hope—some goodness in their community lives.

"Well, I better go check the books and see how much cash we can spare, though I may not give even all of that to Father Francis at one time. It might be better, and safer since there are a growing number of bandits in New England, to put him on some sort of a budget."

Sister Mindy smiled weakly as if barely satisfied with that solution.

Once outside, Brother Tom looked up into the milky white sky. High-flying cirrus clouds again, a typical dry winter day according to Brother Bruce, the Community's most enthusiastic amateur meteorologist. Dry and so high that any little precipitation they produced would evaporate well before reaching the ground. Keeping out the more cheerful wavelengths of sunlight but allowing in a lot of UV radiation. Brother Bruce was always saying the climate researchers were still quite unsure whether the current decade of cold weather might really be the beginning of an ice-age, however little. He spent some of his own hours searching for information on the Internet on that and other important topics, usually late at night when he should have been sleeping.

Feeling too tired to worry about what might happen the next year, let alone the next decade or the next century, Brother Tom walked out into the grassy area which cut between the living quarters and what were labeled the 'human services' buildings by Brother Del in his faux-bureaucratic moods. The woodworking factory, garage, storage building, and farm buildings were

below the original house—now four times as large as when Brother Tom had bought it. The farm buildings were, in fact, scattered about the small fields used as giant kitchen gardens. The vegetables intended for fresh use or for preserving or canning were grown there, along with cutting flowers. There was a large greenhouse for growing herbs and vegetables during the winter, in addition to the smaller greenhouses attached to the buildings which were the living quarters and the far bigger greenhouse for winter vegetables was nearly reframed after coming down in a wind gust during an otherwise mild storm in June. The nine milking cows, as well as the seven calves kept for meat or for eventual use as milkers, lived in the lower fields, near the pastures, during the good weather months and were moved up to a barn near the young women's dormitory during the cold months.

The metal watering trough that Pierre had found in an abandoned antique shop was close at hand and Brother Tom rested his right hand upon the edge of the object misappropriated to hold dirt and flowers. The dirt it held year-round, the flowers only five months or so a year, though mums and pansies, sometimes petunias, could be coaxed to grow during some of the cold months of early spring or late autumn. Or maybe 'early spring' was no more than 'late winter', late autumn no more than 'early winter'. Word-splitting in the view of a man increasingly forced to deal with practical problems during all his waking hours, a man who'd gotten himself into this messy situation because of a tendency to contemplation which he'd only been able to indulge between the long periods of hectic activity which had dominated his life, first a life as a child in the American 20th century bubble and then a life as a corporate nomad and then as a do-gooder and then... This life.

Brother Tom looked around at the buildings used for living quarters. The log-cabin built by Brother Bruce when he'd first come to live near Brother Tom and Sister Jennie was now hidden behind and under several layers of log-cabin additions and was home to Brother Tom and Sister Jennie, the Artanians, the two women from Norway, and Sister Mindy as well as Bruce. The Community's office and its file room were also in that building as was the meeting-room,

once a recreation room in the semi-finished basement of the original cabin. The community had long outgrown that meeting-room and had to serve two sittings for community meals, but no one had taken on the task of proposing a good solution. The workers in the community were already stretched thin and couldn't take on another building project.

The pool table, the ping-pong table, and the Foosball machine which Brother Bruce had brought had been first kept in a large first floor room in the young men's dormitory, until Sister Jennie noticed that Pierre and Trey seemed to be suffering from lack of sleep. Pending the construction of a community hall, the recreation equipment had been put into storage. In the young men's dormitory, four bachelors living in one wing of bedrooms and three married couples lived in the other wing; there were two bedrooms vacant in the bachelor's wing and three in the married couples' wings and some rumors that two children were on the way and more private family quarters would soon be needed.

Similarly, the young women's dormitory had five bedrooms, three of them large enough to hold two or more women, and now only had two residents. The clinic was the last of the living-quarters of the Community. The clinic was a building one fifteen foot room deep and three thirty-foot rooms wide. Built for easy expansion, its central part with the main entrance being the room used for office-work and meetings with parents or patients, as well as medical examinations with no more than flimsy screens for privacy. That room was set in the middle of the building, flanked by an isolation room and a room with more general access—both of those rooms intended to house patients. There had been talk of adding a room for use as a hospice, but Sister Mindy had decided to keep the dying children in with those merely sick as much as possible.

As he had confessed to Sister Mindy, Brother Tom was not yet ready to decide how much to give to Father Francis. In any case, he almost knew by heart every number in the Community's books. Despite the occasional flurry of profitable activity: Brother Del's sales of music and jingles, shipments south to

New York City of the furniture made by Pierre and Trey with help from Bruce and Evan, and the more regular shipments of dried herbs and herbal wreaths; there was little money coming into the Community, thus not much going out. In all, there was perhaps \$41,000 in cash and cash equivalents, another \$35,000 or so in accounts receivables netted for accounts payable. Medicines and foods they couldn't grow, certain luxuries such as makeup for the women and sheet music for the worship services and for Brother Del's performances, as well as supplies for his demo recordings, took at least \$3,000 a month. As a rule, even the luxuries were really necessities and, for the most part, the sales agents demanded cash, generally at least 25% in advance and the rest on delivery, before they'd even consider an order, even of the most important medical supplies.

And he really thought they needed that new computer system and the metalworking machinery, so he considered that \$29,500 to be locked up.

Brother Tom found himself entering the sacred confines of Sister Jennie's greenhouse with his mind still cluttered with practical concerns and community memories though he felt a need to let go in a binge of the most importantly useless contemplation.

"I'd offer you a penny for your thoughts except that they look too painful to be inflicted on another person, even your loving and beloved wife."

With that, Sister Jennie brushed by her husband, bringing on a smile with no more than a touch upon his heavily clothed forearm. She moved over to the faucet to mix some dried and crumbled compost into a bucket of water. As she stood there with her back to him, he couldn't help staring at her behind. She was voluptuous and not at all was she ever embarrassed by that; she had never been one to let the skinny 16 year-old models destroy her self-esteem. That had been one of her best, and sometimes most annoying, characteristics. And he loved her for it, her attitude and also those feminine hips and breasts and even her rounded belly.

As she passed by again, he grabbed hold of her, taking the bucket from her hand and setting it down. Usually she was all business and pushed him away

when he made off-hours moves, but she cuddled up against him. No one was around and, more importantly, he could smell something about her, he could feel her breasts swelled a bit already though she could not be very far along in her pregnancy. Afraid to say a word about it after she'd miscarried twice since they'd been together, and at least once before he had met her, he just pulled her close as if he were trying to rejoin her to his rib. With a gentle grunt, he buried his face in her hair. "You've been making fresh lavender shampoo again."

She nuzzled her face into his neck below his ear rather than answering, and he knew he had to get her back to their two room suite. At least, it had all started in a greenhouse connected to the building where they lived; if only they could make it up there without being interrupted by someone needing a decision made or needing some help caring for some needy person. Brother Tom had lifted his eyes to the door of the greenhouse, getting ready to move into the house and up the stairs when he heard Abigail's excited voice, "Father Francis. You're early!"

He sobbed into his wife's hair and heard her say, "Tonight isn't many hours away, sailor-boy." She pulled away from him and quickly shook her hair and then straightened her blouse before smiling up at him and patting him on the cheek. As she passed, her hand brushed ever so lightly against his pain. "Hold the thought for a few hours and I'll make the delay worth your while, Sweetheart."

He watched as she picked up the bucket; she had been as aroused as he was and likely she was showing at least some of the physical signs, but she simply poured the liquid into the watering tank for her herbs and then turned toward the door. She rustled up her hair once more to make it look like a normal work-a-day mess instead of a nuzzling mess, and then walked by him toward the door while he was still trying to catch his breath and subdue the pain of delayed desires.

Another minute of therapeutic thoughts about tomorrow's work of sawing the logs into timber, a number of calm breaths in a row, and Brother Tom

followed his wife into the main part of the house. He could hear Father Francis speaking in a nervous and high but clear voice: "... attractive for sure, and she didn't understand the meaning of celibacy though I explained it several times to her. She did understand it well enough to think it strange anyone would take such a vow, but she returned three times to try to climb underneath the blankets with me. A bit ill-disciplined in some ways, but she was really a nice girl in most ways... Young woman, I should say. About 17. And I think she'd been raised in some sort of... Shall I say, bad environment." Tom entered as the Franciscan friar finished with, "I had to convince her that you people didn't do strange things like taking vows of celibacy even if you did call each other by 'Brother' and 'Sister', and then she agreed to help me bring the four children down here. I hope she stays here with you people."

Brother Tom was glad, but not surprised, to see that Abigail was not in the room. The tale had been for Sister Jennie's ears, and for his. If the young woman did stay, it wouldn't do to have such tales being spread about among the other young people, even if the tale, and likely others even juicier, were true. Ordinarily, Brother Tom would have started off with a joke about resisting sexual temptation, but all such topics were painful to him right about now, and he was still trying to divert his thoughts to matters more appropriate for public life.

"Are the children in the clinic?"

Father Francis nodded. "Sister Mindy shot out the door as soon as my red Jeep pulled into the parking lot. There were young men returning from some heavy labor of some sort, but they ran over and one carried the dying lad in. Another helped the two Norwegian women to move the malnourished boy with the parasites into an empty room near where Trey and Pierre live." With a wink, he added, "I think Pierre suggested that location hoping those two Norwegian women would be coming over to take care of Mike. I didn't let them near the girl with the measles since I didn't know if all of them are vaccinated. Connie moved the girl with measles in with the other child having the same affliction..."

“Tammy.”

Brother Tom let out a long breath before saying, “Sister Mindy has taken care of vaccinations. She has a regular regime of poking and prodding new members of our community, especially children. We usually put a guard at the door of the clinic to catch them as they try to escape into the woods.”

If the friar had had more than a thin scattering of nearly invisible blonde hair in his tonsure, it would have been shaken violently as he laughed. “Lions and tigers and bears are to be preferred over a well-meaning nurse armed with needles.”

“It would help if we could afford to buy the new systems with injection devices that are connected directly to the computers. Once a patient’s name and age and weight and sex and the vaccine name or drug name are entered, the computer sets the dosage and... Whatever. I guess the computer will even question if a known patient should be receiving that vaccine or drug. I don’t understand all that those systems do but Sister Mindy and the computer geeks in the community are all excited.” Brother Tom sighed and added, “Everything is getting so expensive here. I understand it’s different in China and parts of Russia and Europe.”

With a wink, Father Francis assured him, “A more prosperous country would be nice but, given what our situation is, we just need some more funds and a caravan of buses driven by helpers. I could bring you enough abandoned or mistreated children to fill all the lands around here.”

“I don’t know if we can grow very fast. We need an influx of responsible, hardworking adults before we could handle an influx of children needing to be cared for and protected.”

A more serious expression pushed the smile from Father Francis’s face, though it was a good-natured expression at that. Before he had a chance to reply, Sister Jennie said, “We’ve already spoken briefly about the money situation, Tom. I told him we can give him something to continue his good works, but we won’t make a commitment until at least tomorrow after we talk it over with the others in the Community.”

Brother Tom nodded and turned to walk into the examination and treatment room, followed by Jennie and Father Francis. A young woman in that room looked down at her feet as she reflected Brother Tom's, "Hello." Willowy she was. Slender of all parts, including her face. Her hair was long and sort of a grayish or blondish brown, though she was clearly in her late teens. Moving with a grace impossible to understand when one is born into a bulkier male body, she returned almost immediately to her task of rubbing the back of a boy little more than skin and bones. It was hard to guess how old he might have been. Perhaps as old as 12, perhaps as old as several centuries judging by the worn-out gray of his eyes. He was bald and looked to be missing at least half of his teeth, and something told Brother Tom that Father Francis might get twice the \$5,000 he had planned to give him. On the other hand, they couldn't take too many children, not at one time, and the going price for redeeming sick or abused children might rise if there proved to be a market. Of course, the good padre had to keep his car gassed up and repaired. Pierre and the other scroungers were having great success in finding gas tanks with substantial amounts in them, some having to be filtered to be sure; a nomadic missionary might not be able to successfully scrounge up gas wherever he happened to be.

Another boy in the room had Down's Syndrome. Not surprisingly, he looked cheerful. A plate which looked to have been licked clean was in front of him as well as an empty bowl which had likely once held soup. He was pushing the second half of a cupcake into his mouth as Brother Tom walked over toward him, figuring he couldn't be in too bad shape if Sister Mindy was giving him a substantial amount of solid food.

"What's your name?"

"Sherlock."

"Sherlock? Is your last name 'Holmes'?" The boy giggled and shook his head. He was perhaps a little over five feet tall if he'd been standing and was pretty sturdy though he could probably hold a good ten more pounds on his large bones. "I'm guessing you're twelve years old." With a twinkle in his

shielded brown eyes, he shook his head again. "Okay, are you going to tell me what your real name is and how old you are?"

After thinking about it for a few seconds, he said, "My real name is Felix Humphries, but 'Sherlock' is a better name." Another short pause and he added, "I'm nearly twelve and a half."

"Felix Humphries seems to be a fine name. At least to me. Why do you like Sherlock better?"

"It's a nickname."

The response seemed to be more or less final and Brother Tom simply put out his right hand and said, "Welcome to our community." The boy put his sticky hand in that of Brother Tom and pumped it with surprising vigor for someone who was a little short of flesh.

Brother Tom walked over to look at the boy with the leukemia as Sister Mindy prepared to wheel him into the sick ward. He didn't look likely to make it much longer. Father Francis came over and stood beside him as the gurney was rolled away. "It's possible, Brother Tom, that you might be getting another healthy young man in your community. I told his older brother, the one who was trying to care for him, about this place. He said he might come down after he'd cleaned up a few loose ends on the family farm. Ed. Ed McCray. That's the name of the older brother. The poor, sick lad is Tommy."

"Does Ed know how to farm."

"Seems to, but I'm no expert. He's not able to run the farm by himself, but that's nothing against him. The best of farmers have almost always needed a family, or at least a close community."

"If he knows how to farm, that would make one in this community. Though," and a smile came to his face as he continued, "Brother Del has read every back issue of *Organic Gardening* and he's also learned the Latin names of all the good bacteria that live in the soil or compost piles. And Brother Bruce is now going through all those journals of good information about dead and decaying matter." With a nod back to Sherlock, as he would undoubtedly come to be called, he commented, "That one seems like he's going to be a cheerful little

pisser, if you pardon the language."

Father Francis laughed and replied, "No apologies necessary. The world needs more cheerful little pissers."

The door opened and both men turned to see Sister Jennie enter, followed by Pierre, who looked exhausted and was quite dirty other than his recently scrubbed face and hands. They'd barely stopped beside the two men when Father Francis said, "Excuse me, Clarissa was busy helping Sister Mindy and I didn't even introduce her to Brother Tom." With that he made the rounds of introductions and then introduced Sherlock, to the lad's great pleasure, though he was mostly busy stuffing another cupcake into his mouth. Brother Tom looked around, wondering where the hell he'd gotten that second treat from, or maybe his third or fourth? His eyes returned to the group around him just in time to see that Clarissa was casting looks at Pierre. To be sure, he was a good-looking, sturdy fellow, but the decision came unbidden that the young woman should be lodged in the large house where she could remain under watch until they knew what bad habits or infections she had, what proper desires had been aroused to improper purposes.

Dinner was always served family style, though in two sittings until a larger hall could be built. Everyone at each sitting, guests and residents of the community alike, sat down at the large tables upon which were placed the platters of broccoli and corn and potatoes and roast pork with garlic which dominated the smells in the room. There were baskets of fresh-baked breads. Plates of fresh vegetables: sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, radishes and greens. There were also small bowls of pickled vegetables lending odors of vinegar and dill and cinnamon to the air inside the community dining-room.

Feeling somehow out of place, Brother Tom found himself wondering how long this bounty would last. They were short many worldly goods, including those of mercy such as expensive medicine, but they'd been surprisingly lucky in having so much food. All of the vegetables and fruits for this meal were grown fresh on site but they'd had shortages of fresh food before and had merely brought out the cans and jars and boxes. The scroungers, as the

young men and women called themselves, had found so much preserved food with good expiration dates in abandoned stores and restaurants and houses. And there were still enough farmers in the area raising pigs and cattle that they could usually get fresh meat with perhaps a delay of a week or so until a butchering was to be done. Food was available but not all food was available fresh the way things had been in the days when meat-markets and supermarkets competed for plentiful business. But the lack of a large market, along with shortages in truck fuels, might tempt farmers to move south where the mass of people had gone.

After Father Francis had suggested that Abigail should say grace, a knock came at the outer door. Sister Jennie rose, but Brother Tom, wearing a wary expression upon his face, said, "I'll get it. The rest of you go on with the meal." He signaled with his eyes to Trey and Pierre; they rose to follow and so did the friar of his own accord. In a land so greatly depopulated, guests were rare and sometimes not to be welcomed, though a guest who knocked on the door of a building showing signs of occupancy had probably not the most dire of plans.

Brother Tom was feeling more confident about the situation by the time he reached the front hallway, but he motioned with his hands for Pierre and Trey to stand back while he and Father Francis walked on to open the door. As the door was opened, Brother Tom saw a tall, rawboned fellow probably a little short of twenty years. He stood there, somewhat uncomfortable, obviously not sure what to say; it was Father Francis who suddenly smiled and stepped forward. "Ed, I didn't expect you to come so soon."

The young man grinned at the sight of the priest and said, "It got kind of lonely without Tommy, and I was..." The smile disappeared from his face, and tears could be seen in the inside corners of his eyes. It was then that Brother Tom took a closer look at the fellow's face. His forehead was too high, his cheekbones too prominent above slender cheeks. His chin met the world as bravely as any hero of old-fashioned adventure movies. His ears stuck out too far and his hair looked as if he cut it himself without the benefit of a mirror.

If there were anyone on God's Earth who could be trusted at first glance, it was this fellow who was so roughly hewn and poorly trimmed.

Stepping forward, the Franciscan priest offered, "We were just sitting down to eat, but if you'd like to see your brother first, I'll take you over." Brother Tom turned to the young men hanging back in the shadows, "Go down and eat. Tell the others I'll be back in a little while with a guest, the brother of the boy Sister Mindy is caring for." He was about to tell Father Francis he should head down and get a good meal before he went back on the road, but the friar had already fetched his outer coat and that of Brother Tom from the hall closet.

Sister Mindy met them at the door of the clinic. Apparently, she'd heard Ed drive up and had been suspicious, but the internal phone system was down because of a server gone bad. After a short conversation with Father Francis doing most of the talking and the ensuing introductions, she led them toward the sick ward but stopped at the door and turned to look at Ed. "I should warn you before we go in. He's gotten worse just in the last couple of hours. It's probably good you came when you did." She reached out and squeezed his hand and then had to nearly drag him inside the room.

Tommy's breathing was both labored and erratic. As they first stood around his bed, he breathed twice in rapid succession, heaving his body up into the air to draw in the air, and then he grew quiet and didn't even try to breath for about five seconds. At first, Ed had stood back a little from the bed as if afraid to see his brother too close. It seemed a little odd since he'd been alone in caring for the little fellow for the past six months of sickness, according to Father Francis. After Tommy stopped breathing for those five seconds, Ed pushed forward and fell to his knees at his brother's bedside. Taking the boy's right hand in both of his powerful, calloused hands, he bowed his head and began to pray, "Our Father who art in Heaven..." Father Francis also fell to his knees while Sister Mindy and Brother Tom bowed their heads. A moment of silence followed the Lord's Prayer and then Father Francis rose and patted Ed on the shoulder before leaving and motioning the other two to follow.

"How long?" was the blunt question to fall from the friar's lips.

"Maybe 12 hours. More likely two or three, though it would be a mercy if I had the morphine to ease his pain and..."

"You have no morphine?"

She shook her head. "The government is more willing to consider outright euthanasia than easier rules for painkilling drugs. I could get drugs which would act immediately as poisons, but morphine..."

"There's other sources than those controlled by the government, but..." He sighed. "There is no time to make those sorts of contacts, but if you have the need for such things as morphine, you might be surprised at some of the contacts I have." Turning to Brother Tom, he suggested, "Why don't you head back and get something to eat. Just set something in the oven for me and Ed and we'll eat when he finishes visiting with his brother. I'll try to pry him away for a while and then let him come back to be with Tommy for the end."

Barely had he finished speaking when the door opened. Sister Jennie came in carrying a basket which was steaming from the cold air outside. Connie followed with another basket as well as a large thermos. "We were bringing Sister Mindy's meal over for her, and we figured we might as well bring enough for the other three of you." Turning to Sister Mindy, she said, "I didn't think..." She'd gotten no further when the nurse shook her head. "Well, Connie and I will set up the food on Sister Mindy's writing table. It's a bit small, but it'll do so long as we put some of the platters on the desk or file cabinets."

A few minutes later, Abigail entered after Sister Mindy had gone back into the sickroom with Father Francis. When Sister Jennie questioned her with a look, Abigail, whose eyes had been wandering purposefully around the room, said, "I came over to see if Sister Mindy needed a break."

After casting a warning glance to Connie who was trying to suppress a smile, she said, "I think that either Connie or I could have handled the situation."

"Well, you might need help to..." She gestured weakly toward the food and its dishes but was rescued by the opening of the door to the sickroom. Father

Francis entered, followed by Ed. And a gentle smile appeared on Abigail's face as she checked out this new fellow.

Sister Jennie gave out another warning signal, this time to Brother Tom, who'd noticed a while ago that Abigail acted toward Trey and Pierre as she would toward brothers, though Trey definitely felt something more than sibling affection for her. He'd known he'd eventually have to take on the tougher responsibilities of a surrogate father, but, for now, he was mostly interested in roast pork, fresh bread slathered with butter, and some of those vegetables which his wife assured him were the only proper food of a hardworking man.

As it turned out, they hadn't brought nearly enough food for Ed. The young man might well not have had a good meal for a while, with his efforts to care for his brother and to keep a farm alive, he couldn't have had much time to cook more than the simplest of meals—if he'd eaten much cooked food at all lately. He ate a loaf of bread, with nearly a whole stick of butter; his own portion of roast pork was followed by that of Sister Mindy, who claimed to be nearly a vegetarian, and half of Father Francis's portion; a half field of broccoli and corn and peas disappeared from his plate; and all washed down by great mugs of coffee and herbal teas and a pitcher of cold well water fetched by an Abigail who was clearly fascinated at this young man with a bottomless pit of a stomach. And then it all ended, and Ed looked up with sad, guilt-ridden eyes as if ashamed he could have eaten so much while his brother lay dying in the next room.

It was nearly two hours later that Ed and Father Francis came into the office where Brother Tom and Sister Jennie were talking finances. Ed hung back, his reddened eyes sunken in pits of black. Father Francis merely asked, "Where should I put Ed for the night?"

Sister Jennie thought for only a second before saying to Father Francis, "Your usual room is set up for you, and the room next-door down has fresh linens on the bed if I'm not mistaken. I'll run downstairs with you to make sure."

Suddenly feeling like crying himself, Brother Tom rose and left silently,

heading to the storehouse to see if they had a coffin already made which would be small enough for Tommy. On his way down, he went into the clinic to see if Sister Mindy needed help preparing the body. To his great surprise, he found her sitting on the bench in the office, head bowed and sobbing hard. And then he remembered this would be the seventh child she'd buried in the last 12 months, at least four of whom likely could have been saved with medicines and equipment still available down south. Before sitting down to try to comfort her, he went into the sickroom and found Tommy lying exposed to the world, half-washed. The haircutting implements were on the table next to the bed but hadn't yet been used. She'd always insisted on treating the corpses of all her children with as much respect as was given to the corpses of dignified citizens back in better days. It didn't matter to her if the child had been abandoned, if its body was covered with disgusting sores, or if it was unnamed so far as she knew. She didn't even care if the coffin would be closed even during the visiting hours. And they'd always kept to the tradition of visiting hours along with some sort of funeral service and then another service for the interment.

He returned to Sister Mindy but rather than sitting beside her, he pulled her up and took her over to the closet. As he was putting her coat on her, she started to pull away, protesting, "Tommy needs to be prepared for his last journey." A woman who, for all her physical disabilities, had been known to lift 100 pound children and carry them from examining table to bed, was weak. And she was still sobbing. He pulled the coat over her and said, "I'll take care of Tommy."

"You've got your own..." and she broke down sobbing violently.

After pulling her close and giving her a hug for a good number of seconds, he bent over to look her in the eye. "I'll get some help. There are others here, you know, and we should be willing to ask for help when we get tired." She didn't look convinced but she was too tired to argue, and he guided her out the door and over to the main house where he turned her over to Sister Jennie and went over to the log-cabin where lived Brothers Bruce, Del, and Evan. The first was squeamish and Brother Tom didn't ask him; the second

was busy working on a jingle for lingerie targeted at the young career woman; and Evan was chosen. And came.

## 7 Shopping

Father Francis had chosen to stay at the Community for a few days longer. He said he'd been needing some rest for a while, but he seemed more inclined to spend time comforting Big Ed or counseling Clarissa than resting. Outside of their talks with the priest, Big Ed and Clarissa were both kept busy, without any complaints on their parts. Big Ed, on his own, had wandered into the barn and just started tearing down a tractor that wasn't working too well. So far as anyone could tell, he hadn't started it or seen anyone else bring it to a sputtering start. Brother Bruce claimed the young man had simply looked at the old John Deere and known it was a piece of farm equipment that needed some attention.

Clarissa spent much of her time helping Brother Bruce to organize the community's collections of books and other printed material including manuals for all their computers and appliances and power tools. Sherlock had recovered in an amazingly short time and, in any case, he was not to be kept inside when there were people he hadn't met, and some of those people were doing such interesting things as sawing logs into timber and wiring up the semi-finished section of the young woman's dormitory; the second proved to be the greater attraction to him, apparently because Abigail and Tricia and Rae were going in and out of their quarters throughout the day.

After Mindy had spent a couple days tending herbs alongside Sister Jennie, Father Francis discovered an interest in the drying process for mints and spent some time talking with the still despondent nurse. It seemed impossible to even her strongest admirers that she would ever return to her former strength,

to her former level of energy. Brother Tom heard of fears that she would go to pieces every time a child died in her care, maybe go to pieces over a sick child who would probably return to good health. Then again, he knew that some in the Community didn't have enough to do and were inclined to speculate and gossip, though that wasn't a long-term problem. It was simply that the crops were in, the extended projects to paint and weatherproof the outsides of buildings, to prepare equipment for winter storage, were over. Some of the residents were simply taking a well-deserved break of a few days.

And it was only a couple more days before the community fell into a routine of sorts. Abigail shifted from the clinic to the herbal greenhouse to help Sister Jennie work with the living herbs and fresh vegetables. Sister Mindy had picked up a couple of coworkers, Connie and Rae, and the three of them were working the drying ovens, mincing the dried herbs, and bottling those and the dried tomatoes. Tricia was running errands for Brother Tom and Brother Evan who were working with Trey to set up the lathes for making chair legs even as Pierre was picking out good quality boards to be the tops of heirloom quality tables. Trey had made various objects on lathes in his high school woodworking class up in Toronto, but only piece by piece. Pierre had worked in a furniture factory but only in an apprentice role. Neither of those young men had set up the jigs for semi-automated manufacture. It was turning out to be trickier than anyone had expected, though Tricia didn't seem to be intimidated as she peeked at the plans between the kneeling men. Tricia made a few suggestions about places in the settlement where there were pieces of scrap metal that seemed to her to be suitable for the jigs they were sketching out. Brother Tom smiled in appreciation of her enthusiasm and apparent inclination to mechanical arts and watched as she disappeared only to reappear shortly with a small box of scrap metal and a grin on her face.

As Trey and Pierre were pulling out the pieces of scrap metal and trying to make sense of them as jigs, Tricia turned to Brother Tom and announced, "Sister Jennie said I could go with her and Father Francis and Big Ed. They're going out to the stores."

Brother Tom was quite surprised by the suggestion that they were headed out on a shopping trip in a region notable for stores and houses emptied of food. He knew of those empty shelves and cabinets because he'd helped to carry out the canned peas and the boxes of dried food substances. True it was that there were said to be some stores not too far out; Father Francis said he often stopped at abandoned buildings to pick up his next day's meals, but Brother Tom thought the pickings were slim and he figured there were others looking for food though he'd never seen any on his scrounging trips.

Tricia, who was only twelve after all, was oblivious to his silence and to the questioning expression on his face. It was Evan who said, "There aren't any stores with food anymore."

"Father Francis says he knows some stores not far away that still have stuff in the storerooms even though the shelves are empty."

With that, Brother Tom rose and said, "You two can handle this for now. I'll help you machine the jigs once you figure out the best way to do things." And he walked off, hand resting lightly on the jean-jacketed shoulder of Tricia. He had to smile as he looked down at the bits and hunks of blondish hair sticking out from under her *Red Sox* cap. She was growing into a cute, tomboyish creature of the sort who would feel more comfortable splitting her time between the predominately male work-parties in the woods or in the workshops and the predominately female groups in the kitchens and greenhouses and weaving room. He was starting to feel more confident that they were allowing people the room to grow in a direction compatible with their own inclinations, neither forcing boys and girls into rigid roles once useful to American corporations needing ambitious male workers and product-hungry women in the houses nor into roles more compatible with an accelerated corporate society which wished both men and women to be producing and consuming in similar ways and at a similarly hectic pace. Feeling happy that he was perhaps succeeding in what he had set out to do, or had been forced to set out to do, or... Whatever. Brother Tom was beaming when he reached the small group gathered about Ed's pickup truck.

“What’s up with the shopping trip?”

Sister Jennie gave him a strange look as if wondering what in the world could be on his mind; was she thinking he was getting ready for another attempt at a loving interruption to their busy schedule? After locking his eyes with hers for a few seconds, she wagged her head and passed his attention over to Father Francis who was trying to ignore what was passing between this man and wife. Flustered only slightly, Father Francis said, “Ed stopped off in a grocery store a little less than an hour up the road and was able to find some cans of food in good shape. I knew about it but hadn’t realized how close it was because I traveled from there to here by a roundabout route. Anyway, Ed said there are also some boxes of kitchen utensils and cookware. We’re going to go fetch all the good stuff.”

That there were intact goods in stores wasn’t what surprised Brother Tom. Ed had stopped and eaten at a grocery store a little less than an hour up the road before coming and eating enough food for two or three hardworking men? He was going to have to be a damned good farmer just to support himself. Or a damned good scrounger. Or both.

Shaking off his surprise, Brother Tom said, “We’ll take two trucks. . .” Turning to Ed, he asked, “Is there enough to justify two trucks?” Ed nodded and the sometime leader of the Community turned toward the garage before turning back. “How about a half-ton flat-bed?” Ed nodded, a bit more ambivalently and said, weakly, “Maybe.”

Somehow, but not unexpectedly, those younger in spirit—Father Francis and Tricia—ended up in Ed’s pickup truck while Brother Tom and Sister Jennie were alone together again, though it was to be while driving and not for very long. Not that they were never alone together. Brother Tom knew they were alone together for the six hours that they spent in a near-coma of exhaustion each night. In bed and under the covers at that. “Remember that novel you got me to read just after we met. *The Green Child*. There was a story in it, supposedly mostly true, about Jesuit missionaries in South America who organized the Indians into a community, the community destroyed by the

Portuguese slavetraders in that Robert de Niro movie, I think. Anyway, they found they were working their charges so hard that they were falling asleep as soon as they lay down and not waking up until the roosters crowed. The supply of new babies was really drying up until they started a new ritual. After half the night had passed so that everyone had a chance to sleep off some of their exhaustion, they would ring the bells and the married couples were supposed to wake up and make babies.”

“We’re not in quite that state yet. After all, I might be pregnant, and I didn’t get that way in a dream.”

“No, you couldn’t have been dreaming that night. I could barely keep up with you and only because you slowed down to let me catch up, but...” Glancing over at his wife, Brother Tom saw a knowing expression on her face and he winked though he did have memories of a night he thought to have been the night of conception, but he had his conceits and she... What was she thinking? Maybe she was wondering if he had maneuvered her into the truck with him so he could arrange a roadside stop? But it was pretty cold out there and the cab of the truck would be uncomfortable for much that involved two people moving around. A heavy toolbox sat between them. It could be thrown to the side of the road for a few minutes to be sure, but... Whatever she was thinking, he was sure she had an oversimplified idea of what was going through his mind. That made him feel good. She knew him but not well enough to eliminate all surprises through the next few decades, or however long they both lived. But he knew he had his conceits...

It was about fifty minutes, partly spent driving along the frost-heaved road and partly offroading through fields not yet too overgrown, before they reached a shopping center not much different from dozens in the area. The grocery store didn’t even look particularly promising, though Ed might have been able to detect the presence of food from halfway across the state. Brother Tom chuckled at the thought of all the young man could eat, and, out of the corner of his eye, he could see Sister Jennie throw him another knowing look. Maybe, tonight would be good. Today had been less stressful than usual, no

more than the technical problems of designing jigs for making furniture. He and Trey had moved one small load of firewood from that cut by Brother Bruce and Pierre early that morning, but it had been nothing like the past couple weeks of bringing down trees and trimming them and then moving their trunks; even with the help of the hoists in the heavy flatbeds, that had been muscle-bruising work. Getting away for a while was going to be a help. Yes, maybe tonight would be a good night.

Ed had led the way around the store to its loading docks and had just parked his truck when suddenly he jumped out and up onto the platform. He caught a figure which was moving fast but with a noticeable wiggle: a strong woman with a voluptuous body and strong body. Ed was holding her, barely, when Brother Tom ran up to the struggle, followed by Father Francis and then Sister Jennie. Tricia circled around before climbing up on the platform as if being ready to help Ed in his battle with this creature if it were to escape.

Brother Tom did his best to speak gently, "We intend you no harm," but it didn't sound convincing even to his ears. It was Sister Jennie who pushed by him and put her hand out toward the head of the struggling woman. In doing so, she pushed back the fur-lined hood and, was that creature ever a pretty young woman. Couldn't have been more than fifteen, with the full red lips and roundish, half-face eyes which were said by some Darwinians to be one way in which women, at least young women, trapped both men and themselves in a relationship to the advantage only of selfish genes. Brother Tom shook his head to clear away the nonsense and retreated another step as he saw the young woman relaxing just a bit as she and Sister Jennie took the measure of each other. Stepping to the side, Brother Tom had a good look at both faces. Both women were somewhat round-faced, with high cheekbones and spotlessly clear skin. One young and the other had never let anything unhealthy inside her body or on her skin.

"I'm Sister Jennie."

The face of the very blonde young woman wrinkled a little as she asked, "Sister? Are you a nun?" She looked over at Father Francis who'd unzipped

his jacket, likely hoping the sight of his clerical collar might help the situation. It all made sense to her, but Sister Jennie shook her head and said, "No, we have a community of laymen." Looking briefly to her right to the spot where Father Francis had advanced, she added, "Father Francis is a priest who tries to help abandoned children, and he brings them to live at our community when they have no other place to go."

Ed suddenly gasped and then gave way in a great series of sobs that shook his powerful frame. He let go of the captive and stepped back, the tears streaming down his face. The young woman looked really confused and looked around as if thinking to escape this band of nuts, but Jennie reached out and put her hand upon the woman's arm to reassure her. Father Francis had moved to Ed's side and walked him back past the group and down to the end of the platform where they both turned and rested up against a metal railing.

Jennie explained to the young woman, "Ed was caring for his brother who was dying of cancer. A few days ago, Father Francis brought little Tommy to our clinic, and then Ed showed up that night, just in time to see his brother die." Suddenly, a figure came forward to stand at the side of Sister Jennie and to announce, "I'm Tricia. What's your name?"

"Charlene. Charlene Haines."

In response to Charlene's look, Tricia replied, "I go by Tricia Baker, but that was my mother's name. I don't know what my father's name was."

Charlene seemed to be starting to relax. And then her gaze wandered over to Big Ed, and she kept her eyes upon him. Never one to feel the attractions of Lolita, though this Charlene was one who was fully mature in many ways, Brother Tom felt an ache in his groin at the look in her eyes. It wasn't that it was an undisciplined look, like that of Clarissa; no, it was her eyes, 'bedroom eyes', some would have labeled them. But it wasn't a sexual come-on, not purely anyway, it was more that this was a woman who was almost as purely feminine as any human being could be. She seemed to exhaust feminine vapors through her pores. She was mother to be, the lusted-for wife though she looked as if she might be too strong-willed and too opinionated for most men.

Brother Tom asked himself if his insights would prove to be true, or only illusion. Truth to tell, he was not confident in his judgments of his fellow creatures, and that had been one of his reasons for fearing what had been coming down upon him since Bruce Phillips had talked to him about the rumored founding of a community.

Motioning to Tricia, Brother Tom said, "Let's go check out the insides of this place while all these people chitchat."

With an appealingly childlike expression, she nodded and asked, "Did you bring your iron?"

"My what?"

"Your iron. You know, your gun."

Reluctantly, Brother Tom confessed, "I've got a magnum 38 in my belt." And, he could have added that he could do better than hit the broad side of a barn with it, but just barely. To the displeasure of Sister Jennie, but the surprising approval of Sister Mindy, Brother Bruce had obtained several handguns and a semi-automatic rifle to supplement the varmint guns and shotgun already at the community. Sister Jennie hadn't objected to those more mundane guns, but had protested against the militarization of 'a peaceful group'.

Quickly did Brother Tom pull the flashlight from the huge pocket of his parka and turn toward the backdoor of the store. "Watch for the rats." A shiver went up Brother Tom's back, and probably the backs of all male creatures in hearing range, at the sound of that husky, low, confident, and willful voice. Charlene might truly be a dangerous young woman, but maybe also inspiring. No fear there was in his heart as he passed into the darkness.

He passed the light over the boxes and crates inside. Some had been rummaged through already. Perhaps by Ed, perhaps by Charlene. There was also rodent type damage—chewing and droppings. He was moving slowly between the crates when suddenly an engine hummed to life, and then bright lights came on. It took a few seconds before he could open his eyes without pain, and then he looked toward the sound of the laughter. It was a laughter without malice of any sort, though he suspected he was the butt of the joke.

It was Charlene standing by a bank of switches and circuit body. Sister Jennie stood by her, smiling.

"The generator still works, and I put in some gasoline the other day."

The only possible response was, "Will you be coming back to join us in our community?"

"Is the big guy going to be staying with you?"

"Don't know yet, but it looks like he will. Don't know for sure what he thinks of us, but he seems to be attracted to our farm equipment."

She laughed and, surprised by his own deviousness, he added, "And he'll fit in with the other single men at the Community."

Charlene looked back in the direction of Ed and Father Francis as if she could see through the metal walls. Slowly she passed her eyes over Brother Tom again, asking, "You the leader of the group?"

"Sort of. Mostly because I owned the house where we started out."

Her eyes narrowed for the first time, and she said, "There's more to you than that. At least the others in this group seem to think there is. You're the one they consider their leader."

In a lame voice, he joked, "That's just because I'm a convenient person to blame when things go wrong."

Charlene's eyes had passed on to Tricia and then she looked toward Sister Jennie. The young woman and the woman not nearly old locked gazes for a long few seconds, and then Charlene announced, "I'll give it a try. Is my little brother welcome?"



## 8 Charlene and Anthony

After filling the back of the half-ton flatbed truck with crates of foods and kitchen supplies, the group was set to return to the Community when a teenaged boy, perhaps thirteen or fourteen, suddenly appeared in the parking lot. He walked right up as if it were an everyday occurrence to run into groups of strangers in this largely vacated region of New England, and then he walked up to Charlene and stood beside her in such a way that he kept everyone else in sight. “You sure we can trust these people, Sis?” She just nodded. He asked, “You letting them take this stuff?” and she nodded again before saying, “We’re going to join them where they live.” He pondered that for a few seconds and apparently decided he could trust his sister’s judgment. He turned to the group and selected Brother Tom as the one he should speak to. Looking the leader right in the eyes, he asked, “Anything else you need?”

“A couple chainsaws, some winter coats, and maybe a table-saw or two.”

“I can lead you to chainsaws. There’s a garage down the street that used to be a landscaping business, and there’s still all sorts of gardening equipment there. Coats? Yeah, there’s a store with a lot of women’s clothes not far from here and a garage at a private house that’s filled with boxes of used clothes of all sorts. Some boxes were chewed open and the insides used as nests, but there’s probably a lot of stuff that’s still good. And I know a couple houses where the people abandoned some pretty good tools, mostly portable stuff. Good chop-saws and radial-saws and drills and things like that.”

Anthony was his name and he was truly the brother of Charlene, just as confident as she, to the point of being cocky. He led them for another two

hours of highly productive scrounging. He claimed to know of many more good stocks of abandoned goods, but the trucks were both overloaded with valuable tools and foods and clothes. All three trucks, that is, since Charlene and Anthony had their own long-bed pickup truck, jacked-up and overpowered and generally equipped for movement over the roughest territory. Their uncle, an auto mechanic, had customized the truck after the winters had started to worsen. And, then, they and their father had moved in with their uncle and aunt figuring they had a better chance of prospering in a slightly larger group. Their father and their uncle had died in the five years since the households were combined and their aunt had gone to Mississippi with a daughter and son-in-law.

Before leaving, the entire caravan drove over to the house of Charlene and Anthony so that brother and sister could pick up some of their personal goods, leaving a lot behind locked doors to be picked up later. As they pulled up, Charlene turned to Brother Tom and asked, "Would you like a tour?" Guilty about taking off too much time, he was about to refuse the invitation when she added, "Dad and Uncle Jimmie did a lot of neat things to make the house warmer and more efficient. You might be able to get some ideas." He was still inclined to refuse since they'd already made plans to come up on another scrounging trip—the house could be viewed at that time, but Anthony had walked from his truck over to Ed's truck and apparently extended the same invitation. Ed and Father Francis were at the front door with Anthony before Brother Tom could object.

With a sigh, he said, "Might as well."

With a smile and a nonchalant, "You should get more sleep, mister," Charlene opened the door and jumped from the flatbed. He couldn't help wondering if Big Ed had caught that sight from the front, and then wondered if that had been the purpose of her maneuver. The young woman wasn't shy about her large breasts or her pretty face, especially those damned seductive eyes—were they blue or green?, and she also wasn't bothering to hide her interest in Ed, though she hadn't really said anything more than, "Hello, Ed," shocking him

that a stranger could know his name. The innocent lad was likely in for some more surprises, mostly pleasant with any luck, at the hands of this teenaged woman three or four years his junior.

As they walked toward the bungalow sheathed in cement blocks and cement, stucco and mortar mix—with a little metal and plastic thrown in, Sister Jennie took her husband's hand and the two of them walked as if they'd shed their heavy responsibilities. Brother Tom could barely remember the last time they'd been clear of the settlement without a rigid schedule of tasks to perform before returning to play mother and father to a motley crew of children and adults.

The outer door had been left open by the first small tour party; entering after his wife, Brother Tom found himself in a small room similar to the lock in a submarine. Or at least, similar to what he imagined the lock in a submarine to be like, based on movies and television and other gossipy, unreliable sources. It was a little stuffy, but he couldn't say he minded being squeezed into such a small space with two attractive women, even if one was in her teens. He didn't even mind too much as Charlene butted him in the ribs as she turned the wheel on the door. "Would this be easier if I stepped outside for a minute?"

"It wouldn't let you open the door." She pointed to one of those biometric plates, this one taking the palm of the hand, though he was pretty sure the retina of the eye was considered generally safer. Not that anything could keep out an intelligent and determined man: "Anything one man can do, another man is smart enough to undo."

"Huh?"

"That was something Harry Houdini once said."

Charlene looked back at him just as the inner door popped open, and Brother Tom was guessing she had no idea who Houdini was. And then the three of them sort of tumbled into a...

Cubbyhole?

It was Sister Jennie who cleared her throat and asked, "You like living in small spaces?"

Charlene shrugged and said, "Most of the rooms in the house are a little bigger than this. Our bedrooms are nearly eight by eight and the living room is 12 by 15. That's pretty normal for houses around her."

There were no doors separating that entry-room from the next room, a small kitchen where a coffeepot had been set to brew. Charlene took off her outer jacket and threw it over a chair. Brother Tom had to keep himself from staring at the most magnificent fifteen year-old body he'd ever seen. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Sister Jennie also cast an admiring eye over this creature both blessed and cursed by a body which would have put her in even more danger than most women in this depopulated land. Then again, Charlene seemed capable of taking care of herself. Then again once more, she'd let herself be caught by Ed before she knew if she could trust him or the others in his party.

"I have to say that you are a remarkably lovely young woman." Well, Sister Jennie had let it out, and somehow that seemed to drain away some of the tension, at least from Brother Tom's perspective. Now he could admire a gorgeous creature without sneaky or lecherous twists of his eyes. He nodded and added, "You also seem capable of prospering under difficult circumstances."

Charlene had beamed at Sister Jennie's comment, but had tossed off Brother Tom's compliment with a brusque, "Dad and Uncle Jimmie did good work in setting this place up and telling me and Anthony how to get things done."

It was probably her composure that drove Brother Tom to comment, "Big Ed is also quite competent for being so young."

And that did it. She blushed and stammered once before asking, "People call him 'Big Ed'?"

"Sometimes."

And they passed on to meet the other three in normal sized room which had a large wall-unit with a television, a DVD player, a VCR player, an old audio CD player, and various electronic game systems.

"This will have to stop." Once more Brother Tom's mouth had worked before he'd had a chance to check the words. This time it brought the conver-

sation to a halt, but Anthony merely shrugged and said, “I hope I don’t get like that when I get old.”

Before Brother Tom could figure out how to react, but after Ed and Father Francis had shown confusion on their faces, Charlene poked Brother Tom in his still sore ribs and said, “He means me too, but I’m always bugging Anthony for wasting his time on that game junk.”

“Only because you want to watch all those old-timer, Tom Cruise movies.”

“You’ve packed extra insulation against the walls and built new inner walls inside the insulation?” It was Ed who’d spoken just before he went over to inspect the windows. The metal shutters were closed outside, so it was hard to see just what had been done to modify them, but it looked as if the original windows had been replaced by some sort of thick glass with metal grids inset. The inner walls looked somewhat normal, though it wasn’t clear what purpose they served. Just to make the room look somewhat normal? In a detached voice, he added, “You went overboard. I got a warm house with a lot less effort and a lot less material.”

Sister Jennie looked amused as she broke the silence by noting, “It’s a bit stuffy in here.”

Charlene pointed to some vents just above the baseboard. “We don’t run the ventilation system when we’re not here. It would be a waste of energy.”



## 9 A Call for Help

A couple months later, a cold autumn had turned into a bitterly cold winter, though without snow as of the middle of December. Things had been moving along well, the new members of the community settling in and trying to take on more than their share of the workload. Scavenging parties had been going out regularly and several 200 gallon tanks were filled with gasoline, a couple of 500 gallon tanks with diesel, and a 4x4 square of 500 gallon tanks with heating oil. Parts of each building had been turned into storage rooms to hold all the canned goods, bags of rice, and other miscellaneous supplies gathered from the abandoned stores and warehouses in the area. There were plans to enter some of the private homes, carefully and with respect for the property, after making sure they were abandoned. Why let food or other supplies go to waste when there were so many mouths to be fed and more would be coming in soon by way of Father Francis?

One day, after an especially boring period, Pierre summoned Brother Bruce to listen to a call he'd recorded from a radio transmission. And Brother Bruce fetched Brother Tom who could make only imperfect sense of the words of the girlish voice which said, "My Grandpa is dead and so is Mr Rose. Now the others might die as well." And she repeated the message before she cried a little and then said something about it all being her fault because she invited too many people to live with her dying Grandpa.

Without looking up from the radio's instrument panel, Pierre said, "There's more which is easier to understand. She said she's near Route 9 and gave a street name and a house number. It's pretty close to Belchertown according

to a map on the Internet.”

Brother Tom asked Pierre, “Did you talk to her?”

“Yes. She said she couldn’t stay on because the others needed her.”

“Any way you can get back in contact with her?”

“Got her call sign, but she won’t be near the radio set for another twenty minutes or so. Said she’s checking every 30 minutes.”

“Start calling her on the radio in one of the pickup trucks and have someone fetch Tricia or Charlene to talk to her and try to keep her calm and get as much information as possible. The more we know, the better prepared we can be.” As Pierre was already in the hallway and headed for the door, he shouted out, “And start loading food and medical supplies on a truck,” and then caught himself and added, “You’ve got enough to do. I’ll get some of the other young men to load up the trucks.”

Brother Tom listened quickly to the entire short recording, the girl’s message and ensuing conversation between her and Pierre and learned her name was Janice. Then he headed out to see that everyone was already at work preparing for a rescue mission. So it was that he stood and watched while trying hard to look as if he were in control of all this hectic activity. He was learning much in all this that was supposedly under his direction. Sister Mindy had boxed up cleaning agents and medicines and Abigail was carrying them out with the help of Clarissa and Charlene. Trey and Big Ed and Anthony had soon fetched a good ten boxes of food and blankets out of the warehouse and loaded them onto a flatbed along with some split and dried wood. Sister Jennie came over from the greenhouse with Connie, both prepared to go along with her to help Sister Mindy care for people who were apparently on the verge of death from some illness. Helga and Beret walked by, looking wistfully at the activity, but told Brother Tom they would be taking care of the clinic while Sister Mindy was gone. And the man in charge wondered if he’d have thought of all that was being loaded on the trucks; he was pretty sure it wasn’t all necessary.

And never did Brother Tom stop marveling at this community which had

developed independently of his efforts, sometimes in opposition to his desires, and, in fact, without much in the way of explicit organization by any person or group of people. Oh sure, he mostly organized the large project teams and appointed team leaders. Sister Jennie ran the greenhouses and the community kitchen and assigned leaders of the teams which did the routine cleaning and maintenance tasks. Sister Mindy oversaw all matters of medicine and sanitation. Brother Bruce handled all the technological issues and had also organized a school—which was largely developing in a free-form manner not quite acceptable to him with his public school training. There were others who had become experts in farming; though barely able to move around on his two canes, Al was still overseeing construction and maintenance of the buildings and had also become a gentle grandfather of sorts to the young people running the small furniture factory, to the amusement of Evan who was sort of in charge of that factory. There were others who'd handled smaller, but still important tasks of organization, but, on the whole, things had just moved on their own, or rather they'd moved in a certain direction as if powered by all the interactions of moral citizens who were working with moral purpose, though Brother Tom didn't think there was any meaningful sense in which it could be said that there was much in the way of goals at a Community level. He'd set out on his current path to allow himself and others to form a community which would allow people to live for goals other than the mercenary exchange of goods and services, but that wasn't a goal so much as it was a rejection of goals which had led to a morally incoherent country.

“Brother Tom!” He turned to see Mindy moving rapidly toward him though he still couldn’t figure out how she could even see him well enough to move in his direction. Her neck and upper back were more and more bent over with each passing year. “Since we don’t know what we are up against, we should set strict rules of quarantine. Those of us who go down should be under that same quarantine. We can set up a transfer site for you to bring down more supplies, but the two of us should go into the house alone to check things out.”

“Two?” Brother Tom was smiling as he asked, “You and Charlene?” It was

unspoken that Sister Jennie not be allowed in the house of sick people, though she'd always miscarried early and it seemed the embryo was implanted quite successfully in her womb, but no sense taking a chance. And he realized of a sudden he shouldn't even allow her to go with the party.

Sister Mindy didn't seem to be smiling, though it was hard to tell since he was looking at the top of her head, as she replied, "Of course not! She's only fifteen."

"Don't tell her that, and I wish you good luck in keeping her out. She does a woman's work and takes on a woman's responsibilities to the extent we let her get away with it and she's as pigheaded as anyone in the Community."

"It's true that she's my best and hardest-working aide in the clinic, but she has one foot in the adult world and one foot in the world of children. She belongs in school and she should be out socializing with the other young adults more often."

"I don't know about that. I remember reading that, before the modern era, there were many twelve and thirteen year-olds who were high-achievers, even some young kings who fought for and gained the respect of their warlords. It might be that the modern world is prejudiced against youth just as much as against the elderly."

Sister Mindy grew silent as if not knowing what to say. She was often willing to listen to Brother Tom's criticisms of modern society, but he suspected that she was currently concentrating on the problems of that household of sick people in Amherst; it was likely she was unwilling, or even unable, to think about anything else with any clarity. He away toward the parking lot to see that the teenaged men had finished loading the supplies. Brother Bruce was going around congratulating them on a job well-done, to both their pleasure and their amusement.

Brother Tom called out, "It looks like we're ready to move out. I'll set out in one of the jeeps with Trey and Pierre, who know the area better than anyone else, and the trucks will follow us." As he walked toward the jeep, already gassed-up and loaded with emergency food and medical supplies, Brother Tom

motioned to Pierre with his head. The young man headed over, calling to the unseen Trey to follow him. Trey emerged from behind the half-ton but walked over to the pickup truck instead, where he helped Connie and Abigail get up and into the cab of that vehicle; Brother Evan climbed into the driver's seat. Sister Mindy walked over to the half-ton to be driven by Brother Bruce, but Sister Jennie walked over to the Jeep instead. Brother Tom sighed and walked over to ask her first, hoping she wouldn't force him to give her an outright order for the first time.

"We need someone to stay here to take charge." Sister Jennie looked to him as if to wonder that he would've dared to speak such words to her, and then he took the bull by the horns and said, "And you're the logical choice since you're one of the leaders and shouldn't be going into a sickhouse if we don't even know what they have."

Her eyes lit up for a moment and he moved his right hand forward to brush her bulging belly and she took a breath in sharply before looking away. She looked back at him and said, "To tell you the truth, it might say something bad about me, but I'm suddenly less afraid the baby would die than I am that she'd be born with severe problems." And she turned away without another word and Brother Tom decided it was wise to leave things as they were. She had grown very touchy the past month or so, perhaps because she'd miscarried at least three times in her life. And then, he had more to shrug about when he noticed Anthony had pulled into the small convoy in his pickup truck, but he smiled and waved back at Charlene in the passenger seat.

Muttering to himself, "We're taking a bloated army down, but maybe it's for the best." And, then again, as he drove off, he thought he should have put his foot down. Probably no more than half these people should be going. Especially if it turned out to be some sort of highly infectious agent. Or a trap.

The short column set out with the trucks giving the Jeep a good 30 yard lead so it could find the best possible path. Some of the roads in the area were still passable for all the frost-heaves and lack of maintenance. There were also

a lot of roadside fields, though some of them had been filled with alpine types of shrubs and brush, including even trees growing in tangled messes close to the ground.

# Part II

## Janice Davis



## 10 A Sun-loving Mama

Janice's memories of Tomas were shadowy. She'd been three when Tomas had lived with her and Mama and not quite five when he left. He'd seemed awfully big to her. And dark, of skin and hair. He spoke in a pretty and rhythmic way, but even when Tomas spoke English, she had to really pay attention to the sounds and to his lips to understand what he was saying. Yet, she had warm memories of the times he would talk to her in sounds she understood not. He would laugh as he spoke and would show her pictures of some place with lots of white sand beaches and a really big sun in the sky, a lot bigger than the sun that shone over Athol, which was the only place Janice knew. He was nice though he once gave her something that looked like a pie from MacDonald's, but it burned her mouth and tasted terrible to her.

She remembered that Tomas had a big, musical voice, a big laugh, and he filled up an entire park with sound when he sang one of his songs that Janice didn't understand. He was a lot of fun because he was always having fun himself, often dancing through the house, through the yard, or across the street, even when there was no music that she could hear. But Tomas always seemed to be hearing music and maybe that was why his voice was always music whether he spoke or sang. She had wondered for a while if he was always hearing the voice of that large sun which hung in the sky in those pictures. She had begun to suspect those were pictures of Tomas' home.

It was during that dimly seen brightness in Janice's memory that she first heard talk about her Daddy who had died before she was born. Her Mama never spoke about him, except every once in a while when she dressed Janice

up in a new dress and then she would step back and say, "If only your Daddy could see what a pretty girl you are."

When Janice told her grandfather about that, his face had darkened and he had said, "I'm sure he can see you. He was a good boy even if he did get mixed up with the wrong kind of women." That was also the first time she could remember sleeping over at Grandpa's house, Easter when she was only five.

Tomas had been gone since it had gotten cold, and Mama had started paying more attention to Janice though she seemed awfully sad for some reason. She had promised to take Janice out trick-or-treating in the neighborhood. Mrs Polanski had already told her she had a special tray of homemade chocolate candies for her favorite monsters and ghosts and princesses. There was another old lady down the street who always acted like Janice was her own granddaughter though she called her 'Sally', which was all right because Janice could never remember the lady's name. She was confused a lot and maybe that was why she was friends with Mrs Polanski who never seemed to be confused; she always knew what to do or say to make people feel good.

Mama had gone out to get a costume for Janice but she came home with a man who was tall and had a funny mustache. It was kind of real skinny, just like the man himself, and looked like it'd been drawn on his upper lip by one of Mama's eyebrow pencils. Mama stopped in front of Janice as she sat in her Tigger beanbag chair in front of the TV watching cartoons. She stooped down with a sad face and gave Janice a little hug before she said, "Look, Honey, I know I was supposed to take you out trick-or-treating but something's come up. I'll make it up tomorrow, Saturday. Mama doesn't have to go to work and we'll go out shopping and go to MacDonald's for lunch and then we'll go out for an ice-cream sundae afterwards." Mama rose and took the man's hand and started leading him away when she turned around and said, "Honey, this is Eugene, a real good friend of mine." Eugene kind of shuffled his feet and looked away though he'd said, "Hi, Janice."

Mama and Eugene had gone into her mother's bedroom with some boxes

and a shopping bag and, a while later, Captain Hook had come out chasing Peter Pan, though Peter Pan looked and ran more like a girl than like a boy. It was Mama. Mama was a real girl, with big hips and large breasts and lots of makeup. So she ran funny and never had never even liked to play kickball with Janice and Tomas in the backyard.

Janice stayed on her chair in front of the TV and watched as Captain Hook chased Mama dressed as Peter Pan around the room three times before she ran out the front door and he followed. Janice shifted her eyes back to the cartoon where some monster was turning itself into a flame-throwing tank; she felt herself draw back but not too bad—she had learned to have fun watching these cartoons. And she couldn't pay too much attention for a while because Peter Pan came running back into the room before the flame-throwing tank had finished destroying the monster that looked like one of those plows that pushed snow around during bad storms.

Janice knew Peter Pan was really Mama, but she tried to imagine a better world in which Peter Pan was real and Mama was more like that old lady who couldn't remember the names of little children though she was awfully nice to them.

Janice was starting to get a real bad feeling and it didn't get any better when Peter Pan stooped in front of her, kissed her, and said, "Mama's gonna be gone for a while. There's some baloney in the fridge and some peanut butter and jelly and the bag on the counter has some of those chocolate chip cookies you like so much. It'll be a real treat. Eat as many of them as you like, so long as you don't get sick. After all, its Halloween."

And then she was gone and Janice was alone as the flame-throwing tank turned back into a monster that looked kind of like a dinosaur but he wasn't as friendly as the dinosaurs in most of the cartoons. She sat there as the monster started fighting another monster that was bluish and shiny like all the robots on TV. She grew more scared and wished she could turn the TV off, but she couldn't move and had to watch as one monster shot flames from his mouth and tried to burn up the other and the other one grew an arm like a

rope but it had pincers on the end and it tried to rip pieces out of the first monster. Janice was happy when the fight was interrupted by a commercial. It was an advertisement for Baby-real, the baby that moved like a real baby and drank from her personal bottle and her diapers needed to be changed after she drank. As she watched and hoped Mama would get her one for Christmas, Janice forgot to turn off the TV and she was trapped when the monsters came back on the screen and the fight went on until the flame-throwing monster won. She was kind of happy because she thought that was the good monster, but it was kind of confusing because even the good monsters did horrible things and liked to fight and kill things.

She was real happy when the show ended and she was able to jump up from her chair and shut off the TV. But then she realized it had gotten dark outside and Mama had forgotten to turn on the lights in the kitchen and hallway. In fact, there was only one light on, just at the door, not enough to light the whole hallway. It barely cast a small light into the kitchen and the only light in the living-room was from the neighbor's driveway light. As quick as she had jumped up to shut off the TV, Janice jumped up and turned it back on. She picked up the remote control and just started to press buttons until she found something nonthreatening, just a bunch of grownups talking behind a desk. They were joking and laughing. Janice didn't understand the joke about troffs and riches or something like that, but so long as there were no monsters, she would be all right. Monsters were okay as long as there were adults around. Sometimes anyway. And some adults, especially Grandpa, who was so calm and warm and smelled so nice of sawdust and paint and other good stuff all the time wouldn't put on the TV very often and didn't put on any cartoons with monsters though once they'd watched that movie together about the big monkey who'd climbed on top of a real tall building. That had been fun as much as scary with the two of them sitting on the couch with a bowl of popcorn between them. Every so often, she'd gone over and sat in Grandpa's lap until the next commercial came on and they went into the kitchen to get another soda or some more popcorn and they sang *Pop Goes the Weasel* or *Old*

*MacDonald* or one of those other songs Grandpa loved so much. Singing with Grandpa was even better than watching TV with Grandpa.

Now, what was she to do? She was stuck in front of the TV with the house mostly dark and no one around. If only Mama had taken her down to Grandpa's house like she sometimes did when she went off somewhere. It was a nice house. A farm house that Grandpa had bought after Grandma had died and after he'd stopped working in Springfield. He had apple trees and concord grape vines. Janice had helped to make applesauce and also grape juice and grape jam. Before Sparky had died, she'd helped to groom him and once she'd even helped to put fresh sawdust in his stable. Too soon, those memories faded and the dark present reality came back.

And the dark present reality included a building that was being knocked about. It was like one of those laundromats she went to with Mama, and its sign was torn out of the ground as Janice watched and then the camera moved and showed a big wave of water coming right across the street. It knocked down a couple houses and then a large building that looked like a store. And there were sparks coming from the lines over the street and then the traffic light got ripped away and smashed against a tree before falling in the water and sending up more sparks. And then a person came over to the edge of the roof of another building and then the wave hit that building and it collapsed under the person. Janice could see the man waving his arms as he went down into the water.

Then he was gone under the wave and when it had mostly passed over, there was some junk sticking up over the water but there was no man. Janice felt empty. And she watched for some time as a couple more buildings went down and then the nice people were talking again behind their desk. They weren't smiling now. They looked sad and suddenly a woman in a yellow rainsuit was talking as the wind and rain pushed her around. And Janice still watched, unable to move her eyes away though she feared she would be watching as another wave knocked this woman down and took her away. But it didn't and then the people behind the desk were talking again

about Camilla and Frederick and some new person with a name she couldn't pronounce in her head. Janice felt relief that they were talking about people and not about monsters or storms, though she was afraid they were talking about the people who'd been killed by the storm.

And then the doorbell rang. A fresh fear came to mind. Mama was supposed to have brought home a bag of candy to give to the trick-or-treaters. There was no candy in the house to give anyone who came to the door. Maybe that was all right because Janice looked over to the door, and though there was a light right at the door, there was a pretty deep shadow near the recliner and another tricky one—multiple shadows overlapping—near the doorway from the living-room to the end of the hallway.

And then Janice heard a weak voice calling in from the doorway, "Sally? Are you all right in there?" And then the doorknob turned and the door opened. Mama had forgotten to lock it on her way out! Janice was about to scream when the old lady from down the street poked her head in and called again, "Sally? Are you here?" That was all Janice needed. She jumped up from her chair and ran into the woman's arms, almost knocking her down. The words came bubbling out of her mouth, "Mama forgot to turn on the lights and I was stuck in front of the TV and I can't even go trick-or-treating cuz I don't have a costume."

Even if Janice couldn't remember the lady's name, she was still nice and warm and she pressed Janice's face into her aged bosom, rubbing her back between the shoulder blades at the same time. And then she heard, "I'm going across the street to visit Mrs Polanski. She has some hot chocolate on the stove and some fudge brownies in the oven. Why don't we head over there and get some before all the trolls and goblins finish them."

After leaving a note and grabbing a warm jacket for Janice, the two of them grabbed the spare house-key from the utility room and locked the house behind them. Janice didn't even mind a bit that she became 'Sally' for the rest of the night. Mrs Polanski even called her 'Sally' though she laughed as she did so.

As luck would have it, Halloween the next year started out as if it were going to be a disaster as well. Mama had gotten interested in business after deciding she wanted a nicer house and nicer clothes. “For you as well as for me,” she’d reassured Janice. Not that Janice needed nicer clothes. Sometimes Mama had run short of money, but Grandpa told her he had a savings account and also something called a pension which Janice figured to be like an allowance and she figured it was a good one because he could order pizza or go to the movies whenever he wanted to, or at least whenever Janice was visiting. He was always buying clothes for Janice or lending money to Mama, though that wasn’t always pleasant. Once she’d heard Mama say, “I know you hate me for being poor and you only do this for Janice.” Grandpa had an edge in his voice when he replied, “I don’t blame you for having financial problems as a single mother. There are other reasons why I don’t like the way you’re raising the poor girl.”

But Mama didn’t borrow money from Grandpa that Halloween when Janice was six. She’d not had to borrow money from Grandpa since she’d met Carl. She’d even paid all her bills on time so that they didn’t get all those phone-calls in the evening that had always upset Mama so.

Carl always had plenty of money, even more than Grandpa. So far as Janice could figure it, Carl’s Daddy had died and had given him a really big savings account. Now Carl made more money by buying land and buildings and making other people pay a lot more for them. It didn’t make a lot of sense to her but it was grownup business so Janice didn’t worry too much about it, though she was more confused than ever about what happened when someone died.

She wasn’t even sure where Santa Monica was, but that was where Mama and Carl were going to look at some business deals. “Some really hot deals” is what Mama had said to Mrs Polanski and then again to Grandpa though she had a sneer in her voice that second time. It sounded like she was making fun of Grandpa.

Grandpa had opened the door for Janice to walk in with her backpack. He

told her, "The puppy's closed up in the kitchen, Sweetheart. Go in and talk to him before he dies of loneliness. He's been alone for nearly five minutes now." Janice laughed because she knew the tone of voice Grandpa used when he was joking, though she didn't quite understand what he had said. It would be horrible if a puppy could really die of loneliness just from being alone for five minutes but Janice didn't think it could happen. She'd gotten pretty lonely herself and had never felt she was about to die though she had sometimes sort of wanted to die. But she wasn't really sure it felt any better to die. And she was a little afraid she'd die and become a monster the way it happened in some of those movies Mama watched with Carl. Maybe it would have been okay to die if she'd had a savings account to give to Mama.

Anyway, Grandpa's joking ended and she heard Mama and Grandpa whispering in harsh voices as soon as she started to walk down the hallway. She turned left into the living-room just as Grandpa could be heard saying, "After what you did to Billy..." Some words followed that seemed gibberish to her and then she heard a laugh come out of Mama that sent icy fingers into her chest. "It was an accident in Texas while he was training for the goddamned paratroopers. You were the one who was so proud of your time in the Army and he had to make you proud by going off to get himself killed." With that, Janice scurried through the living-room toward the kitchen. Tears were coming down her face, though she wasn't quite sure why.

She knew that Mama didn't really like her that much and it hurt her to think that Mama hadn't liked her Daddy either. Maybe that was why she didn't like Janice so much. Not that Janice had much reason to complain. Mama often sat brushing Janice's hair and singing to her, so long as she wasn't meeting a man somewhere, or going off with a man on some sort of vacation or business trip, like the one with Carl. "There are golden opportunities out there, in Santa Monica," was what Mama had said the night before when she had told Janice she'd be staying with Grandpa for a month or so. For once she didn't want to stay with him, she wanted to go out with Mama and see what it was like where people weren't just prigs bundled up in too many clothes

to protect them from too much cold. Janice didn't really know what a prig was, though it struck her as a kind of nasty word, at least it sounded nasty, just like those other words she wasn't supposed to say, at least not in front of grownups.

It wasn't exactly a punishment to stay with Grandpa, not like being locked up in her room all weekend that time she'd cried when that really big man had come over. She hadn't meant to cause any trouble but she'd been in pain with those teeth cutting their way through her gums.

Janice found the puppy in an enclosed area in the back of the kitchen near the entrance from the mudroom. It was bigger than she'd expected. Instead of a hand-sized puppy, it was as much as she could have held if she'd been sitting down and it was trying hard to find a way out of the enclosure in which it had found itself. The enclosure was no more than wood and plastic screens like they used in playpens. Janice undid one of the straps holding together a corner and released the creature only to have it bound out so rapidly and so powerfully as to send her flying backwards a few feet before she went down on her bottom. Continuing to slide, she ended up with her back against one of the cabinets under the sink, but she wasn't much concerned with her own predicament because the puppy had taken off around the house at full speed. He came around back into the kitchen before she had time to get back on her feet. Seeing a helpless creature, he came over and licked her face a few times. And then he was off again, to the sounds of giggles.

A few laps later, the puppy kind of settled down in front of her, but with an air of waiting; she sensed he was expecting her to start something that would be fun for both of them. She was willing but couldn't really think of much. Usually, at this time of the morning, she would either be watching her cartoons or out running errands with Mama, depending on Mama's schedule and mood. Mama had been in a better mood since she'd met Carl, and she wasn't working at the drugstore on weekends and nights any more; she only worked at Carl's real estate and insurance agency. Janice's mind raced over all the possibilities. She could sing and dance like they did on *Sesame Street*

whenever they didn't have anything else to do, but she always felt funny when she did that by herself. She could pretend to be flying around with Tinkerbell or with Mary Poppins but that worked better at school when she flew around the playground with Denise and Emma. Besides, she liked it better when she was pretending to be a Mommy taking care of her children. She liked being a Mommy who didn't work so she always was around to give her children lunch or take them to the park.

Janice wasn't able to think of much to do and so she headed in to the living-room and grabbed the remote-control of the TV from the table next to Grandpa's old, green chair. She sat on the floor halfway between the chair and the television set and turned it on. There was nothing on but one of the cartoons about people turning into other things. There was a girl who turned into a furry person with large claws and she was really strong and could jump real high. And there was the man who became all rubbery so that he could stretch himself up and rescue a kitten from the top of a tall tree. Another man set himself on fire by thinking about it and then he could set anything else on fire as well. It wasn't her favorite TV show but it didn't scare her anymore like it used to. At least it didn't scare her all the time and not as much as when she was real young. Sometimes she even liked it though usually it wasn't about rescuing kittens from high up in trees. Usually there were monsters or bad guys who were hurting people or stomping on houses that had babies and puppies in them. So the good guys had to go out and fight them. Even though some of the good guys looked like monsters also.

The puppy tugged on Janice a few times, hurting her hand with his sharp little teeth though she thought he was trying to be gentle; then he pulled on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. After she pushed him away a few times, he gave up trying to get her up to play and he settled down next to her, whimpering a few times after he'd curled up and laid his head down on his own front paws. A new show came on but the shapes continued to change on the television screen as the people changed to tractors or to monsters or to robots, the monsters changed to spaceships or submarines, the scenery changed from a

big city to outer space to the bottom of the ocean. Colors came and went, sometimes merging into one another as shapes were changed, leading Janice to think maybe everything was but a dream of color and all things, all toys and cars and clothes, were nothing but what was on the outside. Barbie could be changed into a soldier by putting on a uniform like the ones that her Daddy and her Grandpa had worn. She could become an astronaut but putting her in a spacesuit. Maybe Mama would love Janice more if Mama would put on one of those dresses Mrs Polanski called a house dress?

"What are you doing in front of the TV, young lady?" Grandpa's voice was gruff, but, when she looked up at him, he looked more confused than angry. "You were never the type to just sit still on a nice day like this. Especially with a puppy next to you, a pup with more energy than any creature has a right to have."

Both gladly and reluctantly did Janice tear her eyes from the fire-breathing robot that was stepping on a bus in the middle of a city street. She knew it was just a cartoon and it looked as if all the people got out first, but...

As soon as Janice looked up, no more than a fraction of a second after her eyes met those of her grandfather, he hauled her up with a movement so energetic that she felt as if she would go flying past him and out the window at the other side of the room, unless she were to hit the ceiling, but, of course, she never left his firm and gentle grasp, though she started giggling and wiggling as if wishing to escape, as if fighting against the movement toward the door. The puppy was yipping and yapping as he followed them out the door and into the backyard and...

It was snowing! Grandpa held Janice close as they both stared up in wonder at the tiny flakes coming down from the sky. The sidewalk and walking stones were wet though there was no snow accumulating on the ground, not even on the bushes or grass. Of a sudden, the most wonderful burbling sort of laugh came rumbling out of Grandpa's stomach, shaking his chest and then even his shoulders. "And I thought you might have a tough Halloween. Look at this. The most wonderful sort of surprise. A Halloween snowfall." He moved away

from the house, passing near the small apple and peach trees before setting Janice down on the grass. By that time, the puppy had discovered what a game it was to chase these little white things around as they fell from the sky and occasionally swirled about before falling on the ground or on his tongue nearly as outsized as his paws.

After a hesitation of no more than a second or two, Janice shook off whatever it was that had dulled her responses; she ran around after the puppy, not so much joining in his games but rather making sure to have the best possible view of all that he did. Run about puppy did, follow Janice did, all accompanied by bursts of the burbling laugh from Grandpa now puffing away at a brown wood pipe that looked to have even more years than its owner.

And then puppy slipped on the wet grass now showing spots of white. Janice tripped over him and the puppy rose and ran over to gently pounce on her and lick her face. There was a little more than a pile of laughing limbs and one long, red tongue licking snow and dirt and the face of a little girl, pretty much at random; there was no sign the puppy was concerned about what he was licking, it was sufficient to be licking. Janice was still laughing and rolling about on the pleasantly cold ground when she felt herself being lifted up.

"We need a little quiet time, young ones. It's about time to name this little fellow."

Grandpa set Janice down slowly and carefully, not as if he were afraid to hurt such a rugged little girl. No, a ritual was beginning. Something important was about to happen: the giving of a name. Hand-in-hand, Janice and Grandpa walked around the house and up the stairs to the porch. Without one needing to lead the other, they walked to the west side of that wraparound porch and sat on the redwood swing hanging from the ceiling. Sensing something important was about to occur, maybe even sensing it had much to do with him, the puppy followed quietly, with as much dignity as such a creature can muster.

After they had sat quietly looking out on the snowfall for several minutes, Grandpa turned to Janice and said, "We have about ten minutes before I go

in to make some hot chocolate.”

With an air of confidence, she replied, “We can do it.” And why shouldn’t she be confident? Hadn’t she gotten a perfect score on the very first spelling test she took in her life? And wasn’t ‘dog’ one of the words? “Spot,” came first to her lips, but she didn’t even need the dignified shaking of Grandpa’s head to tell her it wasn’t the right name for a dog midnight black from head to tail. And, “Midnight,” it seemed to be. She looked up at Grandpa, a proud expression upon her face. Just to convince Grandpa, who had been the one to teach her how to read and write and spell, she said, “M, i, d, n, i, g, h, t.” He was nodding his head slowly, clearly thinking the matter over to make sure there were no hidden problems. He’d often told her that every perfect plan of action had at least one hidden problem. “There’s no harm in taking a little extra time to think over a matter.”

And Janice could feel her heart beating against her ribs as Grandpa sat there thinking the matter over. After a long time, at least it seemed so to her, he nodded his head more freely, smiled down at her, and said, “Midnight’ it is.” With that, he rose and said, “Now it’s time for some hot chocolate. And a dog biscuit for one of us.” Mischievously, Janice asked, “Which one of us?” Grandpa barked and then turned to chase her to the end of the porch before picking her up, throwing her over his shoulder, and entering the house behind Midnight who had squirted through the doorway as soon as it opened.



# 11 Problems More Real Than Halloween Ghosts and Goblins

Halloween brought about six inches of snow which melted quickly, but it was only a couple of weeks later that Janice looked out her bedroom window in the early morning to see a fairyland of snow and ice. The two spruce trees in the backyard were weighed down so that they seemed more poles than bushy evergreens. She ran into the kitchen and saw that some of the utility lines were so loaded with ice that they seemed to be in reach of anyone walking by on the sidewalk. In the distance, Janice could hear sirens. She thought there were both police cars and ambulances sounding off, but she wasn't sure. She was still confused by the two different sounds. Firetrucks were another problem entirely. Grandpa had tried to teach her the difference between the sounds, but...

Suddenly, she realized it was cold. Not terribly cold but she was sure Mama wouldn't be happy. Grandpa's house was often a bit chilly because he liked to sleep with the thermostat turned way down, but not Mama. This was as cold as Grandpa's house and not much like Mama's house. Wondering what was going on, Janice decided to dress in her lined jeans and a sweatshirt and go exploring. She didn't have to go far to hear her mother saying, "Damned fucking New England!!" Mama's voice was quite muffled, but that wasn't what puzzled Janice. When she had been told not to say that f-word, separately by Mama and Grandpa, they'd both told her that it was an insulting and disgusting word to describe something beautiful that had to do with men

and women loving each other. Not sure why such a word would apply to New England, Janice walked into her mother's bedroom to find her there and alone, without Carl for the first time in a couple months.

But Mama wasn't to be seen, though Janice was sure that was her that was making a hump under a pile of blankets and quilts, ski-jackets and sweatshirts, towels and even a bathmat. There was an opening of sorts under the hump, right near the pillows at the head of the bed. "Janice, darling. Come under here and I'll keep you warm."

She protested, "I'm fine, Mama," and stayed where she was, near the dressing table where Mama kept all her makeup and combs and brushes.

"You must be one of those true New Englanders like your Daddy and your Grandpa."

Janice was trying to understand the strange tone in which her mother had said "true New Englanders" when the hole disappeared. The bed was just a solid, unbroken hump of various things made of cloth. She turned, wondering if she could manage to boil the kettle herself. A cup of hot chocolate would hit the spot. It had been her favorite drink for the past two weeks, ever since the snowstorm on Halloween. A few minutes later, she was trying to figure out why the burner on the stove didn't get hot when it was turned on. She tried the burner to its side and still no luck. In turn, she tried the two back burners, but the black remained black and didn't turn red. Janice stepped back and looked at the strangely behaving stove. All the dials were turned to 'high' but there was no red. How was she to make her hot chocolate?

While she was still puzzling the matter, Janice's cellphone rang. She picked it up and said, "Hi."

"Hello there, Tigger."

It was Grandpa! He'd know what she was doing wrong with the stove. In a great excitement, she told him what she had done, but all he said was, "Are all the dials still turned to 'high', Sweetheart?" After she told him they were, Grandpa said, "Set down the telephone, Tiger, and go turn them all off. You know 'off', don't you?"

“O, f, f.”

“That’s right.”

After she’d done as he had told her, she picked up the phone to hear those funny sounds like on those Boston stations at night. She could barely hear Grandpa ask, “Are you all right?” over those noises. All she could think of saying was, “Mama’s freezing to death again.” A muffled reply and then she complained, “I can’t make my hot chocolate.” Grandpa said something. Janice thought he said he would get up if he could, but she wasn’t sure. Then she heard nothing but those funny sounds for a few seconds and then nothing at all. After hanging up the telephone, Janice sniffled a few times before she realized her nose felt really cold. She headed off to the hall closet to get her Patriots scarf which she then wrapped around the bottom of her face a few times. Just to be safe, she also took her neon-green mittens before turning to the front door.

It was marvelous out there, though her feet nearly went out from under her on her first step. There was ice on everything and hanging from everything else. Janice managed to get down the two stairs by holding on to the metal railing. Then she sort of slid her way down the sidewalk, whooping it up as she went all the way to the fire-hydrant. She hung on to the fire-hydrant and looked around in amazement. It wasn’t that early. It was Saturday, not Sunday, yet no one was around. The streets were empty, the houses were dark. Then she remembered what Grandpa had said. The electricity wasn’t working. That was why the stove wasn’t getting hot.

But that didn’t tell her why the streets were empty though it took her a minute or so to realize that a lot of people were probably huddling under their blankets and quilts and coats the way that Mama was. Letting go of the fire-hydrant, she went sliding across the street and toward the Polanski’s house. As she was turning into their sidewalk, she took a spill into the snow only to find it was covered by a hard icy surface. It wasn’t the fluffy pile of soft stuff from the snowstorm the previous week.

Janice had not had a chance to gather her breath after the hard fall when

she heard, "Are you all right, Honey?" She looked up to see Mrs Polanski and her 15 year-old daughter Ari making their way carefully down the sidewalk. Ari took a look at Janice's face and apparently decided the young girl was okay; she started to laugh. Janice felt her face turning red, though she didn't blame Ari for laughing at such a spectacle. Janice knew she was clumsy as well as being so plain compared to her pretty mother. The only thing she was good at was spelling, and maybe drawing animals, but she and Grandpa had spent a lot of time reading books and writing stories and drawing pictures. The thought of spelling and drawing raised Janice's spirits a bit as she lay there looking up at Ari who suddenly bent over, almost going down herself at the motion. She laughed at her own clumsiness and then gave a hand to Janice who rose carefully, nearly bringing down the two of them before Ari lost her balance and did bring the two of them back down on the icy snowbank. "Are you two all right?" Mrs Polanski looked worried for an instant, until the teenager and the six year-old started giggling. Then she said, "Ari, I better get over to Janice's house and open some windows like Mr Davis asked me to do. The two of you can help me over but stay outside."

Mrs Polanski's was at the front door of Mama's house when a siren could be heard nearby and the three of them turned to see a police car pull up. A young policewoman jumped out of the passenger side and was halfway up the sidewalk before she asked, "Is this the house with the gas leak?"

"Not a leak, Officer. Someone turned the stove burners to 'on'..."

When she seemed reluctant to say more the policewoman let her eyes move to Janice for just a second before nodding as if she understood. "Is there anyone still in there?"

"Mama is under all her covers in her bedroom."

A little later, Janice and her Mama, dressed in a heavy parka, were drinking hot chocolate prepared on the Polanski's gas-stove. Janice was helping Ari to solve a jigsaw puzzle when she looked out the window and saw Grandpa's pickup truck pull up in front of her house. After a few minutes of carefully making her way back to Mama's house, she was inside the house, even colder

than before, in time to see Grandpa coming down the hallway from the bedrooms. "Is your Mama over at the Polanski's?" Before she could answer, he looked toward the opening door and told Janice, "Wait outside with Ari for a few minutes while Grandpa and Mama talk."

A few minutes later, Grandpa opened the outside door and waved Janice in. His face was bright red against the white of his beard and hair and eyebrows. His lips were pressed tightly together as if he were holding in words that might poison the air. As soon as he saw Janice, he tried to smile, but only succeeded in twisting his face that much more.

Grandpa turned and led Janice up the hallway without a word and they went into her room where he pulled out her backpack and suitcase. "You and your mother are going to come down and stay with me until the power is restored."

"Do you have 'lectricity, Grandpa? Mrs Polanski lit her burners with a match. She said that's the old-fashioned way and then she told me not to ever try it."

"I have woodstoves and one of them has an oven. I also have a generator sufficient to run a refrigerator and freezer and a little more. So long as the gas holds out."

The ride down to Amherst was a bit quiet, though halfway down Grandpa did ask, "Are you warming up yet, Sylvia?"

Mama replied, "A little, but I can never get warm enough with all that ice and cold air just on the other side of these thin layers of glass and metal."

Grandpa grew quiet once more and so did Mama.

As soon as they put the luggage in the bedrooms, Mama took a quilt and went to the living-room and sat on the couch near the woodstove. Janice followed Grandpa out the kitchen door. He headed right for the wood pile by way of a path cleared of ice and started loading firewood onto a cart. When he looked up at Janice, he slapped himself in the forehead and looked at her as if he'd forgotten something important. "Well, little Tigger, we forgot the bucket for the kindling." She looked up at him in a state of confused expectation,

and he pointed back toward the backdoor of the house. There was a large blue metal bucket sitting there. Right away, Janice understood what needed to be done, at least the first stage. She ran over and fetched the bucket but then stood quietly, wondering what kindling was.

Grandpa threw two more pieces of wood onto the cart, and then two more, and then he looked up at Janice. For a few seconds, he looked confused and made Janice think she should have known what kindling was. Then his face cleared and he pointed to a small pile of wood that was chopped up into real thin pieces. "That's the kindling, Sweetheart."

After loading up the wood bins in the living-room and kitchen and the playroom in the cellar, Grandpa went to the mudroom. As soon as he opened the door, Midnight came charging out and went right to the backdoor, waiting for it to be opened. A few seconds later, he charged outside and was able to make it down the walkway from the garage without slipping—there wasn't a spot of ice on Grandpa's sidewalks or driveway or walkways. As soon as he hit the glaze on top of the snow of the backyard, he went sliding with all four legs asprawl.

Grandpa was still laughing as he emerged from the garage carrying a large metal can. He walked over to a green metal box near the backdoor. It was just a little taller than Janice and, when she walked up to it, she found it was a lot wider than she could stretch her hands. Grandpa prepared the can just the way he did the smaller can with gas for the lawnmower and then he opened the front of the metal box. There was some shiny red machine inside. It was a bit like the engine for her cousin Jimmy's ATV but bigger. After pouring some gasoline in the engine, Grandpa put the gas can back together for storage and then he pulled a cord on the engine, just like the lawnmower. It started right up and he turned to Janice and winked his eye at her. "Now we can have our hot chocolate this evening without messing the top of the wood stove."

Janice was mystified, not knowing what that engine could have to do with hot chocolate. As Grandpa carried the gas can back to the garage, she stood watching the box and listening to the engine hum. A minute later, they were

standing in the kitchen and Janet watched as Grandpa filled a pot with hot water and set it on the hotplate, Grandpa turned to her and said, "The generator outside is making electricity and we're in business even without electricity from the power company."

That seemed the most amazing thing in the world. Janice had learned in school that electricity came through the wires hanging over the streets and sidewalks; they had taught the children not to go near lines which had fallen from the poles. But Grandpa knew how to make it himself with an engine! Janice felt something changing inside her; she wasn't quite sure what it was but she found herself feeling calmer. Maybe it was just because she'd found out that people could do things for themselves, like heat themselves with stoves and make electricity for hot chocolate. She felt her confidence fade a little at the thought that maybe Grandpa could do things like that, but...

Ordinary people? Like Janice. Certainly, she didn't think her mother would be capable of doing things like that. Mama shopped and she made herself pretty and she worked in offices. A few minutes later, Grandpa made three mugs of hot chocolate and took one into Mama before returning to grab the other two. They went into the living-room and sat on chairs next to Mama who shivered a little as she drank her hot chocolate. After a few minutes, everyone, even Mama, looked a bit better, in fact, quite a bit warmer since the woodstove was heating up. Except for Midnight who was getting restless after being inside for 15 or 20 minutes. And soon enough, he got Janice excited about going outside. For once, Grandpa shook his head and then explained, "My bones are old and tired, Sweetheart. Tomorrow should be a lot better for playing out there if the sun comes out and melts the ice a little. We might even be able to make a little snowfort if it doesn't warm up too fast. Won't be much of a fort, but it might protect us against very short Vikings."

The next morning was warm enough to promise a quick end to the ice and snow, though it seemed likely much more would come before winter even officially began. Fighting against nature, Janice and Grandpa built a snowfort, also taking time off to mark the location of a large gas tank to be installed

the following week. They put up large stakes for the tank, just in back of the metal shed. By then, the two foot walls of the snowfort had already melted down six inches or so. It was disappearing! Shrugging off that disappointment, Janice set about helping Grandpa to harvest the crumbly contents of one of his compost piles. Using a crate, Grandpa had made into a sled by nailing old skis onto the bottom, Janice and Grandpa hauled several barrels of the rich, black stuff over to the vegetable garden, throwing that stuff onto the snow. Grandpa explained, “It’s not quite finished composting yet. It isn’t greasy and it doesn’t smell, but it’s raw enough that the earthworms will love it. I’ll add a thick layer of ground-up leaves as an added treat and they’ll break it all down come April or May and,” with a pause for a wink, Grandpa added, “they’ll till up my soil, leaving it airy and soft without me having to do any work. And airy, soft soil is just the type for fast growth of the roots of my tomato and cucumber plants.”

Janice thought Grandpa to be the smartest man in the world. He knew so much, about machines, about animals and plants, about how to take care of people. He could grow food and had even talked about getting a milking cow and a horse to help him do his work on the farm. He didn’t even need to get electricity from the power company; he could make it himself. So far as Janice could see, Grandpa would be quite capable of living all by himself, making everything he needed, doing everything for himself. Some of those things confused her a little, to be sure. She didn’t know why Grandpa wanted a horse to help him around the farm when he had a nice tractor besides his two pickup trucks, an old one for farm work and a new one he used to go to the store or to pick up Janice and Mama during ice storms.

## 12 Getting Along in a Cold, Deserted Land

Janice and Grandpa looked at each other after Mama had driven off with Carl. A big girl of nine, and halfway to ten, Janice was trying awfully hard not to cry, but she felt better about letting herself go when she saw a tear dripping out of the corner of Grandpa's right eye. He had gone out of his way to be nice to Mama these past two months since she had announced she was moving to Atlanta. She'd given Janice the choice of going with her and Carl or staying with Grandpa until they were set up down south. Janice knew that wasn't the real choice; if she stayed with Grandpa, she would be staying for good and that was the choice she made though everyone was polite and pretended that Mama would come back and fetch her in a year or two.

Mama had been so pretty and so popular with men and she had lots of lady friends as well. Janice knew she wasn't able to live up to her mother's standards; the only things she was good at were things Mama didn't care about, like building birdhouses and nightstands and improving soil and training Midnight. For all that, she thought Mama still loved her and she knew she loved Mama.

Grandpa carried Janice's last two storage-bins up into the house and didn't say a word to her, leaving her free to wander around and think and feel. It wasn't easy to be alone. Well, not quite alone. She was with Grandpa, and he was her favorite person in the world, but he was just one person. He was fun to be with, but he wasn't the same as her friends who had moved to Alabama

or Arizona or New Mexico or Paraguay. And he wasn't the same as Mama. He was better in most ways, but a grandfather wasn't the same as a mother.

The banging of hammer upon nails and wood brought Janice back to the cold world which she had chosen over the warm paradise her mother and Carl had headed toward. She was near the dead grape vines. Not dead just because it was late September; they had never come back to life the previous Spring. And she turned around, seeing to her left the Arctic hardy blueberry bushes Grandpa had been cultivating for nearly five years. Had he guessed the cold weather was going to come instead of the Greenhouse Earth expected by almost everybody? Grandpa refused to say what thoughts had been going through his head when he had installed the 250 gallon gas tank. And there had been the extra insulation he'd put into his farmhouse, at the expense of inside living-space; the walls had been moved inward nearly six inches by the time he was through. There were the expensive windows he'd put in. The storage shelves he'd built down in the cellar, along with dehumidifying and ventilating equipment.

Grandpa was pretty smart. That much was pretty clear, and now it sounded like he was up to something else. Curiosity allowed Janice to push her problems to the back of her mind. She walked up toward the house, emerging from behind the eight foot-high pile of lumber and cement blocks to see that Grandpa had driven stakes into the ground at the side of the garage. He had also driven nails into the side of the garage and was now running twine between the various stakes and nails. By the time Janice had reached him, he had marked out a rectangle that stretched the length of the garage and stuck out halfway to the house. While she was watching him, she felt something press her about at the knees and she almost went down. "Midnight!"

He was ready to play, but Janice was more ready to find out what Grandpa was up to. She pushed him away, confusing him more than a bit. It wasn't like her to refuse one of his clumsy, seventy pound invitations. "What are you building, Grandpa?"

He had started to dig some holes at the corner of the rectangle he'd just

marked off, and he didn't stop his digging while he replied, "Just a simple structure, mostly a roof. It's to store some wood close to the house. I don't think we'll be stuck in the house for months at a time, not tough guys like us, but we might be stuck in for days at a time. Days when it'll be a struggle just to travel the ten feet out to this woodpile."

Janice looked back at the main piles of wood—some under tarps; those piles were no more than a 30 second walk from the backdoor of the house. That didn't seem so far to her, not even on a cold day. It might be uncomfortable to walk outside at all when it was below freezing, but she'd done it lots of times. Grandpa had probably done it a lot more times. She shrugged it off and moved closer to observe his digging.

"I'd let you help, Sweetheart, but the soil is filled with rocks, and it's real hard to maneuver the shovel to get them out. But don't worry, we'll both build the lean-to and it won't be long before you'll be a skilled framing carpenter."

That brought on a confusing mixture of feelings. She loved doing things with Grandpa, and he always took time to teach her and didn't get angry with her when she did something stupid. And she was really proud when she learned how to do something that Grandpa considered important. But...

All that stuff was boy stuff. Mama would have certainly said so, and she used to laugh when Janice played catch with her cousins Jack and Harley or when she helped Grandpa to upgrade his computer. If anyone was around, anyone that is that Mama liked, she would laugh and say something like, "She's a real Tomboy in some ways, but she'll outgrow it just like her cousin Shelly did." The first time Mama had said that, it had surprised Janice because Shelly, who was sixteen at the time, was the type of girl that Harley called a 'girly-girl'.

Janice's curiosity got the best of her, and she moved over toward the toolbox, looking at hammers and pliers and screwdrivers, as she asked, "Where is the wood we're gonna use?"

Grandpa just nodded his head over at the huge pile of wood that Janice had just passed. "I think we'll find something there. Pawel... That is, Mr

Kowalski and his son took took down and milled five fir trees, two oaks, and that old walnut." Janice started at the mention of the walnut tree. It had stood at the edge of the old orchard at the back of the Kowalski's barn and had been her favorite tree to sit under on a hot, sunny day. There had even been a small swing hanging from it, though it was more a swing for a young child, not a girl already ten. Though he never looked up from his digging, Grandpa must have sensed her upset because he said, "There was nothing we could have done to save that one, Tigger. It was old and the streak of bad winters, following the hot, drought years, just did it in. It had only a few shoots on it when Mr Kowalski began trimming the lower branches back in May." He chuckled and added, "It nearly defeated their chainsaws and did a pretty good job on the milling saws he brought out to finish the work. It had hard wood even for a walnut tree." The he chuckled again and told Janice, "Billy was asking for you when they were here unloading."

"What are we gonna make with all that wood?"

This time, he looked up and smiled at her. "We'll make some real nice things from it. I might make a new floor for the kitchen from some of it. Would last for decades, but we'll make you a nice dresser. How would you like that? And I'll teach you how to use the tools so you can do most of the work."

Janice smiled and asked, "How about a jewelry cabinet?"

Grandpa's head jerked to the side a little and he laughed. "You aren't the type to be holding on to a lot of diamond rings and pearl necklaces, Sweetheart." She turned red and Grandpa stopped laughing immediately. "I didn't intend anything bad by that, Sweetheart. Anyway, any pretty girl needs a cabinet to keep her little things. Her lockets and rings and hammers and chisels and such." He winked at her and added, "I think I even have a set of plans for a real nice little cabinet. But it's not that little. It'll hold a good number of little things."

"How about some things that aren't so little, Grandpa?"

Grandpa turned to her and winked. "Maybe we can change the plans a little. After all, you're going to be a skilled cabinetmaker before the project is

over.”

Janice felt good at that even though ‘cabinetmaker’ would probably make her mother laugh and roll her eyes. But maybe she shouldn’t worry about all of Mama’s opinions. She could just settle in for a while and let Grandpa teach her a lot of things. He even made it fun, though Janice wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t that he played games while she was learning. Maybe it was just that he enjoyed learning so much that she couldn’t help doing the same. He even said they were going to learn how to use computers they way they were meant to be used. And they were going to do it together. “None of that junk that lets you make Christmas cards by pointing and clicking, none of those programs to dress up dolls, or to send email without having the slightest idea about the underlying protocols.”

As long as Grandpa said so, Janice was willing to go along. He’d never been wrong before.



## 13 A Person of Skills

Grandpa stood back and took a look at the greenhouse. “You did a pretty good job for a thirteen year-old, Tigger.” Janice smiled at the old nickname; it had been years since Grandpa had regularly called her by the name of her favorite cartoon character when she was a young child. He stepped back two more steps and rested his chin in the spread between the thumb and pointer finger of his right hand. In that position, he contemplated the structure before adding, “You did a pretty good job for anyone of any age, Sweetheart. And the roof angle is...?”

“60°, Grandpa. A round number just a little bit more than 15° added to our latitude of 42°. As we’ve discussed umpteen times.”

“Those were learning moments. Anything between 45° and 75° is good enough, so it’s best to just set the angle for your convenience.”

Janice rolled her eyes but then turned them intensely upon Grandpa as he buckled a little on his right side and winced before putting his weight back on the makeshift crutch he’d been using since he’d torn something in his knee a week back. She held herself back from helping Grandpa and then found herself smiling after she saw he was all right. Grandpa had said she’d done a good job. As she bent over to pick up her ski-gloves, she happened to look at her hands. Mama wouldn’t be real proud of her now, not with calloused hands. And then, before putting the gloves back on, she glanced at the dry and chapped skin on the back of her hand and then lightly brushed the tips of her fingers over the skin not much different on her cheeks and her forehead.

“What’s the matter, Janice?”

"Nothing, Grandpa." Janice could hear the quavering in her own voice and she was somewhat surprised when Grandpa didn't pursue the matter. He was often pretty persistent even when she really didn't want to talk. With her being so alone, no boys or girls her age and few enough women around, Grandpa seemed to feel he had to draw her out. But sometimes a thirteen year-old girl didn't really want to talk with a grandfather about certain things, not about the thoughts and feelings which were confusing her and not about the troubles going on about her. Looking like his eighty years had hit him all at once, Grandpa turned and headed for the house. Janice started picking up her tools. After she'd put the toolboxes away, she walked slowly toward the house, wondering what she was to do. Grandpa was getting depressed, but so was she. She needed friends, not for anything in particular, just to talk to about clothes and boys and...

Not tools or greenhouse designs, though Grandpa had told her that men and women, boys and girls, were going to be picking up more of the old-fashioned skills with over 80% of the population in New England gone to the warmer south. Maybe girls would start talking about hammers and battery-powered circular saws instead of...

"Nahh!" she spat out loud, truly loud, so that she wondered if the wolves never so far away were maybe pondering the denial. Not that she was afraid of the wolves. Grandpa had told her that North American wolves, for reasons no one knew, had an almost perfect record of not attacking people, except for wolves with rabies. They couldn't be trusted around domestic animals, cows or goats or cats, but they almost always left people alone even when humans were the only food to be seen. Coyotes and domestic dogs gone wild were far more dangerous. Janice even liked it when the wolves howled at night. She would lie there and wonder if they had just brought down a deer or maybe they were hungry or maybe they were just talking to one another.

"Whatever," she concluded as she opened the door to enter the house. It wasn't that she was apathetic toward the questions she herself had raised, but Grandpa had told her it would take a lifetime of observation to answer some

questions about nature and other questions would be ever beyond her reach and maybe beyond the reach of any and all people.

After taking off her gloves and scarves and coat and boots, Janice paused and thought about Billy Kowalski down the road. He sometimes asked for her but they didn't have a lot to talk about when they were together and that wasn't often. He worked with his father, growing food and harvesting timber and keeping up all the machinery. But he was nice and he was really strong and knew how to do a lot of important things, even though he rarely read books and... He didn't listen to music much but he said he liked to sit and listen while Janice played on her flute or her keyboard. He seemed to especially like things by Bach or some of the old hymns like the ones on Grandpa's CDs by Tennessee Ernie Ford. She thought for a few more seconds, not sure what she was thinking but then she turned and walked into the living-room to catch Grandpa in a grimace of pain. It lasted only a second before he noticed she was there. He forced a smile and said, "It's time for your math lesson, Tigger."

Janice wasn't quite sure why he was returning to the nickname she'd had when she was just a young girl, before she'd taken on an adult's responsibilities. It bothered her, but she dutifully went to the bookcase and pulled out her least favorite textbook, a paperback review book on calculus. Grandpa had never finished college, dropping out after a year of engineering studies; he'd started his own machine shop and had done well making high-precision injection molds for plastic parts for cars and computers and even jet engines. He'd even showed her some samples of housings he'd made for CPU fans and carburetors. It sometimes surprised Janice to realize that she actually understood all that, though she was having trouble visualizing the way you could use calculus to estimate how much material had to be removed from the block of steel to make a certain shape of a certain size. Grandpa had told her that few of even the most highly skilled moldmakers knew any calculus. At one time, they'd used various approximations and simple trigonometry. More complex shapes had been made possible in greater quantities when computers were used to control the milling machines and other metal excavators. Then the only people

who really had to know and understand the calculus were the engineers and mathematicians at the software firms and machinery manufacturers. Janice had since decided that those engineers and mathematicians had probably not known the details either, at least not once they were a few years out of college. The details were encoded more and more in the computer software and most people took that as an excuse to get on with other things and forget those details of their craft.

“We might be able to finish up with transcendental functions this month, little lady, if you get back on track.”

“The only thing I like about them is the way you pronounce the words. ‘s’, ‘i’, ‘n’, ‘h’, is pronounced ‘sinch’. Other than that, I’d rather study history or finish reading *Huckleberry Finn*. ”

“You like him better than Tom Sawyer, don’t you?”

“Tom Sawyer was a wimp. He deserved Aunt Polly.”

Grandpa laughed, for the first time that day so far as Janice knew, and said, “You’re getting to be awfully tough for a thirteen year-old girl, young lady.”

“Is that why you’re treating me like a child sometimes.”

“What?”

Grandpa seemed genuinely surprised, and Janice did her best to enlighten him in few words. “You’ve been calling me ‘Tigger’ lately.”

Silence reigned for a few minutes until Grandpa said in an awfully mellow voice, “Well, let’s finish this ‘sinch’ stuff and then you can get back to writing your essay on *Huckleberry Finn*. ”

“Yeah, but I already know what I’ll be arguing.”

“You do?” Grandpa sounded only a little bit surprised.

“*Huckleberry Finn* was a defective book because the protagonist didn’t grow up and the ending seemed to imply it was good to remain immature and to avoid your responsibilities.”

“You really are growing up too fast. But the possibility remains that so subtle a thinker as Mark Twain, despite sometimes glorifying adolescence, might

not have been saying it was good to remain immature and to avoid you responsibilities."

Janice was surprised to hear Grandpa say she was growing up too fast. She thought she was growing up barely fast enough to take on her responsibilities, though she also thought she was doing a pretty good job of fulfilling them, except maybe for her problems learning about the differentiation and integration of transcendental functions.



## 14 All the Lonely People

Grandpa and Janice had gotten into the habit of going up to Athol to check on Mrs Polanski and the Tetreault's at least once a month. They had decided to make this commitment after the sad death of Mrs Greenberg, the lady who had called Janice 'Sally'. Mrs Greenberg had been found dead of a broken neck at the bottom of her cellar stairs but the paramedic said it looked as if she had lived for a little while, all alone and lying on that cold concrete. And then Ari Polanski had moved to live with her aunt in Atlanta while attending Emory University. Mr Tetreault had stockpiled a lot of food and other supplies—his garage was a warehouse filled with cans of peas and corned-beef and, of course, crates of toilet paper. He'd had the septic tank cleared out one last time before all the outfits closed up, saying that would last him until he was ready to be flushed down the toilet himself. No one else had laughed with him. They knew he wasn't going to make it very long at all. And that was one reason for Grandpa's worries about Mrs Tetreault; she had a son in Delaware who was trying to get her to go at least that far south, and he was talking about taking her and his family down to Arizona. She had no one left in New England but it seemed she was bound to die where she was born and raised and lived her life as wife and mother.

Thus it was no surprise when Grandpa and Janice drove to Athol just short of her fifteenth birthday and found two old men struggling to move Mr Tetreault's corpse out of the his house. They were taking it to a pine-plank coffin sitting on sawhorses in the frontyard. A van stood backed up to that coffin. As Grandpa turned the car engine off, he sighed and turned to Janice

to announce the obvious, "Looks like we're just in time for the funeral, Tigger."

Janice felt a duty to cry, but she couldn't. Mr Tetreault had been a nice man, but she hadn't been that close to him, and she was getting used to burying people, especially the older people who'd decided to stay and die where they had lived. She and Grandpa had buried five people over the past year or so, four of his friends and neighbors but also Uncle Tim. She was well-practiced in the comforting and aiding of grieving widows, after all, two of them—Aunt Jessie and Mrs Harlow were now living in Grandpa's house. The house was starting to turn into a nursing home for those who'd stayed around largely because they expected to be dying before long. It would be easier to live with Mrs Polanski who'd been like a grandmother to her since she'd been four. And she cooked great deserts, something which might appeal to Grandpa.

A gasp brought her attention over to Grandpa, who has holding his hand over his stomach like he always did when the pain got too bad to bear. "What choice have I but to bear it?" he'd asked her several times, not expecting an answer of course. Which was good because she had none to give him, just as she had no help to give him, only a comforting touch on his cheek. It took Grandpa a number of seconds to respond to the caress, and Janice knew it was real bad this time. When he turned to her, the tears were pouring out of his eyes, which had grown terribly bloodshot in just that minute or so. "I'm going to need one of those boxes myself before long, Sweetheart, but you can certainly build me a better one than that." Janice thought of the walnut planks already planed and sanded and then she thrust them from her mind and jumped out of the truck. She ran around and opened the door to help Grandpa out.

Mrs Polanski must have looked out the window when she heard the truck pull up, after all the traffic wasn't very heavy any more in Athol. She was halfway down the sidewalk and the two elderly men were following by the time Grandpa made his way off the street with his arm draped around Janice's shoulders. One of the men shuffled forward and took Grandpa's arm to put it over his shoulder. In a Polish accent, perhaps flavored by a bit of Yiddish, he

said, "The little lady is a bit slender a cane for a sturdy old fellow like you." Grandpa accepted the man's help, but, in a gruff voice, he protested, "She's as strong as an ox. She's been moving studs and planks around and nailing them in place to make greenhouses and sheds."

As the two men moved ahead of Janice, she stopped and removed her gloves to look at her hands. So well calloused. Starting to thicken and twist up a little like the hands of a boy or man doing hard labor. "What would Mama think?" She hadn't even realized she'd spoken out loud until Mrs Polanski took her in tow, saying, "There have been many ladies, true ladies, saints and nurses and farmwives with the hands of a working woman. There's no shame in doing what must be done to survive and to make life a little better for those around you."

Trying not to look directly at Mrs Polanski's hands, she thought she could tell those hands were not nearly as hardened as the fifteen year-old hands of Janice, but they were well-worn—by years of bleach and detergents and handling brooms and mops. Well-worn but not in the same way as hands used to drive nails and apply wood-preservative in near freezing weather. Once again, Janice was wondering if there were tasks and ways of life appropriate to women and other tasks and ways appropriate to men.

She sometimes compared herself to Billy Kowalski who was only a year older than Janice but nearly 40 pounds heavier though he wasn't much taller than Janice and didn't look too husky. He could lift beams and once lifted Grandpa's table-saw up onto a pickup truck. Janice needed pulleys and ropes to lift a heavy piece of wood and she would have never been able to lift that table-saw, though she'd been able to shuffle it from one place to another in the garage.

But it wasn't just a matter of her lack of shoulder and arm strength relative to boys her age. A relative lacking which might increase still further by the time she was an adult. Especially in an environment where boys and men were working so hard. Exercise made women stronger but it really bulked up men. Grandpa had told her that testosterone was the hormone of passion

and anger, also the hormone of hardness and strength, and a male's body was more sensitive to the presence of testosterone. He told her it wasn't something that could be altered by injecting women with testosterone, but was rather something about each and every cell in the body of a male or a female.

She could accept that, and didn't want to be a girlie-girl like Mama, but she did want to be a girl. To have other girls to talk to. To have a chance to dress up, though she didn't much like makeup, at least not much makeup, maybe a little lipstick or some eye coloring, but not much.

Janice didn't remain stuck in her contemplations for long. As soon as she was inside, she saw that Grandpa had been put down on the large blue velvet couch in Mrs Tetreault's good living-room. The man who'd helped him seemed to be checking his stomach and then the fellow grabbed Grandpa's wrist and started checking his pulse and pressure.

Janice asked him, "You know about medical matters, Mr Rose?"

"Was a medic in Nam. Based in Da Nang. Got lots of practice as we dealt with more injured boys than all the hospitals in New York could have handled. Too many battlefields. Too many bullets. Way too many landmines."

Grandpa closed his eyes and laid his head down. Just a few seconds later, Janice allowed herself to be steered into the kitchen by Mrs Polanski. Mrs Tetreault had already set the kettle to boil on the woodstove which they used often though they had a generator and a tank full of diesel to run their appliances. "It'll last longer than me," was what Mr Tetreault had told Janice one day, and he'd been right, but maybe not by much. Janice decided to take matters into her own hands, but she decided to wait for the right moment to ask Mrs Tetreault and Mrs Polanski if they wanted to come down and live with her and Grandpa.

The right moment seemed to come at the moment that the mugs of tea were distributed. Mrs Tetreault smiled broadly and nearly shouted out, "Of course," but Mrs Polanski looked a bit cautious. "Are you sure this will be all right with your grandfather, Janice?" Janice nodded and said, "We'd already talked about it a few times." Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see the

elderly man was looking as if he wished an invitation also. She wondered if she should have waited until she was alone with the two women to ask them. She tended to assume the men were able to take care of themselves, but if he were old and had no younger person to help him as his health deteriorated...

Grandpa had been the toughest and most self-sufficient man that Janice had ever met or even heard about, but, now that he was sick, he was needing a lot of help. She decided to ignore the man's silent pleas for now, though she would remember to ask Grandpa about it. Maybe that nice Mr Rose... After all, he seemed to know a lot about taking care of sick people.

And it was his voice which came from behind Janice to announce, "He'll be all right for now, but..." He looked over at Janice who moved her attention to her mug of tea before saying, "I know he's got a cancer growing in his stomach. He told me to get ready for him dying. I'm supposed to make him a coffin but I'm... not ready."

Mr Rose took a seat beside Janice and accepted a mug of tea from Mrs Tetreault before he qualified himself, "It's been decades since I worked as a medic and I dealt with infections and bullet wounds, not cancers. I don't know how long he's got, or even which organs it's in. But it's likely he doesn't have long." After putting in a spoon of the precious sugar and then pouring in some powdered milk, he added, "But he's all right for now. He'll probably even be able to drive home after he rests a couple hours."

"No, Nathan. I hope you didn't tell him that." Mrs Polanski rose in a bit of a huff and walked off to the living-room.

It was the other man who chuckled and said, "I guess you're staying for the night, young lady." He seemed glad, probably hoping it would give him a chance to talk to Grandpa about coming up to his house with Mrs Polanski and Mrs Tetreault and probably Mr Rose. Janice felt put on the spot. As it was, she'd stretched things a little about Mrs Polanski and Mrs Tetreault. Grandpa had wanted to invite them but then had told Janice he was afraid of saddling her with too many old and sick people. Mr Rose was old but he seemed very healthy and he could take care of people when they got sick.

Janice rose. "I'm going to check on my grandfather." Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that Mr Rose was looking at her as if he'd picked up that something was going on. People were getting more sensitive to all sorts of things now that they could see greater prospects of suffering ahead of them. She'd said something about that to Grandpa not long ago, and he had sat down with her and told her that human beings all passed through stages when they were dependent on other people for their care and protection. When they were young. Again when they were old. And, far too often, in the years in between when accidents or illness struck. "Too many people nowadays have no one to take care of them, and, now that the government can't—or won't—take care of them, they will turn into opportunists, looking for any situation that will at least minimize their suffering."

Grandpa was asleep with Mrs Polanski sitting by his side. She rose and let Janice take the chair where she sat. She held Grandpa's hand for a few minutes before she felt Mrs Polanski's hand on her shoulder. She put her finger to her lip and motioned Janice to the chairs in the corner on the other side of the room. Once there, she spoke in a harsh voice. "I know your grandfather had been thinking about inviting me and Millie down to live with you, but I also know why he'd been having some doubts." She patted Janice on the hand. "I think it would probably work out all right, but Mr Worley is all alone and he immediately picked up on the idea. He's going to be angling for an invitation. He's a nice man, though he's not the one I'd pick to be with under these harsh circumstances. Mr Rose would pull his weight, but Mr Worley would be the one needing care and protection, probably more than me and Mrs Tetreault."

"You think Grandpa will be mad at me?"

"No. Mostly, he's worried about you. He won't hesitate to cut Mr Worley off to protect you and he won't even hesitate, much, to disinvite me and Millie if he thinks you will end up bearing a great burden." Leaning closer to Janice, she whispered, "It's not for you to make up for all those who abandoned us up here."

That might have been so, but it was all Janice could do to avoid everyone's

eyes the rest of the evening. She could tell Grandpa was wondering what was going on. He exchanged some looks with Mrs Polanski that promised a secret conference about Janice later on. That made things worse. She'd put her grandfather in a bad spot and now she had to deal with people who were in trouble and were looking for someone to care for them and protect them in such a harsh land where no one could care for anyone else because everyone needed to fight to survive. Grandpa had warned her; he told her that men and women of a soft sort could break down real fast in tough situations even if they seemed very nice. He'd likened it to a marathon runner training by running 50 miles a week. No one, no matter how highly motivated, could just go out and run a marathon without any training. He said it was the same with morals. No practice, no performance when it really counted. So many nice German people had looked away, or even helped, as the Nazis gathered up Jews and other people the Nazis hated. Would nice Americans have done any better?

As supper ended, Janice became more upset with herself. She'd been so busy thinking about the problems she'd created for herself that she hadn't even noticed that Grandpa hadn't eaten anything until Mrs Polanski picked his untouched plate up and said, "That's all right, Dear. Your stomach is upset. Would you like to try a little rice pudding?" When Grandpa nodded, she said, "I've got a small cup of cream that I'll whip up for you."



## 15 A Community of Sorts

So it was that Mrs Polanski and Mrs Tetreault came to live with Grandpa and Janice; Mr Rose came down to Amherst with Mr Worley a few weeks later, shortly after Aunt Jessie had died and Mrs Harlow had gone south with a niece who'd been living in New Hampshire. The two men shared a room, as did the two women. They didn't seem to mind, so Janice had made only a token protest for politeness. With his stomach problems increasing, Grandpa definitely needed his own room, though not a big one. He'd moved down to the smallest of the four bedrooms a month before the other people moved up. It was next to one of the bathrooms, and he and Janice had cut a door through from his bedroom to the bathroom, making it, more or less, his private bathroom. Mr Rose and Mr Worley shared the bathroom with him, but sometimes it must have been tough on them; Janice knew that Grandpa's insides were beginning to rot and what came out smelled pretty bad.

Mrs Polanski and Mrs Tetreault and Mr Rose were a big help. The women took over much of the housework and he became a personal nurse of sorts to Grandpa. Janice concentrated on the outdoor work; Grandpa still helped as much as he could, though he had trouble chopping wood or even running the chainsaw with all the bending and the use of stomach and thigh muscles that those activities entailed. Mr Worley did what he could. He didn't have many manual skills, but he hadn't exactly lost his strength yet. After all, the first time Janice saw him, he and Mr Rose were carrying Mr Tetreault's corpse out of the house to lift it up into that coffin. And the two of them pushed a number of wheelbarrows full of wood from the woodpiles to the house.

Taking care of the house and all the people wasn't too bad, not like Grandpa and Mrs Polanski had feared, at least not until the first January after the household had grown. Mr Worley's right hip and right knee stiffened up real bad at about the same time that Grandpa's stomach problems got worse. At a time when the temperature was regularly dropping below 0°F at night and rarely reaching above freezing during the day, Janice was left largely alone to chop and fetch the wood, to move foodstuffs and other supplies from the cellar or garage, and to keep the snow from accumulating too badly on the sidewalks and porches and the important walkways going into the backyard. Grandpa had told her that human beings should be moving over much of the property on a regular basis no matter how bad the weather got. He said that would be the best way to keep the animals back in the woods, at least until they grew hungry enough and lost enough of their fear to start hunting people.

After a few days, as Janice felt close to collapse trying to keep the house warm, Mr Rose and Mrs Polanski apparently reached some sort of agreement. She took over caring for Grandpa for regular periods each day and Mrs Tetreault took over the easier job of caring for Mr Worley while Mr Rose helped Janice as much as he could. It wasn't an ideal situation. Mr Rose needed to rest and gather his breath frequently, making Janice suspicious that he had some heart problems, but the man wouldn't confess to anything but being 74 years old. He did his best for sure. And so did Mrs Polanski and Mrs Tetreault. Even Mr Worley tried to do as much work as he could sitting in a reclining chair, though it was rarely more than peeling potatoes.

Janice plugged away, day by day, even having to do more studying without much direction other than what she got from the weekly oral quizzes at Grandpa's bedside. And then disaster struck, and it was what Janice had feared. Mr Rose had a heart attack when he'd no more than walked into the cold air to watch Janice playing fetch with Midnight. After running inside to get a blanket and to tell Mrs Polanski, she put on her snowshoes and covered the quarter-mile to the Kowalski's house. She struggled through their small orchard of dwarf, and dead, fruit-trees to find Billy and his father cutting logs

into planks on one of those portable sawmills. She was almost at the side of Mr Kowalski before Billy saw her and signaled his father to shut the machine off.

The sturdy old man turned and smiled as soon as he saw Janice. "Well, young lady, it's been a while since we've seen you. The wife's been saying she was going to invite the entire crowd in your house..." He grew silent as he noticed the emotions showing on her face. It was Billy coming up to his father's side who asked, "What's wrong, Janice?"

"One of the men who came to live with us had a heart attack or something and I need help to get him into the house."

Mr Kowalski's face grew dark. "And your grandfather?"

"His cancer's getting really bad. He can't get out of bed most days. And the other man has arthritis in his hip and knee and Mrs Polanski and Mrs Tetreault can't really help me to lift him." She felt the tears come down her face as she explained, "He's a really nice man and he was a medic in the Marines so he's been taking care of Grandpa and..."

Mr Kowalski put up a hand to quiet her down and looked at Billy before nodding toward the garage. "Get back there with her, Billy. Take one of the snowmobiles and see if you can get the man inside and comfortable. I'll get your mother and follow in a short while." He looked back at Janice and his voice softened, "Mrs Kowalski was a nurse when she was young. Gave it up when Billy was born. She'll be able to help him, and your grandfather, as much as anyone left in the area." He walked over to her side and gave her a quick hug before turning to walk toward the house. By that time, Billy already had the snowmobile out of the garage. A few seconds later, he had climbed on and started it.

The noise of the engine prevented any talk on the way back; Janice just held on, at first to the seat handles, and then she put her arms around Billy and leaned against his back. He was wearing his heavy ski-parka, which he must have gotten inside the garage because he'd only been wearing a vest over a wool-shirt while he was working the saw with his father. Through the

jacket, she thought she felt the muscles sheathing his abdomen and chest. She was thinking he might well be the sort of fellow who could take a lot of the load off her. She didn't want to be like her mother—helpless when it came to physical work; nor did she want to be a full-time housewife like Mrs Polanski; she would have loved to be able to spend part of the day working in the house, part working in the woods or yard, part studying with Grandpa.

As much as Mr Rose needed help, she couldn't keep herself from feeling sorry that they got back to Grandpa's house so quickly; it felt so good to be snuggled up against the back of a strong, young man. But they reached the house and that strong, young man quickly shut off the ignition on the snowmobile and waited just a second for Janice to get off before he jumped off and ran over to where Mrs Polanski was huddled over a lumpy blanket on the snowy ground. Before Janice could even offer to help, Billy had lifted Mr Rose up—truth to tell he was a small man of perhaps 130 pounds while Billy was thickening into a fireplug like his father and had also recently stretched four inches up to nearly five, ten. Janice ran around them to get the doors, and it was only a moment later that they had him on the extra couch in the old dining room which had become a television room before the day that Grandpa had thrown a Stephen King novel through the screen and then had thrown book and TV set out as if one item. He told her once that was why he had proven smart enough and tough enough to survive in a world that drove most of the people out of New England. "Nearly all of them television watchers or readers of books which try to create a television screen in the mind. You can bet on that," he'd added but then the angry expression on his face had broken down and he'd let forth with one of those belly laughs for which he'd been famous—before his belly had hurt too much for such exercise.

After Mr Rose was on the couch, Janice could see that his face was a pale gray. He looked to be already dead, but Mrs Polanski checked his pulse as soon as he was inside and had pronounced, "It's weak but he's still with us." And then the second snowmobile could be heard pulling up in the yard, and Janice walked up the stairs to check on her Grandpa. She could hear steps

right behind her and she turned to see Billy following, quietly and slowly. That was all right with her, though she wouldn't have invited him and hoped he'd have enough sense to stay outside of Grandpa's room until he was invited in.

Janice was at Grandpa's bedside before she heard the door to the bathroom close. Had she been wrong in assuming Billy was following her upstairs? Or had he simply gone into the bathroom in embarrassment when he realized she was coming up to visit with her sick grandfather?

"What's up, Tigger? Is Mr Rose doing all right?"

"I don't know Grandpa. He doesn't look too good." And then she stopped as if in shock. Grandpa also didn't look too good. He was mostly pale but had flush spots on his cheeks and on his neck as if her were burning up, but only in a few places. And there were specks of spittle at the corners of his mouth, like he'd been throwing up, probably bile, which was about all that was in his stomach most of the time. Most days, Grandpa wasn't eating more than a dish of pudding and maybe a slice of lightly buttered toast. After Grandpa winced with his pain, she blurted out, "Mrs Kowalski is here. She was going to look at Mr Rose. Maybe she can help you, too."

Grandpa winced again and closed his eyes. It was through clenched teeth that she heard, "The only thing I need right now is some morphine to help calm my pain as I exit this world."

"Maybe she has some, Grandpa."

He tried to smile again, but then a new wave of pain must have come on. Janice sat on his bed and took his right hand in both of hers. She put her lips to his knuckles and silently prayed, "God, please make him better, and if it's too late, take him and end his pain." Then she started crying. Grandpa pulled her head down and nestled her face against his bristly neck. After a few minutes, Grandpa released her, though she didn't sit up immediately. She was just pulling her face away from his neck when she heard him saying, in a somewhat stronger voice, "Yes, Billy. What is it?"

Janice turned and, through her tears, could see Billy looking uncomfortable, shifting from right foot to left and back again. He stuttered some unrec-

ognizable syllables and then managed to say, “Ma told me to tell you that Mr Rose...” He choked on the name and couldn’t say any more words. Janice turned to see Grandpa nod and then close his eyes before he prayed, “May the good Lord have mercy on his soul.”

## 16 No Time for Funerals

Janice kept her eyes from Mr Rose's body. He was pretty much frozen through after just two days in the garage where he'd been set after Mrs Polanski had washed his body and dressed him in a suit he'd brought with him, though it seemed too large for him. Billy had helped his father to carry the body out and place it on a sheet of plywood; they'd wrapped the body in a blanket and then in a plastic tarp, but it, he, was lying over there, no more than eight feet from Janice when she had been working on the poor man's casket. Mr Kowalski had told Janice that he and Billy would build the casket, but she had wanted to do something. She needed to get out of the house and away from sick men and old women and she was feeling sick deep inside her own self as she watched Grandpa die. And things had gotten a bit worse. Mrs Tetreault seemed to have come down with something that was down in her lungs, probably a pneumonia according to Mrs Kowalski, who was coming over daily and even had slept over one night.

Janice set down her drill and looked over at Mr Kowalski. He had come over an hour ago and mostly watched her work but had insisted on being her helper. Now he was attaching one of the hinges to the inside of the casket's lid. Ugly man, but not ugly in any bad way. In fact, he was ugly in the way of some of those movie stars who had noses three sizes too large and faces with wrinkles as deep as a rhinoceros. Some people might have said, "distinguished looking," but Janice thought of his ugliness as being more in the way of comforting. Fatherly or grandfatherly ugliness. She was still staring at him, and he was still doing a slow and detailed job on a box that was soon to be put into the

ground—he'd said, "We should do a good job to show proper respect for the dead." He wasn't a smart man like Grandpa, but in his slow and simple way, with his short words, he seemed nearly as wise as Grandpa. She was beginning to wish that the four people hadn't moved down from Athol. Then she would be caring for Grandpa and hoping she would be able to just move over to the Kowalski's after he died.

Janice was still staring at Mr Kowalski, trying to forget the corpse which was lying so near, when Billy shot in. Once more he looked nervous and was shifting from foot to foot. He didn't have to say a word; Janice shot right by him and nearly went through the unopened door into the kitchen before running up the stairway, taking the steps two at a time. She burst into Grandpa's room to see that he was lying still, more gray-faced than ever. She was about to throw herself on him when Mrs Polanski grabbed her ever so gently. "He's alive, Sweetheart, but he seems to have fallen into a coma. This might be it. His pain might be over. At least, nearly over." She pulled Janice around and held her head against a motherly neck before saying, "Mrs Kowalski just left. She said she bought a small supply of morphine from a doctor in Northampton. She'll be back with it and..." After a sigh, Mrs Polanski finished with, "We'll have it if he wakes up and feels the pain again."

"What," Janice protested as she pulled herself back so violently as to nearly send Mrs Polanski flying, "if he's feeling pain now. How do you know he's not?"

Mrs Polanski didn't answer, only putting her hand on the small of Janice's back and steering her over to the bedside. "Sit here and be with him for a while. You might well be right that he can still feel pain, and he might be able to hear us as well. It might be time to say good-bye to him."

A couple gasping breaths later, Janice heard the door to the room close and she was alone to cry with her head resting upon Grandpa's chest.

## 17 Alone with Others

Janice rose and threw her shovel to the side. Billy was still down in the second grave, squaring it off. She'd told him she didn't see the need for it, so long as they could get the caskets in, but he told her they should do things right. He'd been over nearly every day since Grandpa had fallen into his coma only two days after Mr Rose had died. And he had cleared snow and ice away and had kept a fire going until the ground was soft enough to dig; then he'd dug as much as he could and had set another fire; and once again; and a third time. That was why they hadn't had a chance to bury Mr Rose, leaving his body frozen in the garage, stored in the casket that she and Mr Kowalski had made. Actually, Mr Kowalski had finished it by himself while Janice had sat with Grandpa for many hours over the three days he was in a coma.

After he'd died, she'd emptied her stomach several times, throwing up bile as disgusting as what Grandpa had produced with his cancerous insides. After she'd felt purified, in a strange and lightheaded way, she'd cleaned-up once more and then went outside to wander around with Midnight under the cloudy sky. Billy had said something to her about the National Weather Service predicting a snowstorm starting that afternoon and going on through the night; maybe a foot or so of snow ending with a dangerous half-inch or more of freezing rain. That had bothered her for some reason, perhaps it was upsetting that the government could continue operating their satellites and weather analyses while they couldn't do anything for the sick people up north.

After throwing a red Frisbee out into the snow a few times for Midnight to fetch, she grew bored and restless watching him flounder through the foot

and a half of snow already on the ground. She wandered over to the garage, knowing that Mr Rose's unburied and frozen body was in there, wrapped up and lying inside his closed but unsealed casket. Soon, Grandpa would be there, lying in the other casket. They would probably lie there in the caskets, side by side, for another few days or more until the Kowalskis could get hold of a nomadic priest, Father Francis, who passed through the area regularly.

Janice had her hand on the knob when Midnight suddenly grew frantic. She followed the black lab around the garage where he started sniffing beneath the window at some spots where something had been digging. Janice struggled through the snow as fast as she could manage and saw that something had dug down through the snow but hadn't been able to get through the frozen dirt. If it had, what could it have done to the concrete slab? After a moment of panic, Janice calmed down, realizing that even a bear could not have gotten into that garage by digging underneath. On the other hand, the walls weren't that strong and the doors were of standard quality as was the hardware—not much against a hungry bear, even if he was modest in size.

Not sure if she had to worry about the safety of Grandpa's corpse, or that of Mr Rose, Janice turned and walked back the way she'd come, whistling for Midnight halfway around the garage. He came and squeezed between her and the door-frame, getting into the garage ahead of her though she had planned to leave him outside. As she walked in, she saw Midnight rush toward the sawhorses that supported Mr Rose's casket, and, then, she was horrified to see two dark, little shapes running into the shadows near the rear of the garage. Midnight almost got one of them. Janice moved toward the corpse, keeping an eye out for more rats. She saw none and began an inspection of the area. There were some droppings on the floor near the head of Mr Rose's casket and she ran right over to get one of the brooms hanging on the wall. After she'd cleaned away the sign of desecration, she opened the lid of Grandpa's casket and checked inside, finding the tarp was intact. After checking Mr Rose's casket and finding all was well, she stood between the caskets and pondered the situation. She wasn't sure what to do. It seemed that Mr Rose's corpse

was safe and she had to go inside to call Mr Kowalski on that walkie talkie he'd left at the house. It had been one Billy had used when he was young, not one with 20 or 30 mile range, but it worked fine between the houses so long as she was on the side of the yard closest to the Kowalski's house.

Someone had to stay with the two corpses? Or some creature that could chase rats away? Midnight! He wouldn't be out here long enough to suffer from the cold and he'd enjoy chasing away rats; it'd be a game with him. Midnight acted surprised when Janice pushed him back inside the garage as he tried to follow her, but he didn't really protest, and before she'd reached the house, she heard him scrambling about. She wondered if a rat had dared to come out with Midnight around. Wishing to get back out soon, before Midnight could knock out the sawhorse supports underneath the caskets, she ran through the kitchen, seeing no one there.

She was heading down the hallway toward the stairs when she heard someone stumble and fall down a couple of stairs. Rushing that much more, she rounded the banister and was heading up the stairs toward Mrs Kowalski who was holding on to the railing for support. Sweat was pouring out through her skin, which was pale with several bright red spots. Janice ran halfway up the stairs to catch the woman and help her down despite her protests. At first, she thought that Mrs Kowalski was pretending to not need the help, but then she managed to make out the garbled words, "Don't," "near," and "all sick." Her throat was swollen almost shut.

Janice set Mrs Kowalski down on the couch and then, not sure what to do, ran upstairs; she was afraid to find the others in a similar condition. Sure enough, she found Mrs Polanski sitting against the hallway wall, drenched in sweat. Mr Worley was calling out for Mrs Polanski to bring him that glass of water so he could take his aspirin. Turning around, Janice saw the glass which had fallen from Mrs Polanski's hand when she had collapsed. Ignoring Mr Worley for the time being, she ran to her own room to fetch the walkie talkie and then ran out to Billy at the grave-sites.



## Part III

The Future Looks Promisingly Obscure



## 18 A Mission of Charity

Brother Tom felt a touch of shame as he fidgeted like a three year-old during the hour-long ride toward the distress call. A touch of shame but then he began to explore why he was fidgeting, wondering if he were fearing the harm which could come from helping sick and contagious human beings. It seemed to him that the fear was justified but it had to be conquered.

And then he thought it better to relax and just do what was right and let the fears go to the back of his heart. Or mind. Or some place inside of him.

The going was pretty good for most of the way; it was a rural area but mostly large yards and a road in decent shape. Yet, the small convoy spread out too much for Brother Tom's taste and he slowed down and let the column tighten up, and, then, he stopped. When he went back, he could see that Brother Bruce was getting pretty excited about the possibility of testing the GPS devices which were guaranteed to be accurate within the width of a human hair or something ridiculous like that. At the risk of disrupting an unbiased test, Brother Tom asked for the handset for the Internet-ready radio in Brother Bruce's truck. After connecting by voice command to the girl's location—already registered under the name 'Janice Doe', Brother Tom shook his head over the wonders of computers, software agents which seemed as smart as human operators and an Internet which still worked by way of towers even with so many of the customers and techs gone south.

After a few seconds, a husky voice was heard. Husky and hacking and hawing away. It was hard to understand the words, impossible to even guess at the sex of the person behind the voice, but finally, Brother Tom made out

the words, "... getting wood for the stove. . . . all sick, some about to die. . ." The house numbers weren't highly visible and Brother Tom was about to get some description of the house when he heard some pounding, maybe an axe or maybe a sledgehammer being used to separate wood frozen together. He spoke into the microphone, "We can hear her at the woodpile, I believe. Please stay at the radio in case we need some more guidance getting there."

With that, he returned the handset to Brother Bruce and told him, "You can soon check your micrometer estimates. We're there by the standards of human footsteps." Brother Tom turned back to his Jeep. Meanwhile, Anthony had driven past and up onto a large yard just ahead. He stopped and opened the door to lean out and shout, "I can see her." With that, Anthony and his sister, Charlene, got out and walked together to the left of the truck. Brother Tom led the other vehicles up onto the yard and beside the nearest house, and he could now see faint wisps of smoke coming from the main chimney and from a smaller chimney at the back of the house. As everyone piled out and prepared to go into action, Brother Tom motioned toward Sister Mindy, "Come on and let's see what's going on. The rest of you stay here and get ready to work once we know what we're up against."

Sister Mindy didn't look very happy as she came up to Brother Tom's side and then walked right by him in the direction of Anthony's truck. They were halfway there before they could see Anthony piling wood into a metal pull-cart alongside a slight figure who was bundled up in a red shell that must have been over some bulky layers of shirts or jackets. As he caught up to Sister Mindy, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"If this is a dangerous disease, Anthony has exposed himself and his sister to a likely carrier. And we are about to do the same. I had planned to do so, but you and most of the others should have let me out and then backed off until we found out what was wrong." She stopped and turned to look in Brother Tom's direction. "In fact, you should turn back now, unload the supplies with Pierre and Trey and then all of you should move off a bit. Now that Anthony is exposed, he can help us carry everything inside and I'm sure Charlene will

soon be inside helping the sick people. I can use my smartphone if I need to talk to you without going near you."

With that, Brother Tom fell back and turned around, thinking to himself that Mindy didn't like to talk on the phone and was more likely to send informative messages through their email network. As he walked back to the waiting group, he saw a figure pull back the heavy drapes at a window in the ell of the farmhouse, almost certainly a kitchen or pantry window. The figure at the window seemed to be an middle-aged or elderly woman. She waved weakly and he waved back, smiling as weakly as she had waved. He thought her face was a bit pinched with white spots near the lips. He tried to adopt an all-business manner when he reached the group. "Let's unload and then we'll leave Sister Connie and Sister Mindy and Anthony and Charlene here. Anthony and Charlene have already been exposed to a likely carrier." And he reached for his laptop computer, preferring that to smartphones, old-fashioned guy that he was.

And that was how things worked out. The reluctant leader took up residence along with Pierre in a nearby house, belonging to a family named Kowalski according to Anthony's call. The house was cold. The three family members had all rushed over to help the sick people and then had gotten sick themselves. That was about three days back by Brother Tom's reckoning, but the girl had been confused. No wonder. Likely it was that the recent days had been a blur of exhausting activity as she tried to take care of a house full of sick people while also having to protect two corpses from rats or so she seemed to have said. As far as Brother Tom could tell, one of those corpses was that of the grandfather of Janice.

While Pierre went to fetch wood for the central furnace, Brother Tom scrounged up as simple a meal as he could, settling on eggs and ham. As soon as Pierre came in from his labors, it suddenly struck Brother Tom that there were fresh eggs, not powdered. "Is there a chicken coop out there, Pierre?"

"Up against the wall near the wood-bin. Some of the heat is vented through. The chickens are a little bit cold."

“Have they been fed recently?”

“An automatic feeder. I replaced the empty barrel of food with one of the ones in the garage. They have a really nice hand-truck, as good as the ones I’ve seen on big delivery trucks.”

Brother Tom’s mind raced from the possibility of inviting these people to join the Community over to the chances they might be willing to sell some chickens and then to blankness as his eyes rested upon his laptop computer, set up to receive wireless messages by way of the communications center Brother Bruce and Trey had set up in the young men’s dormitory. Brother Tom’s laptop didn’t have all the capabilities of the removable computer in Brother Bruce’s truck, but it was more than adequate. The community was known to the people still at UMass and, soon enough, Brother Bruce, back at the Community, had arranged for a connection from the Kowalski’s house over to the Davis’ house through the facilities at the old UMass campus. It seemed to him a strange way to communicate with people only one rural house-lot away, but it worked.

A short message came through from Mindy saying only, “Virus. May not be apocalyptic stuff though it seems to hit even healthy people pretty hard.” And then... Nothing for the longest time. No biff, no message-puppy, for at least a couple hours after Sister Mindy had entered the sickhouse with her helpers. And then, while Brother Tom was sporadically entering notes into his computer diary, a little signal flashed on the screen. It was, in fact, an animated image of a retriever carrying a piece of mail and running as if to come out of the screen. Tom felt fear. Suppose they had run into a truly terrible disease? Had he sent some of his loved ones, some of the most important members of the Community to their death on a false mission of mercy?

Brother Tom was soon reading:

Brother Tom,

Things aren’t quite as bad as we might have thought. I think it all began with a virus nasty enough to kill even the occasional healthy

person. The three older people still alive are perhaps suffering from opportunistic infections in their lungs and sinuses, as is Mrs Kowalski who seems to have been terribly run down from trying to run her own house and help nurse the people over here. Mr Davis, the grandfather of Janice, the girl you talked to, was bed-ridden for a while before he died a week ago or so.

By later tonight, we may tell you to come over, with the understanding you might end up in bed with very bad cold symptoms for a few days. It's around, and we might as well get it over with.

Sister Mindy

After just a few seconds of thought, he sent back the message:

Sister Mindy

Why shouldn't we just head over right now. You're all going to wear out, and we can relieve you later this night so you can get some rest. Maybe the people off-duty, and those recuperating, should come over here.

Brother Tom

It was nearly 15 minutes before the retriever came running out of the screen once more.

Brother Tom,

First, please go back to the Community and get:

1. some bedpans,
2. some cans of chicken broth,
3. blankets,

4. clean sheets, and
5. easy to prepare food for the healthy and recovering people.

There might be some broth, blankets, and clean sheets over at the Kowalski's house.

Sister Mindy

P.S. See you soon and don't worry. I'm fine, and so are the rest of us.

A couple hours later, Brother Tom was at the sickhouse, carrying in a box of supplies. He was by himself, having left Pierre to help Trey and Brother Bruce work on setting up the equipment for making furniture. Setting down the box, he opened the door and found himself looking into a kitchen. And he smelled something cooking and thought it to be chicken soup.

"Could you please close the door? It's pretty cold outside."

Jumping to it, Brother Tom picked up the box and walked in, closing the door with his butt. He came in and set the box of sheets upon the table before turning his full attention upon the slender girl at the stove. Thirteen? About that. She didn't look comfortable being watched by a strange man, though she likely could have guessed who he was. After all, she'd not protested when he'd come in. Rather had she continued to stir the large pot.

"Chicken soup?"

"Yes." And she didn't turn, as if intensely interested in her work at the stove.

Anthony came in, all dressed for outside work, and asked "Brother Tom, do you need help? Janice," and a nod confirmed the slight figure at the stove, "usually does the heavy work around here, but she promised to feed me."

"Janice?" At that, she let herself look Brother Tom directly in the eyes, though her smile was still shy and threatening to run away. "Do you have a last name?"

"Davis, but things like that don't seem so important any more."

With a solemn tone, Brother Tom warned her, "I hope you have a lot of energy. It takes three full-time cooks over in our community to feed Anthony. And he's not even the biggest eater we have." When she smiled a little more freely, he asked, "Your grandfather owned this house?" When she nodded, Brother Tom added, "I'm sorry about his death."

She looked back to the pot and said, "Probably it was for the best. He'd been suffering with cancer for a while. He told me it was all over his insides. His liver and stomach and intestines. It was hurting him a lot."

"It's still sad when anyone dies. Even those we expect to see again in Heaven." After a short pause, he followed Anthony who was already out the door. As he walked out, he wondered if he had just been making polite talk or... Was something like religious faith returning. He'd been only 15 or so when he'd given up on church services, just after he'd been admitted to membership of his Congregationalist Church. Over the years since, his faith had... He wasn't sure if it had died or just gone to sleep.

It took only a couple trips to the truck, which was parked upon the lawn and near the door, to bring in all that Sister Mindy had requested. By the third trip in, the boxes containing sheets and bedpans had disappeared. Brother Tom had just taken his parka off when Charlene came in, smiled and waved, and then pulled out another large pot. Soon, she had poured in a couple quarts or so of water and set it to warm up. Smiling at him, she said, "Haven't got any coffeepots or tea-kettles big enough for a houseful of people who are starting to recover." In a quieter voice, she added, "At least, most of them are starting to recover."

Anthony came in and set down a couple cans of ground-coffee and boxes of tea-bags of various sorts. Janice pulled a couple of pitchers out of the cupboard and set to filling them with water. She set them on the countertop and Anthony grabbed them and walked out as he was saying, "Giving a bunch of sick people lots of water isn't so hard but it's a full-time job to get them to the bathroom."

Brother Tom excused himself and set forth to explore the house, which looked to have four rooms on each floor. Connie Artanian was asleep on a couch in the living room. Looking around, he saw no television but a large bookcase, packed so full that books were piled in front of, or on top of, other books. After walking over, Brother Tom found himself looking at an odd mixture of books. There was a textbook on Euclidean geometry, another on intermediate algebra. There were a variety of *National Geographic* books on natural disasters and ice age animals and rain-forest ecology. A large number of the books were novels, largely of the eighteenth century classics ranging from *A Tale of Two Cities* to *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. There were books on composting and growing tomatoes, a collection of the letters of George Washington. The neighbors Marcus Aurelius and Madame Bovary were meditating and dealing with the small details of life. Melville's heretic with an attitude sat beside Bellow's heretic without a spine, one hunting with a harpoon for what lay behind mere matter and one passively waiting for a God, apparently fearing the Almighty did exist but lacked a spine.

As he turned and headed for the hallway to go upstairs, Brother Tom's head was filled with competing ideas, all jostling for a place. Doctrines of the Triune God—he couldn't believe but wished it were possible for God also to be a social entity; theories that ethical philosophies had failed by emphasizing our charitable acts toward others and not recognizing that we are all, at various times in our lives, beneficiaries of others; the anti-corporatist teachings of Adam Smith and those few of his followers who followed the master in believing human freedom to be more important than perverse forms of crude prosperity.

"Could you go with me to the kitchen to get some more cups of tea and coffee, Brother Tom?"

Charlene's request was more a gentle command. Brother Bruce had once called her *She Who is Not to Be Refused*. A lot of truth lay in that description, but, after all, Brother Bruce was the same one who blushed in the presence of these pretty young women.

And, as was to be expected, Brother Tom didn't deny the busy young lady; he helped her in her errand of mercy, letting her balance the tray with most of the mugs of hot liquid while he carried a couple of mugs and a container of milk he'd brought from the Community. Once on the second floor, Charlene walked to the end of the hallway, making a motion with her head which Brother Tom interpreted as meaning he should bring his load into the first room. It was a large bedroom, perhaps once the room of the young woman downstairs judging by the collection of dolls in the display-case. They were mostly ethnic dolls. Right away, he could distinguish the Highlander in her kilt, a black watch, which was actually a military tartan and not a clan tartan. No matter, she fit in well with the Amerind in her leather dress decorated with beads and with the Japanese girl in her kimono. The case itself was a piece of art.

Turning more directly into the room, he handed one mug of tea to Sister Mindy who brought it to the lips of an elderly woman. He set the other mug down on a desk. There were two other beds in the room, one occupied by another elderly woman and the third by a middle-aged woman, certainly Mrs Kowalski of the well-stocked refrigerator. He picked the mug of tea up again and offered it first to the elderly woman who smiled and nodded her head before asking, "Coffee?"

"No, Charlene has some mugs of coffee but this is tea."

"I think Mrs Kowalski..." Wheezing a little, she continued, "I think she would like the tea, but I'll wait for coffee."

With those words, she went into a fit of coughing, bringing an admonition from Sister Mindy, "Please don't talk too much, Mrs Polanski. You're recovering nicely and you shouldn't tempt a relapse."

"Why are they crowded into this one room?"

"Janice did it to make it easier to care for them. As it is, she has the father and son next door and Mr Worley down the hall. She should get some sort of medal for keeping the place running, though Billy Kowalski didn't get as sick as the adults, and he is up and partly functional for a few hours a day. Probably going to recover completely in the next few days."

“This was a cold?”

“A hum-dinger of a virus of some sort, but not as bad as something like that flu they had during World War I. Mrs Tetreault and Mr Worley have pneumonia, though I don’t know if the virus invaded or a bacteria took advantage of the patient’s weakness. I wish I had a laboratory to analyze the phlegm coming up from their lungs.” Sister Mindy nodded back at the woman who’d been drinking. “This is Mrs Tetreault. Mrs Polanski has a much more mild pneumonia. I suspect she just needs another day or two of bed rest before she can start moving around.”

Brother Tom looked over and returned the woman’s smile. “I’m Brother Tom Macpherson.”

“I guess...” Mrs Polanski’s voice dwindled away to a wheeze and then silence before she was able to continue, “We have you to thank for gathering these angels of mercy.”

With a laugh, he dared to disillusion the woman, “They chose me and pushed me toward founding the Community. I have enough trouble seeing far enough to lead us into tomorrow.”

“He’s far too modest, Mrs Polanski, but you should be resting and not talking.”

“I’d like to ask just one question, if I may. A short one, Sister Mindy and Mrs Polanski might not even know the answer.” Walking back toward the display-case, he opened it to confirm that the doors hung with perfect truth. “Do you know who made this?”

With a proud smile, Mrs Polanski replied, “Janice.”

Brother Tom started and then he grinned and turned back to meet Sister Mindy’s face, all twisted up with suspicion. Mrs Kowalski asked, “Why are you so darned happy about that.”

“Because we’re trying to start a furniture manufacturing operation and we have few people who know how to use power-tools really well. I think even Trey would have trouble making something as nice as this display-case.”

After a moment of thought, Sister Mindy somewhat punctured his joy by pointing out, "There's a big difference between making one of these and knowing how to efficiently and profitably make a dozen at a time."

Not denying that, Brother Tom still remained happy at a discovery of such highly developed skills. He turned back to the patients. Mrs Polanski had shut her eyes and, apparently, drifted off to a peaceful sleep. Mrs Tetreault was resting in a nearly sitting position because of all the pillows stuffed behind her back. He was guessing the poor woman would have had a breathing tube inserted if such were available. In the other bed, Mrs Kowalski, a sturdy woman of heavy but attractive Slavic features, looked to be trying—with little success—to rest. He was thinking the woman was trying even harder to wish away the next few days so that she could be up and about her work.

While he was looking out the window toward a shed, he heard Mrs Polanski start to cough in a way that made him think she was choking. Sister Mindy rose and moved to the side of the woman's bed and motioned Tom to the other side. Together, they lifted the woman enough so that Sister Mindy could put a couple of pillows behind her back that she might be sitting up.

As they had finished adjusting Mrs Polanski's pillows, Charlene came in the door and Sister Mindy motioned her over. "Sipping a very small amount of the coffee would probably do her as much good as anything."

Charlene sat on the side of the bed and lifted the mug to the woman's lips.

Before he left, Mrs Polanski managed to gasp out, "I though you said I'm recovering."

In her official, calming voice, Sister Mindy told her, "You are recovering, but some phlegm is coming up from your lungs and some is coming down from your sinuses and it's meeting in your bronchial tubes." She had started to turn to her next task before adding, "We just have to keep clearing out the junk."

Brother Tom happened to catch Mrs Kowalski's eyes and the woman shook her head, though he thought she was maybe just signaling him that things looked bad for the other woman, Mrs Tetreault. But he didn't know and he was wondering how they could clear the junk out of the lungs of an immobile

elderly woman when they had no good medical equipment.

He left and walked down the hallway. As he stood in the entryway to the next room, he saw a man sleeping. The man looked pale and puffy but not close to the grave for sure. A teenaged boy was sitting and reading a magazine. He looked up and saw Brother Tom. With a smile, he rose and came toward Brother Tom. At first he put his hand out, but then he sniffled and had to turn back into the room to grab a tissue. After he'd blown his nose, he came back to apologize. "Sorry... I probably shouldn't offer you my hand. I'm actually pretty good now. I was up and starting to help Janice with the cleaning and cooking when you folks showed up. She didn't let me go outside to help with the wood, though."

"She sounds like an impressive young lady."

"You bet. Just the sort of girl I want to marry some day."

"And she's a talented woodworker as well." There was a pause before Brother Tom asked, "Billy?"

The young man nodded and said, "Janice is pretty good with wood, though she still has some trouble seeing the grain inside a piece of timber before she cuts it open. You can waste a lot of wood or a lot of time if you can't look inside the wood. My father said it's the same with sculptors. He said the really great ones look at a block of stone and can tell if the statue is already in there. If it's not, it'll be a waste of time trying to force the stone into a shape which it's not prepared to take on."

Brother Tom knew his eyes were widening and lighting up, but all he said was, "So you and your father are good woodworkers?"

"Dad can take down a tree this morning and by tomorrow afternoon, he'll be setting aside wood for a real nice dining room table so it can season. The woodworking will be done in a few days once he can get to it again and then it just has to be stained and maybe varnished."

"Is he okay, I mean..."

"Well, he's not going to be taking down any trees for a little while, but he's okay. Dad and me didn't get really sick, not like Mom or the others here. But

we got sick enough so we could barely move or stay awake for a few days. It felt like a flu I had about five years ago. I guess it maybe helped to kill Mr Davis, Janice's grandfather, but he was in real bad shape anyway. Had cancer all through his gut." Bill ran his hand over his mid-section, not slender but most likely solid from what could be seen of his neck and shoulders and arms.

"There anyone else up here?" Brother Tom motioned up the hallway in the direction of two rooms he'd not yet checked, three if he were to count the open bathroom at the end of the hallway.

Billy turned down the hallway and said, "Yes, but only in one of the rooms. The room on the right was Mr Davis' room. Janice wouldn't put anyone else in there. I mean, she would have if we'd had to. But everybody was pretty sick. Even Dad and me were starting to feel run down when we got word Mom had gotten real sick. We rushed over and it turned out we were sick too. Mr Worley's in the other room. A strange old man. Don't know how he ever got along in life. Well, I guess he had some sort of office job where he processed papers just as he was told to do and he did that boring job for 50 years. Dad said companies used to pay people decently for doing jobs that were so boring that no one with a healthy soul could have stood it."

Brother Tom smiled. "And Mr Worley's going to make it also?"

"I guess so. I went in and played spades with him last night, but he gets pretty bad in the mornings sometimes. That nurse... Sister Mindy?" Brother Tom nodded and Billy continued, "My mom says she's a good one, though they might be fighting if Mom had the strength. They both got their own strong ideas on how to do things. Anyway, she told me that respiratory problems tend to be worse in the morning. Sometimes sick people are their best in the evening."

A half-hour later, Brother Tom was draining a pot of spaghetti when Charlene and Sister Mindy came into the kitchen. Charlene winked and said, "That's what I like to see. A man getting a hot meal on the table after I've put in a hard day's work."

"I only boiled the spaghetti. Believe me, if you ever ate something I cooked,

you'd understand why men go off to work and it's women who stay in the kitchen."

"Not anymore, Sweetie." Charlene winked again. Her blue eyes were so brightly blue that if they'd not been so clear, he would have feared she was coming down with a fever. "Nowadays, we all have to pitch in because the work is all done where we live." After a sigh, she added, "Though I might not ever find a place as comfortable as my parents' house in the old days."

Brother Tom sat down with the three women and bowed his head. Charlene had started to reach for the toasted bread, not having internalized all the habits of the Community yet, but Janice bowed her head at nearly the same time as the other two. She had apparently been raised right by her grandpa, and he wondered what had happened to her parents. He listened without hearing too clearly as Sister Mindy thanked the Lord for His blessings. It was only a minute or so later that Anthony and Billy came in, already dressed to ride with Brother Tom to the Community to pick up some cooked roasts and other food.

## 19 The Community Grows

Janice and the others who'd been at her grandfather's house were integrated into the bigger community relatively quickly but Brother Tom was growing worried at the increased graying of the community. And his worries continued even as Father Francis brought ten teenagers and twenty-somethings into the community, good young adults who'd not had such problems as to leave them badly injured or scarred in body or mind or heart. Most of them had been living with parents or grandparents or other adults who had died or had aged to become a burden upon the one or two juveniles or young adults—the seven aged adults still alive had come to the community as well as one man with multiple sclerosis who was only in his 40s but already needing at least a walker and sometimes a wheelchair.

The day came when Sister Jenny turned her eyes from the setting of the winter sun and said to Brother Tom, "Isn't it about time we choose a name? After all, we've buried three members, married five young couples and one older couple, and have been enriched by the birth of two children with at least five more on the way."

Brother Tom smiled and turned to look at Emily standing in her playpen and looking out the window at her parents. Mrs Polanski reached down to get the infant to wave but, at nine months, Emily thought it was a game of patty-cake and turned her attention from her parents to her babysitter. The proud father laughed and, out of the corner of his eye, saw Jennie smile gently. And then he sighed and said, "Have you noticed that only some of us, mostly the people who first gathered here, are called 'Brother' or 'Sister', despite the

fact that we have so many Catholics, some entering the Church because of Father Francis?"

"And some of those Catholics would like this community to become a third-order Franciscan community."

"The House of the Rising Brother Sun?"

As Brother Tom laughed, Sister Jennie looked at him and asked, "Are you thinking about Sister Moon lying on her back as Brother Sun rises?"

"Something like that."

Later that evening, a knock came on the door of the apartment of Brother Tom and Sister Jennie.

As Jennie led Janice and Trey into the room and sat them on the couch, Brother Tom was pleased to see the admiring glances the young lady was discretely casting at the young man. There had been some turmoil in the community when some of the young men and women had formed couples: Pierre Boucher with Rae Santos and Ed McCray with Abigail Neely who had chosen him the first day he came to the community. Brother Tom had heard that Janice had been quite upset when Billy Kowalski had hooked up with Tricia Baker, though it had seemed to Brother Tom that Billy and Janice had been more like playful siblings than a romantic couple in the making. In any case, there had been a more relaxed feeling among the young adults since Trey Waters had begun to court Janice.

Brother Tom's attention returned to the others in the room as Janice was saying, "So, Father Francis agreed to marry us in three months if he talks to us a few times and discerns that we're making the proper sort of commitment."

Sister Jennie nodded at Trey and then looked once again at the diamond ring on Janice's finger. "Where did you get this? It looks to be a very good quality ring."

Janice hesitated and looked at Trey who nodded his okay. She then glanced quickly at Brother Tom and then back to Sister Jennie before saying, "Mr Rose had left his wife's diamond ring and both of their wedding bands in an

envelope with a couple of nice watches and about \$12,000. My name was on the envelope..."

Trey interjected, "I had no objections to using the ring since I have no way to get one. Under our circumstances, I'm not ashamed of that. And the Community seemed to be doing okay, so she kept the money up to now to see if she would be staying or would need it to move somewhere else. She'd like to give the watches to Billy and his father and the nice woman's watch to Charlene, but we're going to split the money between the Community and Father Francis, if you don't mind." After Brother Tom nodded, Trey added, "I kept some back to buy the cloth for a wedding gown and Mrs Kowalski is going to make it for Janice with some help from Mrs Polanski and Rae."

He seemed a bit embarrassed and Brother Tom decided to rise to congratulate the young man and young woman and to thank them for the gift of the money. They were both strong, physically and morally, and would seem to be a good match though they'd only met five months ago. And Janice wasn't even sixteen... Brother Tom thought to himself, "Under these circumstances, men and women will marry earlier. I'm sure other old ways will return." And he quickly looked around to make sure he'd not spoken out loud before assuring Janice that she had done nothing wrong to keep what Mr Rose gave her.

It was another four months before the community was gathered as Janice was confirmed in the Catholic Church and then she and Trey were married. After a banquet, the couple headed for their new townhouse which Bruce and the other men had quickly finished ahead of the other units in the new building. Those who rose before dawn were able to look out their windows and see Trey and Janice Waters drive off, heading toward the town of Jenkesville, where Trey had once spent some summers with a great-uncle and great-aunt. They were to stay with Brother Tom's sister, Bella, for a few days and nights at her pondside house and then would return with the recently widowed woman who would be moving to the Community along with her youngest child, Morgan, a pretty 14 year-old girl. The other two Phelps children had gone down to Tennessee to work in an uncle's furniture wholesaling business and that had

been promising for the Community as that had put Tom back in contact with Bill Phelps who had promised to take some samples from the Community's furniture business. Real orders might be coming after he checked the quality of the pieces.

## Part IV

### A Grizzly Bear and an Olde Yankee



## 20 A Stroll in an Alien Environment

Trey's voice wavered a bit as he asked, "Think Aunt Bella's going to be ready on time tomorrow morning?"

Janice thought it odd but also nice that Trey lost his confidence when he spoke to her. After all, he was confident enough to take down trees near buildings or to go into the woods to rescue the tomcat, Rumpelstiltskin, from a bear which had treed him. But a wee bit afraid of little Janice?

"I remember driving down this road once with Mama. It was the Mass Pike. Can't believe it was ever a busy highway."

And it was an undriveable disaster now. There were deep cracks and much of the pavement was partly heaved out of the horizontal.

Janice found her left hand firmly in the grip of Trey's hand, so strong yet oddly small for such a sturdy fellow. Firmly but gently in his grip and she leaned comfortably against him as they surveyed the damaged Mass Turnpike. As they looked further down the road, toward a town called Palmer as Bella had told them the other day, they saw someone looking back. From a distance, he looked young but likely as tall as Trey though a bit more slender. He was carrying some sort of rifle loosely, right hand holding the stock near the trigger and the business end resting in the crook of his left arm.

"He doesn't look as if he's about to shoot."

Janice responded, "He looks as if he knows how to handle that rifle and can swing it and shoot at a second's notice. And it looks to be a .22 hunting rifle, so he's probably just carrying it for safety or to hunt squirrels or deer depending on the ammo he's got, but field-dressing deer without a nearby

truck and with only one guy to carry it..." She was silent for a few seconds as she continued to examine the approaching fellow and then she told Trey, "In any case, he's not carrying anything like a couple military-quality pieces Grandpa had. Billy or Brother Bruce stored them somewhere. M16s." With that, she reached inside her parka and patted the M9 pistol in its shoulder-holster and hoped that Trey, sometimes naive and trusting, had brought his. The movement hadn't escaped the attention of the young man facing her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Trey had also noticed her dumb move, but he kept a straight face and responded, "Yeah. I know a little about that stuff and a lot about how to use hunting rifles and I know that Father Francis and others say there are a lot of dangerous, disordered young men around nowadays and some of them make a living in the old-fashioned way of bandits."

The young man was still standing still, watching Trey and Janice who were now also stopped. There was perhaps 100 yards between them and Janice knew that distance was hardly practice for a good rifleman. And she looked again and saw a scope on the rifle, so he didn't even need great vision to hit each of them.

And he began to saunter in their direction but Janice thought he wasn't really moving casually so much as giving the impression while keeping a very close watch on her and Trey...

And he stopped and she watched as his slender body seemed to tighten a great deal. He even seemed to lift his head, not so much as if he were looking above; it seemed to her he was sniffing something and it was something he didn't like. Then he looked back toward Janice and Trey and waved before walking toward them again. She thought he was fighting to hold himself back; did he want to run and get to them fast? He was only about 20 yards away when she could see the grimace on his face, fifteen?, as he said in a voice not too loud, "Grizzly. There's some carrion-eating creature around and Dad and I saw giant bear tracks last week." As he came up close, he added, "We thought he'd moved on, but doesn't smell that way. Smells like a carrion-eater. They

absorb the smell of rot."

Trey was keeping his attention riveted upon the young man as he said, "Any bear can be a carrion-eater and can smell..."

And suddenly did a slight breeze bring the smell of three day-old dead things to Janice and Trey.

Janice was staring at the young stranger even as she felt a little nauseous at the stench of death; she had realized the young stranger wasn't 15 or so as she'd first thought. Closeup, he seemed about 13. A tall 13 and he looked as if he was made to be lean but probably a powerful lean when he grew into his body.

The stranger nodded to the north side of the Pike and in back of Janice and Trey—to the west. "That's where he is, no more than a hundred, fifty yards away from us and definitely stalking you two. Now, us three."

It was Janice who suggested, "We better get moving slowly toward some sort of shelter," but she couldn't imagine quite what that might mean. Yet, the two young men seemed to take it as a serious proposition.

After kind of mumbling, "I'm Josh, Joshua," the young man hesitated but a second to hear "I'm Janice and this is Trey," and Josh turned to lead the way eastward.

It was Janice who suggested, "Let's stay calm and maybe move a bit slowly. Don't want to give a big predator the idea of chasing us. We aren't going to win that race."

"No," and, patting his rifle, Josh added, "We aren't going to do much damage to even a big black bear with this varmint gun and the low-charge .22s I've got on me, unless I make a damned good shot. Follow me. I'll head toward my Pa. He's not far and he's got a real rifle."

Janice heard a bit of confidence in Josh's voice and wondered if he were claiming to be a truly good shot or if he were merely cocky. Or maybe he was confident in his father. If they reached him before the bear caught them.



## 21 The Bear

As the three young people headed south off the Turnpike, Josh gave a signal and then broke into a lope with Janice and Trey following him as best they could along a sidewalk headed more or less south though curving a bit toward the east.

That made Janice nervous to think that Josh was taking on the danger of aggravating the predatory, “chase anything that flees” instincts of a big bear; he must be fearing that the bear was on the prowl for real and... She wondered if the beast was going around them to set up an ambush and she wondered if the beast was a grizzly. A big black bear would be quite up to the task of killing at least one of them... Janice hadn’t been raised by her grandpa to flee when others were in great danger and she hoped that Trey and Josh had also been raised right. They needed to stick together in this tough spot.

Josh was looking about nervously and Trey had moved over to be near Janice. The three of them were moving along a curved road with houses on every lot. Abandoned houses. Abandoned backyards. And some of the frontyards had growths large enough to provide cover for even a big bear.

They were moving along a fairly clear area which had once been the sidewalk but Josh moved out onto the broken asphalt and looked to be sure that Janice and Trey followed him. That path gave them a little bit more room and a little better view of what was ahead but Janice knew she wasn’t going to be able run very fast on this road with big cracks and big chunks turned and sticking up into the air.

Soon, they passed into an intersection as their road curved into another.

Janice looked ahead to see a couple of side-roads and more areas of possible predatory ambush. In a few steps, she could see the signs of a decaying gas station and she thought the road they were on ran into still another road, perhaps a much bigger road. As they passed the gas station, Janice was starting to feel surprised every time they took another step without being attacked.

She remembered something Grandpa had told her and heard herself saying out loud, "You don't mess with a hungry bear." Though she'd said it quietly, Josh's head snapped right around and he shot her a warning through his intensely alert eyes. Trey put his arm around Janice's shoulder and they found themselves moving onto the larger road. Yet, the environment hadn't changed. There were houses or stores on every building lot and those buildings were surrounded with heavy brush and small trees.

The bigger road was a bit smoother. It looked as if someone had run one of those big rollers down it and the fleeing young people were making good progress. Janice found herself traveling down the middle of the road with Trey to her left and Josh to her right. As they were passing an area of especially heavy brush, she saw movement out of the corner of her right eye and turned to see Josh drop to his knee. As he prepared to shoot, he called out, "Run!" He got off a couple of shots before he fell into the shadow of a big, big, brownish bear. Janice saw the fur being ruffled on the side of the bear's throat and then on his shoulder and she stifled a scream as she realized the bullets had struck a glancing blow and bounced off the grizzly.

The bear swung and Josh was able to dodge the blow but he fell and smacked his head on an upjutting piece of asphalt. Before the bear could turn and go after him, Trey shot by her, screamed, "Run, Janice," and picked up Josh's rifle. He'd not gotten off a shot before the bear smacked him with the back of its paw. Janice could see right off that there was a vicious gash on Trey's scalp but not the fatal blow he would have likely gotten if his six-inch claws had met mere human flesh.

She moved forward, determined to grab the rifle and make any effort she

could to drive the bear away from the two young men when she suddenly heard a whistling sound and saw the bear's head jerk back. There was another whistle and she saw that second bullet enter the underside of bear's head and then a third whistle and she imagined the third bullet had made a big hole as it went out the top of the bear's skull. As she was taking her first step toward Trey and Josh, she turned and saw a man coming up fast. He was a tall and lean man, just as Josh might look in another 25 or 30 years.

Janice went to Trey's side and the man set down his rifle as he knelt and leaned over to examine Josh's injured head. And that reminded her to be careful about moving Trey even a little before checking his wounds. He was moaning and moving a little. Janice whispered, "Trey, you'll be alright but please stop moving. We'll get you someplace where you'll be taken care of, but please stop moving."

She had seen that Trey had a blood-matted hunk of hair on the right side of his head and the scalp was pretty raw, but the skin wasn't torn away too badly. He opened his eyes and they were glazed but they didn't seem so bad as to indicate brain damage. But she didn't know. She'd learned some first-aid from Grandpa and a little more from Mr Rose but she didn't know a lot and right now she was thinking she didn't know anything at all.

A shadow passed over her and she looked up to see the tall stranger was crouching to examine Trey. He leaned over, nearly touching the top of his head to Janice's breast and looked at Trey's wound before raising his head as he said, "It doesn't look too bad but we'll get him and Josh back to our house. I'll put in a call to Dr Collins and he'll likely be by before dark. Maybe earlier if he's not out on calls."

Janice was guessing this was a man ever serious, a man always dealing with problems and not given much to smiling or laughing. The phrase, "a man of sorrows," came to her from somewhere, even as she heard the man talking to someone, apparently the doctor himself. After describing the the injuries of the two young men, he said, "We'll have them both at my house by then," and she was hoping that meant the doctor was real close.

The man returned his cellphone to a pocket inside his parka and looked up at Janice, surprising her with a gentle and somewhat shy smile. “I’m Horace Tompkins and that other young man is my son, Josh. He’s hurt a bit worse than this fellow, but I don’t think either one is hurt too bad.” After a pause, he added, “I think they both might have minor concussions and they need treatment for their scalp wounds, but...”

Janice thought he looked to be very worried and she heard her own voice as if far away, “I’m Janice Waters and this is Trey Waters. He’s my husband. We’ve been married just...” Her voice cracked before she could tell Horace it was just a week.

Horace looked at her as if he were trying to see inside of her and take her measure. Mr Kowalski sometimes did that with people until he knew them well, and so did Billy. It didn’t bother her. Much.

He reached out and squeezed her left hand but only said, “You look a little young to be getting married.”

“I’m old enough and Trey is already doing a man’s work up at the Community.”

Horace looked as if he wanted to ask at least one other question, but he rose and said, “You feel safe enough staying here with Trey while I get Josh to my house? It’s just five blocks away. I’ll return and bring your husband over.”

“We’ll be alright for a while. Will the doctor be right over to take care of Josh and Trey?”

“He’s just a half-mile away. He’s on foot, with only a small medical kit in a backpack, but I have plenty medical supplies.” He started to rise but then asked, “You know how to use a serious rifle? A .44 Magnum bear-gun?”

She nodded as she said, “Grandpa taught me guns and a couple of times, I used one of his M16s.” She pulled back her unzipped parka to reveal the M9. “This was one of Grandpa’s handguns, though it wasn’t made for killing bears. Trey might have his on as well.”

The man smiled gently and told her, “I’ll leave you my rifle, just in case. And check to see if your husband has his M9 on. If he does, take it out before

I carry him over to my house."

It struck Janice that this was a man of great confidence and she could only hope it was justified. She felt a bit of relief and watched as the tall and lean man lifted his son gently, carrying like a fragile child. With a nod, he took a few steps, going past Janice before turning and saying, "My rifle's got a nearly full cartridge, but I doubt you'll need it in the half-hour or less before I get back."

Janice nodded and asked, "You can recognize an M9 at a quick glance." Horace Tompkins nodded and said, "I was a Green Beret combat engineer."



## 22 Horace and His House

Janice felt herself ready for combat. She had her M9 in her shoulder-holster, Trey's stuck in the waist of her pants, and was carrying both rifles, Horace's big guy on a shoulder strap, as she followed the man she was thinking to be a true Yankee. She wasn't sure why. He just reminded her of several men she'd known, including a Rolls-Royce expert who'd been both dour and a true sweetheart. She liked the way Horace was carrying Trey, as gently as he had carried his own son. And she saw from the way he carried her 180-pound husband that Horace was even stronger than she would have guessed.

After Janice had followed Horace for about ten minutes, she looked ahead and saw a hill up ahead and wondered why they hadn't flattened it to put up some houses in this downtown region of Jenkesville. A few more steps and she was thinking something fantastic: that hill was Horace's house. The mound took up the north half of a town block, an area probably once occupied by eight houses or a few more. And it wasn't just a mound. It had things sticking up, things that looked to Janice sort of like those solar lights people used to put on their patios except these had big panels. The mound that was maybe a house also had a lot of dark spots that hinted of entries and exits for human beings or for air. And she wondered if those things that looked like big solar lights were entrances for light to get inside that mound. Maybe it was like a cave inside? And maybe it wasn't?

As if shocked, Janice had a sudden thought. Horace Tompkins was the crazy man Aunt Bella had talked about. The man who ran asphalt rollers down roads rarely used and also kept up a fleet of excavators and tractors to

move all sorts of debris from areas no longer used for human purposes. The man who had built a big underground house. The man who was waiting for the return of the mastodons now that an ice age had come.

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[To be continued in *The Return of the Mastodons*.]

## Colophon

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