

# Dust

a novel by

Billy Lee Harman

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Billy Lee Harman  
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For Rosa Parks,  
the hero of my time,  
and for Rachel Corrie,  
for the children.

And now with a mighty dust, and an infinite sound  
of horns and tambours, which came filling the valley, the  
first army of the infidels made its appearance, horses  
neighing, and a thousand pennons flying in the air.

The Battle of Roncesvalle  
*Bulfinch's Mythology*

And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say,  
Peace to this house.

Luke 10:5

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## Chapter 1

### A Tale of Two Cities

Time was good then, with Theresa and Mikey and excellent Oliver. Mikey and Oliver tacked those bottle-caps to their gymmies and danced, danced in the street. Theresa, she sang in doorways. Me, I just tagged along. They let me.

Rain or shine, we worked and played anywhere. It's funny how kids love rain, other folks complaining and telling them they don't have enough sense to get in out of it. Kids just get out there in it, get soaked with the thought of catching a cold just a vague curiosity. The rain, however wild, lays a cool calm, helps things shine

So time was good in New Orleans, with all that rain there. It was good then, as it had been before, at other times in the centuries of that settlement. It was wild and free and sad as it all shined in hearts, hearts like excellent Oliver's and Mikey's and Theresa's and mine. Sometimes we didn't know what to do, in all that rain.

We lived in the projects, in the one where Storyville used to be. But that's not as bad as it may sound, that being then and this being now. Storyville was gone, little left of it anywhere, except in history and minds like Oliver's Earth father's, remembering the Storyville days when King Oliver's trumpet lorded over even the child Satchmo.

And the projects were new then, no crackheads yet pillaging the plumbing for scrap metal to sell. Satchmo, Louis Armstrong, the Dixieland trumpeter, named maybe for a French king, maybe for the sun king Louis XIV who gave this world ballet, or maybe for the crusader king Louis IX for whom the cathedral in New Orleans is named, maybe trumpeted best why we were here and how Storyville might never end, as an introduction to a recording of his of a song about “What a Wonderful World” Earth is.

“It ain’t the world that’s so bad,” said Satchmo. “It’s what we’re doing to it.”

Huey Long, governor of Louisiana, calling himself the king fish, built the projects as a democratic project of his Democrat political party, and he built Charity hospital also for the poor of New Orleans.

Later, whatever the initial spirit, the projects and the hospital would be left to go to hell in a hand basket. But, then, in our New Orleans childhood, the projects were new, and full of hope. Economic equality seemed dawning, evening up everyone with us poor. Maybe to bring us into the fold.

And, of course, we didn’t see ourselves as poor, as hardly any child thinks he or she is poor, all children finding themselves the centers of their lives, in the middle of all classes. And, by God, we were in fact middle-class, in the middle of New Orleans, in the middle of America, in the middle of history, unfolding around us. We sang and danced in our chains in the middle of America’s music. And we were on our way to Motown, upstream from downriver. The music carried us like wind and rain.

We had come far. We travel the universe, doing what we can do, on planets and in other kinds of places where things are headed toward hell in a handbasket. We had been to Earth several

times, I as Lao Zi to try to bring peace to the Mongol warlords, Mikey as Muhammad to send faith in life to the Philistines, Oliver as Moses to bring the same to the children of Israel. Theresa had been Joan of Arc, to do the same for the French, and of course did well. It was she who chose to land in New Orleans this trip, having been *la pucelle d'Orleans*. She was curious about the French of Tom Paine's common sense.

Mikey and Oliver also had French memories to test. They had worked together as Orlando and Oliver with Charlemagne, trying to temper Mikey's inspiration of the Saracens against the followers of Joshua. Mikey and Oliver were always getting killed, and they always did well. Theresa didn't like dying, and she did well.

So we were a diverse group, come to try again to bring peace to this diverse world. And the song Theresa most liked to sing in those doorways, as the tourists of the French Quarter threw coins into a beer box at her feet, was "Amazing Grace". And she loves also how it sounds on the pipes, having also been a friend to Scotland's Catholic queen Mary, never queen of England, never at peace, ever England. Theresa knows the songs of peace and the pipes of war, as Mikey and Oliver know they acquired their tap-dancing skills marching, to Roncesvalles, to death.

And now they knew they had some maybe-more-serious singing-and-dancing to do, and they knew that New Orleans was the rainiest city in the United States of America. We were here now for a hundred-years-war more brutal than the one Theresa had ended in France, and so we all thought it appropriate to launch our current crusade in this French-founded rainy city. But, democratic, we discussed the selection.

"Seattle's world fair space needle gets more rainy days," offered Oliver.

“But, in New Orleans,” argued Mikey, “when it rains, it pours.”

“And here on Earth,” answered Theresa, “a hard, hard rain is about to fall.”

When I showed Theresa the account I’ve given here one more millennium later, she pointed out the anachronism that Seattle built its space needle near the middle of this visit of ours, not before its beginning. But time confuses me at times, over all the infinite millennia of our mission, and so does my memory of people and places and facts. But tide never does.

And the tide seems the same now, this one millennium later, as it was then. It seems to me that Katrina came but a moment after 9/11, while Enron and Anderson were in between, and we were gone again by then. But a winner never quits, because a quitter never wins. So, again, we were here.

Hitler was on the horizon, threatening to undo anything we’d ever tried to do, and ending him would not give peace to all. Racism was also rampant in this United States republic, and religious bigotry promised to respond to Hitler with more religious bigotry here where the Pilgrims landed. And it also promised to spread it more to what human inhabitants here call the holy land.

So we agreed on New Orleans, a city built by oppression and freed by music, and used to rain. If music could sooth the wild beasts, maybe it could calm the crazy humans who had invented it. Theresa selected this city for the hope of our parents in the project. And we learned from them how to feel this time. And also from the levee.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Theresa whispered.

“Tell anyone what?” I asked, looking sideways at her dark eyes gazing forward over the river, not focusing on the other side, as ours seldom did.

“That we’re from outer space,” she answered.



“Ah,” argued Oliver. “You can tell them.”

“Yeah,” agreed Mikey. “Nobody cares.”

“Yeah,” added Oliver. “Nobody’d believe us, anyway.”

“That’s why we can’t tell them,” answered Theresa.

“They’d lock us up in a loony bin, or try to! Wouldn’t that narrow our focus?”

Theresa always answers. She always has the answers. You should have heard her singing in those doorways. You should have seen her.

It wasn’t raining on this one day, but the grass on the levee was damp from dew as we sat there planning our invasion, the Sunday morning sun saying all its promises. The irony was in that we knew we’d live forever. One peace at a time.

“I liked being Lao Zi,” I said. “You know, just going with the flow, letting things be right. I think I’ll say that, when I accept the Presidential nomination.

“I’m a quiet man,’ I’ll say. ‘A quiet man.’”

“Yeah,” answered Theresa. “But we have a lot of work to do before then.”

“And somebody has to blow some horns,” added Oliver.

“More than that,” offered Mikey.

The river said nothing. The levee held it back, as Theresa held us to the grindstone. It’s a tough job, saving this world is, and we had to start now, by making some friends. Racism was rampant in this republic, and Hitler was on the horizon.

And so we’d also need help, much help from many folks, professing from the heart.

And the first friend I made after this landing was by accident, a fortuitous circumstance of my being whiter than my companions and so often away from them in day-to-day passings. One afternoon, as I sat alone on the Moonwalk, named not for the

moon but for a mayor of New Orleans, I met Tolstoi's ghost. Yes, Tolstoi, Count Lev Tolstoi, the author of *War and Peace*.

You'll have to forgive my spelling, if you're accustomed to seeing the name spelled Leo Tolstoy. I like to transliterate phonetically and was very happy when English-speaking Americans at last began calling the capital of China Beijing instead of Peking. Maybe someday more of them will call my book the *Dao De Jing* instead of the *Tao Te Ching*. It's about using your voice more and your wind less.

Lev was still walking on Earth instead of going to Heaven because he was ashamed of himself. Life and death are weird on Earth, even beyond the fact that Earth is the only place in the universe where death exists. Lev had lived a long and wonderful life on Earth and died in a stupid way, trying to commit suicide without dying. So now he was a ghost, dead but still hanging around on Earth.

Like the author of the American Declaration of Independence, Lev had owned slaves, called serfs in Russia. And, like that other author, Lev had written promoting the betterment of all human life. But Lev's thinking and writing wasn't the reason Lev was a ghost. Jefferson wrote and thought similarly.

And, unlike Jefferson, Lev hadn't made his serfs an exception to his hopes of better life for all humankind. And, also unlike Jefferson, Lev not only specified his human chattel as a special concern in his writings but also did positive deeds for them. Among those deeds was building a school for the serfs particular to him on the land they worked for him. So, unlike Jefferson, Lev was no hypocrite.

Lev was a ghost because of an honest mistake, that he'd renounced the best of his life, his novels and his wife.

His book *War and Peace*, while being replete with confusion and contradictions like the Bible, stands similarly partly

because of the contradictions as a gift to all life on this planet. It offers negative examples like Moses' stiff-necked people, and the hope of positive spirit, large heart. And the contradictions also make it a Zen sort of thing.

But worse than renouncing his novels was renouncing his wife. No one paid much attention to his renouncing his writings, but his wife could hardly have paid little attention to his renouncing her. For her, it had been love before sight, having first fallen in love with him on reading his first book, *Childhood*. She had memorized much of it, and she met him when she was hardly more than a child. So the 36-year-old man married the girl half his age. A little like Andre and Natasha, in *War and Peace*.

And then she bore him a baker's dozen children, nearly half of them while he was writing *War and Peace*. She loved him, and he loved her, and you can see it in how he writes of women, especially in the early pages of *War and Peace*. He writes of them as glowing, and especially the little pregnant princess. But somehow he forgot what he'd seen. He forgot how he'd felt. He forgot himself.

He attributes little intellect to women in that book, and that might be the best reason to renounce it, if any reason is just. But it's clear that he saw women's beauty and clear that he loved his young wife, and it's clear that he dumped her when she reached the age at which United States women can retire. And he dumped her not for another woman, but for his intellect, to be alive alone.

"Until the day I die," he wrote in his late writings in despair of death, "she'll be a stone around my neck"

And so he died trying to leave her. And, on that nonsense way, he fell sick of his desperate disparity and died, and so he found there is no death. So his wife died and went to Heaven while he was hiding in New Orleans. And, in shame of what he'd done, he didn't even see her off. And her name was Sophia!

How much more ironic can one get than to leave a woman named for wisdom to be alone with one's own? So here I was, sitting beside the ghost of Lev Tolstoi on a bench on the moonwalk, as the two of us watched the freight-ships passing in this great American port. Surely none of those freighters carried more freight than Lev's heart!

"What brings you to New Orleans?" I had to ask.

"Well," answered Lev, "It's a long story."

"A little, please?" I needed to hear.

"It's history," he answered. "It's the French."

"The French," I wondered, and I begged him to go on, and I beg your indulgence to listen to this tirade before we go on to more mundane or less historic things that play better in films and books and news-media, stuff as new as our friendship with Norma Jean and Lev's meeting Billy the Kid, the assassinations of the Fits, etc.

"Look what they've done," continued Lev. "I guess I should start with *Vallon-pont-d'Arc*, with those graceful and gracious cave-paintings of horses, the earliest historical record of their *joie de vivre*. But the mess started about thirty millennia later, when William the Conqueror stormed across what we strangely call the English channel to conquer even the language of the Anglos there then. Such power, such spirit."

Lev talked as he wrote, eloquently and prolifically, with little pause in thought.

"The spirit was so powerful that three centuries passed before the poetic power of Chaucer gained back a semblance of the old English language and moved it on to the language of Shakespeare. Such power, such spirit! But for what?"

"It's as though the conqueror had left his home behind to be conquered. Three centuries before William conquered England,

Charles Martel and his grandson Charlemagne saved Europe from the Saracens, the invading Islamic hordes. The older Charles hammered them back from Tours, and the younger gave France its national poem by the spirit of Orlando and Oliver at Roncesvalles, and he nearly made of the Roman Church the Church of France. But, three centuries after the spirit of *Guillaume le Conquerant*, France needed a nineteen-year-old girl for protection from England.

“What happened? I surely do not know! But I know that France had even lost the spirit of its art. Shakespeare showed the world that the confines of ancient drama Aristotle had pointed out shouldn’t be treated as rules, but French dramatists were treating them as rules three centuries after their faith-filled child warrior *la pucelle d’Orleans* burned at the stake to give France back its spirit. Now they call her *Sainte Jeanne*, the patron saint of their nation. But where’s her spirit?”

Of course, I considered telling the old dead count that I knew a reason he didn’t know why he should wish to be in N’Awlins now, but I wanted to hear how he saw his own story.

And he was well into it on that bench atop the levee. He talked a little bowed, his grand old hands on his trousered knees, beneath his long grey beard. The water almost rippled from his glare, as he gazed into the river.

“Then there’s this nation,” he continued.

“Six centuries after William conquered England, the dance-master of the French sun-king Louis XIV did for dance what Shakespeare had done for drama. Louis loved it, as he loved the art that went into his glittering palace with its glancing hall of mirrors and its glorious gardens, all aglow with some of the old spirit. But his country hardly carried it forward. We did better in Russia with his dance.

“Our great czar Peter, trying to imitate the glory he thought was Western Europe, earned Petrograd the nickname Window to the West, but there’s much irony in that title. The sun-king’s dance-master’s name, the name of the inventor of the dance ballet, the dance more beautiful than any human motion except coitus, was Beauchamps. The name in French means beautiful fields, fields like the Elysian ones, *les Champs Elysees*. “*Champ*” is also the origin of the English word “champion”.

“And that conquering dance went far afield, becoming three more centuries later a champion of the third world war, the Cold War. And that’s where I come in, I a precursor of communism, I a verbal revolutionary and champion of all the people, and especially the poor. I died just before that revolution, the end of the czars and the brand of nobility that gave me my title Count. So I didn’t live to see its failure, through failure in spirit of my own country. And so I’m here.

“I didn’t live to see Stalin run Balanchine off to America’s freedom. I didn’t see the dancers follow that choreography, Nureyev and the others, one after another. No, I didn’t live to see communism sing its swan-song, but I did live to see that gift from France through the ghost Giselle to Petipa and Tchaichovski and through Swan Lake to the Sleeping Beauty.

“So, asleep in spirit or not, France has given greatly to this earth. And I haven’t mentioned now the greatest gift of her failure of spirit. France gave the United States of America their revolution, their freedom.

“And I don’t mean Thomas Paine. His common sense was about as common as Karl Marx’s, circular logic that would spiral into dirt if left to stand on Earth with no props. Benjamin Franklin’s mission to the court of Louis XVI recruited a whole lot more from France than Paine and Lafayette. The Marquis’ troops and other support cost the French treasury, and accordingly all the

French people, dearly. So, one of the greatest heroes of the American Revolution was Marie Antoinette.”

“That must be a good point,” I said to Lev. “Explain it, please.”

I had heard all this before, but I wished to hear it from this ghost.

“It’s like the importance of my books I didn’t recognize,” he said, looking askance at me and then up at the sky and back down to the river and sighing. “Marie had no notion of what she was doing. When, in her callousness, she said the saying for which she’s most famous, leaving her people to so much suffering and angering them so much by her saying it that she inherited the revolution, against herself.

“‘Let them eat cake,’ she said, when the people of Paris marched to Versailles to demand the bread they lacked because their king and queen had chucked much more of their treasury across the Atlantic than the sun-king had spent on that palace.

“So the revolution that began in America on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1776 began in France on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July thirteen years later.

“‘*Vive la France!*,’ the people ‘insisted, literally.

“So the people of Paris stormed the Bastille, the political prison that had oppressed them all, demanding and getting much more than bread. So, in that weird way, France owed well the gift she gave to New York’s harbor. So the lady Liberty stands for both nations. But France screwed up again.

“Napoleon, Robespierre, the reign of terror. Many persons besides Marie Antoinette lost their heads at Robespierre’s guillotine, and Napoleon tried to conquer the world, to take everyone’s freedom. What the French people thought they’d won in their revolution, thousands of Russia’s people had to pay for, without gaining theirs. The Pierre in my *War and Peace* is wrong at the start.”

“Pierre, named French for Peter, from the Latin word for stone, named for the saint who sank like a stone in the Sea of Galilee for lack of faith, the disciple who denied knowing his teacher three times before the dawn of his teacher’s crucifixion, the foundation on whom Jesus said his church would be built, the rock of the Roman Catholic church, stood in a drawing-room.

“That is, educated in Western Europe, my child of adultery Pierre stood amid Russians speaking French, in a Petersburg drawing-room.

“I described him as candorless as he praised Bonaparte, while Bonaparte was doing all he could to subjugate all the world and then especially Russia, while Russians were dying to keep him from it. When I said the cause of Napoleon’s imperialism was the first French corporal, I didn’t mean the Little Corporal, Napoleon. I meant the first leader who followed Napoleon’s orders. I meant the candorless sheep like Pierre.”

“Is that why you renounced your work?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” Lev replied. “It was from fear of death, exactly. I looked at my characters and the real people around me, and I thought of all the noble notions I could figure, and none felt important to me, in thought of death. I renounced my works because I couldn’t feel that anything I knew or could do or think was important, in thought of death. Rational or not, from fear of death, I feared all possibility of error.

“And no it isn’t rational. Reason tells me that where is life can be no death, that where is beginning can be no end, that all is eternal. But, alone at night, alone although with Sophia beside me, I felt outside her gentle sleeping breath. I felt that I would die for doing any wrong. And I felt no right to do. So I tried to undo all. All I had done.”



“Dostoevski,” I said to him, “said that anyone would prefer to death life in an arshin of space. I don’t know what an arshin is, but I don’t know death either.”

“I do,” said the count. “And neither is much.”

“Lev,” I asked. “In any language, *War and Peace* is more than a thousand pages. Can’t you say all that succinctly, for the simple souls who live on Earth?”

“No,” he answered. “That’s why I renounced it. Everyone must make choices. In life, in war or peace, many ways exist to fight that fear. You can have the peace of family and die a loved grandfather, or you can abandon yourself to death’s possibility by swinging your sword against everything in sight. You can live and die by the ethics of a morality of yours or others, or you can live and die by refusing to make a choice. You can call what you do religion or conscience or redemption or vengeance. You can do anything you like, anything like you. I can’t decide for anyone. I only offered options. You know yours. In your heart. They’re there.”

“So, I think,” I said. “You’re saying people should follow their hearts. Does that mean that anyone who follows one’s heart is right, no matter what happens from it?”

“Yes. I’m saying that exactly. The whole trouble is that too few people follow their hearts. Too many lie straight into themselves. And they call it intelligence.”

And then he went silent, lifting his old gray ghostly head and gazing no longer into the river, but across it. The sun was setting behind us over the rooves of the French Quarter, and the saxophone-player at the entrance to the moonwalk seemed to me to be as silent as the river, though continuing to play as people quietly dropped coins and dollars into his saxophone-case on the wooden walk. So I thought I understood the answer to my question of the count. But I wished to be sure.

“I beg your pardon, Count,” I said, in all the grandeur I could muster from my then nine-year-old human frame. “But I’m still not exactly sure what brings you to New Orleans. I’m not exactly sure. Not exactly.”

“Oh,” said the author of *War and Peace*. “I’m here for a little quiet, and I’m not through fighting yet, and I’m too old to join the French Foreign Legion. I need to battle for my soul and be a little ordinary for a while, and I’m not alone in the battle here. Marie Laveau still slips from her tomb in Saint Louis cemetery from time to time, you know. And there are some vampires, though the werewolves usually stay by the bayous. Besides, I like hanging out in the bars. It isn’t all about the French.”

And he didn’t stay in New Orleans anyway. He helped me out from time to time and was very helpful in my friendship with Mikhail Gorbachev and all that Cold War business, and he surprised me a little in being somewhat helpful in my friendship with Yasser Arafat and the craziness in Canaan. Being a ghost, Lev traveled light, and he went wherever he thought he could help.

So, at the end of the century, after our last effort of that millennium on Earth, Theresa and I took him home for a visit. He was very pleased to meet Saint Joan, and then we sent him on to Heaven. To true Sophia, and their children.

Yes, we had selected New Orleans as our launching point because of Theresa, for her having been Joan of Arc, the maid of Orleans. But, for what we had to do, Theresa had to be born in the cotton south. So her mother this trip gave birth to her in Alabama.

Alabama had a culture of corruption. It didn’t have the cotton culture of Mississippi or more western states. But it had plenty enough hate and indignation to be the primary district of confederacy, as Washington had become the District of Columbia, if confederacy is a right word for bigotry.

And, because at the time we didn't know the rest of us would be needed, Theresa arrived ahead of the rest of us. She arrived just before what Earthlings came to call World War I, and not because of that slaughter. She came because of what was happening inside the United States of America despite its official dedication to liberty and justice for all it had reaffirmed, by its civil slaughter for emancipation, a half-century earlier.

Hitler hadn't yet reared his ugly head, and strife in Canaan then was more between England and France than between Israelites and Philistines, at least as far as most Earthlings could see. Some of our space-personages might well have paid more attention, but the situation there then wasn't very noisy, relatively. It wasn't nearly as noisy as when Joshua fought the battle of Jericho or as the World Wars would make it.

The fight for Canaan that had been between the Israelites and the Philistines in the second millennium before Bob came to Earth was now mostly between those newer colonists and was more diplomatic than warlike. And the economic health of Jews and Muslims mostly played as idealistic pawns in the struggle of those two failing empires for their own economic health. So the mandate that resulted was relative peace.

We had no notion of what Hitler was up to. We couldn't keep track of every little brat in the universe. Since before papacy, European rivalries had always set situations for some little brat to rise up as a catalyst to capitalize on the disorder. But the disorder disintegrated any efforts to predict which brat might find a place. Racism, however, had much focus in America then. So Theresa quickly found her place.

She was born into this world that trip in the tiny Alabama town named Pine Level. We thought it appropriate, the level of a pine being high, or low if hewn into a box. Like Joan's, Theresa's

body wouldn't be boxed, but instead would be scattered to flow with a river, into the wide deep sea. But pinecones were like something Bob had said when he was here: "Except a corn of wheat fall to the earth and die, it remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

And the people of Theresa's little Methodist church in Pine Level understood that point of view and taught her to sing of it in Sunday school: "Deep and wide, deep and wide. There's a fountain flowing deep and wide."

They sang from their church in their fight against the great white whale, as Ahab had railed from the rail of his ship, also with conspicuous despair: "It's a wide, wide world, and a deep unsounded sea."

But, in their acquiescence, they didn't imagine names like *Moby Dick*, and they didn't call the white whale great.

They called their nemesis the white-man, and they prayed for him as they prayed for themselves.

Small words, simple souls, grand spirit.

## Chapter 2

### To Kill a Mockingbird

Theresa loved the high open levels of the pines pointing to whence we came and would return. But the trouble was deep and hardly sounded in Alabama, where Theresa's infancy involved sleeping on the floor beside her Earth-mother's father's chair, as that grandfather slept with a shotgun in his lap. Outside, white men in white sheets stormed by on horseback, on their way to hang anyone darker than they.

The grandfather was whiter than many of the people who called themselves white. Because his grandfather was white, he was so white that many white people who didn't know him thought, when they saw him, that he was white. So sometimes he'd behave toward white people as though he were white and as good as they. Of course he was better than most, with strength from sleeping with a shotgun. But they knew none of that.

And one of the many strange things about Earth-people is that they seem to like making love to people they hate. At least they call it making love, and it involves a lot more physical contact than shaking hands, which they often wouldn't do with the same person. Yet, most of the people who claim not to be racist would rail at the mention of the most obvious solution to the problem, love for all neighbors, whatsoever.

“Would you want one to marry your sister?” asks the typical honky, thinking the question only rhetorical, whatever his own sexual habits. If such sexual habits were fruitful lovemaking, differences of race would wash away like river-water joining the song of the sea. But, as psychologists like to say, rape isn’t a crime of love but one of anger and resentment. It’s a crime of hate, and Theresa learned some of that antipathy.

To fit on Earth well enough to do her job this trip, she’d have to marry an Earthman. But, because a man she came to love on earth was nearly as white as that grandfather, she was reluctant to marry him. She also dearly loved the grandfather, but especially for his strength from sleeping with a shotgun, though he never used it.

“He never had to use it,” she told me on one of our later afternoons on the levee. “But he was ready, and so was I.”

And she didn’t take much guff by herself, either. Once, in those early days in Pine Level, as she walked to her black school through a white neighborhood, a white boy rode past her on a bicycle, punching her as he passed. She caught herself so quickly that, instead of stumbling down herself, she knocked the boy from his bike. And the boy’s mother, seeing it from her house, screamed from her porch.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she shrieked as she stormed down the steps after seeing the punch and the reaction from her house.

“Why do you all push us around?” calmly replied Theresa.

And she walked calmly on. But, when she told her Earth-mother of that at her house, her mother wasn’t so calm. And so Theresa learned a little more.

“What were you thinking?” exclaimed her mother, wiping her hands on her well-washed apron, taking it off and setting her daughter on a kitchen chair, and setting herself in front of her on

another chair, of the same old pinewood. “They might have done anything to you. They might have . . . . Oh, Theresa!”

And then the mother leaped from her chair, bent over her child and squeezed her in her arms with her face deep in the child’s neck, trying to take some comfort too, as much as she could give.

As Theresa felt her mother’s tears warm on her neck.

Since her burning in Rouen, Theresa had become more Daoist than I. But she still understood the power of the sword she never used for killing. As you’ll see later, that’s also why she liked Mikey so much, and yet mostly in her childhood this trip she went to church and did her schoolwork, and obeyed her elders, mostly. She’d like to have knocked more boys off their bikes, but also later she had another tack to take.

Of course her two main elders here were her Earth parents. And, perhaps partly because we have no parents, Theresa loved having parents. Living eternally, we don’t have death, and we don’t have birth, and so we don’t have parents to guide our compassion into doing our best. And Theresa loved her Earth-mother also because she was a teacher to children besides tiny Theresa.

She’d reached high school before marrying. And, in Pine Level, that was enough to teach school. That is, in the little one-room shack Pine Level blacks called their school. She taught reading and writing there. And, more, she taught sharing.

Because the little building had no custodial staff, the children had to keep it clean and chop and carry in wood, for the stove that heated it. But Theresa saw that her mother taught the children to love being in the school, learning and working together. Without such people, nothing we ever tried to do in our travels could ever succeed.

However, Theresa's Earth father was a different story. He was a carpenter, and used his carpentry to get him where he wished to go, which was anywhere he wasn't. But Mikey and Oliver and I used his skill in carpentry and his tendency toward itinerancy to bring him to New Orleans. We weren't supposed to be able to read yet, but of course we could and found him a job through the *Picayune* newspaper. So he worked on some houses in Metairie, a white New Orleans suburb. Later, a KKK resident of that suburb would run for President. But, of course, he lost.

And, eventually, fortunately for us, though not for Theresa's Earth family, when time came for us to start being conspicuous, so would Theresa's father lose his welcome in New Orleans. Despair works in many ways among desperate people, and that desperate father left his wife and Theresa and her little brother in despair, in a city with no other family. Seeking greener grass beyond any hill, he traveled on with his carpentry with not one word of farewell. He could hardly support them anyway, and that might have been his excuse, but he didn't say so. He left for a job, never came back, that simply.

"What will we do?" asked Theresa's mother, one day in their dawning destitution.

She taught in New Orleans too but for little more money than in Pine Level.

"Let's go home," answered Theresa, exactly at the right moment.

So they returned to her mother's family in Alabama.

But her father had stayed in the project long enough for us to grow up a little in New Orleans. So Theresa, with what she'd learned in her time here ahead of us, helped us in our acclimation. And the cosmopolitan Quarter helped her, as did her Catholic school.



In Louisiana, nearly all children were educated as Catholics. Huey Long built the housing projects and hospitals for the poor, but he let the education system stand as it was, and that was best in Catholic charity. The public schools were so poor that hardly anyone went to them, unless they were expelled from the parochial ones.

So Theresa's mother, hardly trained but no one caring, taught in a public school. To teach, and from need, she suffered the city's paying her for much less than they received from her. But, such being rare, even she sent her children to the Catholics.

And the nuns liked Theresa. We weren't here not to know what we were doing, and knowing what we were doing required knowing with whom we were dealing. So, unlike most Earthlings, we were trying more to get along with our neighbors than to get ahead of them, and that made Theresa a willing docile student and earned her far less knuckle-rapping than her fellow students received.

All the nuns were white, and all the students in Theresa's school were black, but the nuns taught that all were equal under God. And, because she knew the answer, as did all the others in that school, Theresa didn't ask where the white children were or why. She just reiterated what the nuns said truly and kept quiet about the rest, but the children shared there too. They shared the truth in sidelong glances.

And, outside school, we did as I've said. We enjoyed being children together, with Theresa behaving as both an older sister and a close friend, and we roamed the noise of the Quarter beside the quiet of the river. We danced amid the drunks on Bourbon Street, and Theresa sometimes sang them into silence. We discussed our possibilities on the levee, and the river often sang us into silence.

One afternoon, sunny on the levee, we talked about Bob, our boss. He had come here himself, two millennia before this current trip of ours, to try to tell Earthlings himself what they most needed to understand. The trouble was all bigotry and hypocrisy.

Like Theresa's, Bob's Earth-father was a carpenter. Unlike Theresa's, Bob's Earth mother didn't work, except to care for Bob and his Earth-brothers and Earth-sister and their father. Bob was born that trip in Bethlehem, a few miles south of Jerusalem, in the land of Judah, in a stable. Judah was a tribe of a formerly nomadic people called Israelites after their patriarch. The patriarch had been named Jacob at birth but had earned the name Israel. He earned it by wrestling with God, or at least an angel.

I'm reminding you of this to be sure you know that this wrestling has been going on for a long time, and so I'll summarize some more. Because of a famine in the second millennium before Bob came to visit, all the tribes of Israel migrated from the land of Canaan into Egypt, and the Egyptians enslaved them. When Oliver and Mikey and I came to Earth this trip, Canaan was a British protectorate, and Egypt was a kingdom. But on that earlier trip Oliver freed the Israelites from Egypt and helped them migrate back to Canaan. And in return he delivered to them some rules from Bob. But they didn't pay much attention to the rules.

As soon as Oliver went home, they broke two rules in one fell swoop. One of those rules was not to kill, and the other was not to covet their neighbors' property. As soon as Oliver was out of their picture, they tried to kill all the Canaanites to take their land, and they said Bob told them to do it. And they also said Bob told them he'd go down there first and clear the way. Well, more specifically, at least one scribe wrote that. At least Lev didn't write anything like that.

In the first foray, the Israelites destroyed a city called Jericho, a little northeast of Jerusalem. They blew down its walls

and killed most of its inhabitants and enslaved some others, as the Egyptians had enslaved them. And later, as they succeeded in their campaign, they built in Jerusalem a capitol for their new settling, and broke another of those rules Oliver had given them. Bob had asked that, if they wished to thank him for getting them out of Egypt or whatever, they should do it simply and not with a lot of grandiosity or hoo-hah. He asked that, if they'd build an altar, they shouldn't cut anything for it, or use any tool on it, or raise it above Earth.

But, after they did worse in Jericho and in other parts of Canaan than those Egyptians had ever thought of doing to them, they built a grand elaborate temple at Jerusalem and bragged about it as though it would make Bob proud. I can understand how they might have gotten used to being in one place in Egypt and lost their tendency to wanderlust, and how they probably lost skills that might have made forty nomadic years in the wilderness less comfortable than it might otherwise have been. But I'll be damned if I can understand why they did what they did to the Canaanites, or how they could claim that behavior in the name Bob, or treat him as a golden calf.

And, I guess, neither could Bob. So next time, when the Romans were treating that land of little milk and honey much as the British were treating it when Theresa arrived this time, Bob came himself. He was hoping that, once and for all eternity, he could make that land holy for all humanity, a place people could look to as a place of peace, an example of good. And he tried so hard, so thoroughly, so carefully. But, again, no one paid attention.

As a child, he talked a little with the Israelites, getting a feeling of what he was up against in the still for him hopefully holy land, but early in that adolescence of his here he left the Holy Land, to walk about much of the rest of the civilized Earth. He

thought it not only fair to Canaan, but also essential to his hope of exemplifying for the world, that he spend some time seeing what Earth had become beyond Canaan.

So, leaving his Earth-parents at twelve years old, he walked and sailed from Jerusalem to Djakarta, through India and China, and back. He also visited the Acropolis and Stonehenge, but he found the greatest lessons in country east of the Holy Land. And I had a little to do with that, having entertained him well with my stories of having been Lao Zi. That was my spaceship parked in the eastern sky the day Bob was born here. I drove him here to see him off, and wish him well, the best.

But he found India most fascinating. I had learned much from Buddhists who had come to China after the Indians corrupted Siddhartha Gautama's teachings against the corruption of Hinduism that had turned karma yoga into an excuse for slavery, proving for the first time on Earth how the best words can be used to excuse the worst behavior. Much of what Bob saw in eastern Asia was unfortunate, but what he learned was lessons nonetheless. So here's a little lesson for you. If you please.

“*Yoga*” is a Sanskrit word for union, union with God. “God” is an English word for good, or “good” is an English word for God, however one looks at it. In India, Hinduism has at least 300-thousand gods, since Indians find so many things good in their simply complicated country. And Hinduism also offers many ways to get to God, to find unity with the universe, *yoga*. But four are much more common than the many others.

One of the four is *bhakti yoga*, which is becoming good through worship. Examples not called Hindu are loving *Allah* and loving Christ and loving *Jawah*. Killing people for making a choice different from one's own in that is not *bhakti yoga*. And neither is it good, but a lot of people think it is, and so they do it. That's corruption.

Another of the four is *jnana yoga*, which is becoming good through thinking. Examples not called Hindu are scholars of the *Qur'an* and the *Torah* and Christian theologians like Anselm. Calling people ignorant for not studying any one book or for not studying all books is not *jnana yoga*. Neither is it good, but a lot of people think it is.

Another of the four is *raja yoga*, which is becoming good through guiding others. Examples not called Hindu are not wars, not imperialism or colonialism, and not *jihads* or crusades. But, while much of my little Chinese book the *Dao De Jing* is about leadership for peace, for unifying one's heart with one's surroundings, many people call it pagan.

The one of the four that inspired the caste system is *karma yoga*, becoming good through doing the best deeds one can manage do. Grocer was the caste of Mahatma Gandhi, and he followed his *karma* to become a magnificent *raja yogi*. But how *karma yoga* became corrupted was by some saying a good grocer's child must be a grocer.

Yet, you know, Gandhi was in India while we were here this trip, and he did wonderfully well without our help. While the Israelites were trying one more time to cut for themselves a piece of Canaan, while the British and other western nations successfully crusaded to help them, with no concern for the Palestinian Canaanites, Gandhi freed India, from Britain. And Excellent Oliver used Gandhi's *raja yoga* in the southern United States, and proudly owned up to it.

But corruption followed Gandhi, just as it had followed Moses and the Buddha, and has followed Bob. The ink was hardly dry on the charter of independent India before civil war broke out, civil war between factions pretending to *bhakti yoga*, in the name of their names for God. And remember that this was in the last century of the second millennium after Bob himself came here and

tried so hard to stop such horrors from ever happening again, the next-to-last millennium before this present one.

One point Bob tried to make when he visited is widely preached but only partly understood. Since he doesn't lie, if he was omnipotent and omnibenevolent, he wouldn't have created all the trouble that pervades the Bible. But, by God, it's full of it, and such continues beyond the Bible two millennia after the Israelites demanded that Romans kill him after Romans took the land of Canaan from them. But that trouble accords only with Judaic distortion of Christian misrepresentation. And that distortion was before the Islamic misrepresentation of both. So we made no new hysteria on the levee.

"I'm not sure we should call her Bob," said Theresa.

"Yeah," said Mikey. "Maybe we should call her Roberta."

"I like that thought," I said. "I liked Roberta in *An American Tragedy*."

"You know," said Oliver, "When I asked him her name, she told me not to worry about it. He said he is what she is, or that she is what he is, or something like that. I don't remember the difference. I remember what makes sense. I just remember sense."

"One crazy thing about Earth," said Mikey, "is that the people here least likely to like calling her Bob are the people least likely to understand what she tried to tell them. Imagine, Theresa, how Cauchon and his Pharisees would have reacted if you'd called her Bob in Rouen."

"I wonder if she flipped a coin when he was here, to decide what gender she'd resemble," asked Theresa. "Maybe he'll be more like a woman next time, but he was much like a woman that time."

"We could call her the anointed one," offered Oliver. "You know how much he enjoys affection."

“Yes, indeed,” answered Theresa. “But I think she knows we call him Bob because we love her.”

“Yes, indeed,” we all agreed, as Earth’s sky brightened a little, just a little.

As I said, it was good times on that levee. But, as Earthlings often wrongly say, nothing lasts forever. We had to get moving, and we had pretty much figured out our main directions, each of our primary missions.

Theresa was our flagship and our scout. She came early to get the lay of the land and would jumpstart the United States civil rights movement and stay through the century, to make sure the rest of us stayed on course and had her help whenever we needed it. Bob trusts her more than the rest of us, and we see clearly why. We all care, but she’s more responsible.

Mikey was going to play bad cop to Oliver’s good cop in Theresa’s movement. Oliver was going to work his way up in the nation’s mainstream institutions, though on the fringe of them where the country was keeping its least pale people. Mikey was going to scream from beyond the frontier, from outside the boundaries of ordinary acceptance, but with threat from the power of unity, like a Mongol horde.

I was here to help the Russians. At least that was the only original plan for me this trip, and it was a plenty-big-enough job after Truman and Churchill gave Stalin most of Eastern Europe and about half of Germany. But, after the United States and the United Kingdom gave half of the Holy Land to the Israelites, while most of the people living there were Philistines, I gave a lot of attention to that problem, too.

But I guess I should try to be clearer about Hitler. Yes, he was the most horrible person who ever walked Earth. But , because he dealt with himself inherently by being so horrible, we

didn't come here to deal with him. He fell by his own weight, a little as did that temple in Jerusalem, because the people couldn't bear him. And he fell faster and harder, because his weight was so much more.

The people didn't just jump from beneath Hitler. Humans of all Earth joined to bury him in rage. The cycle the Bible promises buried the temple. No one ever hated it much. It didn't cost much. Only money.

But, anyway, Theresa went on ahead again. When her Earth father dumped her Earth mother to follow his lack of destination, she and her mother and her little brother went back where they'd been born, as I said. And, to help fill the economic gap her father left this time on Earth, Theresa had to get to work in more ways than one.

As Gandhi learned to like spinning, Theresa learned to like sewing, and she did that to help, in Montgomery. She and her brother and mother spent a little time in Pine Level on their return to Alabama, but Pine Level had never offered much employment. And some of Theresa's Earth family had moved to Montgomery, and Montgomery had public schools in which Theresa's mother could teach. And Theresa found a job in a tailor-shop on the Army airbase outside the city.

So she took her mending to the most rending. Later there I would learn to fly those clumsy little Earth aircraft, but I wasn't quite old enough for that when Theresa worked there, and Theresa was very nearly an adult, as she quickly proved. She was already what English-speaking Earthlings nicely call a primary breadwinner for her family, and soon it looked like she might have a family of her own.

On the airbase was a barbershop, and a barber in that shop fell in love with Theresa, the first time he saw her walking past his shop to hers. His name was Raymond, a name from French for



king of the world, and he was king of spirits in the barbershop where he worked. And he wished to be a prince for Theresa.

He wooed her as well as he possibly could. He smiled through his shopwindow each time she passed, and soon he was running outside to hand her flowers, and soon after that was sitting out front in his shiny red Studebaker, whenever no one required his services inside.

He hoped to impress her with that possession, few Alabama African Americans owning an automobile. But, of course, that didn't impress a girl who commanded a spaceship. And, as I earlier said, she thought he was too white.

But he persisted and started to stop by her house in his Studebaker and deliver flowers to her door. She wouldn't come to the door, but her mother did and was impressed, hardly by the Studebaker but very much by the flowers and Raymond's smile and persistence. So soon he was spending an hour or more most evenings on the porch-swing with Theresa's mother, and so at last Theresa learned more about him than his looks and persistence. Her mother told her a thing or two.

"Mama," said Theresa, "I don't want to hear about him."

"Well," said her mother. "He's a very nice man."

Theresa also thought he was too old for her. I mean that she thought he was too old for her age on Earth this trip. She was still in her teens, and he had saved years to buy that car. But her mother never mentioned that.

"Mama," said Theresa. "Don't you think he's too old for me?"

"Well," said her mother. "That means he know what he wants."

After a couple of months of that, something Raymond inadvertently said on the porch led Theresa's mother to have

doubts of the probity of her daughter marrying this experienced man, but it was why Theresa accepted him.

“I wish I could do more for those Scottsboro boys,” he said.

“What are you doing now?” this mother was afraid to ask.

The Scottsboro boys were nine teenage hobos jailed in Scottsboro for defending themselves against white hobos. After two white girls accused six of them of rape, all but the youngest of the black boys were sentenced to die of electrocution. White men also jailed the white boys, but they quickly released them.

So Raymond, righteously risking all he loved, worked to fund the defense of the black boys. But twenty years passed before the last of the black boys was released. And that was on parole.

But Theresa, because of Raymond’s efforts and despite his whiteness, though she’d made him wait long enough to fear she might, didn’t wait twenty years to accept his proposal,. They married and hosted meetings of his defense-funding organization, and soon thereafter he sold his Studebaker for the fund. Theresa knew it by the silence before he entered their home that evening. Not the last rev of the motor, just the screen door, quietly closing.

“Oh, but you loved that car!” cried Theresa.

Then the king of the world understated the best of it all.

“I love you!” said Raymond to his space-girl.

And, soon after that, Theresa learned that a friend of hers from the Catholic school in New Orleans was working with the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People. Being very colorful, Theresa liked being called colored, and she looked up her friend. But, walking in on a meeting, she found her friend absent.

So, her friend being the chapter’s secretary, her absence gave Theresa a practical reason to be there. She sat down and took notes and became the secretary, almost as quickly as she had knocked that boy off his bike. Theresa knows timing.

Meanwhile, wimp that I was, my route to winning friends and influencing people varied greatly from that of my three companions.

They began their part of our project in the project, developing followers among the adolescent poor. I, instead, watched them work, learning the despair of the destitute mainly to know why I must do what I did. And then I entered the Army Air Corps for a ticket to Yale, not to develop followers but to show leaders how I, their less fortunate friend, might follow them.

But, by my not being as near to the most important people as were the others of my team, that road was rough. While they were among people who shared our feelings, I was amid many who cared little even for the silver spoons they'd had in their mouths since birth. So I needed a lot of help from Lev in making friends with them, a lot of advice from his days in those patrician drawing-rooms, in the window to the west.

And, while Lev's sophistry helped me much, Theresa made friends for the future at her church. Many members of that African Methodist Episcopal church shared her faith in the future, and her willingness to work toward it. They, after all, also of course, had a more vested interest, than would my Skull and Bones friends. But Aquinas would never enter an A.M.E. doorway.

So Oliver combined our approaches. His father, being a Baptist minister, involved him in his church, but Oliver went for other education also. Before it was over, he would become a doctor of philosophy, exemplifying further our belief in the need for knowledge, for breadth of understanding. Oliver enlisted Hegel for our side.

As for Mikey, he took all directions to extremes. He learned Nietzsche as well as Hegel, and Augustine as well as Aquinas. At home he learned protestant preacher ways from his

father also, and in prison he learned the means of Islamic jihad. He lived pursuing war and died deferring to peace, either by any means necessary.

But the key phrase is breadth of understanding. Beyond Hegel and Kant, Oliver loved his Earthly family, especially his Earth-mother's mother. He loved that grandmother, and twice in her regard he showed his affection for the honor Earthlings often attach to death, though he showed it in a somewhat weird way.

The first time was when he thought the grandmother had died. She had fallen down stairs of their building in the project and knocked herself out. Oliver ran upstairs and leaped from a window of their apartment, and his father thought he'd tried to kill himself. And the second time was when she did die. He did it again.

He'd received the idea for that from Theresa. Imprisoned in Rouen, she leaped from a window of her high tower cell, fifty feet to the ground. Saying that she'd tried to commit suicide and thus wasn't Christian, her prosecutors held it against her at her trial, but she told me she'd done it out of boredom. She told me she'd missed the feel of flying, that she'd missed the truth of flying, and so did Oliver. How better might we say?

## Chapter 3

### On the Beach

Mostly, at home and in his father's church, Oliver behaved as a Baptist preacher might expect his son to behave. He joined the church just as he was beginning school, and he suffered so well through the lack of system in the Louisiana public school he attended because his father would have nothing to do with Catholics, that he won a full scholarship to Boston University. It was important to our mission, before he returned south and settled near us in Montgomery, where he became a preacher himself for a Baptist church there, to have him be a symbol of the cradle of liberty Boston called itself.

For his father, his undergraduate major was in divinity. But, as I said, his doctorate study in philosophy gave him much necessary broader understanding. And, in Boston, Oliver also fell in love with an Earthling.

Her name was Rachel, and he met her by telephone, and they fell in love before they saw each other. Like Theresa, he had decided to marry, for his position in his church as well as for his credibility in our movement, and he asked an Earth friend to recommend a woman. But he didn't expect the process to go so much more quickly than it had for Theresa, or so well.

Immediately on hearing Rachel's name, he thought of Rachel at the well, in the Old Testament. So, for those of you who

haven't read it, I'll tell a little of that lesson in patience also, that wait for grace. The Jacob who later became Israel by wrestling with the angel met Rachel at a well as she watered her father's sheep.

And he fell in love immediately also. To keep a custom of that time and place, that older daughters marry before their younger sisters, his Rachel's father tricked Jacob into marrying Rachel's older sister. But Jacob didn't give up, and he accepted a promise from the father that he might marry Rachel also.

And that was several generations before Bob's commandment against adultery. So, after some trials and tribulation but mostly a lot of longing, Israel did marry Rachel, also. But first Rachel's sister bore Jacob many children, And Rachel was barren through many years after her marriage to him.

But, at last, she bore Jacob a son, who became Jacob's favorite as the son of his old age. They named that child Joseph, and he's the Joseph of the coat of many colors. But I won't trouble you with that part of the story right now.

The point I'm trying to make is that Oliver loved Rachel, and the more because he loved the Bible, and a diversity of colors. He was happy he didn't have to wait as long to marry his Rachel as had Jacob to marry his Rachel or as had Raymond to marry Theresa. And he was glad she gave birth to more children more quickly, though it was through the worst of their part of our battle.

Mikey's father this trip was also a protestant minister, not as formally as was Oliver's but formally enough to send Mikey also to the public school. Mikey's father was a spirited man, involved more than any of our Earth families in the fight for African American rights, and his mother was at least equally spirited and was her husband's second wife, like Israel's Rachel. Mikey's father was involved in Marcus Garvey's movement to

take African Americans back to Africa, and Mikey's mother loved his father, and they did all hand-in-hand.

So, at about the time Theresa returned to Alabama, some Louisiana KKK clingons reacted to their spirit by burning their church, and some white members of their church helped them buy a house in Michigan, in the tiny city Albion.

Albion had been a stop on the antebellum Underground Railroad. So, while Mikey's father knew the name of the town meant white, he expected it to be a better place than New Orleans for his family. But, on arrival, he discovered that an Albion municipal statute proscribed non-Caucasians from owning houses.

So Mikey's family sold back the house and rented one in nearby Lansing. And, in that city, the capital of that northern state where slavery had never been legal, Mikey's father found still less welcome for his freedom movement. An unwelcoming committee murdered him on his way home from his church.

They pushed him beneath a trolley he was trying to board to get home, and the trolley ran over him. No one convicted anyone for the murder, and his family's life insurance company said he'd probably thrown himself beneath the trolley on purpose. So Mikey and his mother and his little Earth-brothers and Earth-sisters were left more destitute than Theresa had been in New Orleans when her father left of his own discord. Mikey's father's congregation was mostly poorer than was Mikey's family.

Mikey's mother did what she could to support her family, taking any odd job she could find. But it wasn't enough, at least not for the state government social welfare workers, though Mikey's family did have food and clothing and a clean little apartment. The rules didn't recognize the possibility that a one-parent home of pecuniary poverty could be healthy. The rules didn't recognize Mikey's mother's spirit. And functionaries followed the rules. They had a checklist.

“But you have no husband.”

“We do what we can.”

“You have no steady job.”

“I do what I can.”

“It isn’t enough.”

But all she could do was all she could do, and that troubled her terribly. So, her spirit broken, she was confined to a mental-hospital, after the functionaries placed Mikey and his brothers in separate foster-homes, for what those dysfunctional functionaries called welfare. The foster homes were scattered across East Lansing and Lansing, and the insane asylum was on a hill in Kalamazoo, sixty-some miles west. And, in southern Michigan, the institution was a joke among children.

“You’d better watch out,” Michigan children would say to their peers, when they exhibited some of the silliness to which most people are prone. “They’ll send you to Kalamazoo. They’ll put you on the hill.”

But Mikey stayed in East Lansing just long enough to make a record for himself, to show that he could do more than the albion people there would permit from him. The education functionaries couldn’t deny that he did his homework and scored high on his tests, and his classmates admired him for it. Or at least welcomed his help with their efforts. But that was alien there.

“What do you think you’ll do with your life?” asked his most conscientious teacher, when his academic and social performance took him to Presidency of his eighth-grade class. “You show a lot of potential.”

“Maybe a lawyer,” answered Mikey, as obsequiously as he could manage.

“Oh, well,” said the teacher. “A nigger can’t be a lawyer. Setting your goals too high will lead to disappointment. How



about something with your hands. Jesus' father was a carpenter. How about a carpenter."

So that left Mikey pretty much on his own, to shape his life here however he wished, to try to make our point. So, after he finished the eighth grade, he went to Boston to live with a half-sister, a daughter of his father's from the marriage less happy than with the wife who gave birth to Mikey.

Boston, calling itself the cradle of liberty before the emancipation war, was another stop on the Underground Railroad, but that war didn't end its segregation. Mikey's sister lived in Roxbury, an African American ghetto of Boston, mostly a slum. So Mikey found it an easy place to offer his point. And Oliver was then in Boston also.

So Oliver and Mikey met often there. They discussed possibilities, steps in our movement. Because our plan was for them to take different paths to the mountaintop, they met away from their Earth-friends. But they gelled their feelings through long conversations, in open public places, out of doors.

They gelled their feelings trying to meld their speech with yours, your vibrations of wind in your land of the free. They tried to see and feel how you fit in your union of states. But, less windy, they somewhat failed.

"What do you think of that statue," asked Mikey, nodding his head to his left, as they sat on the steps in front of the statehouse, the Massachusetts capitol across Beacon Street from the monument to the black Boston regiment whose white leadership sacrificed it and themselves for that uncivil war.

But Mikey wasn't referring to that big black bronze relief beside steps down to Boston Common, facing the statehouse brazenly, but darkly.

"Fighting Joe Hooker?" asked Oliver.

“No,” answered Mikey. “Mary Dyer.”

“The statue is beautiful,” answered Oliver. “But I don’t know anything about the woman. Yes, please tell me, her story.”

“Yes, she’s what we’re here for,” answered Mikey. “To my mind, that’s the greatest monument in this cradle of liberty.”

Oliver looked at Mikey. Then he looked across the street to the war monument, and then back to the statue of the woman sitting apparently peacefully on a high seat beneath a shading tree before the eastern wing of the statehouse. That black bronze wasn’t warlike at all. So he asked Mikey to keep telling.

“You know, my traveling friend,” replied Mikey, “that the Puritans traveled here across an ocean for freedom from oppression of their religious expression. You know as well that the separation of church and state in this nation’s Constitution is for that purpose, to protect religious expression from oppression by the state. And you know the Puritans didn’t give a damn for the expression of the natives here, because those natives didn’t call themselves Christians. Then came Mary Dyer.

“Well, that beautiful peaceful woman called herself a Christian, but she also called herself a Quaker and refused to quake from the particularly peaceful form of religious expression that came with that denomination. So, less than a generation after the Puritans sailed here for their religious expression, they hanged Mary for hers. They hanged her on the Common, on gallows they built, right over there.”

He pointed to the grassy park where people sunned themselves after lunch in this commercial capital, or played in various ways or slept homeless, nights on the benches.

“Do you know Boston Common was originally reserved as a training-ground to learn to kill the natives if they tried to reclaim some of their native land?”

“I did know that,” said Oliver. “Thanks for reminding me so well. Yes, it’s what we’re here for, Mary Dyer and the Indians. Speaking of Indians, I wonder how Gandhi’s doing. A lawyer from a caste of grocers. It isn’t hopeless here.”

So then they rose, and walked across the street, for Oliver to see the statue from its front. They noted that her statue was of black bronze like that of the monument to the black regiment, though Mary had been white. And then they walked down Park Street to Brimstone Corner, where Puritan ministers had preached hellfire from the balcony of the church now named for the street named for the park the Common had become.

And then they crossed the street and wandered back into the Common, to the black bronze of the fountain there, its water flowing narrow and shallow.

“What do you think about Palestine now?” asked Oliver as they sat on one of the benches around the fountain, rolling its water there in sight of the church.

“I still call it Canaan,” offered Mikey. “It’s horrible what Hitler’s doing, horrible not only for the Jews but also for the Palestinians.”

“I wonder,” offered Oliver, “why the Puritans didn’t go to Palestine. They wouldn’t have had to travel so far, but I guess the land there then may not have been quite as much of a wilderness as this land was then.”

“Maybe,” agreed Mikey. “And people there think they have a religious right to that land. So they may have put up more of a fight than the natives here, as the Zionists and the Palestinians are, against each other, now.”

“Legalities and politics,” scowled Oliver. “Confusion on the earth.”

“That’s why we’re here,” smiled Mikey. “To make things plain.”

By the time of that conversation I had joined the Army Air Corps and was at that air base outside Montgomery where Theresa was working as a seamstress, and she and I had our long conversations as well, though segregation made that difficult.

“How’s it going with the NAACP?” I asked her as we sat on the bench at the bus-stop in front of the Empire Theatre, where Hank Williams was about to become famous, a white man who learned from a black one, maybe too much.

“Legalities and politics,” she scowled. “Confusion on the earth.”

“That’s why we’re here,” I smiled. “To make things plain.”

“I know,” she said. “But it’s crazy. How can it not be plain that people are being slaughtered for nothing? Yet the legalities here hardly permit mention of the slaughter. These Earthlings call it violation of civil rights. Civil rights are nothing, abstraction. Slaughter is something. It’s bloody death.

“We have a flag we put up outside our office almost every day. It doesn’t have stars or stripes or anything symbolic on it. It has plain English words and not many and but one with more than one syllable: ‘A man was lynched today.’

“‘Today.’ That’s the one word with two syllables! Do you think the problem might be that two syllables are too many? Not plain enough?

“Today! Not before the Civil War. Not before the American Revolution. Not before Moses led his people out of Egypt. Today is when a man was lynched, here and now and leaving a family with no brother or no father, with one fewer person to love them and feed them, today and tomorrow and year after year, as long as they may live, beyond today, every day. How, in this hell, don’t they understand?

“How’s it going at the NAACP? Civil rights is how it’s going, legalities. It’s strategies and precedents, trying to use previous insufficiencies as an excuse to be not quite as insufficient now. You know I’ve lived forever, but here in this grotesque mess I’ve learned to be impatient. Why can’t we just be plain today?”

“I’m sorry, Theresa,” I said. “I wish it were as simple as the Gordian knot.”

So then she bowed her Earthly head. And, when she raised it again, she showed no hope of resolution. But she answered the question.

“It’s simpler,” she said. “But we don’t have an Alexander great enough.”

I didn’t try to answer. She was working at answers far beyond my forte. So I left that to her.

“That’s my point,” she went on. “It’s as plain to me as the blue of that sky we flew through to get here. But I don’t know how to explain it through the superficialities and subterfuge, the legalities of lunacy. All one should need to say is that it’s bad to cause suffering. But Earthlings say that themselves, and do it nonetheless.”

I still had a lot to learn, from Theresa and from the Earthlings of this time. I had joined the Air Corps both for the fun of flying and to go to school on the G.I. Bill, not only to make powerful friends but also to learn their points of view and the points of view that had become academic around Earth and in this nation. My parents here weren’t nearly as colorful or inspiring as those of my companions, the parents of my cohorts in this project to try again to save this world. And there was no way my Earth-parents could pay for me to go to Yale and meet the people and learn the secrets of Skull and Bones.

But let me be more specific. I guess it's time to tell you more about my Earth upbringing in this time, how I decided to go to Yale and how I knew about Skull and Bones, and about Beatrice. That was all key to my mission's success.

First, my Earth-parents pretty much ignored me, both being alcoholics. My father was promising when young but had drunk his way out of a career in accounting, and my mother had dropped out of school after three efforts to pass the ninth grade. Because of what was then called a nervous breakdown.

"You graduate from high school," said my father, when I told him I was thinking of going to Yale. "And, after that, I don't give a damn what you do."

"You're not so muckin' fuch," said my mother, when I told her I was accepted, and I thought of Mikey's mother being committed for her care.

I didn't then bother to analyze the relationship of that attitude and my parents' alcoholism with the fact that a brother of my father's was a United States Senator from Connecticut who was graduated from Yale. But, though the senator never visited our home, he helped me some. And Lev advised me well, both early and late.

My academic performance in the New Orleans Catholic school system might have earned me admission to Yale, and the G.I. Bill paid most of my expenses. But, because what I learned from Lev impressed my uncle, he paved my way into Skull and Bones. And it also impressed the rich boys I met in flight school.

And, also, of course, my war record helped pave my way from there, but Beatrice would help me more than anyone else, in everything in every way.

"You know the physical differences between men and women," said Lev on the levee on an afternoon of my Earthling

adolescence, maybe incorrectly assuming that my otherwise preoccupied parents had told me such facts of life.

“Do you know why rape is impossible?” my father had asked me, on a rare occasion of his talking while walking with me on Earth.

“No,” I answered, knowing he was telling me one of what he thought were jokes.

“Because,” he said without a hint of a smile, maybe or maybe not because he had well learned the common policy of never laughing at one’s own jokes, “a woman can run faster with her skirt up than a man can with his pants down.”

I didn’t laugh at my father, and I didn’t speak in response to Lev. My father didn’t seem to notice that I didn’t laugh, and Lev didn’t expect me to answer. My father went on with his thoughts of himself, and Lev went on talking to me.

“But, also,” Lev spoke on, “there are important differences in character. Women are more steadfast and admire others especially for that, while men are less predictable and admire others especially for that. That difference is the usual cause of failure of marriage, divorce of love, divorce.

“Most women wish to stand by their man, but most men would like to lie by any woman, however much they love their wives. Women value family and home more than men do, and men use that as an excuse to stick their wives at home while they go off gallivanting. Men are by far the weaker sex.

“I put some of that in *War and Peace*,” he said. “But I didn’t understand it much myself yet then. Prince Andre and his father understand each other, feeling that leaving the little pregnant princess to go to war was both most honorable and, from having to care about the princess and the child, most burdensome. That the burden the little princess most felt was having her husband go into

harm's way wasn't a burden to them. But, at least, I showed him sorry in the end.

“And there's more. Men rake in more money and think they rule the world, but women rule the world because they spend most of the money. They don't always sign the checks or swipe the credit-cards or push the computer-buttons, but they make the main decisions for the most important purchases for their families, while men mostly do that for their toys or for means to rake in more money for women to spend, and for war despite all offering of peace.

“And, deep in their hearts, all rational people know that. Both men and women know in their hearts that women care more about the most important things than men do. So it's a rotten shame that no woman has ever been President of the United States, and it's a rottener shame that a woman would have to be as trivial as a man to change that. The President's job is to rake in wealth for the homeland, by any means necessary.

“But, anyway,” offered Lev, “My prince was right about one thing. He shouldn't have married the little princess before he'd gone to war, and that's my advice to you. I know how you feel about that little girl you're taking to your school dances, and I know you know the hard rain that's coming. So go to your flight school, and fly your machines of destruction, and win your war. But do that before you marry that little girl and start a family. Do that for sure before you marry her. What's her name? Beatrice?”

“Yes,” I said, “Beatrice.”

So, yes, Beatrice was better than I was. She wasn't beautiful by the 1950's standards of the United States. She'd never have made the center of *Playboy* magazine, as did her friend Norma Jean. But an aura of peace and grace pervaded her presence, maybe partly from her being the oldest of three children



with an overweening but seldom present father, and a mother who died when Beatrice and her brothers and sisters were young, after loving them well. And, partly because the Constitution of the United States wouldn't permit my being at the top of its overt power-hierarchy long enough to do all I had to do there, that grace would serve our mission well. Beatrice would have to be not only the wife of a President of the United States but also one's mother.

And also her family was better than mine economically. She didn't live in the project but in a Victorian house on Esplanade Avenue. My dad had drunk himself to death by the time I met Beatrice, and our only family income was a pension from his having spent six months in the United States Navy in the Spanish American War, before being discharged for arthritis from shoveling coal on a ship. And Beatrice's brother and sister thought they were better than I was in other ways also.

"I had no idea you were intelligent," said her sister to me when, after graduating valedictorian from my Catholic high school, I let them know I was on my way to Yale. "We thought you were stupid. You never talk to us."

"Yeah," said her brother. "And you listen to classical music."

And, perhaps, I guessed, because of the money, my Earth mother was afraid Beatrice might be better than I was.

"She's not so muckin' fuch," she said the first time we talked after she met her.

But my mother wished the best for me, and Beatrice's siblings knew Beatrice loved me, and they wished for her whatever she wished for herself, and her father didn't much care. At least he didn't care beyond his grasp.

"I'm the father of this house," he said, perhaps, I guessed, to pretend to power and care, when she introduced me to him as he read pulp fiction in his bed of that evening, when she was too

young to be going out at night, though he let her, “and what I say goes.”

But, as I supposed that both my mother and Beatrice’s father said what they said to clear their conscience of whatever might happen, Beatrice and I went our way very well. So, when Lev, hearing me repeat her name, smiled but looked down again into the river, as a freighter’s foghorn sounded as the freighter passed us, with its waterline well into the river, I also had another supposition. But I needed to clarify it.

“Tell me again,” I asked, “Why you renounced your books.”

“I didn’t appreciate women enough,” he answered, and I took his advice.

And I hoped he’d meet my parents, when at last we helped him get to Heaven.

My Earth brother liked nothing better than killing deer and smaller animals and fishing in the bayous. As soon as he was graduated from high school, he moved across Lake Pontchartrain to Hammond. The town had played as a perfect backdrop for the film *In the Heat of the Night*, and he fit perfectly in the town as a worker in a small wood-products factory, peeling veneer from trees harvested there and anywhere else. Eventually, he became a buyer for the company, traveling across the United States finding wood for their products, and he learned to play golf. But he still preferred hunting and fishing. So we could never talk together much.

Lev, in *War and Peace*, shows the horror of what humans call hunting. He tells of dozens of humans on horses with hundreds of hounds, chasing a wolf. After the humans drive the wolf into the track of the pack of dogs, the dogs disable the wolf until she’s weak enough for a human to dismount from his horse

and cut her throat. After that triumph, which the humans call the thrill of the chase, they turn their strongest and fastest dogs to do the same to a hare. Then they hang the wolf and cut off the feet of the hare as trophies.

So when, in his ghostly travels, at the White Horse Tavern in New York City, Lev met Dylan Thomas, he wasn't proud.

"If my head hurt a hare's foot," Thomas had doubted with hope, but Dylan passed out in the gutter in front of the bar and died drunk, and my drunken Earth-father fished but never hunted.

He fished all day long sometimes, from a rowboat with nothing but a cane pole with line and bobber and sinker and hook and some bait, most often a worm. He was raised in Michigan near Albion, and he told me once nostalgically that there in winter he'd fished with a short steel pole through a hole in the ice and stood there all day long, not for the thrill of each little catch, but for the peace. And, wherever or whyever, what he caught was supper for our family and never a trophy.

But I guess my Earth brother would think that weak of him, and I don't know if that father of ours is in Heaven, but I know he sought plainness.

And I know my Earth mother is there for her plainness.

But my Earth sister married someone like my Earth brother and also moved to Hammond, where they bought a Victorian house and decorated it with blue and pink knickknacks and family photographs, and not one single work of art. My sister said she liked Barbra Streisand, but she owned none of her recordings, nor a stereo system. She worked as a receptionist for some psychotherapists and learned some of their vocabulary. She talked about relationships and closure, medication and manic depression. I couldn't listen to her talk about Beatrice. Beatrice was lovely.

Beatrice's siblings spent no time with mine, though mine would have welcomed that. To them, Beatrice was upper class,

and therefore desirable for the status of the relationship, while not for the actuality. So my siblings expressed forgiveness of Beatrice's siblings, while Beatrice's hardly spoke of mine.

The last time I saw Beatrice's brother, he had founded his own church and was trying to promote it with a CD of himself, performing what he called gospel rock. So he asked me whether I still listened to AM radio music. His e-mail address was [pastorpete@aol.com](mailto:pastorpete@aol.com). What was his rationale? His motive?

The last time I saw Beatrice's sister, she had dropped out of college and married an automobile mechanic who said he was into Zen. She reminded me that her IQ had been in the top ten percent of all the citizens of Louisiana. And she said email was too inorganic. If so, for what?

Anyway, for all my sympathy, I needed plainer friends. Beatrice visited her siblings from time to time, because Beatrice is a lovely woman, besides being their sister. But I curbed such unfamiliar interaction with my Earth family.

Except a leak I'll mention later.

In despair.

## Chapter 4

### The Jungle

At the airbase outside Montgomery, I behaved pretty much as Pierre had in Lev's book, drinking with my comrades and displaying bravado in unpredictable ways. I had also learned a lesson from my uncle the senator, who had helped steal Geronimo's skull from his grave in Oklahoma and deliver it to the Tomb, the Skull and Bones clubhouse on the New Haven campus. I wasn't proud of my uncle for that, but it surely showed bravado in an unpredictable way. And many big-boys laughed and loved it.

"Did your uncle ever tell you about it?" asked my Tomb-mate Harriman at a meeting after my initiation into that elite dark secret club.

"He knows how to keep a secret," I said, as though my uncle may have told me much, as though he may have trusted me so much.

So I made a splash in flight-school, by seeming carefree while also becoming expert with those little airplanes. And I made a splash at Skull and Bones, by learning from Lev to fly the little nuances of his French Russian drawing-rooms. And I made a more tangible splash in the war, very touching for me.

After 57 successful missions of mine in the chase, a Japanese fighter shot me into the Pacific Ocean. I was flying a small bomber, with no copilot but a bombardier back in the belly

of that little lumbering plane. I also didn't know my bombardier wouldn't make it out alive, and that's the first thing I thought about as I floated alone in the ocean, the first death I knew this trip here. I still don't know how he couldn't bail as I did, but that doesn't help my feelings. He was a friend of mine, and I was responsible. I was the pilot and more than he knew. I knew why I was there.

But that wasn't the last of my thoughts there. My thoughts turned as they had when I was Pip here to help with the Civil War. Then, in the Pacific, I also thought of the deep unsounded Atlantic in which I was floating, fallen from a harpoon-boat and left alone for hours, while the rest in the boat did their work.

Captain Ahab had nothing on me for understanding the depth of the sea. That is, until he learned its full depth later, strapped dead to the white whale. Or maybe he did know, with his focus.

After my friends Queequeg and Ishmael fished me out, he made me his cabin boy. And serving Ahab was sound experience for working for Lincoln during the war. Both Ahab and Abraham had focus, and the two of them even looked a lot alike, and both fought the white whale. And both listened carefully to me, and both died early, like my bombardier. And still I don't know if I could have done better for either.

Yet, of course, that helped me at Skull and Bones, having been so close to a United States President and to a battle with an enemy I hardly saw and never touched, and having been so close to death myself in that hardly sounded sea.

Eisenhower learned bravado at West Point and quietness from De Gaulle, but he didn't make the quiet bravado of the circle of the Tomb, until after he won at Normandy.

"What were you thinking about?" Harriman asked me.  
"All alone in the ocean."

I didn't tell him I'd thought of my influence on Ahab and Abraham, and so his family hired me to work for them in Texas. That was my plan, with my degree in economics, to make my way up in the oil business, which powered the world economy, which powered Earth. But braver silence was Beatrice.

I had her name and a portrait of her painted on the fuselage of my plane. And, after that picture sank into the sea, I rose from the sea and flew back to Beatrice herself, as quickly as I could. I hadn't told her I was from outer space, but I did tell her I was going to be President of the United States, and she believed me.

"If that's what you want," she answered. "You're so brave and quiet. I know you can do whatever you wish. And I know it'll be good for all of us."

So, as soon as I was back from the war, she accepted my hand in marriage at a military wedding. The swords of my comrades arched over us and everything, and we went on to Yale for me to study economics, and that other stuff. And also there, living in a little apartment just off campus, we started to raise a family of Earthlings immediately.

After John Quincy Adams, because he'd followed his father John Adams into the Presidency, we named our first child Quincy. Because legacy would be necessary, and I didn't wish to be noisy as a President any longer than I had to be to get the job done, and he could carry on if Beatrice and I could teach him well enough, I liked that thought. But it was Beatrice's idea, and I knew she could teach him well, however busy I was otherwise.

So, after I muddled through the mess of abstraction that academic economists heap onto the concrete dynamics of supply and demand, while having a little fun playing very well for Yale at the United States' national pastime, I and my little family left the silver spoons of New England for the black gold of Texas, to

accept the job Harriman's family had offered me, to get going in this world, more into our mission.

At first, we rented a house, but we bought a car, to get us around, to get settled. The car was a red Studebaker, and that idea also came from Beatrice, because I'd introduced her to Theresa and Raymond when she visited me in Montgomery from New Orleans, and Theresa had told her about Raymond's selling his car for the Scottsboro boys' defense fund. Beatrice took all that to heart.

"If they come to visit," said Beatrice, "he can take us all for a ride in it."

And soon we bought a house, a little two-story white clapboard just outside the edge of Midland, with a wide front porch looking across the wide Texas plain. Midland was appropriately named, as then from there one could see across flat land to the horizon, in any direction. From our home, West Texas reminded me of the wide western ocean into which I'd fallen a few years before. But Beatrice was much better company than her picture that had sunk in that sea. We had another son quite quickly.

And, soon after buying the house, Beatrice began teaching Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church. She was making friends, while I was making mostly business contacts in the oil industry, before Harriman called me from Houston with a little surprise that didn't surprise me much. When the telephone rang, I was washing the Studebaker in front of the house on a Saturday afternoon, to take Beatrice and Quincy to church next day in it. But, wiping my hands, I went inside and answered the call.

"Hey," said Harriman. "It's me."

"Hey, Harriman," I answered. "What's up?"

"I got what you asked for," he said.

"What did I ask for?" I asked.



“Well,” he said. “I can’t tell you on the phone. I’ll drive out to Midland tomorrow. My dad wants me to look at some things there anyway. But, believe me, you’ll be happy. You’ll be happy.”

Next day, we did our usual Sunday thing. I drove Beatrice and Quincy to Sunday school and sat through the adult class myself, though a lot of it irritated me a little, not the feelings but the facts. After Church, we had some of Beatrice’s church friends over for lunch, and after lunch we sat and talked on the porch. Beatrice sat on the swing, pregnant for our second child. Quincy sat beside her.

We could see Harriman coming, the dust rising more than a mile away, as his car became visible out of a brown cloud. And Beatrice lowered her hand from her brow and told me it looked like my friend.

“Yeah,” said Quincy, imitating his mother, his hand hardly big enough to shade his eyes from the wide Texas sky. “That looks like Uncle Harry’s car.”

After Harriman got his hugs, and his howdies and pleased-to-meet-you’s from our church friends, he leaned against the nearest porch-post, beside the steps. And Beatrice spoke into the first lull in the following congenial Sunday chatter.

“You haven’t eaten,” she said. “Have you, Harry.”

Still sitting with Quincy on the swing, she looked at Harriman leaning against the porch railing, his arms folded as he looked down at the assembly of dusty Texas shoes of smiling Texas church-people. And he looked up but didn’t answer.

“Go inside,” she said smiling. “See what’s left.”

So he and I went into the house and got him a plate of potluck fried chicken and Beatrice’s potato-salad from the fridge, and we walked on out the kitchen door and sat on the back steps. The Azaleas blooming beside us reminded Beatrice of New

Orleans, in the Garden District where the houses were much larger, but the view much more curtailed. And I let Harriman bite and chew and swallow a little before I spoke.

“Something good, huh,” I said.

“You’ll think so,” said Harriman chewing, and he swallowed and spoke on.

“We’ve found you a Russian functionary, and we’ve figured a way to get him out of Russia to meet you, and he talks like he might be as excited about the possibilities as I think you are. God, I hope you can pull this off.”

Harriman usually didn’t say that much in one stretch. So he was excited too.

“Okay,” I said, smiling at my school-chum with his mouth suddenly again full of potato-salad. “How do we do it? What’s the next step?”

“Well,” said Harriman swallowing. “It has to be a secret. So you’re fired.”

“Fired?” I asked, grinning. “I was just getting good at this oil business.”

“Oh,” said Harriman. “You’ll stay in the oil business for a while. But you’ll be on your own, not just working for us. We’re going to back you in your own oil exploration company, to give you cover by saying you’re exploring for mineral rights around Texas while you’re actually gallivanting around the world, making all those friends you say you need. That is, if it’s what you want, and if you can bear being away from Beatrice, or if she can bear not being with you. Beautiful azaleas.”

“I’ll try to keep the trips short,” I had to answer. “And it’s necessary. We can’t not do it. Beatrice won’t like it, but she’ll understand. She understands.”

“You’re a lucky soldier,” said Harriman. “We’ll get it done this winter.”

So it was in my early days in Texas that I met Gorbachev. It amazed me later that no one figured that out, as obvious as it should have been to anyone who had read biographies of both him and me. It took us fifty years to win the Cold War Truman and Churchill had caused by their mistakes after Eisenhower and Stalin defeated Hitler. But that was short order, considering the size of the mess they'd made. How could so few have noticed? What do humans look at? Why don't they see?"

I had married Beatrice, the woman whose face I had painted on my plane, and my presidential campaign biographies show only one period in my life after our marriage when I was away from her more than a few days. It was after the Harrimans set me up with my own oil-exploration company, which I named for a Mexican revolutionary in hope that we might eventually unite all of North America, with its capital at Flagstaff Arizona, someday. What wasn't plain?

The biographies say I was off buying mineral-rights from Texas farmers, but I didn't buy many. Gorbachev's biography has him separate from Raisa then also, leaving Russia to visit Western Europe. And such travel was hardly permitted for someone as low as he was in his Party then. I understand that few know much about Skull and Bones. But the CIA should have suspected.

But, anyway, in Paris Gorbachev became my friend, much like my bombardier. He listened to me, both as a friend and as what the CIA called his control. And he lost his job for it, but at least he didn't die early.

"It's very strange," Mikhail said in our first conversation, as the morning sun lit the dust of the cobblestones of Montmartre. "That you should name your oil-company for a hero of the people."

Brilliantly the sun lit the dome of the basilica, the sacred heart.

“You’re going to be a great hero of the people,” I answered.

“Should we tour the Bastille while we’re here?” he asked.

“I’m not much into prisons,” I had to answer, politely.

“Neither am I,” said Mikhail. “I much prefer this hill.”

“Well,” I replied. “I hope we’ll be a beacon from it.”

“I’m not supposed to know the Sermon on the Mount.”

“But you do. Isn’t that a little why you’re here?”

“A little,” he said. “But more for my wife.”

“Do you have any children?” I asked.

“Not yet, but maybe soon, with this new hope.”

So we made friends, all of us. By the time Theresa started our open effort, that December evening by sitting down on that bus and refusing to stand up in front of the Empire Theater without her rights, she’d made so many friends that many thought her friends had put her up to that. Truth, nevertheless, is that not even Bob put her up to it. She was already up to it, because she was Theresa. She was just waiting for her own right time. But Bob and we three others understood. We saw how well she’d done.

“Until justice rolls down like water,” was Oliver’s answer, when he was asked to accept official leadership of that movement, to the question of how long would last the movement Theresa had begun by sitting down on that bus. “And righteousness like a mighty stream.”

And then he was a new young preacher in the community there, with the other leaders thinking he was a child among them, and an outsider with nothing to lose.

And, when he said that, Theresa wept real Earthling tears of joy, and all the African Americans in that church and in other

churches all across Montgomery and the nation shared her joy and much of her courage through the winning of the bus boycott little more than a year later, and beyond to national legislation ten more years later.

How long, O Lord? Ten years, perhaps?

Longer than that, and further than there!

A generation later, when a student stopped a Chinese ostensibly communist tank in the Chinese communist capital, by simply standing in front of it in Tiananmen Square in front of a portrait of Mao on the face of the Forbidden City, Nelson Mandela had something to say about it in Africa.

And not in African America but in Africa!

“It was a Theresa moment,” he said, and he was right as spring rain, however many people know “*tiananmen*” is Chinese for quiet gate to heaven.

And also, on one of my rights exploration trips, I met Yasser Arafat.

A couple of future prime ministers, of the state that Earth gave to the Zionists as much too meager besides hardly appropriate compensation for what Hitler and his supporting sycophant Germans had done to Israel’s people who had dispersed worldwide but mostly to Germany, had formed an organization to force the founding of that state by any means necessary.

One of the means was to kill nearly a hundred noncombatant British with some Palestinians and and Jews by blowing up a hotel named for the king of Israel we say wrote the Psalms.

So, as Mikey might have recommended before he returned to Mecca and learned Islamic brotherhood and tried to take up the methods of Oliver and Gandhi but was killed for that turn to

pacifism, Arafat retaliated by forming a terrorist counterterrorism organization, hoping to fight fire with fire, I guess.

The organization Arafat formed to retaliate in kind was *Fatah*, and the future prime ministers were Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, and the organization they formed was *Irgun*.

So, millennia later, together those factions refueled the flames in Canaan, with fighter planes from America terrorizing one side and people making mistakes more extreme than Mikey's terrorizing the other side, making suicide a means for homicide, unreasonably and irrationally, irreligiously.

So the next means the Zionists thought necessary was to call the retaliation terrorism. They knew the crusading culture of the Christian nations of Earth would ignore their instigation and call their retaliation against Yasser's retaliation an eye for an eye, to support it despite Jesus.

Also, the month I met Yasser, someone calling himself a Hindu murdered Gandhi. But who cares about Hindus. Even in America?

Yet Mikhail and I drank tea in Paris, and Yasser and I drank tea in Jerusalem. And, about a quarter of a century later, I would drink tea with Chairman Mao in Beijing. So one of the few things I found funny about those meetings was that so many different Earthlings drink tea but from different containers.

Russians drink it from big glasses, while Arabs drink it from glasses a little smaller, and the Chinese drink the tea they keep in China from little cups, while the British drink it from cups a little larger. But, as for me, it gave me a buzz, literally. It made my head buzz. So I didn't like it.

But it could have been worse. We could have been drinking vodka or smoking hashish or opium or drinking Beefeater gin or some of Hitler's *hofbräu*, and I was plenty spacey enough without so much as the tea. And, after a while, after I learned that

all that stuff messed up Earthlings' minds as much as it did mine, that a United States intelligence collection method was to give alcohol to Muslims as a token of respect, and that many Muslims ignored Islamic proscription to accepted it as such, I stopped finding that funny. But, excepting the tea, Yasser did none of that.

"You can't stop it," he told me as we sat in the old city, drinking tea from middle-sized glasses at a table outside a small open-front teashop on the Via Dolorosa, at a table unstable on the cobblestones of that narrow street of that particular vaulted antiquity. "They've started it again, and it won't stop until they stop, and they won't stop. Their heritage is less fair and older than ours. Peace can't come from age-old greed, at all."

Those cobblestones had paved Jesus' path of tears. And they were far dustier than those on Montmartre, and Yasser's people were far more willing to be martyrs than had been Parisians or Russians, ever. As Muhammad, Mikey had offered them that possibility, as Saul of Tarsus had offered it to the early Christians, but Mikey hadn't expected folks to take it up so fervently. He'd offered them a religion to unify their pride as a people, and he'd offered martyrdom only as a result of war, not as a necessary means to it.

"I know," I said. "They won't willingly stop. Many of them believe God gave them this whole country, and many of them covet the country whether God gave it to them or not as did the crusaders, and most of them will try to use religion as an excuse, but all of them together isn't a world majority, or even a majority in Canaan. They can be stopped."

"Who's going to stop them?" asked Yasser. "The world majority? The majority in Canaan? Whatever the majority of people, the majority of power is with the weapons of the United States and the United Kingdom and Western Europe, and they've all promised to lend that power to Israel if we make any move to

reclaim the land they've taken from us. The Soviets are supporting us somewhat. But America makes that a stalemate.

And, by the way, why do you call the land Canaan, knowing as you must that most of the population is Palestinian?"

"I call it Canaan exactly because I regret that the superiority of weaponry has anything to do with it. I call it Canaan because the best deal any of you is ever going to get is that you share it with no claim to superiority. And the only way you're going to get that deal is by saying so and behaving so. The western powers will respond well to that but only if they can see it. So we have to show it."

"Well," said Yasser. "At least you don't call it the former British mandate, and you speak a worthy ideal. So, I think you may be a friend to anyone worthy of a friend, but I have to say again that people calling murderous thievery religion would make that idealism our tombstone if we stood up to it alone. Bur, anyway, who are you, and how did you gain your references, those for this meeting?"

"I'll answer in a moment," I said. "If you'll forgive a question in the meantime. Have you read Kipling's *The Jungle Books*?"

"Children's books," said Yasser. "Books for children."

"From a winner of the Nobel prize for literature," I responded. "From an Englishman in India, while England treated India as England treated Canaan when I was born on this earth. He wrote of war, and he wrote of Islamic subterfuge, and he wrote of reasons for both. And he wrote of how we all could just get along with each other. Do you know what he said were the 'Master-Words'?"

"'We be of one blood,'" quoth my new friend, on this other side of Earth from our landing, from our powerbase. "'Ye and I.'"



“I am a friend,” I answered. “And I gained my references through other friends, and you don’t stand alone. But I know you’re right that the problem is horribly out of balance, and I know it will take considerable time, and so I’m not asking much from you, not now. All I’m asking of you now is that you work toward the ideal as well as you can, in the best ways you can see to do.”

“I do that anyway,” said Yasser. “So I’ll give you the promise, all on my side and asking nothing from you, about whom I know nothing beyond what I see and hear now. I will never produce an imbalance, never cause more Israeli eyes to be taken than Israelis take from my people, never break more promises to Israelis than Israelis break to my people. I don’t have the power.”

“Then isn’t it an empty promise?”

“The promise is I’ll do the best I can.”

“Then I believe it’s a good one!”

So that was set in motion, however slowly it might move, and Theresa’s movement was moving quickly. And her timing was right as well to move on quickly to the motor city, to be nearer to her Earthling little brother, and to Mikey. Her Alabama friends in our movement, their movement for their freedom on their Earth, were starting to feel that their private power was more important than their collective motion. They were vying to be more powerful than she, and so she left them.

And, then, by missing her, they learned better and jumped back on her track, their track on their no-longer-underground railroad. The subtlety of her inspirational devices always honored all of us, as did how she could move so many ways at once while seeming at rest, at peace. She moved ahead leaving no one behind.

But I wasn’t having her move so far from Texas without coming to visit and telling me some of the details before she put that additional distance between us. I’d been so busy gallivanting

that I'd hardly read the newspapers about what was happening in Montgomery, and I hadn't spoken with Mikey or Oliver in years. When you have eternal life, you don't pay much attention to time, and sometimes it goes quickly. So, before her move to Detroit, I asked Theresa out to Texas, for her tell me what she'd done. And we sat on our porch swing as Raymond drove Beatrice halfway to El Paso and back. He did love that Studebaker, though not as much as he loved Theresa.

“Tell me about the bus,” I begged.

## Chapter 5

### Dandelion Wine

“Oh,” Theresa said. “It wasn’t that much. I just sat down and wouldn’t get up, and I still don’t know what got into me, what made me do it that day. I guess it must have been a lot of things all adding up.

“One thing was the legality, the search the NAACP was making for a viable case to take to court. Other colored people that year had been arrested for not getting out of their seats to make room for less colorful people. But there was always something wrong in each case that might have made it hard to defend.

“One case was Claudette Colvin. She and an elderly woman beside her both refused to get up. But, when the driver went to get the police, the elderly woman got off the bus, leaving Claudette sitting alone. The elderly woman might have been a good case, but Claudette was pregnant, and she wasn’t married. So our legal beagles left that case alone, so people wouldn’t say Negroes were promiscuous. That was, any more than they did already, to rationalize their raping Negro daughters.

“But I think it was more the driver that made me do it then. I’d had a run-in with him before, about that business about having to get on through the front door to pay one’s dime, and then get off and get back on through the back door to sit down, if you were lucky enough to find an empty back seat. It was raining, and I had

no inclination to get back out in the rain just to get back on. So, in that earlier episode, I just went on back and sat down. I mean, I just did, as in justice, not injustice.

“I thought that, because of the rain, that driver might have overlooked my ignoring the craziness. I’m always trying to give everybody the benefit of the doubt, but I’m often wrong and was that time. He got out of his seat and came back and ordered me out the front door to get back on at the back. That time I said nothing, but I did a little something that probably made him mad.

I got up, but I dropped my purse near the front door, and I sat down in a front seat to pick it up, and I didn’t hurry about it either. The driver’s face was nearly as dark as mine by the time I got out the door, but his color was closer to purple. So I wasn’t at all surprised that he drove away before I could get to the back door. I kind of enjoyed my walk home in the rain, since I dearly love rain, as you know. But Mama and Raymond were pretty upset.

“Anyway, it was that same driver this time. I’d tried to avoid him since that earlier incident, waiting for the next bus whenever I saw him driving one. But this night it was kind of late, and I’d been walking shopping, for Christmas presents.

So my feet and I were tired. So, when I got on the bus, I was paying more attention to my feet than to the driver. So I just dropped my dime in the box and stepped out and went back and stepped in again and sat down.

“I sat in a front seat of the colored section, beside a man sitting by the window. I might have sat further back, but some seats were empty in the white section, enough for me not to worry about them filling up before my stop. But they did.

So, at the Empire Theater, a man got on and walked back to me and stood there looking down at me and the man beside me.

The man beside me moved to get out of the seat, and I moved my knees aside to let him out. But I didn't follow him.

I moved my knees and the rest of me over by the window and just sat there, looking out at the front of the theatre. So the white man stopped staring at me and turned to look at the driver, who was already watching through his inside rear-view mirror. And he didn't wait for any words from that other passenger. He popped out of his seat and walked back to us. And he had a gun.

"He had a pistol in a holster. But, except moving my eyes enough to see him staring into the rear-view mirror and storming back with his gun, I hardly moved. He didn't point his pistol at me or even pull it out of the holster, but I had to wonder why a bus-driver thought he needed to pack a pistol, and why the police let anyone do that on a public bus.

"Are you going to get up?' he asked me, standing shoulder to shoulder with the white passenger.

"No,' I said, and I still didn't take my face from the window. I just sat there waiting.

"I'll have you arrested,' he said.

"You may do that,' I answered.

"And neither did he waste any words. He took his pistol to the payphone in front of the theatre and spent a nickel to call his boss. I could hear him talking, getting the go-ahead to quell my disturbance by any means necessary. And, a few minutes later, a patrol car arrived with two policemen in it.

"They got on the bus, and one of them asked me why I hadn't stood up and given my seat to the white-man. I know it's rude to try to answer a question with a question, but I felt like being a whole lot ruder than that. So I gave him the same answer I gave the mother of that white kid I knocked from his bike in Pine Level.

"Why do you all push us around?' I answered.

“And I remember exactly how he answered, with the frightening authority of any French corporal doing his job. Your friend Lev was right in suggesting that every single soldier of the *Reichskrieg* was responsible for the Holocaust.

“I don’t know,’ said the policeman. ‘But the law is the law.’”

Had the policeman looked into Theresa’s eyes, he might have seen the little shining onyx that was about to beat the great white whale. But he didn’t, as I did now, hearing her telling of this dawning, of her light here this time.

“So he and his partner arrested me,” she said. “They didn’t beat me or even handcuff me, but they arrested me and gave me nothing not required by their law, not even the drink of water I requested several times, not even that much justice.

“But there was one kind person working in the jail, and I found that also frightening. The nice person was the woman who took me to my cell, locking me alone in one but changing her mind just as she turned away to leave me. She told me another cell had two women in it, and she asked me whether I’d rather not be alone. I told her it didn’t matter much to me, but she moved me anyway, wordlessly.

“I was grateful for that kindness in that dark place, not because I wished not to be alone, but just because it was kindness. I was so grateful that I didn’t ask her for water, because that bright warm act of kindness in contrast to the dark cold of the confinement made me feel I owed her, that I owed her not to trouble her more. I mean it made me feel as though I owed something to that French corporal jailing me. And that frightened me.

“And I also learned a little from the women in the second cell. One of them neither looked at me nor spoke all the time I was there, but the other asked me if there was anything she could do for

me. Considering the circumstances, the only thing I could think of to help her feel less helpless than we did was to ask her if she might get me a drink of water. I saw a metal cup hanging on a hook above a sink above the toilet.

“So she rose from her steel shelf they used as beds there and dripped some water from the tap into the cup. And, after I thanked her and drank the water, she expressed her understanding of the meanness of many Montgomery bus-drivers, and she asked me whether I was married. So, when I told her I was, she told me some of why she was there, but I couldn’t understand her story. It made hardly any sense to me.

“She said her husband was dead and that she was keeping company with another man. She said that other man attacked her, that she tried to retaliate with a hatchet, and that he had her arrested. She said he’d healed somewhat during her two months there and that then he wished to get her out of jail. But she said she then preferred to have nothing to do with him.

“Good, I thought. But bad was that no one else who knew her knew she was there. She had a stub of a pencil and a scrap of paper, and she wrote down telephone numbers of her brothers, and I told her I’d call them. I did, the next day, and I saw her on a street a few months later, but I wondered how anyone’s life could get to such a state, and she was kind and smart! Could being black degrade as much as that?

“I almost didn’t get the numbers. At first she couldn’t find any paper. But, while the lady jailer was letting me make a telephone call, the lady prisoner found the scrap. Because she didn’t hand it to me before my friends arrived to get me out, I still almost didn’t get it. But the lady jailer left the cell-door open while she let me through the door to the stairs, and the lady prisoner ran out and threw the paper down the stairs. And the lady jailer didn’t stop me from picking it up.

“My telephone call from jail was brief but poignant. Mama wanted to know whether they’d beaten me, and Raymond said he’d be down there in a few minutes. And I knew that, because he had neither a car nor bail money, he couldn’t.

And so I loved his faith, and it worked out. My boss at the NAACP and one of their lawyers and his wife, white friends of ours, got there first. But Raymond arrived a little later with the bail money. He’s always a true prince, a shining knight.

“But surely I’d have spent at least the night there, had we not a white lawyer.

“Poor Raymond. He loves me so much. And, because he’d sold that Studebaker for the Scottsboro boys, he had to call a friend to get a ride to come and get me. One thing we’ll have to do in Detroit is buy him a car. That we’ll have to do.”

“Do you think we’ll ever see him again?” I asked.

“Beatrice will guide him back by supertime, I guess,” she answered.

“So tell me more!” I asked. What happened next?”

“Well, everybody jumped into confab mode. Telephones were ringing all over black Montgomery. Nixon, my NAACP boss, saw this straight off as the perfect case, the one we’d been waiting for. Since the nastiest thing I’ve done this trip is knocking that white-boy off his bike and bragging about it, no one could fault my decency. Raymond was sick from worrying about me being in jail, and the thought of my doing more sickened him more. But, because he knew we must, he came around. He agreed because he knew we had to. He’s a very brave man. Such heart.”

And, before going, she paused a moment to look at the horizon.

“My fiery friend,” she said, “the one with whom I went to school in New Orleans. stepped out of line as soon as she heard. Without asking anyone, before the night was over, she gathered



some friends and went to work. One of her friends had access to a mimeograph machine, and they ran off a few thousand copies of a flyer. And, by dawn, they'd distributed them all over black Montgomery.

So, with that flyer asking that no one ride a bus Monday, that school-chum of mine actually started the boycott. The rest of us just fell in step from there. Such spirit here on Earth sometimes.

“And, as though it were news, a white friend who worked for the main Montgomery newspaper published the text of the flyer on the Sunday paper’s front page. And, with the help of that posting, and the spirit and speech of thousands of other colorful friends in Montgomery, by Monday morning it was big news. I couldn’t see a bus-stop from our apartment, but Oliver could see one from his and Rachel’s kitchen window. So he saw that the first bus at that stop that Monday morning carried no one other than the driver

“And later that morning was my trial. I pleaded not guilty to a standing-room-only crowd in the courtroom and was found guilty. And it was what we’d wished for, for us to be able to appeal to higher courts, but a wonderfully higher court was held that evening in the biggest black church in Montgomery. That weekend, my school-chum’s organization, the Women’s Political Council, had published another flyer, more officially. And it requested attendance at a mass meeting at the church.

And that court was standing-room-only inside the church, outside the church, and into the street. People were hollering and singing and saying things like that I was sweet and that they’d messed with the wrong one now. At another meeting, during the weekend at Oliver’s church, Oliver had been asked to lead whatever came of this. And he led this meeting at that larger church, and then it was all official. African American Montgomery stood united. There was no stopping us now.

“That’s about it. The boycott was on. The city council and the bus company fought it with everything they had, and some of those cowards who call themselves white bombed some of our houses and ran away in the night like roaches afraid of a midnight snacker, and Oliver’s house was one bombed. But Rachel kept the light on, and the rest of us shined as well, and a year later the buses were integrated.

“Oh, and you should have heard Oliver,” she said. “You know, when he was Moses, he made himself a speech impediment and made his brother Aaron do most of the talking to the Pharaoh. Not so this trip, not from the beginning, not at all. That first mass-meeting was an inspiration. From him to everyone. Even to me.

“He said our movement wouldn’t end until justice rolls down like water, and his words rolled down like water. I could hear all that studying he’d done in Boston, but it wasn’t what he said as much as how he said it, with passion flowing like that water. I was so, so very proud of him. I thought I’d likely burst.”

But now she sat quietly, looking down like into water. And I shifted a little and looked out at the wide Texas landscape. Two clouds of dust were rising in the distance, converging from two different directions on the road, one with a big yellow dot in the middle, the other with a little red one. It was Raymond and Beatrice in the Studebaker, and Ben and Quincy in their school bus.

“Many things are bursting well,” I answered.

“Yes, they are! How’s Arafat?” she asked.

“Not so well” I said. “He’s keeping his promise to me, but he’s right that there’s little he can do. Palestinian factions are sprouting up all over the land, and Israelis keep building settlements, wherever they wish. And the Arab nations are becoming more hostile and pushing Yasser out of the picture. There’s no focus of control for the Palestinians.”

“Well,” said Theresa, “He’s just going to have to sit tight and keep doing the best he can. No one else there is willing to stabilize or take the whole heat with a grin. If he stays steadfast, it’ll get better. It shall.”

“But it’ll get worse first,” I said.

“How about Mikhail?” she asked, demurring.

“I haven’t heard from him lately,” I had to answer.

But that ended that kind of talk for the rest of that day.

Ben ran from the school bus into his mother’s arms, and Quincy followed his little brother off the bus and took a pat on the back from Raymond. Raymond replaced me beside Theresa on the swing, as I moved to sit on the steps and accept my youngest son from his mother, and Quincy took his schoolbooks into the house. And his mother followed him through the door, presumably to start supper, saying nothing, but smiling.

Beatrice was always the best, seeing further than I.

Mikey had just returned to Michigan. In Boston he’d befriended others who’d found reason to give up on the American dream. Like them, he made himself into a caricature of the pompous business-people of the whiter race, wearing outrageously fancy suits and straightening his hair. And then, with them, he tried to steal monetary wealth. He became a crook, a petty hustler.

Caught in a burglary with some friends, he made his way into the Massachusetts prison where Sacco and Vanzetti had spent their last days for legally requesting their share of the American dream. Since their sentence was death, while his was but eight years of his life here, their nation had made some progress. But not enough.

One of Mikey’s partners in crime, who was less colorful than he but had been a partner of his in bed, received no jail time, only probation. But Mikey spent those years more productively

than she would have in prison or did outside and free. He read, book after book, mostly idealistic philosophy, mostly saying that what had happened to him should happen to no one. Mikey, of course, already knew that better than did Theresa's cellmates. But he read the books to learn more. And to speak in others' terms.

He also wrote in prison, but mostly letters to his sister in Roxbury, telling her how he felt about what he was reading and making for her the case he'd made as Muhammad to the Arabs, that religion had provided the pride powering what had been done to her race, and that thus her race should find its own religion, to empower pride in return.

"Jesus didn't have blue eyes," Mikey wrote to his sister. "He was Semitic."

And his sister talked to friends of hers about what Mikey was writing to her, and her friends talked to other friends of theirs. So, by the time Mikey returned to liberty in the cradle of liberty, he had many friends he hadn't met. They were waiting in Roxbury for him to lead them to their liberty. They'd even organized somewhat.

On Grove Hill, in the nearest thing to a middle-class neighborhood his sister's race had in that land of the pure-white Puritans, they'd made a mosque. They'd made it of an empty storefront building while Mikey was in prison, and they called themselves the nation of Islam. But some people called their mosque freedom house.

Spreading the relative prosperity of Grove Hill into other neighborhoods of Roxbury, they were leading others to work together to turn abandoned storefront buildings into clean and productive neighborhood businesses, serving fairly and well.

But, later, some people would call them communist, and Oliver and Mikey would talk about that later, in a hotel in Harlem.

“Communists,” said Oliver. “We both know better than that.”

“Yeah,” answered Mikey. “But I went to a different college.”

“I was in jail, too,” replied Oliver. “19 times, if I counted correctly.”

“Not as long as I,” said Mikey. “But harder time for less reason.”

Lots of convicts called sharing prison time going to school together.

But, communist or not, many African Americans in Roxbury or anywhere else wouldn't leave their Christian churches for the Nation of Islam, and yet many of them picked up the communist capitalist essence of the movement anyway. A couple in Roxbury, Otto and Muriel Snowden, founded in one of those storefront-buildings another organization they called Freedom House and didn't call a mosque, and there they carried the spirit more broadly for Roxbury, long after Mikey moved more widely in the world.

The last I looked, the mosque was still a mosque, but people didn't call it Freedom House. And Freedom House was still in Roxbury but had moved into a big brick school building near the mosque. And it was still doing all it could for the community, offering the classrooms for classes in real-estate purchasing and electronic data-processing and for church-group meetings and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, anything for which anyone would use the space to try to keep Roxbury from self-destructing.

So Mikey had done well in prison. But, though a branch of the Boston Public Library was within a block of the mosque the last time I looked, Grove Hill had self-destructed much as had the New Orleans projects despite whatever hopes Huey Long had for

them, as had Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York City, and many other places. But we can't blame Mikey or the Snowdens for that, unless we can blame Mikey for not living eternally on Earth, with all the problems everywhere.

"It needs to be a game of pickup," said Mikey in his storefront mosque. "And what needs to be picked up is the revolutionary spirit and the courage to follow it, to follow it for the better, by any means necessary."

So he picked up his spirit and followed it from Roxbury to Harlem by way of the south side of Chicago, and a brief time in Motown to get a little spiritual guidance from Theresa, as we all had to check with the shining onyx from time to time.

He might have sought pointers from the Pointer Sisters, but they hadn't yet made it past Texas from California, with Motown then less sounded than Mikey. Like Mikey, it was hardly sounded at all outside the black community, though both sounds would suddenly rise to the world near the end of this visit of his. Though Mikey's approach was hardly methodical.

But Oliver, on the other hand, while increasing his volume steadily, took his politics to presidential level before I joined the Republican Party. He met Dicky before I did, when Dicky was Eisenhower's vice president, when I was somewhat secretly a gallivanting globetrotter. So, after I met Dicky, after Fits Jr. beat him out of the presidency, Oliver and I compared notes, in that hotel in Harlem. I, for that meeting of our team, had to sneak in.

"What's up with that Fits Jr. character?" asked Mikey.

"Yes," answered Oliver. "He speaks so well and behaves so badly."

"Maybe it's all those drugs he's taking for his back," Theresa suggested.

“How about that Tricky Dicky character?” I asked, seeing no other answer approaching.

“He seems wonderfully sincere,” said Oliver. “Or, if not, maybe he’s the most dangerous man in the world.”

“My hunch is more like the most dangerous man in the world,” I suggested. “But that Fits Jr. character might be worse.”

But Fits Jr. helped us cross the line the governor of Alabama said he’d drawn in the dust in Montgomery, the cradle of the Confederacy: “Bigotry now! Bigotry tomorrow! Bigotry forever!”

“Bigotry” wasn’t his word, but it’s his words’ meaning.

Oliver called that governor Pharaoh and said he’d let God’s people go sooner or later, but we all felt we’d lost a little ground. Montgomery, the city of Theresa’s bus boycott, was the capital of that state there. So how could the Governor talk like a bigoted bus-driver there then? Didn’t those people ever learn?

Fits Jr. talked to us, which is more than Eisenhower did. Eisenhower left us to deal with his vice president at best. Except when he deployed the 101st Airborne Division to keep another Pharaoh’type’s National Guard from keeping some kids from going to school in Little Rock, Arkansas. That we greatly appreciated.

But neither did Fits Jr. talk to us for anything, until the United States government let the Alabama government let the Birmingham government officially and openly do more damage than the Ku Klux Klan had ever done clandestinely, at least in so short a time!

Why do people have to learn such things? And does people’s calling that the lesson the Children’s crusade not say that they do? So how can they deny it?

Oliver never wished that a child be on the front line of any of the Gandhian battles he was leading. But the government was

responding to the non-violent people's requesting freedom by violently beating them into the ground, drawing their blood and then quartering them in jails. And, while Oliver hardly hated, he easily hated the harm done to those peaceful people, and he doubted he could bear seeing children treated so, and he found that doubt self-evident.

And the movement had mandated a life of its own. Like Arafat in Palestine, Oliver had come to feel himself less a leader of a movement than a plug against improper movement. His rolling words had inspired the spirit in huge audiences, as Mikey's were inspiring it in smaller audiences. But now mainly his job was to keep people from taking Mikey's advocations too much to heart, too much in deed. That is, while he found that flow self-evident, he had to hold it off until Mikey taught his final lesson.

But the spirit's response to the mandate was immediate. So people took it in their hearts to their homes, to their households for table-talk in Oliver's terms and often Mikey's, dinner-table talk. And the households were full of children, black children who talked with other black children, in their backyards and streets and in their black schools. And those children told each other that they wished to do more than stand in lines to be refused library cards. They wanted God to help them, and they wished to help themselves. And they would do it by any means necessary.

They wished to stand not only behind one another in the library lines but also shoulder to shoulder on the front line. And Oliver had to let them, because he couldn't stop them, because he couldn't stop the spirit he'd worked so hard to unleash. So he bowed to the children and prayed with them, thousands of them in downtown Birmingham, as the government unleashed the dogs.

It was a nice day for a stroll. Dust-motes, like those one sees as light streams through a window, were sitting quietly in the sunlight on the concrete of the buildings of downtown



Birmingham, but not beaming strongly enough into the eyes of the police and firemen of that city, who were arrayed like the British at Lexington, with their dogs and fire hoses, awaiting black parents, and their children.

The children and parents ambled into the center of the city. They sang that they should overcome the oppression of their unalienable rights. Beneath the blue sky with its white clouds, they knelt to pray before the police that they might no longer need to show the third color of the star-spangled banner, the red of their blood the same as the blood of the police, and of the firemen who should have been putting out fires, not feeding this conflagration. But, answering no prayers today, the city stood ready to oppress.

The children rose beside their parents, and the police let loose the dogs, and the firemen the water. The dogs tore, and the water smashed, and the children fell in the street, and the parents crashed against the buildings, and the blood flowed. And the dust lay low, wet and soggy in the street and on the buildings, not mighty now or shining. Before it was over, three thousand children and their parents were bled away to jail. But also at last a few found truth to be self-evident. Before it was over, some firemen wept.

And that's how it ended, that week in Birmingham, Alabama. Day after day, the children marched, and the dogs tore as the water smashed, until the first American fireman quelled the conflagration, by simply refraining from turning on his nozzle. Hell, he couldn't see anyway, through the water rolling down from his eyes, in a mighty righteous stream of justice.

Other firemen followed him, and the dogs skittered away as dogs would always like to do. And next, after that year, in the United States of America, was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A century underdone.

## Chapter 6

### Through the Looking Glass

Yes, in the next year, more than a century after the Emancipation Proclamation! How long does it take to get the law, claimed and voted upon by the greatest democracy on Earth, to come alive? How long, O Lord?

The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. The *Magna Carta* and the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights and the Emancipation Proclamation. All alight in a literate nation. All saying the same. All self-evident. All reasonable. All rational. All plain.

So who cares? But the hosing had caught Fits Jr.'s attention. And, like the carpetbaggers after the Civil War, he saw an opportunity. So he enlisted Oliver in his campaign, as he had squeaked into the Whitehouse by a margin given him by his promises to black people, and by adults and young people who felt he was cute or saw he was young or both, and by Jewish people to whom he promised to support oppression in Canaan, a narrow margin of many small people. Oliver, of course, knew what was up and didn't officially endorse him, but he kept quiet and let him win and held Linden to his word for the Civil Rights Act.

Of course black voters might not have been so docile to such presidency, had they been permitted to learn to read. But Oliver turned Fits Jr.'s narrowness into a broad jump across the

line the governor of Alabama had drawn in the dust, a broad leap for the literacy that can keep such private prying out of power. So, onward Oliver marched to St. Augustine, an American city named for an African saint. As Lev said, it isn't all about the French. And neither is it all about Alabama. Oliver was after Columbus.

The most beautiful monument in the Puritans' Boston is that bronze statue of Mary Dyer. And the most beautiful monument in the Conquistadores' St. Augustine is a bronze statue of Isabella, the Spanish queen who sent Columbus here. Mary is seated in serenity, while Isabella is seated on a mule as a servant assists her down a treacherous mountainside. And Ponce de Leon founded St. Augustine seeking the fountain of youth.

Symbolism is rampant, ramping down the rocky path through Columbus's second voyage and the seeker of the fountain of youth whose name means lion's bridge, to the primroses and other flowers of Florida and on through the birth of a nation to modern St. Augustine.

And, at the end of that primrose path to that oldest of lived-in American cities, that city named for Augustine of Numidia, Oliver found the horror of it.

The French colonized Numidia, which is now called Algeria and is still full of French influence. And Oliver found horror in St. Augustine, more horror than in any other place he'd traveled. He found it in the streets and in the courts.

"Racism is more rampant here than in any other place I've seen," he replied to it.

And he could hardly do anything there. Beatings and killings were commonplace, and the state judiciary supported it, even more than in Alabama. One of Oliver's nineteen stays in jails of these United States was there, and no one could get him to speak about what happened to him there, not even Theresa. How

horrible it must have been, to keep Oliver quiet about it. Somehow Oliver failed in St. Augustine, and he did not return.

Instead, he moved on to Selma. But Oliver, like Odysseus, is never at a loss. So he used whatever he learned from Saint Augustine to make Selma a success without a sacrifice of children, but not without beatings and bloodshed of others. Lev, cared he not more for peace than for war, would have admired what the governor's gendarmes did to Oliver's people as they tried to march to Montgomery to try to take Theresa's movement one more step. The police let the people cross a bridge just outside their city of origin with a Bible name, then turned them back and attacked them on it, as they tried to retreat.

Police on horseback, like Cossacks and hussars, stormed onto the bridge and into the acquiescing people, flailing and clubbing on national TV and pushing Linden as it had pushed Fits Jr. in Birmingham. Like Fits Jr. in Birmingham, Linden refused support for that march, and this time TV forced him to support another attempt a few days later, with Theresa and Oliver together heading the final steps of that march. The final steps were in Montgomery to the Alabama capitol, while the Governor skulked inside, as the people crossed his line. So televising the bridge at Selma set the momentum for the voting rights act of that year.

So we'd long lost need for Fits Jr. And that was fortuitous, because I'd had him killed as soon as he'd committed his political party to the momentum that pushed through our legislation. Fits Jr. was gone, and the mighty stream rolled on.

No, we didn't have Fits Jr. killed for the United States civil rights movement, but his death didn't hurt the momentum. The voting rights act went through as a Fits Jr. dream before Linden was settled, and the momentum kept Linden a little in Oliver's corner from then until Linden did himself in with Vietnam. We knew we wouldn't have to kill Linden, just let him commit himself

to his political suicide, but we had to kill Fits Jr. to save the world from nuclear destruction by his hubris. That would have stopped all Earthlings' movement, or at least all humans'. So we couldn't think of that as sporting.

Anyway, my main motive in killing Fits Jr. was more personal, and in a sense for civil rights. For me the main motive was what that overweening little prideful drug-soaked spine-broken sliver of humanity did to Beatrice's friend Norma Jean. Oliver and Mikey, having been knights of Charlemagne, agreed for similar reasons, for the memory of Arthur, and Guinevere. And yes I mean Beatrice's friend I mentioned earlier.

Norma's life was tougher than any of ours, even tougher than Mikey's. Her mother was a Bourbon Street stripper, in one of the bars where Beatrice's father kept track of the cash for things like that, prostitution and drugs. And Norma had no notion who her father was and little notion who she was.

But Beatrice's response to Norma Jean showed early how different Beatrice was from her siblings. Beatrice's siblings made a sort of hobby of trying to think of reasons to call other people stupid, and they found that easy with Norma Jean. Norma was blonde, because her mother bleached her hair, and blondes then in the United States were supposed to be dumb. So Beatrice's siblings decided Norma was dumb and said so, to anyone who listened. They said it to Norma, to her unhappy face.

Beatrice, however, listened to Norma. And she spoke to me, and I've always listened to Beatrice, and so I also listened then to Norma Jean, and so Norma became my friend as well. I listened so well, and she spoke so well, that we might have become more than friends, were I not already in love with Beatrice. Norma liked me because I told her I was going to learn to fly.

“Men don’t let women learn to fly,” she said. “Do you think it’s because we’re too flighty?”

And at that she laughed aloud with a bright ha ha that made me wish to weep.

“You fly like a bird already,” I replied. “Please don’t ever let them clip your wings.”

“I read somewhere,” she replied to that, looking at me with a little scowl, “that British men call women birds. Do you think that’s why?”

For that, I had no answer, and then she had a long way left to fly, and she spread her wings early, because she had to. The drugs and prostitution got the best of Norma’s mother early, and took her to a mental institution. Mikey wept when I told him about it, for his Earth mother and for all of us.

Anyway, there was nothing dumb about Norma. She was sixteen years old and had a choice of going to an orphanage or getting married, and she was smart enough to seek advice before she decided. So, having hardly any friends, she turned to Beatrice. They talked on a bench, before the cathedral.

“What do you think of marriage?” asked Norma.

“I think it must be nice,” answered Beatrice.

“How?” asked Norma.

“Well,” answered Beatrice, “kissing is nice. But it’s more than that. It’s an important job, raising children. Nothing on Earth is more important than making sure that people grow up to be happy being good for each other.”

“My mom says I should be a movie-star,” said Norma. “That’s why she bleaches my hair. She says girls should have fun, not be tied to a man.”

“I guess,” said Beatrice. “If that’s what you want. But I don’t see it as being tied to a man. I see it as being tied with a man, having fun together.

“I love being a girlfriend, and I love my boyfriend. You like him, and he says we’re going to be President of the United States, and I believe him. I believe him, because I believe that together we can do it, and it will be we, not only he.

“I’ll spend more time with our children than he will, and he’ll spend more time with his cabinet than I will. But we’ll make decisions and plan for both together, because we love each other and understand each other and care about all others also.”

“What about church stuff?” asked Norma Jean.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Beatrice.

“I mean you go to church. You don’t go to this church here, the nuns’ church. But you go to your Presbyterian church every Sunday, you told me. If a person doesn’t have a church, how can a person get married? And, if you can, does it count?”

“I think marriages are made in heaven,” said Beatrice.

“But I don’t think that means they’re always made in church. Jesus didn’t have a church, and he preached the Sermon on the Mount beneath the open sky in a field of wildflowers, lilies and such.”

“I know,” said Norma. “I tried to go to church a few times, but I couldn’t get myself to keep doing it. I didn’t have any money, and they passed a plate and talked about their building-fund or this fund or that fund, and I had to just pass the plate on.

“Every time I did it, the people next to me looked at me like there was something wrong with me, and maybe there is. I’m my mother’s daughter, and I love my mother and don’t think I’d love my father, because of what he did to my mother and me.

“And Mom’s going to a nuthouse, and I might be going next. At least that’s what the nuns say, when they think I’m not paying attention. But it isn’t that, and it isn’t the money that makes me feel there’s something wrong with church. It’s sickness there.

“I mean physical sickness. Every time I’ve gone to church, the preacher’s asked the people to pray for sick people who couldn’t be there that Sunday because they were sick at home or in the hospital with pneumonia or cancer or some other craziness.

“I’ve read some of the Bible. I know it says that, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, all things are possible for you. And it tells about a woman with an issue who touches Jesus’ clothes and suddenly doesn’t have the issue anymore. It just stops.

“The Bible says Jesus turned to the woman and told her that her faith had made her whole. But the guy who wrote that part of the bible says at the same time that what made her whole was something coming out of Jesus! So what kind of Christian was he?

“I know Jesus told the truth. When I was little, I was sick all the time, until I got sick of being sick and decided not to be sick anymore, and I haven’t been sick since. So I don’t know why those preachers don’t preach the faith that Jesus taught.

“I wonder why something doesn’t come out of those preachers’ mouths to let those people with pneumonia or cancer or mumps or measles or whatever know their faith can make them whole, if they’d just muster a speck of it no bigger than a mustard seed.

“I don’t get it. I know faith isn’t always easy. But I feel we should try.”

“I know,” said Beatrice. “I wondered that when my mom died. My dad wouldn’t go to church, but she took me and my brother and sister every Sunday. I think maybe she left us because she didn’t feel like she could handle other things, like bringing us up.”

And then Norma Jean began to weep, sobbing on that bench, before the cathedral.

“So that’s why I go to church,” said Beatrice, laying an arm around Norma’s shoulders. “I keep hoping something can come



out of my mouth to help people, and that's why I go to the Presbyterian church, instead of to the nuns' church, this cathedral.

"Protestant churches are called protestant because people can speak more freely there. The Catholics treat everyone as though the church knows something the people couldn't understand, no matter how much intelligence or faith they have.

"Everything's in the Gospels that anyone needs to know, but the Catholic Church treats it like it's a big secret that people have to depend on the clergy to use. You've heard the stories some of the boys in the boys' school tell. That's a secret.

"So you're lucky you're not a boy," said Beatrice, hugging her friend.

And Norma stopped sobbing and laughed at that.

"You'll have to get rid of the headache medicine," she said.

"What headache medicine?" Beatrice asked.

"Once when I was passing the plate," answered Norma, "I looked into the purse of the woman beside me, when she was groping around for money to put in the plate. It was full of little bottles of different kinds of headache medicine.

"How's that for faith? How are you going to cure yourself of cancer if you can't cure yourself of a headache or even have enough faith to wait until it goes away? One thing I like about boys is that they don't take a lot of headache medicine."

"Maybe not for long," said Beatrice. "I heard a radio advertisement that said you should take some of that headache medicine if you have a sprained ankle and want to play football. Think how your ankle will feel if you stop taking the pills."

"That's not funny," said Norma Jean. "It reminds me of my mom. I read somewhere that taking headache medicine makes you get more headaches too. I think some pain may come from people telling us something's wrong with us they need to fix."

“I know what you mean,” said Beatrice. “The pills do more breaking than fixing, and maybe so does the church.”

“I don’t think I could handle the orphanage,” said Norma. “With all those nuns, instead of my mom, to see and hear.”

So she took her faith to the river and found on the moonwalk a young Merchant Marine, fresh into the service and fresh off a freighter in the port of New Orleans. With his pockets full of port-money, they were married as quickly as Louisiana would let them be, and Norma was on a bus for the sailor Jimmy’s mother’s house in San Diego, while he went back to sea. Norma rolled out to California, and Jimmy sailed into the Gulf.

San Diego, Saint James. Somehow I’ve ever confused the two folk songs, “Saint James Infirmary” and “The House of the Rising Sun”, before and after Norma Jean. By her wiles from the prostitution of the port of New Orleans, Norma graduated to that other port in California without so much as setting step in any Louisiana house of ill repute, or knowing she was walking into her own morgue by way of a city named for angels. And Norma was happy enough with Jimmy’s mother there.

She got a job in one of those diners people think of when they think of the fifties, with the chrome-trimmed red-leather-topped swiveling stools and the little jukeboxes on the counter. And there, in light from the electricity inside, from the sun outside the big front windows in daytime, and from the streetlights and the headlights of cars pulling up outside at night, she served pie from glass cases and stuck little green order-slips on a spindle on the sill of the window to the kitchen, in smell of eggs and hamburger grease. Some might call that low in life, but it surely beat the bars of Bourbon Street.

And she was good at it. She balanced plates of salad and plates of French fries on her arms all day, and after that returned

home to supper with her mother-in-law, a sad but smiling widow of the most-recently-ended world-war. Norma laughed and played Scrabble with her mother-in-law and waited for her Jimmy to come home from the sea. She listened to the radio, danced with herself in the little house, and waited.

You might wonder how I know all that. But being an immortal alien has its perks, and one is access to Heaven. So Norma told me all that later, including also that she loved her Jimmy. His stops at home were heaven for her then.

They didn't do much, Norma and Jimmy. It was mostly days on the beach and nights in bed. When she couldn't get time off from the diner, he came there and hung around drinking coffee and playing the pinball machine, and playing the songs he knew she loved on the jukebox. She balanced the plates with glances at him, as he tilted the machine and swore, then quickly smiled at her. That for a time 'til he was gone again.

And, one weekend, he drove her to Los Angeles, in a car he'd bought for her and his mother, a Ford and not new, but a convertible. They put the top down and drove the coastal highway as the wind blew through Norma's hair she still kept blonde.

Riding up with him in the driver-seat, she saw the sea he traveled blue and white beyond the sand, and driving in the city she saw other sights she'd never seen. She saw the large lawns of Beverly Hills, bigger and more immaculately tended than any in the New Orleans garden district. She saw the houses of pink stucco like some dream she'd never known to dream. And she saw herself and Jimmy stopping for hotdogs like in San Diego. But she also saw the waitress in the diner where they stopped.

"I wonder if they need someone," she said.

"They could use someone," said Jimmy. "Look at her."

"She's just seen better days," said Norma Jean.

So, back in her diner in San Diego, she kept her habit of not wasting time. She talked extra to every man in a car she saw to have Los Angeles County license plates. And, the next time Jimmy came home from the sea, she looked less at him when he played pinball. Her focus was more often elsewhere. She wasted less time waiting now.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Jimmy, after a day of being ignored.

“What’ll you do if I end up looking like that waitress in Los Angeles?” she said.

“Paint you maybe,” answered Jimmy. “That’s what sailors do with old stuff.”

He laughed, but Norma didn’t, and next day the question settled quickly. A man of her new pink stucco dreams sailed in and wafted the tails of his pin-striped double-breasted suit as he sat on one of the chrome and vinyl saddles and spun around to the counter and plopped his porkpie hat on top of the little jukebox there. He looked around and ordered mincemeat pie, and coffee straight up, like a man.

He glanced around while Norma brought it, and he spoke before she did.

“That guy over there likes you,” he said to her

“Which guy?” she asked, a hand on the counter.

“That sailor playing pinball,” said the pink stucco dream.

“Sailors like every girl they see,” she answered. “That’s why they’re sailors. They just grab any breeze they can catch, and then sail on. It’d be nice if a flyboy would sail in here. Where are you sailing from?”

“I’m sailing from south of the border,” he said. “Land of beauty where gardenias grow. We’ve just finished filming a movie down there, just south of Tijuana. Now I’m flying back up to

Hollywood, to cut it up and put it out. I mean we're going to flower it out to the public. You want to be in movies?"

"Yeah, sure," said Norma, glancing at Jimmy, who was pretending he wasn't paying attention, while the machine did nothing for his inattention, no ball in the slot, no nickel. "I'm a waitress, not a dreamer."

"You're a dreamer," said the dream. "So I'm going to say this quickly, and quietly so your boyfriend won't come over here and pick a fight, because I don't have time for it. You're young, and all young people dream, and not all young people are as beautiful as daylight. You're young and as beautiful as daylight, and I saw you before I opened that door, like a camera-lens clicking. I caught you smiling at that customer."

The dream pointed a thumb at a customer at the end of the counter away from the pinball, and the dreamer scowled and vowed not to smile now. Jimmy pulled a nickel from a pocket and put it into the machine, but he didn't pull the knob. And Norma, looking at Jimmy and frowning, made as if to turn away. But the dream stopped her.

"Alright," said the man. "Here's the deal."

With one hand, he pulled his wallet, from his inside coat-pocket. With the other, he moved his hat from the jukebox onto the stool on that side of him. He pulled a business card from the wallet, and after it a hundred-dollar bill, with the same hand. He laid the bill upon the counter, and the business card atop it.

"That's in case you don't do what I'm going to ask you to do," he said. "I'm flying high enough for one day, and so I'm going to land for tonight. And, at 10:00 a.m. tomorrow, I'm going to come back here and park out front, and hope you'll be there. If you are, we'll go to Hollywood together, and I'll make you a star."

That was the first time she noticed him looking at her. And it was a warm look into her eyes just as her scowl went away. He was scowling now, and she noticed that also, without a word.

And then, as he rose from the school, she looked down at the card and the money.

“If you’re not here tomorrow, call me,” said the dream, now with its swagger gone. “Come see me. Come to L.A., whatever you want. I shouldn’t have said I’ll make you a star. You’re a star already. I can just see it. I can see it.”

He still didn’t smile, and he turned away and walked out the door, waiting until he was outside before returning the porkpie hat to his head. Through the front window, Norma saw the Los Angeles license plate as he drove away. And the car was a convertible, but not a Ford, and new.

And, though its top was up then, it was down next morning.

But, before then, after Norma cleaned out the cash-register, paying for the pie and coffee and getting change from the hundred-dollar bill, she turned and saw Jimmy leaning on the counter. She hadn’t seen him leave the machine, and now he was waiting for her with a sadness she’d never seen in him. And this look into her eyes was fear.

“What was that guy talking about?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” said Norma Jean. “He said he’s a Hollywood hotshot, and he’s going to make me a star. People like that come in here all the time. Sometimes this place is like roadhouse. Probably some wacko drunk. Acting crazy. Talking crap.”

“You’ll never need painting,” said Jimmy.

But, next morning, Jimmy sailed back to the sea, and Norma Jean’s dumb blonde hair flew all the way to Hollywood, after rising late to say goodbye as well as she could to Jimmy’s mother. She thought she had to sneak away, and she didn’t think

she had to sneak out much, having no star-clothing anyway. But still she thought she had to say good-bye, and so she did as well as she could. After eggs and coffee.

“I love you, Mama,” she said rising from the table. “I’ll be a little late tonight.”

“I know,” said Jimmy’s sad mother. “Jimmy told me.”

Norma didn’t look to see the look in the eyes of her mother-in-law or wonder how Jimmy had told his mother what no one had told him.

And a touch of the back of her hand to the back of the mother’s hanging limp at the skirt of her housedress was the best she could manage before she left that little house, with one dress and one change of underclothes in a big straw handbag she’d bought in Tijuana, maybe for such an occasion.

So Norma flew away again, with less excuse, or more.

## Chapter 7

### Innocents Abroad

Whichever, Norma did become a star, at once. The porkpie dream was right about her and had not misrepresented himself. No Jimmy in any sense, and a respectable producer in every sense, he engineered opportunities one after another for Norma to be seen by anyone he thought could help her. So, before she hardly knew what was happening, no one thought she was just a dumb blonde. She was *the* dumb blonde.

Never dumb, she played a dumb blonde in movie after movie, and many of the men of America fell in love with her while their wives and girlfriends raged. She was the only major movie-star to pose nude for *Playboy* magazine, and the women raged the more about how dumb they wished she were as their husbands bought the magazine, and did who-knows-what with it. It wasn't on the coffee table.

She never got over Jimmy, but neither did she ever see him again, on Earth. She thought about sending his mother money, but she knew his mother's world-war widow's pension kept her as happy as money could make her. And it would have cut Jimmy's heart out, if she hadn't already done that, herself.

She married again, and again. But it wasn't the same as had come from that serendipitous look on the levee. The first of the agains was to a sports-legend, a baseball-player who was a



role-model to little boys the Earth over. The second of those famous agains was to a literary legend, a playwright who was a role-model to adult artists the Earth over. The first was because she wished to have fun, and the second was because she wished to be important.

She did indeed have fun with the first and stayed as good a friend to him as she had been to Jimmy. The second was doomed from her days in New Orleans, her days of wondering why people would have so little to do with her, beyond trying to belittle her. After that, nothing on Earth could make her feel important.

She married a great playwright to learn drama, as though she didn't know drama to the core of her beautiful soul. And she studied acting with a great acting teacher, as though she couldn't feel how to act from her lovely heart. So, after playing a dumb blonde, she played a smart dilettante. To appear to herself to be important, she boffed the pres. She thought that that might be her coming out.

It was a lot easier than killing him. She was a movie-star, and Fits Jr. gathered movie-stars around him, as though they were knights of the roundtable his cabinet might well have been, were he able to understand the concept of a round table. He had to be at the head of the table, or dancing on it like a jester in his own court. But Norma had no psychic view, or notion what might follow.

To her, he was the President of the United States, and she was a daughter of a Bourbon Street whore. To her, every woman in the United States admired that gallant swaggering statesmen, and no one had ever admired her for anything other than pretending to be a dumb blonde. Beatrice and I admired her, but we'd last spoken with her in New Orleans, and now she seemed fine.

She seemed fine, a movie star and hanging out with the President of the United States. We knew nothing of how she felt

about Jimmy or his mother, and the situation seemed to us a dream come true for her. It seemed to us to be better than anything offered to her in New Orleans. We knew she'd not been happy there. And now we thought she was. And we're still sorry. We're still sorry.

But enough of my apologies, none of which excuse. All of us, I and Mikey and Oliver and Theresa, and anyone else on the whole wide Earth who'd ever seen people self-destruct, should have seen what was happening. Instead of seeing her films and laughing at her, we should have seen her self and wept with her, for her as for ourselves.

What happened is that she said she'd boffed the pres, and said it publicly, more than once. The Fits Jr. court of adultery thought that might pass as a dumb blonde's drunk remark if she didn't say it more than once. But the Fits Jr. court that tried and convicted her of being too honest for their comfort knew she wasn't a dumb blonde and hadn't said it out of drunkenness. So they engineered an alternative for everyone involved.

Fits Jr.'s family legacy was bootlegging and union-corruption. Just as Fits Jr. tried to suck up to African Americans for their votes, his father had sucked up to labor unions for their members' money they called union dues, after ending prohibition ended his earlier means of sucking bucks for himself. And Fits Jr. had a sense of humor, although he strained it like everything else through the drugs he was taking for his back. And, in reply to his telling Norma about PT-109, she told him she'd been married to a sailor.

She felt ashamed as soon as she said that  
"But his name was Jimmy," she said. "Not Johnny."  
So Fits Jr. made puns of that qualification.

He had his court find a California union goon to pay Norma a visit and shut her up, and he asked them to find one named Jimmy, for special emphasis.

And the court found a guy named Jimmy Huffa. And Fits Jr. thought that was great, a guy named Huffa to snuff this dame for saying she'd boffed the pres, presumably in the buff, as in *Playboy*. And, for all Fits Jr.'s talk about Arthur and Camelot, he'd never read *Le Mort d'Arthur*. So he thought this little plot of his poetic justice. But we showed him poetic justice.

But shamefully late for Norma Jean.

Huffa was then a junior goon for a mixed-up operation headquartered at a nightclub in Los Angeles called El Dorado. And one of Fits Jr.'s court-goons met with that union-goon there and discussed the possibilities and made the request. And Huffa said what he thought and got what he could.

"You'll have to make her an offer she can't refuse," said the court-goon. "We have it that she's a proud woman, and she's not as dumb as she looks. What we're suggesting is that you offer her a choice between us offing her or her offing herself. You know, you can talk about like the choice between guns and pills."

"You talk like I don't know who we're talking about," said Huffa. "I think I've got the *savoir faire* to do this job, but there'd better be a whole lot in it for me. Anybody finds out I did it, and every horny jerk in the country's going to be out to off me. I'd be out to off me, if I weren't happily married. So make me your offer. How much for this?"

"There isn't any offer," said the court-goon. "The only thing I'm authorized to say is that you'll be alright. Things are shifting in Detroit and Chicago and Washington, and someone who can deliver a message like this will be very welcome in any of those venues. You'll have to build your business beyond

Hollywood anyway, to make big in your business. Oh, and be sure and tell her your name is Jimmy. You don't need to know why.”

So Huffa scratched his chin. He shook up the sediment from the melted rocks in his scotch. He looked at the instruments standing idle on the bandstand empty of players. He carefully refrained from scratching either of his palms. He nearly stuck a stubby finger into an itching ear. He slurped a little of his tepid scotch. He returned the glass to the table. He leaned back in his chair. He stuck out his lower lip. He sniffed and nodded. He said okay. He did it.

But Norma Jean did not go gentle into that good night. She hid herself away for a few days in a motel near Big Sur and tried to find herself in the surf beneath those rocks. And then, not finding herself there, she decided to seek herself in her mother. She hadn't seen her lately.

She'd had her moved from the nuthouse in New Orleans to a sanitarium in Pasadena. She loved her diagnosed paranoid-schizophrenic manic-depressive mother and liked to call her the little old lady in Pasadena, as she thought of her as a rose parade. Later some blond boys made a hit song with that title, and I think Norma might have enjoyed it, for herself and her mother. But she never heard it, just saw the roses.

She took a taxi from Big Sur back down to Pasadena, something she could afford as a star. Mikey, for all his eternal life, regretted that his role on Earth never permitted him to visit his mother in Kalamazoo before she died. Norma was at least lucky in that, in knowing she'd done the best she could for her mother, always and forever.

But now, in the threat against her life, she had need of her mother. She didn't know whether she'd ever see her mother again, and so she went to see her now. She sought two things, in her trek

now from the taxi through the pastel hallways, to the courtyard with its many roses. She sought from her mother advice and consolation. And her crazy mom delivered both.

Her mom sat in a wicker rocker in a corner of the courtyard, beneath a huge rosebush, talking to herself. Seeing her daughter strolling across the lawn, she shut up and paid attention with wide bright eyes, her irises fluctuating with the sunlight on her daughter as her daughter walked beneath the eucalyptus trees and lilac bushes someone had decided to place in the courtyard, to add the scent of lilacs, and for cool of the shade.. Norma often had wondered how this not-very-big courtyard in this insane-asylum had exactly what it needed, to look like what she thought might be heaven.

“Hi, Mama,” said Norma, kissing her mother on her furthest cheek and settling into the rocker on her nearer side. “I’m sorry I haven’t been here lately.”

“I know,” said her mother. “Where was I for you?”

“In my heart, Mama,” said Norma. “Always.”

And that was enough for Norma, reminding herself and her mother of the truth. Details are seldom told or sought in matters of the heart and eternity, and Norma knew that in that moment. So she and her mother shared the box of candy Norma had brought, and craziness the two of them rattled about this and that and here and there. Until the sun looked to be about to turn the afternoon into evening.

Then Norma kissed her mother again, and bade her farewell and took another taxi, this one to a motel in Hollywood. And there, as she looked at the cheap drapes and a picture of a sailing ship Jimmy might have thought artsy, she thought of him and his mother and her mother and the deep unsounded sea and sparkling sand and her child hand in brilliant motes of dust in sunlight

through a window, and she took some pills and went to sleep, and never awoke again. At least not there in Hollywood.

So, that was my main personal reason for wishing Fits Jr. killed. But, for the world in general, the reason was how he responded to the Central Intelligence Agency, and specifically to an operative named Rich Abyss. Like me, Rich was a Yale economist, partly because he took his name seriously. He saw life as a deep unsounded sea of wealth. So he delved deep in that rich abyss.

His first opportunity to raise a huge lode of that wealth to the surface was in Germany in implementing the Marshall Plan. There, he met Charles de Gaulle, whose leadership of the French Resistance and its subterfuge assistance of the success of Earth's powers less crazy than Hitler at Normandy inspired Eisenhower to evolve the United States Office of Strategic Services into the Central Intelligence Agency further than Truman tried.

The Office of Strategic Services was a World War II development of the Pentagon to deliver strategic intelligence to the military for military purposes.

Truman dissolved it and chartered the Central Intelligence Agency to give it responsibility for also collecting civilian intelligence. And Eisenhower, in his coordination with de Gaulle, saw a need and a possibility to give it responsibilities beyond collecting intelligence. He wished to make it a dynamic tool for keeping peace proactively, rather than repeatedly having to restore it reactively, through war.

Rich and Charles talked about that, as they struggled to restore prosperity to war-torn Europe, while watching new wars developing all around the world, from Canaan to Vietnam. So Charles recommended Rich to Ike, for the fledgling agency he was developing through the leadership of his Secretary of State John

Dulles and John's brother Allen, who was then Eisenhower's Director Central Intelligence. So Ike passed Rich along through John to Allen, who appointed Rich director of the Office of Scientific Intelligence, in Allen's reshaping of the Agency.

Rich's most widely known project there was the development of the U-2 spy planes. Rich thought the abyss of possibilities not only deep but high, and later he also developed projects to identify UFO's. So he developed the U-2 as an eye to the sky, as well as to the earth. But the eye to Earth nearly got all humanity killed. And that was by way of the pride of Fits Jr. He proved by it that we were right.

U-2 surveillance found and filmed Soviet development of missile bases in Cuba. And Fits Jr., instead of quietly calling the Kremlin and entering into negotiations, had his staff call the *Washington Post* and the American Broadcasting Company and anyone else who could spread the word and the pictures, and then he entered into a public word-shooting contest that nearly turned into a nuke-shooting contest that could have blown the earth to kingdom come. His famous speaking-ability nearly turned literally into bombast.

Why? Ike was still alive and well, and Rich was still at Allen's CIA. But Fits Jr., instead of asking people who knew how international exigencies worked, told his yes-men what he thought, and they agreed. And what he thought was that he'd show the world what a brave young man he was and how he wasn't going to let those commies threaten America. Truth of it was that the potential threat wasn't nearly kinetic until Fits Jr. threatened the Soviets. After that hectoring, the questionable missiles in Cuba were hardly relevant. Relevance turned to intercontinental nuclear missiles on both sides.

But I shouldn't have said he was hectoring. Hector at Troy was facing an actual threat. The Greek army had surrounded his

hometown and were parading like Fits Jr. all around it. So Hector nodded his plume to his wife and son and braved the battlefield with the bravest face he could put on in his fear for his friends and his family. Fits Jr. may have fit better in earlier millennia, but in millennia earlier than Arthur's if so, if he'd fit well anywhere at any time. He was more like those Greeks than that Trojan, and the Greeks later learned. Fits Jr. crusaded publicly for his private hubris. Greeks learned to call that the tragic flaw. But, in his short life, Fits Jr. never learned.

Yet the people of the United States bought his bombast, as they cheered watching cowboys killing Indians on television, after actual Indians killed the Indian Gandhi, for being too peaceable. So, of course, Khrushchev, not being as crazy as Fits Jr., backed down and pulled out, knowing his missile presence in Cuba was by no means worth the impending doom. So headlines bombasted that Fits Jr.'s bombast had made the other fellow blink.

But all on Earth should have been blinking tears from their eyes through all of that, and the other fellow became still less a fellow, making all worse.

But still not then did my companions and I decide to take out the fellow who had directed that regression from the fellowship that Rich and Allen and John Foster and Ike and Charles had tried to salvage from the abysmal morass of Truman's and Churchill's mistakes. The final decision didn't occur until after the failure at *La Baya de los Cochinos*, the Bay of Pigs. There, again, Fits Jr. refused the advice of Ike and Rich to follow Charles' example. And this time people died for nothing, nothing beyond Fits Jr.'s hubris. That debacle proved a pattern we couldn't suborn.

Here's more background. While Ike was President, Allen made Rich project manager for an insurrection in Cuba. The three of them based the plan on the success in Normandy, but with less



military incursion and more civil revolt. Charles' French Resistance forces had provided essential intelligence before the twentieth-century Normandy invasion and essential sweeping-up after, but the mission had cost Earth too many corporals. Too many loyal soldiers had bled their lives into sand.

So the Eisenhower plan for Cuba was to land not at the Bay of the Pigs. That area was sparsely populated, and the wish was to maximally apply the Cuban popularity of the insurrection. The project Rich hoped to manage was a landing at the city of Trinidad, with minimal military forcing, just enough for safe landing, a conspicuous landing, but a safe one. The conspicuousness would let the internal resistance both know of the support and have a way to help.

And, with conspicuousness and safeness together meaning assurance that the support be substantial but not an invasion by itself, the bottom line was that this would be an insurrection with just enough help from outside friends to assure success.

Such was the spirit of General Eisenhower, who went to West Point because he hadn't funds to pay college tuition. He learned all his lessons well, and he fulfilled all of his obligations well and never excepted his conscience from that. He was quite a Taoist himself, not overtly helping us much with civil rights, but assuring that doors stood open. So his Cuban insurrection could have been a piece of quiet glory. It might have been his crowning glory as one learned person. But with little public notice.

"For our sins," Ike might have said, weeping in a shadow.

But Normandy was noisier, and Fits Jr. wanted noise. He wanted his horn blown, and so he tried to turn Rich's plan into a perfect imitation of Normandy. He promised more troops and changed the landing site to the Bay of Pigs.

"That's a fine ideal you have," he said to Rich. "But world opinion is important, and the United States has to take credit for

this, and we can't afford failure. We have our military might, and we can't be sure the Cubans you've recruited will hold up their side of the bargain. After all, they did let Castro take over their country."

Rich didn't remind Junior that the United States had trained Castro's troops at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. He made a mental note to look up whether Fort Jackson was named for Old Hickory or Stonewall, and which Carolina held Fort Sumter. He wondered why the statue of Old Hickory in the square named for him in New Orleans so much resembles the statue in Lafayette Park, where homeless people sleep in front of the White House. He wondered why Fits Jr. didn't care about such questions. He glanced out to the rose garden. He acquiesced. He smoldered. He dreaded.

"I'm here to serve," he said, rising from his Louis XVI Antoinette armchair.

"Well, it's a go," said Fits Jr., wincing in his Shaker rocker.

The invasion went as newly planned, up to a point. The landing-crafts landed at the Bay of the Pigs, and the troops stormed onto the beach, as their fellows had at Normandy. Not until the mud of Vietnam did the Pentagon design ground-gripping treads into combat-boots, and so there was a lot of slipping and sliding in the sand, as at Normandy. The new plan promised little initial conspicuousness, but the landing was plenty conspicuous nonetheless. So Castro's forces quickly defended.

Men lay dead on the beach, while the people of Trinidad and all of Cuba, hoping to see it on television someday if the United States prevailed, awaited the outcome as all of Cuba's official government army concentrated fire on the beach, at the hundreds of United States troops there with a few expatriate freedom fighters.

And the blood ran, and the water washed, and the sand blew and shifted, and the noise and smell of gunpowder, invented by some Chinaman, sang and reeked, in the air.

Some Chinaman, in the interest of science, or just to blow things up, or only for the noise? As Ahab said, standing at the rail of his ship, somewhere beyond that bloody water people were plowing their fields, not knowing much of Earth was happening. Chinamen and Chinawomen were fighting their own battles for or against communism or anything else that threatened their ability to feel at home, happy in the flowering of their fields. On good days, in pleasant forgetful minutes, they enjoyed the plowing with dreams beyond, with thoughts of family and friends and further. However, meanwhile, the Bay of Pigs was sucking blood, as no pig would.

A Massachusetts man named Melville told the story of Ahab at the rail of his ship, abysmally railing at the great white whale in the deep unsounded sea. And, as Melville tells the story, Captain Ahab's first mate stands behind him at the rail, hearing Ahab try to sound the unsounded as Ahab hears the mate behind him but hardly heeds his presence, until suddenly and inexplicably recognizing that he's not alone. And then, suddenly and inexplicably, he turns to address the mate.

And, as we don't know for what to ask when we don't know our hand, Ahab turns to ask what we can know.

"But blanched to a corpse's hue with despair," says Melville, telling this tale of silly subservience, "the mate had stolen away."

And now, hardly heeded, Rich stood behind his President. Men were bleeding, dying on the beach, and the last resort was to send in the planes. It was part of the new plan, part of Fits Jr.'s compromise of the old plan, to send in air-support if the ground-invasion looked to fail. So, as Fits Jr. stood in the war-room,

hardly heeding the situation through the technology of the time, Rich stood behind him. And, of course, he advised his President that now was the time for that. But Fits Jr. heeded not at all.

“I think it’s time,” said Rich. “For the air-support, I mean.”

“Not yet,” said Fits Jr. “Half the force hasn’t hit the beach.”

Rich had dealt with two Presidents of the United States and one of France, and he knew how to be polite and treat a war-room as a drawing-room, but everything he knew was telling him that everything was wrong with this. So now, having heard the response to the obvious assessment he’d understated, he knew the crux of the situation. Fits Jr. wished to be better than Eisenhower. And Rich was a pawn in his play.

“Arthur’s table was round,” said Rich.

“What?” said Fits Jr., reading from his rocking-chair the paper reports clacking from the code-machine. “This is like Normandy. I’ve studied Normandy. The air-support was minimal. And it was more than was necessary.”

He said that quietly as he rocked, his burr-head brush-cut pointing to the ceiling as he held the spooling paper in one hand. His other hand rested on its arm of the rocker, as his eyes gazed glazed at his advisor trying to be everyone’s mate. Whatever their direction, Fits Jr.’s eyes showed little recognition of any substance outside him, outside his present fit.

“Half the force that’s hit the beach is dead,” said Rich.

“Ask what you can do for your country,” said Fits Jr.

So the troops died, and Castro continued, and we killed Fits Jr. Overweening pride is how the Greeks defined hubris, and Fits Jr.’s pride was about to overween this world. If we’d let him continue, the Cold War couldn’t have been won for centuries, and might easily have turned hot enough to send the whole of Earth to hell.

“You see, I was right?” said Fits Jr., after the failure of his piggishness. “If we had landed at Trinidad, our landing force might have retreated into the mountains and told of your failure. If we had sent in the planes, the world would have thought the United States of America was responsible for your mistake.

“So, now, I can plausibly deny our responsibility.”

“*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” said Fits Jr., after the futility of any diplomacy with him inspired the Soviets to build the Berlin wall, to let him and the world know that they weren’t making a career of blinking at this screwball.

So, thinking the next move to destroy Earth might have been over that, I thought we shouldn’t wait to see.

“*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” I quoted, thinking of Hitler’s bombast.

“And they call me dangerous!” agreed Mikey.

“Doesn’t he know anything at all?” asked Oliver.

“I think he has to go,” I had to offer.

“I think you’re right,” answered Theresa.

And then, with my head bowed like Lev’s at the river, I waited for her to tell us the rest of her answer, as Mikey and Oliver didn’t bow their heads but looked at her, not with any push or pressure but patiently awaiting the answer they knew would come, as Theresa’s bowed her head like mine but with tears in her dark and lovely eyes.

And then, hardly audibly, she spoke her answer.

“As soon as you can manage it,” she said.

By the time to kill Fits Jr., Beatrice and I had brought ourselves and Quincy and Ben to Houston, and Zapata Petroleum was just a sort of funny fringe of my involvement in the world oil-economy, of which Houston was the administrative capital, and I’d made many friends in Texas, large and small.

Two of the friends were Linden Johns and John Conundrum, the former Democratic Texas senator and then Vice President of the United States and the then Democratic Governor of Texas, but I recruited a Republican friend also. Dicky, because of his ambition to spread his power from sea to sea and further, was easy to befriend. His hubris was crazy, but it was easier to control than Fits Jr.'s.

“Yassuh, boss,” I said to Dicky. “Uh huh.”

“Mm hm,” he said to me, and was my friend.

So, by that, I made the assassination of Fits Jr., the President of the United States, a bipartisan effort. Linden, because his hubris was nearly as huge as Fits Jr.'s while he was far less clever than Dicky, was still easier to recruit.

All I had to do to get him in line was to point out that he'd be president immediately after, while recruiting Conundrum required Tricky Dicky's trickness before he earned that nickname, but he did it.

So, from that, the players play fell in place. It was no game, but Earthlings call such scheming such, and Earthlings are ordinarily easy to recruit. Just tell them what to think they want from life.

So the whole political ploy fell quickly into place.

## Chapter 8

### For Whom the Bell Tolls

It was easy. I'd get someone to guarantee a public parade schedule for Fits Jr. I'd get some wacko with a credible motive to snipe him somewhere along the route, and I'd get someone more dependable to make sure he was sniped, at the same time from about the same place. I'd slop things up enough to be sure the wacko sniper was caught in short order, and soon after I'd have some desperate dude commit suicide by police, killing the caught sniper.

Surely you can see that most of the complication was in finding the right personalities. Everyone had to be a lot like Linden, but everyone also had to have different skills and opportunities. Linden and Conundrum were both essential, for the opportunities they presented, for getting the target to the sniping. The Vice President could get him to the city, but the governor would have to get him within rifle range. So the last problem was how to suck Conundrum into the effort.

But the first problem was tricking Dicky through a lot of long talks I had with him. First, in those talks, I let him understand the power of my position in the petroleum industry, and that step led to the remaining steps falling like dominoes. I convinced him that, if he supported me in becoming a leader in the Republican

party's administration, I could my use that leadership and my petroleum power to make him Linden's successor as President.

He was tricky enough to see that I was seeking further steps for maybe my own Presidency. But he also saw that his would be first and that there'd be more tit for tat from both of us along the line. And I was also tricky enough to see some tit for tat for all of us, as you'll see. But what has this to do with Conundrum?

Easy answer. Conundrum and Dicky and I had one long and gradually forthright conversation, over scotch with Linden at the Cattlemen's Club in San Antonio. I thought the venue crazily appropriate, since Saint Anthony had been the most powerful single factor in subverting Saint Francis's organization from Francis's disavowal of monetary wealth to the Franciscans' becoming a premier fundraising organization, just as I would be the most powerful single factor in winning the Cold War. I regretted Anthony's subversion, and I hoped mine would be for the best. But I understand mixed blessings.

And, within those walls of longhorn decorations, the hangings of horns of dead cattle as though they were trophies of war, we Democrats and Republicans planned the next four Presidential elections of the United States of America, the land of the free, our democracy. Here's part of the conversation.

"Here's the deal, John," said Dicky. "Would you like to be president?"

"The whole thing sounds too crazy for an answer," said Conundrum. "Well, of course it sounds crazy."

"Don't talk crazy," said Dicky. "We're not goof-offs. We're important people."

"Alright," said Conundrum, pausing hardly long enough to sip some of his scotch through fresh rocks, not at all like Jimmy Huffa's at the El Dorado. "Let me be sure I've got this straight. Someone's going to assassinate Fits Jr., for Linden to be president.



Then Linden's going to abstain from running against you, for you to be president. Then you're going to make me look good, for me to be president. What about the fact that I'm a Democrat, for Christ's sake?"

"Switch parties," said Linden. "Are you too proud for that? And Christ has nothing to do with it! Don't be maudlin."

So that was the vast bipartisan conspiracy that laid Fits Jr. moldering in his grave, with its flame above it, at Arlington. It was that quick and easy, with my Skull and Bones friend boosting Linden's selling Fits Jr. on a visit to Texas, the land of the Alamo. He didn't know the Alamo had been a mission in a city named for Saint Anthony. But he was always up for a parade.

"As I remember," said Fits Jr., "the Alamo isn't in Dallas."

"But it's cattle country," said Harriman. "You'll love it."

"If you say so," said Fits Jr. "Too bad Norma can't go."

So we set Fits Jr. on his path to death, and Rich and Mikhail and Huffa helped me with the rest. Rich recruited a dependable rifleman, and Mikhail scared up a wacko rifling fall-guy. And Huffa destroyed some evidence.

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Fits Jr. had to save some face, and Rich was a fall-guy for that. Rich was good enough at drawing-rooms to know both that he'd have to take a fall and how to assure that he not fall further than he wished. He and I had talked, and I'd let him in on the secret of my being from outer space, and he knew enough about outer space to believe me. So he immediately replied by telling me of a couple of things he knew.

"Sometime in the second millennium before Christ," he said as we sat on a bench on the Capital Mall near the Smithsonian Aerospace Museum, "a pharaoh said he saw foul-smelling circles and disks in the sky. Do you know anything about that?"

“Must have been when Oliver, I mean Moses, was arriving,” I answered. “We’ve improved our emission-systems since then. We’re using more methane, and we’ve completely eliminated sulfur from the mix. The wonders of modern technology.”

I don’t know what he was thinking. But then he looked at me and looked away and at the cherry trees, at the George Washington monument and the Lincoln memorial, and the capitol. And then he nodded and shook his head and went on.

“Lyon, France,” he said. “In the last quarter of the first millennium after Christ, some people said they saw a craft land and let three people out.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Theresa told me about that. That was when Oliver and Mikey landed to be Orlando and Oliver at Roncesvalles. Theresa came along for the ride, because she was between jobs and thought she’d take a little vacation. That’s when she fell in love with France and why she asked Bob to let her be Joan of Arc. She told those people no one would believe them. How about you?”

“You’re a stone lunatic!” said Rich. “What can I do for you?”

The deal Rich made with Fits Jr. was that Rich transfer to the CIA’s UFO unit, which Fits Jr. thought was crazy to begin with. It was quite a lot like Br’er Rabbit’s begging Br’er Fox not to throw him into the briar patch, when Br’er Fox was threatening bodily harm to Br’er Rabbit. Br’er Rabbit was raised in a briar patch, and Rich had pretty much raised himself to the sky, trying to identify objects in it.

I don’t remember who came here as Uncle Remus. But I remember that the outcome delighted Rich, and I remember that he lost no respect from anyone in the Agency. Fits Jr., on the other

hand, having lost it long before the Bay of Pigs debacle, had no respect from the good-old-boys of Ike and Allen,. He lost it by founding the Peace Corps as an arm of the Agency.

He so admired Eisenhower that he tried to outperform him in every aspect of intelligence, not only in that adverse emulation at Bay of Pigs. So, sitting in that rocking chair, with those drugs pumping through him, he dreamed up many ways to be ideally arrogant. And one of his ideas was the Peace Corps.

He thought recruiting, to do their best for peace, smart good retired experts and smart good kids from colleges all over the country, and then recruiting them from that into central intelligence, would be effective and efficient. Ike's and Allen's old-boys were quite contented to recruit from such as West Point and Skull and Bones for their agency, and leave the Peace Corps to people the Peace Corps might attract to be a force for international peace by sharing, not by subjugating. And the overt organization and mission of the Peace Corps easily empowered peaceful people anyway. But Fits Jr. wished to be the smart-guy.

So he founded the Peace Corps into subterfuge. And one of the silliest ploys of in that became refusing personnel with overt intelligence experience entry into the Peace Corps. Of course the silliness is in that the subterfuge neither stops covert agents from entering it nor prevents recruiting honest young men and women into it for work for the Peace Corps' overt mission. And neither does it prevent the corruption of both categories of people that's inherent in the covert recruiting process. And how covert is the conscience of the people who refuse?

But that doesn't explain the silliness of the Defense Intelligence agency having the Defense Intelligence School train United States military personnel in photography by having dozens of them in their new civilian clothing they bought with their new civilian clothing allowance practice their new skills by

simultaneously taking photographs of the George Washington Monument with identical cameras from class days before they go off to embassies all over Earth to collect intelligence for defense attaché operations whose overt mission is to collect intelligence while the fact that they use photography to do it is classified “confidential, no foreign dissemination”.

Confidence or confiding in what or in whom? Shouldn't it be sharing to stop alienation and not refusing to share with people one calls allies if they're foreign? And shouldn't confiding be sharing intelligence to stop alienation, foreignness, etc?

Of course, the motive for that misreferring misrepresenting misnomer is to make the foreigners designated as enemies of the United States pay attention to those low-ranking soldiers with their antiquated equipment and limited training, rather than pay attention to the more adequately equipped and trained operatives of the Central Agency.

But the next question is whether both the foreign enemies and those loyal soldiers or anyone else paying attention to that couldn't figure out that it was a ploy, and the next question is why the Defense Intelligence Agency instructors didn't tell their students that the Defense Intelligence Agency was making decoys of them, and the next question is what figuring it out did to their loyalty.

But, anyway, Rich's intelligence beat Fits Jr.'s literally to death. Rich easily used his unadulterated access to find an expert Agency rifleman. And, except the rifleman, and me there in front of the Smithsonian, he spoke with no one about the mission. He simply told his rifleman that the mission was too secret for other involvement. And, meanwhile, Mikhail did about the same.

The reason Mikhail was able to meet me in Paris so early in our careers was that he had performed excellently in the Soviet Union, both academically and in his profession of the ideals he

observed his government to call loyalty, whether or not the government believed in them.

So he quickly won recruitment into the KGB, and a trip to Paris, to recruit me. Harriman originated the idea and originally contacted Mikhail in Russia to recruit him into talking his manager into sending him to Paris to recruit me. And he told Mikhail to tell his manager of my oil-industry connections, and especially of my naming my company Zapata petroleum, which was also Harriman's idea.

Mikhail didn't have the access level within the KGB that Rich had within the CIA. But he had access to his manager, who had much more access and was able to find the wacko sniper, after Mikhail passed on to him that part of our plan. But no one told Mikhail any other details of the plan.

As I've suggested, the plan was for the wacko to be incompetent enough to insure that that he die also, but Harriman told Mikhail that the plan depended on the United States government executing immediately anyone caught killing its President.

But the resource Mikhail's manager provided was perfect for the job. He was a former United States Marine, a young man who had become disgruntled by not being accepted as an official American sniper and had been discharged for his wacko suggestions, and so had offered his services to the Soviet Union. And his name was Remington Bosworth.

Remington. How appropriate. And next, to make it look on the up-and-up to him, we had him go to Moscow to meet Mikhail and then come back to Houston to meet me. And, to keep the plot invisible to anyone else, Mr. Bosworth never met anyone in it other than the two of us. And that's where Jimmy Huffa came into the plan, to destroy the evidence, to keep the secret.

On that dreadful day in Dallas, we put Rich's sniper in an office in a suite we'd rented in the Texas School Book Repository, a building along the route tall enough to open a clear shot. And, for Bosworth to use another office in that suite, we arranged a legitimate job for him there and gave him a key the suite. And, also for both for secrecy and credibility, we issued him and the sniper identical Remington rifles.

And the schedule didn't need to be precise. Fits Jr.'s schedule was to parade past the repository in a Lincoln Continental convertible with its top down on his way to lunch. The snipers' schedule was to wait most of the morning for Bosworth to take two shots whenever he felt comfortable enough to ascertain accuracy. And Rich's sniper was to synchronize with Bosworth's sound whenever it occurred.

Bosworth watched the pass to lunch and took a shot with ease. On hearing the sound of that shot, Rich's sniper pulled his trigger and put a bullet into Fit's Junior's head as it bobbed from Bosworth's first shot, which was far more accurate than we'd expected. His second missed the car entirely.

Technology is always more advanced than television, and we saw the whole thing, on tape for television, all three hits. Rich's sniper had a camera in his office far more advanced than what those Defense Intelligence Agency students had, and nearly as advanced as the satellite cameras that impressed us when they were declassified in the nineties. So, surely not for posterity, but to feel responsible for his part, Rich arranged a record of the whole thing.

Bosworth's first bullet went through Fits Jr.'s neck and hit Conundrum. To be riding so close, Conundrum must have wished to be president too much, or trusted us too much, or both. And next Rich's sniper's projectile splattered pieces of Fits Jr.'s brain all over the car.

Apparently someone else got involved, maybe someone Mikhail's manager sent along, to be sure the job got done. But that person missed Fits Jr. entirely but put more holes in Conundrum, and Rich's camera showed only the hits and not the hitters, but my team had little reason to care. Except that it provided helpful diversion later.

I felt horrible when I saw the pictures, Jackie clambering onto the trunk-lid, trying to get help or get safe. I had already felt bad about her husband's faithlessness to her, even worse than I felt for her husband's betrayal of the better things his brother Robert tried to carry through despite him. But to see her like that. It was dreadful.

I never told Beatrice any of this. And the only good feeling I ever had later about those pictures was that Jackie went on to a happier life, monetarily wealthy enough and doing things of her own, which was more important or should be. Reasonable or not I feel more hurt for Jackie and Norma Jean than for the Bay of Pigs.

But the dastardly deed was done, and next we had to destroy the evidence, and Norma Jean helped me with that, by telling me about Jimmy Huffa. I visited her in Heaven as soon as I heard she'd died, and she told me how Huffa had intimidated her. And that was exactly the talent we needed to close up this operation.

Rich's sniper was safe. He was a dedicated Central Intelligence professional, and he knew no one in this little conspiracy, except Rich, anyway. Bosworth had met both me and Mikhail, and we couldn't take the chance of his recognizing us and raising questions, later when we were famous in our roles to win the Cold War. And Huffa proved the perfect antidote, and the right solution, for that mess.

By then, Huffa had graduated, not to being a major Chicago union-leader, but to being pushy enough in exploitation of women to do what we needed. From the sleaze of the non-Pacific side of Hollywood, in his new job as porn-king of people like Fits Jr. but less Presidential, he had spread the sleaze to many places, including Dallas. I knew he would, and I'd watched him grow, in this year since what he'd done to Norma Jean.

So I looked him up, at his old sleazy club, El Dorado. Some things never change, and Jimmy huff-and-puff-and-blow-your-house-down is one of them. He's no more rotten in his grave than he was on Earth's surface, and he'll never be in Heaven. So Norma Jean will never have to look at him again, or at Fits Jr. The last I heard, she was having fun with that other Jimmy. Sailing silent silver clouds above.

Anyway, when I found Jimmy huff 'n' puff, he was sitting in the silence of afternoon absence of music in his old club named for greed for gold in the city of angels, sipping dregs of scotch nothing like Catholic Queen Mary. Who knows what evil lurked in his heart as he sat alone in that dark closed club as the California coastal sun shined brightly outside, though not as brightly as on the clouds above?

Whatever, I proved him the shadow he was.

"Jimmy," I said. "Want a job?"

"How did you get in here?" he asked.

"The door was open," I answered. "Trash."

"Trash," said Jimmy. "Trash is a matter of opinion."

"Fine," I said, sitting down. "Oliver Wendell Holmes said trash isn't trash. He said it's just something in the wrong place."

"Dirt," said Jimmy. "He said that about dirt, and he was a lawyer. Are you some kind of dirtbag? Are you in the wrong place? Or maybe a trash lawyer? What do you want?"



So I could see the dregs of the rocks in his scotch had become sludge in his brain. And nothing in his next demeanor indicated knowledge that he wasn't then alone. Bowing his head to the table, his eyes seemed to me to peer at his eyebrows.

"I have a proposition for you."

He said nothing, but his eyelids moved.

"Do you remember Norma Jean?"

Now his eyelids moved back where they'd been.

"I have the same sort of job for you," I said. "But better."

He sighed and looked at the empty bandstand.

"I'm listening," he said.

"I know your business," I said. "You've built a clientele in Dallas, out of losers who'll do anything to win but are such losers that they don't know what winning is, people like you. Do you understand?"

"I do my job," he said. "I'm getting into bigger unions next, to help better people who just do their jobs. Just tell me about the job and the money, and I'll do my job. Your philosophy isn't my business."

So I told him the details, among them that Fits Jr. dead couldn't carry Huffa's huff'n'puff corruption further. I told him to find some other such loser and threaten him with a choice of either killing Bosworth or having his family die. I told him to find someone whose life wasn't much for his family or anyone else anyway. I was sure he could do that, in the strip-club business. But I wished to be sure.

"Not a woman," I said.

"No problem," he said.

And from there the rest was easy. Huffa found a Dallas strip-club owner, with a wife and several children in school, and in debt and in trouble with Huffa's employers, who were essentially the Sugar Fits underground legacy. He was in debt for trying to

get out of debt by skimming beyond his cut and also for trying to compete a little on his own in some of their businesses.

For the final deed, I left the timing to loser Jimmy, and he passed it on to the other loser. The strip-club-owner killed Bosworth on his way from interrogation to jail. And he let himself die of cancer in prison without ranting much.

I killed Huffa myself, back at the El Dorado. But that was more than a decade later, and it had to do with another move essential to winning the Cold War. So I'll wait to tell you about that until we get to that part of the story. The next part was getting Dicky elected, after Linden quit.

And meanwhile Oliver and Mikey were finishing their part.

Linden did three more things for us, or failed to do three more things against us, depending on how you look at it. On the momentum of the legacy of the young dead President, he let the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act go through Congress. And, on the momentum of his own greed for power, he escalated Eisenhower's advisory mission in Indochina into war in Vietnam. The first of those doings of his was primal to our mission, and the second forced him to resign and make room for Dicky. But a problem was that the second somewhat conflicted against the momentum of the first.

Seeing dead burnt babies in Vietnam distracted attention from having seen beaten and bitten babies in Birmingham. But the Alabama legislation after the bus boycott and the federal legislation in the next decade laid a foundation that promised to give the civil rights movement momentum Sugar Fits couldn't have hoped for for himself, by any of his means. So Oliver and Mikey decided to make three last symbolic gestures, gestures grand and memorable enough to stand in history forever, and then to get out of Dodge.

Or we might count five, rather than three. First, Oliver would make a grand enlightening spiritual speech to a hundred-thousand Americans from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Second, partly because of that, he'd win the Nobel peace-prize and make another speech, this one to all of Earth. Third, Mikey would make a pilgrimage to Mecca and return preaching brotherhood and sisterhood of all on Earth. And, fourth and fifth, Mikey and Oliver would get themselves killed.

They'd be martyrs to the cause, for whatever that is or isn't worth.

The fourth and fifth, besides being Mikey's and Oliver's style, was necessary partly because of Fits Jr.'s death for nothing many Earthlings understood. Fits Jr.'s death stood quickly, through the momentum of Birmingham and Selma, as at least partly a martyrdom for freedom. But we couldn't let another white-man stand alone as Lincoln largely had, as a martyr for black people. We thought it important that African Americans show their own sacrifice. And Mikey and Oliver were ready.

One might think slavery and Birmingham and the bridge outside Selma would stand as such a symbol. But names of single people ring more signal in the ears of people than do names of deeds or places, or crowds. Even the name of Hitler rings more loudly in most ears than do the names of Normandy and Auschwitz. Maybe the reason is like the reason French corporals get so little credit or blame. People seem to think all things come from leaders. Big persons build the places and win the wars. Little persons do nothing but die. Martyrs are big persons dead.

So, while Linden sent millions of little persons across the Pacific Ocean to kill as many other little persons as they could, Mikey took his own leading personage across the Atlantic Ocean to see what was becoming of the millions of little persons to whom he'd given pride in the previous millennium, and Oliver planned a

capital march on some land between those oceans, to speak up for all those little persons, for all the people. Oh, Earth is so complicated, and so unnecessarily.

The civil rights movement had become extremely factional, divided by ideas of how to approach the problem and by egos of persons trying to approach it. The division between Oliver's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Mikey's Nation of Islam, between civil disobedience and whatever means was necessary, was the most famous disagreement. But the factionalism began much earlier.

It began before Theresa's bus boycott, when many African Americans thought the NAACP was doing too little by restricting itself to legal action, to court-battles. For the bus boycott, Oliver and others formed the Montgomery Improvement Association, to focus on that particular event. Then, after the boycott succeeded, rather than return to NAACP dominance, Oliver and others formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to broaden the movement beyond Montgomery, and past the courts, to all Christians.

Mikey promoted the Nation of Islam, to make conspicuous the alternative to the SCLC's call to common sensitivity, and Atlanta students formed the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee, partly to separate sectarian dominance from their state of affairs. Then Stokely Carmichael formed the Black Panthers, because all the existing organizations were too peaceful or too clerical or too something, or because he wished to be the boss, *le chef de guerre*. That last is always the tragedy.

Nothing on Earth is worse than bigotry, and bigotry cannot survive without hypocrisy. So grotesquely absurd is that people claiming to fight racism, which may be the ugliest form of bigotry, tried to do it with bigotry. Rather than all setting aside their egos to form a coalition of all organizations working together, they

fought against each other for private preeminence, to be the chief of the fight for freedom. Were they fighting first for freedom, or first for their preeminence, their own egos?

*Vive la France! Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité!*

Whichever, Oliver's effort to fill the capital mall with freedom fighters was an extreme exercise in coordination, extreme because of the wish of factions to remain factions, and Linden didn't help much either, intentionally. Linden hadn't graduated from teaching kids in Texas to lecturing politicians in the District of Columbia because he believed in sharing. He graduated from manipulating children to manipulating politicians because he liked to manipulate. He liked decisions to be his.

So, aware that Linden shared that quite common illness of psyche, Oliver proposed to him a march on the Capitol. Linden's initial answer was no direct answer, a message vague through aides that he was too busy killing people in Vietnam to have people storming his seat of government. And, over a little time, the message developed into specifics such as that such a march might distract the populace from the war-effort and might turn into a riot. Both the war and the race-riots were scaring him.

During that time, Detroit and Los Angeles were going up in flames, and people were using assault rifles as flower-vases. African Americans were burning and looting their own neighborhoods in cities across the country, and many races and walks of life were standing up to soldiers, not only in Vietnam but also within the United States' borders. On the front lawn of the United States Defense Department's headquarters, American students placed stems of flowers into barrels of American corporals' rifles. And, on a university campus in America's heartland, American corporals slaughtered American students.

So Oliver seized the unfortunate day, to gain from it a little good fortune. Linden was scared, and Oliver directed the fear, to

scare some of the hell out of him. He promised his personal effort to quell the race-rioting, if Linden would meet with him. And Linden, his Presidency out of control, grasped at what he thought was a straw. Just the two of them, in the oval office, aides dismissed.

Other myths call such a signal combat.  
For mortal hope of immortality.

## Chapter 9

### Journey to the Center of the Earth

“I just . . . ,” began Oliver.

“No,” said Linden. “Let me tell you why you’re here.”

Oliver acquiesced with a quick nearly imperceptible glance at the luxurious Swedish ivy over the fireplace, the principal hearth of the United States of America. Whatever was the symbolism of the ivy from that white Scandinavian nation, the symbolism of the brevity of the glance was aversion to the gaze-averting lesson African Americans had learned from centuries of European American oppression. And, as he resumed looking at Linden, Linden hardly perceptibly winced as he began to speak.

But their chairs, though French provincial and on opposite sides of the hearth, were identical.

“You’re here because we’re a nation at war. The war is within, and the war is without, and it’s as real as anything and maybe more real than whatever you and I think, whatever my people or your people think, whatever anyone thinks. So, here’s what your people and my people are going to do. We’re going to make a consolidated gesture.

“You’re not going to march on the capitol of this nation. You’re going to meet with your people peacefully, at the steps of this capital’s monument to one of my people, the predecessor of mine who first brought forth legislation specifying your people as

having the same rights of citizenship in this nation as my people. Do you understand?"

"I understand," answered Oliver, as he rose with caring grace from his chair as an aide opened the main door to the office as Excellent Oliver smiled and accepted the hand the also standing President of the United States offered.

But the aide remained outside, and Oliver shook the hand about as briefly as he'd glanced at the ivy, and he left the office with no further word.

"Thank you," he might have said, "for throwing me into that briar patch."

And, while by no means completely, he acquiesced further.

From there, the toughest thing Oliver had to do was to deal with the extremists who preferred not to stand at the foot of a monument to any white-man. And, with every person in every faction understood the value of the national attention the site would provide, those person were few. And, moreover, everyone understood the value of a peaceful meeting over a militant march at such a site. So persons could speak and not just scream from the crowd. They could speak loudly, but clearly with focus.

So the biggest remaining question was of whose focus. Some of the Panthers wished to stoke some explosives into the Smithsonian Institution as some sort of grand finale, since no black person named Smith had ever received his name from his ultimate ancestors, and Ian Smith was then white head of the government of Rhodesia, the African nation named for Cecil Rhodes. Stokely had put that fact together with the fact that the preeminent symbol of international education was the Rhodes scholarship also named for Cecil Rhodes. So, therefore, in Stokely's mind, demolishing anything named Smith was good. He, too, for his means, was



looking for a symbolic gesture. But Ralph Abernathy answered that one. And he answered it personally.

“Black is beautiful,” argued Stokely, in one of the few coalescing meetings into which he made his way. “And black needs to be powerful.”

“We all know that,” said Ralph, speaking up without turn offered him, something rare for him. “But how many people know who Cecil Rhodes was?”

“That,” answered Oliver, also speaking out of turn, “is why Ralph is my best friend. He’s everybody on Earth’s best friend. Let’s get on with business that can do some good. Let’s get to work at what we can best do.”

So, in that cyclic manner, many things coalesced. The final negotiation was for how many minutes each speaker for each faction could spend speaking from the steps. And the final answer was purely democratic, ten minutes for each. Yes, Oliver lost that concentration, got carried away. But that was his finest excellence. It had nothing to do with ego. He just opened his heart. He had to do his best. At Roncesvalles. Anywhere.

The day arrived, and everyone expected many thousands of people. All the factions had appealed as strongly as they could to their memberships, and some experts were estimating that as many as forty thousand people might arrive.

“A thousand for each day Bob conversed with the devil,” said Oliver.

“A thousand for each year you wandered the wilderness, Oliver,” said Mikey, telephoning from the Holy Land.

“A thousand for each decade between my burning and this white-guy’s emancipation proclamation,” had to add Theresa.

Quiet as I am, I didn’t mention what I had called the complexity of Earth in my little Chinese book the *Dao De Jing*. I

might have said that the number was four for each of the ten thousand things that make up Earth, but what happened here then went far beyond symbolic numbers, and far beyond experts. More than ten times ten thousand persons showed up, nearly half of a fourth of a million, and it was a rainbow, after so much rain. The people were of all colors, and the grass was green, on their side of the hill.

Speakers spoke, and singers sang, and the people spoke with one another and sang, from their hearts for themselves, for their families, for everyone.

“We shall overcome,” they sang.

Overcome what? Overcome anything that tries to stop this rainbow singing!

“My country ‘tis of thee,” they sang.

Of whom is it? It’s of and for all this broad rainbow singing, and from and for the many who can’t sing!

“Sweet land of liberty,” they sang, and for a moment, on one small part of Earth, landscaped flat for water standing, far away in place and time from the brambles valley Roncesvalles, a tenth of a million people stood their ground, together. And last, in the rainbow light, Oliver had his turn to speak.

“I have a dream,” he said, and no one complained that he spoke more than ten minutes. Not one person there could think of that. The dream was just, undeniable, plain. The dream was the rainbow.

It was from the sun. It was on Earth. It was right.

Theresa had burst into its being the twentieth-century movement that had made that dream viable in the hearts of that rainbow that day in the District of Columbia.

But, , leaving Oliver to do well enough by her guidance, she was silent at that presentation of it.

She had moved to Detroit, not only because of her Earth brother and Mikey, but also because she loved the African American music she had watched go there from Storyville. Mikey had moved there not only to broaden the movement but also for a little peace with a Harlem woman with whom he'd fallen in love, whom he had married and with whom he was having beautiful Earth daughters, one after another. But, however much he loved them, that couldn't stop what he'd started, and so at last their house was bombed and burned, like Oliver's and Rachel's in Alabama.

Mikey's segregationist movement had grown large and famous and feared by the white side of bigotry, and some of his Boston friends were using their public power to gain private wealth, on the black side of bigotry. And one of them, the one who had led Mikey's Islamic movement while Mikey was locked up, was using his religious professions to build himself a sort of harem. So Mikey, partly through another trip to Mecca, his earlier home among humans on this earth, stepped from that rise and fall to making his final point.

So, for us to distance our just righteous movement from the egocentric greed that made men build bank-accounts and harems for their private esteem, Mikey's pilgrimage to the other side of Earth was a way of literally distancing the movement from the corruption pretending to it, but Oliver was giving us more reason to get out of Dodge.

And I mean further out of Dodge quite quickly. A positive reason for getting Oliver out of here quickly was that he had done all he could legislatively do, but a negative reason was that he was beginning to behave like that cohort of Mikey's. He was screwing around on Rachel, worse than Jacob had screwed around on his Rachel. Jacob had been complying with the mores of his time. Oliver had no excuse, at least not ideally, in this time. And he was breaking hearts across the land.

And, as if that weren't enough, the chief of police of the United States of America was on his tail. K. Buggen Goober, the founding director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was trying to jump on Linden's kill-the-commies bandwagon by proving that Oliver was not only the negro radical the mayor of Montgomery had called any African requesting freedom, but also a Soviet puppet. So, surveilling Oliver, tapping his telephone in hotel rooms, he learned that Oliver was sometimes not alone in bed, while Rachel was at home while he was not.

Of course Goober, who was a closet transvestite, also had more private bigotry motivating him. Heterosexuality, because it was something he couldn't do, angered him because it seemed to him a mark against his competence, his personal value. So he hitched up his garter belt and, finding nothing communist about Oliver, other than Oliver's wish that wealth be shared and his having a few communist supporters, tried to defame him otherwise. And the only available otherwise was Oliver's sexual promiscuity, and Goober leaped on that, like a hound in heat.

But, as I've said, Theresa was the point-person in our operations, all of them from Hitler to Canaan. So, when Goober's vendetta hit the newspapers, she called a special meeting back in New Orleans. And there, because Theresa bade us not to look into the river for excuses, we sat on the Moonwalk like tourists from Trenton,. She directed us, more directly than usual, to look into ourselves. And we did.

“What are you doing?” asked Theresa of Oliver. “Your screwing around is going to screw up both memories of what you've done and what more memories of you could do. It's called legacy here, what you're screwing up. You're acting like Fits Jr.”

“Oh, please,” was Oliver's first reply, looking into air without the grounding of the river, but then he glanced into himself

and went on with his eyes apparently gazing across the river while he looked more like he had his tail between his legs.

“Remember Siddhartha Gautama?” he asked. “He wasn’t one of us, but he tried to be like the best of us, and he said giving up sex was the hardest part for him. Look how beautiful these Earth women are, with all their softness and warmth, their grace. Just look at you, your onyx eyes, far-seeing.”

“But they’re Earth women,” argued Theresa. “And you’re not an Earth man, and not right, in this.”

“Look at you,” Oliver repeated. “If I had come here as a woman, I’d have to be a lesbian.”

No one answered that dilemma, and no one had to. Theresa was right, and Oliver was both right and wrong. So we let him make one more big pitch, his Nobel peace prize speech that wasn’t only for his race here this time but for the whole rainbow, the whole Earth. We let him present to this world a real threat of a lot of poor people, poor yellow people like those being bombed in Vietnam, poor red people like those robbed of their land all across this continent, poor brown people like those begging to pick berries in Michigan, poor black people like those collecting garbage in Memphis, poor white people like those kept in the woods in Appalachia, all poor people. That’s what, there on the levee, he promised to do before we let him go, to let him try to leave with grace.

“It better be good,” answered Theresa.

“But I’m going first,” added Mikey.

“I know you’ll do well,” said Theresa.

Mikey’s trip to Mecca was as much a pilgrimage for him as for the rest of us. He was amazed at how much one can forget in fifteen centuries, though that may seem weird to someone who doesn’t understand immortality. Most Earth-mortals hardly

remember what they read in the newspaper or saw on television yesterday. If they did, they'd have to admit that most of their attention is to advertisements.

I advised Quincy of that before he ran for president, that and that most humans don't reason much anyway, for all their pretensions to it and claim to superiority from it. Most humans are too lazy to read or to think about the pictures they see. They say they vote on the issues, but they vote a side they pick. They pick a side someone tells them matches their feelings. But they don't bother to think as they feel.

Mikey went to Mecca to see for himself what had happened there since he left in the middle of the previous millennium. The main thing that caught his attention was the vastness of the Sahara, and he said that made him homesick in many ways. He said it reminded him of my talk about having been Pip floating alone in the Atlantic and a future president of the United States floating alone in the Pacific. But I could tell that, much more than for me, his heart felt for the vastness itself, and for his wife of then.

Like Israel, like the young man Jacob, Mikey as Muhammad had fallen in love with a beautiful daughter of a wealthy man, and served her father's business. For Mikey the business was importing and exporting merchandise along the trade-routes across the vast sands as far as Canaan and back. That was Bob's first reason for sending him there then, and that's what he did. It was an early effort at globalization, toward seeing the breadth of Earth. The goal was to make one neighborhood.

But, nevertheless, as he traveled the sands on his camel in his caravan of merchandise, the thought most in his mind and the feeling most in his heart, as he viewed the vast outstretching sand, wasn't for the merchandise, and it wasn't for Earth. It was neither for the merchant wealth of Earth nor for the merchant father. It was for the lovely daughter.

Maybe it was partly because she was older than he was, and so somewhat a mother to him, as well as his wife. Maybe it was because she ran her father's business and made most of the merchandizing decisions before he died anyway, leaving Mikey no need to be a slave to her father's legacy. But, whatever the reason, his heart was mostly with the daughter.

So, when he first traveled to Jerusalem, he discovered another reason for Bob to send him there. He found a war-torn city, factions fighting everywhere with no differences in ideas he could understand or see how anyone could understand. There were Israelites and Hittites and thisites and thatites, and he couldn't tell the difference without asking stupid questions.

"Are you a thisite?"

"No, I'm a thatite?"

"What's the difference?"

"They're trying to kill us?"

"Why?" Mikey had to ask.

"For the land. It's our land."

"Isn't there enough for both?"

"Surely. But it isn't theirs."

So Mikey talked with many persons of all the factions and found but one consideration that made any of the factions different from all the others.

"Why can't you all share the land?" Mikey asked the people of that one faction.

"Because God promised it to us," all members of it said, without exception.

Of course, being an immortal space-alien, Mikey cared little more about the land than about the merchandise his friends the camels carried on their backs, from Mecca to Khartoum and on to Canaan and back across the sand he'd come to love. But he found one other thing common among the factions, that the men of

each faction seemed to try to think of women as they thought of cattle. They thought of others' lives, cows feeding them and camels helping them, as their wealth.

And, calling women their helpmeets, neither did they except them from that. That is, they thought of women as wealth because they thought of life as merchandise, to be bought and sold, or stolen. All factions also thought of men that way, but the men were bigger and possessed more power to do what they could with anyone they could beat, if they couldn't bamboozle them. Women, on the other hand, as I said they do in the *Dao De Jing*, mostly acquiesced, as well might. And women held more of the warmth whence we all come and still desire.

So when, on his return from that trip, Mikey told me of that valuing or devaluing, I told him about my notion of quietism and how I had tried to promote in China the understanding that women should be honored for that quiescence and inherent warmth, and that the power of it be respected as water, as the pliancy of water holds power on Earth by such.

"People," I said, "can splash all day in vain, while rivers carve canyons."

"I didn't think of that," said Mikey. "So I did something more radical."

"I'll bet it was a good one too," I said into Mikey's bespectacled eyes.

"I hope so," said Mikey. "I founded a new religion. On my way back home from a trading trip, I dropped myself off at a cave I'd used on other trips for storing some things to transport later. Telling my ramrod to take the caravan on home, I'd told him I had to inventory my stores there and would come on later, and that was true. I don't lie."

"I know," I said. "I wish I could say that. So tell me the inventory."



“Well,” said Mikey, “the main piece for me was the one about treating women like merchandise, but I knew I was there to do something about all the killing, also. I don’t die, but those folks were all worried about dying, or what they think it is.

“Oliver had told me about his ten commandments, and I had a very tough time reconciling that against what any of those thisites and thatites were doing. So I figured a way to give a set of such to another faction, also in the name of Bob.

“I didn’t ignore the fact that that would create another faction. But I thought that, if I presented Bob to them as an authority for what they were doing, and told them that if they did well as Bob had had Oliver tell the Israelites to do, they’d have a little pride for themselves and incentive to band together as the Israelites had.

“That way, instead of having all those dog-bites or flying-kites or whatever, they’d have but two ites. There’d be the Israelites and whatever the rest of the people wished to call themselves under Bob. I was hoping that would be a consolidation of factions down to but those two, and I hoped that then the next step would be easy.

“But no. I’m so silly sometimes, maybe always. I knew what a mess Earthlings had made of what Bob told them himself a half-millennium earlier, and I saw a lot of descendants of what was his audience in Jerusalem then now paying about as much attention to Oliver’s commandments as any other thisite or thatite did. But people now calling themselves Christians didn’t seem a power faction there then. And I thought that now they’d turn a cheek.

“Anyway, that’s what I did, and then I got out of there, after some quality time with my wife. Oh, I forgot to tell you I built into the religion a commandment to protect the sanctity of women, but that didn’t go well either. Bob said the meek shall

inherit the earth, and Earthlings think that means stealing land. The same with men with women.

“Somehow those Earthlings, who say their ability to reason makes them superior to mosquitoes, find ways to rationalize that meekness means thinking they’re better than other people and so have a right to take anything from them they wish. They do it by saying they’re meeker to Bob than are the people whose blood they suck. Weird.”

“Weird, alright,” I said. “They don’t know Bob from the beeswax their ears seem to be full of. I wonder how long Bob’s going to tolerate that crap, from any faction. I wonder what the Christians or Paulites are going to do next. They’ve come a long way in their globalization now. They’ve been in Rome since Paul fled there. And that was after he bamboozled Greeks. That’s a big shoe waiting to drop. And it won’t drop meekly.”

Between that conversation and Mikey’s return to Mecca, more than a millennium after his first visit there, a lot of shoes dropped. Adherents to Mikey’s new religion consolidated enough factions to take control of the whole of the Holy Land, and the Paulites or Christians spread across Europe and crusaded against Mikey’s new religion’s occupation of Jerusalem. Mikey had opened a huge bucket of worms.

The military arm of Mikey’s religion tried to conquer Europe, and Mikey had to come back with Oliver to try to do something about that, at Roncesvalles. The Paulites sold out to military and monetary might, and sanctioned terrible torture of anyone who disagreed with them, especially in Portugal and Spain. And, after calling that inquisitions, they did what they did to Theresa in much the same way.

This, in the words of an Earthling who watched the fire there that time, is how they ended what they did to Theresa: “She

was soon dead and her clothes all burned. Then the fire was raked back and her naked body shown to all the people and all the secrets that could or should belong to a woman, to take away any doubts from the people's minds. When they had stared long enough at her dead body bound to the stake, the executioner got a big fire going again around her poor carcass, which was soon burned, both flesh and bone reduced to ashes."

Remarkable also is that the *raconteur* of this was for the prosecution. And notable also is this, which the executioner said after: "Once in the fire she cried out more than six times 'Jesus!' and especially in her last breath she cried with a strong voice 'Jesus!' so that everyone present could hear it. Almost all wept with pity."

And the end of that life of hers on Earth was slow. The fire-tenders had been told to keep the fire distant enough to make her death as difficult as possible. We must understand that the distance between Jesus and Paul is much more vast than water and sand. We must understand that. To keep coming back.

When Mikey toured the Holy Land and Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the nineteen-sixties time of trial in the United States, he was surprised at what the religion he had founded had become. He had founded a religion of pride, which the people there had channeled into revenge, and on into greed. But now it seemed turning back the other way.

All the people Muslims were calling the people of the Book had ignored Bob's commandment to keep their alters simple, to use no tools to build them and not to raise them higher than the level of the land on which they ordinarily walked. And the Paulites were the worst offenders, vying throughout Europe to see who could build the tallest cathedral and tooling altar icons more gaudy than any golden calf. The Muslims also tooled temples with

pride, and they placed priests in high minarets to pray to Bob and the people. But they carefully complied with the commandment not to develop images of anything Bob had already created. And Joshuities, while never raising another golden calf, plainly worshiped its gold. And they curdled the milk of kindness in self-pity.

And Jews and Christians worshipped mammon so intensely that they often pointed to Islamic poverty as though it indicated unworthiness. So Mikey was happy to find Islamic commerce quite basic, a system of exchange hardly different from the times of his traveling in his camels' caravans across the sands to the Holy Land. But, more, he found lovely that the vindictiveness and greed he'd combated with Oliver at Roncesvalles was now here hardly visible, even in poems and myth. It was largely gone.

There was, of course, the oil. But the nations' governments sold those dead bugs as a commodity at the best price they could get. And, if political manipulation entered the negotiation, it wasn't with a plan to spread Islam around the world as the Saracens had tried to do through Spain to France, but simply to get the best price. So how the non-Islamic nations vied against each other for oil or power or anything else wasn't the business of the Islamic nations. Those nations, like Muhammad, were simply merchants.

"But democracy gives you more right than the Israelis," said Mikey on that last visit of his, to a man selling Coca Cola in the old city of Jerusalem. "I mean to all this land, from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and back across the Jordan to Gilead. I mean democracy, the right of the majority to rule. Muslims are the majority here all across the land."

"What about you?" asked the Coca Cola salesman. "Your swarthy color isn't the majority in your land. Do you think that all those people of your color, who are fighting and dying and being

imprisoned as criminals in your country, merely for requesting the same rights as the majority, have no right to complain?"

Possibly the most beautiful thing about Jerusalem is how brightly the sun shines there, on the brown bleached stones of the city's streets and walls and on the twisting black branches of the olive trees outside, setting their dark shiny fruit aglow.

And now, in that brightness, as Mikey pondered the problem while the old Coca Cola Salesman sold a few more Coca Colas, his reasoning was dying deader than Lev looking into the river reconsidering his preachings in *War and Peace*. And the Coca Cola salesman pointed a way to its coup de grace.

"Then you're saying," Mikey asked after rousing himself but weakly, "that the Israelis have a right to take your land?"

"I'm saying," said the Coca Cola salesman, "that I am in Jerusalem selling Coca Cola, and my family needs no more than it gets from my selling this stuff your country likes to drink to rot its teeth. I could tell these American tourists with their children what this stuff will do to their teeth and their children's teeth, but I'm sure they already know it, and it isn't my job.

"So, with the permission I beg you to honor, I shall return to doing my job, to keep my family happy. However, I wish everyone well, and so I'll offer you a way to better answer. I'll tell you how to find my brother.

"He tends a garden on the hill across the way."

## Chapter 10

### Pilgrim's Progress

Mikey told me he often found his conversations in that holy land to suggest that he and his counter-converser were the ancient mariner and the wedding guest. But he said he never could tell whether his role was that of the mariner or that of the guest, and so now he simply waited for the rest of what this Coca Cola salesman would condescend or ascend to say to him in that bright dusty sunlight.

“Outside the Lyons Gate,” said the Coca Cola salesman, “on the near side of the Mount of Olives, above the Garden of Gethsemane, is a terraced garden. It’s the Prayer Garden, named such because the Roman Catholic Church says Christ prayed there, for a little peace alone before his crucifixion. And my brother is the gardener.

“It’s about a fifteen-minute walk, leisurely in the weather we almost always have for such walks here. Sit beneath an olive-tree, on the stones supporting one of the terraces, with a clear view of the sky and the walls of this city. If my brother is not too busy talking with other tourists, he will come to you and stand before you, gazing across the lower garden. If you ask him a question, he will sit beside you and answer all your questions until you seem to him to be ready to leave. Then he will rise and drop his walking-stick. Rise from the stone yourself and pick it up. Then hand it to

him with a little money. My brother sells answers. I sell Coca Cola.”

So Mikey, bidding the man farewell, kissed his wrinkled hand and left the city. The first tribulation of that fifteen-minute walk was getting across the busy thoroughfare between the gate and the mountain, and the next might have been finding the right road up the hill. But Mikey picked the first one he saw, trusting the Coca Cola salesman and sure he'd have given more direction, were it necessary. So the next tribulation was an offer of guidance from a younger salesman.

The road was narrow, steep and nowhere straight, but walls banked up on both of its sides with no side streets aside in Mikey's sight, and so he figured he could find his way alone. However, as soon as he entered the precincts of those weed-grown gray-stone walls, he saw a boy leaning beside a gate on his right. The boy elbowed himself perhaps reluctantly away from the wall and scowling strode down the road to Mikey. And then, upon reaching him, he smiled and stopped.

“What do you want to see?” he asked, standing squarely in front of Mikey in the middle of the little road, smiling like the best of shopkeepers as his fingers moved, ready to point a way.

“Just here,” he said, not waiting for answer and waving his left hand toward the wall on Mikey's right, “is the Garden of Gethsemane. I can show you there the oldest olive-tree in all this land. It's huge.

“Just there,” he said, still not waiting for an answer from Mikey, who now was grinning as broadly as the boy, “is the tomb of Mary. It is very beautiful and full of beautiful paintings. And it's very dark and cool on this hot day.”

“Let me see,” said Mikey, considering his options carefully. “I would very much like to see the Garden of

Gethsemane, if only you will promise not to cut off an ear of mine. I have use for both, if you can tell me the secrets of the place.”

“Not a chance,” said the boy, “either of cutting off your ear or of telling you the secrets of the place. Think what either would do to my tip.”

In the Garden, the boy indeed showed Mikey an obviously very old olive tree, with its trunk perhaps nearly as wide as Mikey’s height, and Mikey was quite tall. But the garden didn’t much impress Mikey, as he found it much more pruned and small than he’d expected. So he walked quickly around the tree on the path around it and out the gate, as the boy tried to tell him things.

“And the tomb of Mary?” asked the boy, as he followed Mikey out to the street. “It’s just here, just a little way back down the hill, there across the road. Everyone wishes to see the tomb of Mary. Everyone knows who Mary is. You’ll find it beautiful.”

So Mikey followed the boy but balked at the entrance. Looking down through the stone-framed entrance, into the darkness below the gray stones, he felt the coolness. He remembered the air-conditioning in Saint Louis Cathedral in New Orleans and feeling that God lived there, not Bob but something surreal, beyond his experience.

“No,” said Mikey. “Maybe some other time. Thank you very much.”

So, after handing the boy probably more shekels than such salesmen ordinarily received in a week, he walked on up the hill. And, walking around the next bend and feeling grateful to the boy for not trying to sell him something more, he saw the prayer garden. And he turned into it through its open gate.

And the garden, with the olive-trees and the stone-blocked terraces and the view to the city and the sky, was exactly as the Coca Cola salesman had led him to expect. So he strolled the



terrace on the level of the gate, stopped where he felt he was halfway to the far end of the garden, and sat on the stones. And, as he looked across to the city and up to the sky, he sort of prayed a little in his wait, but he didn't wait long.

He'd seen no other humans in the garden as he entered. But, within a few minutes, from the direction of the end of the garden away from the gate, an old man with a stick in his left hand strode slowly toward him while touching the stick to the ground each time his left foot did. Mikey had never figured how mechanics of walking-sticks helped. And neither did he now

So, now, as the old man, garbed as Mikey understood more endemic to Afghanistan than here, in a loose turban partly trailing down his back and in other loose swaths of cloth, and rubber sandals in a style more common to leather, he didn't try to figure anything.

And, because the old man didn't wait for a question before sitting, neither did Mikey begin the conversation.

"I've been to the United States," said the man.

"Yeah, me too," said Mikey.

"I live up there now," said the old man, pointing.

He waved a hand palm-up toward a higher part of the hill on the other side of the road. So Mikey looked and saw some houses set into the hillside with laundry hanging drying on balconies, and he wondered in which house the old man lived and how many people lived there with him, wife and children, grandchildren, parents, who. But he didn't ask.

"I know more about America than you do," said the old man, leaning his chin on his untooled stick as his loose sleeves surrounded it, his turban shading the crown of his head from the sun, but not shading his eyes. "You talk about democracy, about how the people have the right to rule, while you use that notion to excuse depriving others of the right to just live quietly. You say

you care for common concern, but you care more about thinking your car is better than your neighbor's. And, if your neighbor disagrees, you call him stupid.”

“I don't own a car,” said Mikey, “and I'd like to ask you about you.”

“Nice prelude,” answered the old man. “But I was telling you about me, about how I feel. You don't call your neighbors stupid to their faces, but to other neighbors you also think are stupid. You do that because you think you're being smart, by fooling your neighbors, by being sneaky. Do you know what a casbah is?”

“The mythical den of thieves?” Mikey tried to answer.

“They're mythical alright,” said the old man, “but far from fictional. They were fortified cities and now are tourist markets, wherein lie and lay your myth and the response of Islam to people like you. If you're wondering where I learned enough English grammar to use words like ‘wherein’, the answer is Harvard University. I'm a Ph.D., in English literature, and I live up there. Up there.”

Again he waved his right hand palm-up toward the houses on the hillside.

“You,” he said, “being an American, think I'm bitter being a Ph.D. and living in a house without electric or gas washing or drying machines. My family likes spending time washing, and my family likes the smell of the clothes drying on the line, and the feel of the air blowing through them. It's better than electric air-conditioning, and it's better than sitting around thinking up ways to lie and steal, as our people do in the casbahs, as your people do everywhere. The casbahs, and all the breaking of promises and other lying at which Islamic people have become competent, are only retaliation against the silliness of western culture.

“Did I say silliness? Of course, I said silliness! You Americans and Germans and French think, when your neighbors buy Cadillacs or Mercedes or Citroens, that they’re picking on you if your only car is a Ford or a Volkswagen or a Renault, or a Fiat. Ford built the car for all people, and ‘Volkswagen’ means people’s vehicle.

“Am I preaching? Of course, I’m preaching! You people are so crazy that, when someone catches you in your silliness, shows you yourselves how crazy you are, you just think up some way to be stupider. And that’s the whole reason for the problems here now between Islam and Judaism. You westerners, you Americans, you people.

“You mean because we supported the Zionists after World War II,” said Mikey.

“Zionists, schmionists!” replied the doctor of English. “Are all you Americans totally deaf? You instigated the problem by teaching all those nice Semitic Jews who emigrated to New York to be like the rest of you people. After Joshua and David died of old age, the biggest problem we had here in this holy land, except trouble the Israelites caused themselves, was Europeans.

“Think about it! Joshua himself told the Israelites to cool it, to stop all that warring and greed and start paying more attention to the Ten Commandments, and they mostly did until David started fighting everyone, including other Israelites. But, after David bit the dust, things were relatively calm here until the Israelites started fighting each other before the Babylonians and the Persians and now the Romans started taking advantage of that! Calling it colonization or whatever?

“I’m not a Ph.D. for nothing! Sure, David’s baby-chopping temple-building son caused some problems, but it wasn’t like David killing anything that breathed to cover his tracks when Saul was trying to stop his coup, or like the later fratricide or Joshua’s

earlier efforts at genocide that started the whole thing here in the name of God, like Hitler's efforts at genocide. Yes, the Romans tried to turn the whole wide world and everyone in it that wasn't Roman and a lot of other Romans as well into what Israel became in Egypt, but at least that wasn't genocidal.

"But, from then until this century, world history has been mostly Europeans calling themselves Christians fighting over the rest of the world. Thank Allah for Muhammad coming along and giving us enough pride to resist all that crap, or enough unity, whatever. If Charles hadn't hammered back al Ghadafi at Tours, we might have world peace now.

"But, instead, we had to wait for inevitable economics to bankrupt the over-reaching nations, and that took until this last century of this last millennium, after Christ. No, I'm not a Christian, but those Europeans claim to be, while they do all that coveting of their neighbors' Saabs. So what were you going to ask me?"

By this time, Mikey was ready to go, back to his hotel and get some sleep. His eyebrows were starting to strain the insides of his brain, and he was having a tough time looking at all at the wondrous deep blue sky there, or so much as remembering it was there, or where he was. But he managed to remember the Coca Cola salesman.

"Oh," he said. "I almost forgot. Thanks for reminding me."

And the old man, scowling over the Garden of Gethsemane, sat still and waited for the question.

"How do you feel about the Jews taking common ground to build a separate nation for themselves? I mean, true democracy gives them no right, since Muslims are more populous across this land and all of Earth than are Jews, don't you think?"

And the old man didn't take a second to think about that.

“I already told you,” he answered. “They won the right to call it theirs. So, if they wish to call it theirs, they can. But it isn’t theirs, and it isn’t ours, or yours. The land, all Earth, a gift from God, belongs to all of us, to you and to me and to them. ‘This land is your land; this land is my land,’ says an American song. I don’t care who calls it theirs, as long as we all can feel at home. I live up there, and that’s my home. That’s all.

“*Parfois,*” said the gardener, “*il ne faut pas cultiver notre jardin.*”

And then the old man rose from the stones and dropped his stick on the gravel path of the terrace. So Mikey rose from the stones and stooped to pick up the stick and handed it back to the old man. But, bowing and walking out of the garden, he forgot about the money. Until he was back at his hotel. Then he remembered.

Next morning, he returned to the inclining winding road and saw again the boy leaning against the stones. He waved, and the boy smiled and returned the wave, as Mikey turned from the road to look at the place the boy had said was Mary’s tomb. Near the bottom of the cold stone steps, someone in some sort of ceremonial vestments sat at a tiny table, reading by candlelight. But the person didn’t look up.

So Mikey walked around alone. In the dim light and chill air, he looked at the lovely renaissance paintings and some perhaps older relics, and one stone coffin had more candles burning near it than the others. So Mikey stood before it for several quiet minutes in the chill air before returning to the steps then reluctant to leave. And then the person in the ceremonial vestments reading looked up. So Mikey nodded as he passed and received a nod in return.

And then he walked up the road and reentered the prayer garden. Not seeing the old man, he walked beyond where he’d

talked with him, to where he saw a family having a picnic on the terrace the wall on which he'd sat retained. They were a man and a woman and several children, and one of the children looked at Mikey and laughed, and he felt they all were laughing at him.

"Have you seen the old man?" he asked them.

"What?" asked the man, not smiling.

"Have you seen the gardener?" Mikey replied.

"No," said the man, looking away.

So Mikey turned back to the gate, stopped where he'd sat to talk with the old man, took from a pocket some shekels of change and stacked the coins neatly on a stone beside steps up to the terrace, and left the garden and returned to his hotel.

And the next day he was in Egypt, and he heard the same there, everywhere.

"Let them keep that land," the Muslims said in a refrain with no music, just a humility and rationale of heart that Mikey had never heard from anyone in America or throughout the universe, not even from Theresa. "They won it. But let us keep our homes."

Mikey kept his schedule. He was there to see how Islam was doing, and he kept his according plans. From Egypt, he moved on to Saudi Arabia, where he dined with princes and trod again his path from Medina to Mecca, across the vast and empty sand. Praying with thousands at the Kaaba, he had never felt more wholly the brotherhood of man, and he knew that was his message to take back, to America.

But the message came to him more strongly at the Sphinx. At that monument, once to riches and now to riddles, built by slaves for predecessors of the regime that had enslaved the Israelites, he tried to take the Sphinx's point of view, literally. Standing with his back to the stone eyes, wondering what the Sphinx might have seen before civilization blocked its view, he

asked himself one more time what anything was all about, anywhere, ever. And a sudden light breeze brought an immediate reply. And it was older than the Sphinx.

“Sand,” was the answer. “Let them keep that land.”

“So,” came the answer. “Help us have our homes.”

So, when Mikey returned to the United States of America, he preached the error of his segregationist ways. He preached the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people and paid a public visit to Oliver and publicly proclaimed agreement with him for peace. And next, in a speech at the Renaissance convention center in Detroit, he proclaimed the need for rebirth in the motor city of America. He proselytized brotherhood and sisterhood and neighborliness, was tempted to sing Woody Guthrie songs, spoke in parables and riddles, and rambled like brambles.

“What are left and right,” he asked, “other than opposite directions of one person? If one person facing west stands behind another facing west, left is south for both as right is north. If the two turn and face together east, north is left with south right, for both of them. If they face each other, they join their opposite directions. And that’s what we need to do, face each other. But first we need to face ourselves.”

“Amen,” murmured parishioners of Oliver’s, as they did in their Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal churches when they felt the heart of the preacher beaming through. That is, when they felt the heart of the preacher warming through, whether or not they figured what he said, and Mikey went on more obliquely.

“Let’s talk about bigotry,” he said. “Not racism, but bigotry itself, of which racism is a horrible part but yet but a part, a symptom and not the whole disease. Let’s talk about some other forms of bigotry, the rotting whole disease devouring us all.

“Following our civil war that threatened the union of these states, Democrats were the party of the segregated South, while Republicans were the party of Lincoln. Now, according to some on either side, the opposite is true,. How did that happen?

“Some people define freedom of choice as depriving infants of any choice ever, and many of those people decry killing killers. How is killing the guilty worse than killing the innocent, and how did that turnabout of rationality come about? What’s its reasoning?

“We call those people the liberal left, and we call those who disagree with them the religious right, and many of those who disagree with the right to choose to kill babies call themselves Christians and call their disagreement belief in the right to life but at the same time believe in killing not only killers but also anyone who disagrees with them, whether or not they themselves would ever kill, however they are otherwise, at all.

“How can people calling themselves Christians preach killing, for revenge or anything else? Aside from the questions of turning the other cheek and forgiving one’s neighbor seventy-times-seven times, how can people claiming to believe in the Gospel of the lord Jesus Christ preach the refusal of the possibility of repentance that only life can earn, that only life can give? Can you tell me how the dead can repent?

“Often so-called psychologists of the liberal left support vengeance by calling it closure. Aside from the question of how having the guilt of another death on one’s conscience in one’s life can make one a more happy or peaceful person, how can killing in return for killing be called closure? How do most women feel after an abortion?

Can two wrongs make a right? Can killing close killing? If not, close what?



“And why, if you don’t see how that’s bigotry, why not? Bigotry is taking sides, and it ranges from partisanship to my-religion-right-or-wrong. And it ends in decent people making worse than fools of themselves, just to stay on the side they’ve chosen, despite themselves.

“One of many relevant facts is that the political terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ refer to the same thing. ‘Liberal’ refers to the ideals of this nation’s Declaration of Independence. I mean ‘liberal’ refers to what conservatives are trying to conserve.

“But maybe I’m missing something. I know I’m no political scientist. In grade school, even before I dropped out of school because my favorite teacher told me I’d never be a lawyer because niggers don’t know nothing about anything that takes brains, I couldn’t understand the difference between a republic and a democracy, something about Greeks and Romans. Well, I’m an African American, and I still don’t understand the difference between a Republican and a Democrat, except that they disagree. So maybe a psychologist can teach me better. But, for now, I’m saying how I see it.

“And, my brothers and sisters, whether or not you choose to admit the fact that that’s what you are besides being my neighbors whom I love, if you think this African American has wiggled too far out already, consider this as well, if you please.

“Hitler wasn’t beastly. No beast could or would do what he did. And no species on Earth kills its own species for reasons. Humans claim to be better than beasts because they have the ability to reason. Well, if so, I have to ask, when are they going to start using that capability for something better than trying to excuse bigotry?

“Most of you know I’m a Muslim. Most of you also know I recently returned from a visit to what Muslims and Christians and Jews call the Holy Land. A few of you, certainly not many of you,

also know that I spent a little time sitting on a rock at the top of the Mount of Beatitudes, where Jesus is supposed to have preached a sermon.

“Jesus was beastly, and he said so. He asked us to look at the fact that sparrows don’t take thought for tomorrow, but rather just accept the gifts of God. He also asked us to consider the lilies of the field and see how beautiful they are without going out and trying to make themselves grand in some kind of ceremonial vestments, Gucci or otherwise. So maybe Jesus was less than a beast. Maybe he was a vegetable.

“Well, be that whatever, as I sat at the top of that mountain, on a rock beneath three Eucalyptus trees, breathing the fragrance of the lilies of that field, enjoying their splendor and the view of the Sea of Galilee beneath the mist, I looked aside and saw two lizards necking on a rock in the sunlight. And oh such lovely smiles on their faces there.

“I, however, scowled in my realization that all around me, there in that holy land and across the sand to Mecca and across the sea to Detroit, humans were sitting around on upholstered chairs reasoning how to find ways to hate each other. So, uneducated as this nigger is, I had to kind of wish I were a beast, like those lizards.

"But next I’d wish I were a lily, and there’d be no end of the pride I’d manage to muster with my human reason, and I might end up leading the lizards or the lilies in a jihad or a crusade against other lizards or lilies. Worse, I might make long speeches, trying to justify my newfound bigotry. So I’ll get to the present point.

“Israelites slaughtered Philistines after the death of Moses. Christians, in the Crusades, slaughtered Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem. Hitler, under the sign of a similarly broken cross, killed six million Jews, anywhere he could.

“Most people calling themselves Christians rightly have compassion for the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, but following the teachings of Jesus would have them compassionate with a few other events of history as well.

“In the name of God, Israel tried to kill all the Canaanites, for their land. When some of the Canaanites took some of that land back, Europeans killed more of them and called the killing crusading. In the name of Christ’s cross.

“English people calling themselves Christians, to be free from other Europeans trying to keep them from being the sort of Christians they wished to be, came to this continent and effectually instituted genocide of its natives.

“We call Hitler’s trying to do that sort of thing to the children of Israel in this century the Holocaust! But all those events were holocausts, and mostly in the name of Christ and all in contradiction to Jesus’ teachings and the commandments God gave Moses for us! When will it ever end? How long, O Lord?

“Now, the Israeli Canaanites are trying to do it again to the Palestinian Canaanites, and again in the name of religion. Worse, when the Palestinians try to defend themselves, the Israelis retaliate and get sympathy. And they get it from the descendants of the perpetrators of the North American holocaust.

“Muslims say there is no God but God and that Muhammad is his prophet. I say that there is no God but God, and that every honest loving person is his prophet. And I say that every dishonest hateful greedy person is his enemy, and every bigot is a hateful liar, since hearts are true, by any name.

“So that’s the point. But now let’s try a parable. Then we’re out of here.

“People are professional painters. They profess whatever makes them feel good, and then they paint it into abstractions to make it look good, and paint is like the people themselves. White

is supposed to have no pigment and is used to symbolize purity, and black is supposed to have all pigments and is said by many to be beautiful, and yet no paint is entirely either, or neither.

“Death turns people pale. Just before their dark graves. But no humans are black or white. They’re all the same colors as the earth.

Caucasoid or Negroid, desert sand or peat moss, it’s all some shade or tint of rusty brown, and the rust is the same. In people, it’s the oxidation of iron in blood, yes iron in blood. But it’s Rustoleum in our begging bigot minds.

“If Moses and the Ten Commandments are Judaic, few people calling themselves Jews today are Judaic, since most of them preach killing Palestinians to grab their land. If Jesus and the Beatitudes are Christian, few people calling themselves Christian today are Christian, since most of them preach killing Palestinians to grab their land. And so it goes.

“So most people on their sides of the oceans don’t much care about those on other sides of the oceans. Most people, being too preoccupied with getting better stuff than that of nearer neighbors, don’t look so far. And most people, calling such getting even, will do anything they can get away with toward that narrow end

“Unpainted truth is that vengeance is a vicious endless cycle that began with the first bigot, the first person who thought himself different and therefore more deserving than a neighbor, and so tried to diminish his neighbor for his own gain, thereby selling his soul.

“Unpainted truth is that most of us ignore our souls.

“I am an African American, an African and an American. I am your friend and your brother, and you are my friend and my brother or sister. Like it or not, that’s how it is on God’s green Earth, beneath the seas, across the sands.

“And, sooner or later, that plain unvarnished truth shall make us, all of us, free.

“Yes, ahll of us, you and me, we.”

That was Mikey’s grand finale, and Oliver’s grand finale was coming soon, since now he had been nominated for the Nobel peace-prize, as we knew he would be after Montgomery and Birmingham and Selma, and maybe more loudly to this world the hundred-thousand-person march. So, meanwhile, The heterophobic pervert in charge of the United States’ federal police was futilely trying to defame them both. And soon his futility would turn his tactics to killing both Mikey and Oliver.

But Theresa and I would wander on. And Lev would continue his wanderings into exploring homelessness in the western half of Earth. And he found bigotry also there, in professional treatment of the homeless.

In his old Slavic sadness, he wished to know how pallid folks can be, and he found it in a place where he might well have hoped they wouldn’t be. He found that pallidness in the competitive decadence of persons purporting to provide help for the homeless in the cradle of liberty in the name of the love of Saint Clare of Assisi. And Theresa witnessed a piece of that in New Orleans.

And that was long after Mikey and Oliver accepted death for the cause at the hands of instruments of American law enforcement.

They, Lev and Theresa, found it in the next millennium.  
Rather than enforcement of unalienable common law.  
Rather than the common sense of compassion.  
Rather than sympathy.  
Dissonant.

## Chapter 11

### Remembrance of Times Past

We, of course, with our alien powers, could have stopped Mr. Goober, but we had our reasons to let him go ahead, as you know. So we delayed his perverted process just long enough to let Oliver make his peace speech in Oslo and for us to have a little going-away party, which Lev offered to cater.

Lev had become a James Dean fan, and he wanted to ride and oil pump as Dean had in the movie *Giant*, rocking away against the sky.

He had a thing about anything giant, and west Texas reminded him of the Russian steppes. So I asked him out to Houston, and we took a little drive. I mean little by Texas standards. We drove west.

And there, as I told Lev about the transitional emphasis we were planning, he and I played a little teeter-totter on a west Texas oil-well pump.

“A going-away party,” offered Lev. “And I know just the place.”

“No ballet,” I begged. “And nothing intellectual, if you please.”

“No problem,” said Lev. “I found this great little bar in New Mexico. It’s in a ghost-town I visited a few years ago while I was looking around to find some interesting ghosts to hang out

with. A lot of interesting ghosts hang out in New Orleans, but I was trying to widen my horizons.”

The creaking and clunking of the oil-pump made more sense to me than Lev, but I listened to this old dead sage of Russia, as fairly as I could.

“It’s a gold-mining ghost-town, but it’s in cattle country. And it’s famous because Billy the Kid used to hang out there, or hide out there, whatever. Some guy from Michigan named Penrod owns it. It used to be a drugstore.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, while the well-pump waited for nothing. “Now it’s a saloon, but it used to be a drugstore? What’s up with that?”

“I already explained,” said Lev. “It’s a ghost town. Nothing there is the same as it was. That Penrod guy came out from Michigan because he was tired of being an electrical-contractor but had made enough money at it to buy the drugstore, which wasn’t even a drugstore by that time, and he turned it into a saloon he calls it the White Oaks Saloon. The name of the ghost-town is White Oaks, and it used to have a pretty happy-go-lucky saloon named that, before the town went bust. It was a fancy establishment, even had a sign out front saying ‘no scum allowed’. But that didn’t stop Billy the Kid from going in there. It was also a whorehouse.”

So then, before accepting Lev’s offer, I looked across the Texas plain, and then I thought of Mikey’s desert, and that gave me more reason to demur, but I had long ago learned to trust Lev, and so I asked him to continue.

“Okay,” I said. “New Mexico. Volcano cores. What else?”

“The grass is brown, like here,” said Lev. “But it isn’t as flat. It’s cattle country, and the name of the county seat is Carrizozo. That’s Spanish for great grass, but the cattle have to do

a little hill-climbing to get to all that great grass, and there's a plain of burnt dirt called the valley of fires, just outside Carrizozo. I thought some of you people might have done that in some sort of invasion. But White Oaks is up in the hills."

"Is it near Roswell?" I asked. "We have conventions there from time to time."

"About eighty miles," answered Lev. "But that's not why I think it'd be a great place for a party for us. That Penrod character moved out there because he wanted to be a gold-miner, but he still goes back to Michigan for fruit-harvests, to work with the illegal aliens. Yeah, I thought you'd find that funny, but he has a Mexican wife named Mary. Together they throw a great party, and the drugstore has a big backroom."

"A big backroom?" I asked. "What do they do there, deal drugs?"

"Maybe sometimes," said Lev. "But mostly, except for the pool-table they put there, they don't use it other than for Saturday nights. Saturday nights, they have a big ball, with the best musicians from all around the county. They call it a dance, but it reminds me a lot of old times in Petrograd. Except that they wear Stetsons instead of plumes. Their boots are almost as pointed."

So then I looked across the pump-axle at Lev, rising and falling with the brown grass behind him alternating with the bright blue sky, in my view then and there. He was homesick, and I could tell that, and so there was no way I could refuse him this party. And a good time with friends is a good time anywhere. And then he interrupted my musing.

"Besides," he said, "the county's named for Abraham Lincoln."

So it was on. I took the proposal to Theresa and Mikey in Detroit and to Oliver in Atlanta. They all loved the thought, though they ordinarily found our conventions in Roswell boring.



Theresa loved to ride horses, if the horses seemed to like giving her a ride, and Oliver and Mikey had teamed their spirits with horses at Roncesvalles, a lot of them dying with them there. It promised to be a good and reminiscent time.

“You know,” said Theresa, “I bet Norma Jean would like to go.”

“Yeah!” whooped Oliver. “How about James Dean? He’s dead too!”

But, when I took Oliver’s suggestion back to Theresa, she and Mikey demurred.

“He’d be hitting on Norma or Lev,” said Theresa. “Not the right focus.”

“Yeah,” agreed Mikey. “She’s waiting for that sailor Jimmy.”

“And Lev's going back to his wife,” agreed Oliver.

So we limited our guest-list to just the four of us and Lev and Norma. We thought about inviting Billy the Kid, but none of us knew where in hell he was. Bob was still trying to make up his mind whether to forgive the killing for the statement he made for the little ranchers of the county. And, meanwhile, Billy was just wandering hither and yon.

So I borrowed a gooney-bird, a Douglas DC-3 from another friend, Gene Autry. Gene owned the Angels, a baseball team in the city of angels, and he may be the only human who regrets my not taking my baseball-playing into the major leagues after Yale. For me, Gene was king of the cowboys, not that Roy Rogers guy who stuffed his horse and put the poor creature in a museum. So Gene and I were friends, and he loaned me his plane for our party. And I love the friendly flying. It beats bombing.

“How can you own a baseball team?” I asked Gene once.

“We pay the players very well,” he answered, shrugging.

I didn't quite understand the logic of that, but I understood the logic of the wild blue yonder, So, in the aircraft I'd borrowed from the composer of "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer", I and Theresa and Mikey and Oliver flew out of Atlanta for Carrizozo.

Lev was going to pick up Norma, however dead people travel, and meet us there. But the four of us not only flew there but sang to further buoy the long flight. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", "All the Way", whatever. We were loosening up a little. It was a vacation

We landed lurching on the one runway of the Lincoln County Airport, or the Carrizozo Municipal Airport, as the name was in dispute. The lurching was partly from my rustiness, having flown nothing physical since bailing out twenty years earlier, and partly from the gravel of the strip. The county's main airport was in Ruidoso, forty miles away in ski-country, beyond the old county-seat. Hardly anyone landed here.

Ruidoso had not only skiing but also a thoroughbred horseracing-track, and an Apache reservation with gambling in a 400-room luxury-hotel the Apaches called the Inn of the Mountain Gods. Carrizozo had a railhead, which is how it became the county seat, instead of Lincoln up in the Capitan Mountains. Billy the Kid had escaped from the county courthouse and jail in Lincoln. But now things were different.

A coughing guy met us on the runway and told us where to park the plane. And he gave us coffee in paper cups in the little building that served as the terminal, and he also told us his name. But I've forgotten it somehow, while remembering that he told us he was a retired United States Marine lieutenant-colonel, and had emphysema.

"How's business?" I asked him. "Who flies in here?"

"I'm not sure you want to know," said the colonel.

“I guess you must have flown in the Marines.”

“Fighters,” he answered.

“Bombers,” I said.

The colonel politely answered nothing, and I felt a little ashamed of not having been a fighter-pilot, in such close combat with those little Earthling planes.

“I was only in the Army Air Corps in World War II,” I told him.

“I did mine in Korea,” he answered. “Had to leave because of this.”

He hit his chest with his right fist and coughed and took a deep breath.

“I’m not sure we planned this trip very well,” I said, thinking I knew why he wasn’t asking us anything. “It doesn’t look like you have a rental-car agency here. I feel stupid mentioning it. Any suggestions?”

The coughing colonel looked me eye to eye. He looked at my darker companions, offered a smile of kindness to Theresa, and nodded to her understanding eyes. He started to scratch his belly but stopped in embarrassment, and then he scratched his head instead, and straightened his face. And then he looked out the big windows to the airstrip and the rolling grass. Plate-glass windows on that side made the building enough of a terminal.

“That pickup over there,” he said, indicating to his right with a thumb while still looking forward across the airfield, toward nothing but the flat strip and the rolling hills beyond. “I don’t use it much, because I’ve got the van out front. Fifty bucks a week, if you want it. Sorry I can’t do better. Or . . . .”

Whatever he was going to offer as an alternative, he stopped speaking when I pulled pocket-cash and handed him a hundred. One thing I’d learned from all that time in Texas was

how to be polite there. New Mexico seemed to me to have the same values.

“Appreciate it,” I said. “That’ll do fine. We’ll bring it back in a few days.”

The coughing colonel nodded, took the hundred-dollar-bill from my hand, handed me a couple of keys, and walked us to the truck. Then we retrieved a little luggage from Gene’s gooney-bird and tossed it into the back of the truck and turned our faces to the sky a moment. And, then, at last, the coughing colonel asked us something, submitted a query to these strangers landed in his airport in a gooney-bird.

“Real estate?” he asked. “Looking around? Thinking of staying?”

I wondered what exactly might be cranking in his emphysemic brain. I wondered what an emphysemic former Marine fighter-pilot might think of a white-man and a black woman and two black men flying into a nearly abandoned airstrip in a perfectly-maintained antique aircraft. But I could see in his eyes that he meant no ill will, that instead he was welcoming us. Succinctness is very nice sometimes.

“Nah,” I said. “Just a party with some friends. But I love the view.”

“Yeah,” said the coughing colonel. “Forever is a nice way to look.”

And, with that thought, I jumped into the driver seat of the F-100 pickup, and Theresa leaped more spryly onto the passenger end of the vinyl bench-seat. Mikey and Oliver piled into the bed, and Mikey parked his butt in the wheel of a spare tire lying flat back there, while Oliver sat on the bed-bottom and leaned his back on a side, crossing the ankles of his stretched-out legs. If you’ve ever felt the freedom of a pickup truck, you know what I mean.

Then the coughing colonel bade us have fun. And we headed up the straight highway, past the valley of the fires, into Carrizozo. And, at the crossroads giving that tiny town its reason to exist, we pulled into its only motel, the Four Seasons.

And the clerk had no questions for us wayfarers. She checked us into two double-doubles, rooms with two double-beds in each. And Theresa and I took one while Mikey and Oliver took the other.

I've always loved the balance we find, the four of us. Theresa being the best of us and I the least, whenever any fork in the road requires our temporarily parting in two, Theresa and I take one path and Mikey and Oliver the other, and I know why and love the reason. Theresa is the best of us and I the least, and so we join for the outside while Mikey and Oliver take the middle. And, because Lev had known a lot of generals, I asked him once about that strategy.

"First," he answered. "You wouldn't do that if you didn't work best together in that pairing. Second, I could point out that it spreads the sharing best, which is your essential question. Third, similarly, I could call it an appropriate military flanking analogy. But, most, remember that best is the first. Do they ever let you drive?"

"All the time," I answered.

"You have good friends," he said.

And of course, when he said that, I remembered that he was one of them.

"What about Lev and Norma Jean?" I asked as we opened our adjoining rooms.

"Oh, yeah," said Mikey.

"Go ask," added Oliver.

So I threw my bag into the room and walked back to the motel office, where I found the clerk or owner or whatever standing behind the front desk, looking down at some paper. With the chimes tacked to the door still ringing in my human ears but not apparently in the ears of the clerk, I walked to the desk and put my hands on the desk. And then the clerk, who I supposed may have been the mayor, looked up and waited for me to speak.

“I wonder,” I said, “if some friends of ours have checked in.”

“Some people are in the room next to yours,” she said, shrugging.

With my human reason, I discerned that this motel had few guests, none except the four of us and whoever was in the room on the opposite side of mine and Theresa’s from Mikey’s and Oliver’s. But I didn’t assume that those other folks were Lev and Norma Jean. So again I waited.

“Mm,” then said the proprietor or whatever, “They said that, if anyone asked about them, I should tell you they’re in the bar across the street. I don’t know why they called it a bar. It’s a very nice restaurant.”

“Yah hah!” I said. “Thank you very much!”

The person nodded and grinned and returned to her paperwork. And I returned to my friends, who were all now gathered in Theresa’s and my room, wondering what to do next in this vast vista of tourism. Theresa was standing on the dresser, reciting Mikey’s Renaissance convention-center speech, as Mikey and Oliver applauded and laughed. It set the right tone for this internal outing.

“They’re at the bar across the street,” I said.

So Theresa jumped down from the dresser, and Mikey and Oliver went next door and looked into mirrors and grabbed their

wallets and shut the door and came back, as Theresa just stood waiting, leaning on the dresser, her butt against it.

“Yubba dubba doo!” said Oliver. “It’s party time!”

You can’t blame a freedom-fighter for having fun once in a while. So we all locked up and walked across the street to another place called the Four Seasons, this one a restaurant and bar with a drive-up take-out window. Inside, Norma looked like she’d lived there all her life, chitchatting with a half-dozen natives all at the same time, while Lev sat sulkily talking to one.

Norma stood at the jukebox while Lev sat at the bar, while Theresa and Mikey and Oliver sat in a banquette, while I went to the bar to get us something to drink. The place was quite crowded this late afternoon, and I had to squeeze between Lev and one of the many men there in cowboy hats. So, while I waited for the Mexican bartender, I put a hand on Lev’s shoulder to attract his attention.

“No problem,” said Lev’s conversation-partner, as Lev turned to me.

“Oh, ho!” said Lev. “You finally made it. Where in hell have you been?”

“Not in hell,” I answered. “We’ve been flying from Atlanta in a gooney-bird.”

And then, after the bartender brought me some beers, I went to the jukebox and received a hug and a tearful smile from Norma Jean, and returned to the banquette where the rest were still trying to catch up on details of their movement here this time until now. But, after the flight, not feeling like sitting, I leaned against one of the bench-backs and looked around, and quickly I became a little angry at Lev. I knew too many people in this place.

One after another, as I scanned the faces of white cowboys of this still wild west and people white Americans called Latinos and Indians, I saw beneath the white hats shaven faces I’d seen

before. By this time, in this trip to Earth, I had nearly a score of years of experience with CIA operatives, and I'd taken training courses in intelligence with operatives of other agencies. And this looked like a class-reunion.

So now I knew why the coughing colonel had expressed uncertainty whether I wished to know about the airport traffic. Except in classrooms, I'd never seen so many agents of the United States Drug Enforcement Agency in one place at the same time. So, wondering what all these agents for enforcement could be doing here, I was as appalled as a spaceperson can be. And, as I walked back to the bar, many of them nodded at me.

"No problem," again said the man on Lev's right.

"Long time, no see," said the man on his left, to me.

"What in hell is going on here?" asked I of Lev.

"Oh," said Lev. "I thought you might want to know about this. This little bar or restaurant, or whatever the local Chamber of Commerce or chapter of Masons wants to call it, is the main world club of DEA defectors. When they wish to make more money, a mighty mess of them come traipsing here. Opportunities abound you know, and this is a funnel. Didn't your Skull and Bones pals tell you that?"

"It isn't my specialty," I answered. "And I was hoping for a vacation."

"Well," said Lev, suddenly seeming as angry as I. "It should be your specialty. Nothing is more disruptive of your mission here on Earth than the drugs these salivating suckers conjure up. But, anyway, these salivating suckers don't like music. So we won't see them up the hill tonight. But Russia was never as bad as this."

I knew he was right about the salivating suckers and their threat to our mission. And, because I knew he wouldn't see the simplicity of original approach, I saw no reason to try to explain to



him that elimination of bigotry and hypocrisy would in turn eliminate that. Ghost or not, though Lev was a good man, he was an Earthling and wouldn't understand.

So I nodded and smiled, patted his old Slavic back, and returned to Theresa.

But later, looking further into the situation there, I learned much from it. That little airfield with its one gravel strip and one small hangar, was an international airport. Most of the traffic about which the coughing colonel said he didn't think I wanted to know came from Mexico, and much of it came from Columbia. The colonel flagged off no flights and asked no question, and I also learned of a body-shop in that tiny town, for changing the colors of cars coming in from Mexico, before sending them back.

Later that knowledge gave me an idea, of how to use double agents to fight fire with fire in my own way. For example, I drew in Manuel Noriega so congenially that he gave me a cigarette boat, one of the speedboats smugglers use for running cigars and worse from Cuba to the United States, but that didn't keep me from locking him low beneath the Miami federal courthouse. I did that as I'd used my oil connections to end the OPEC crisis in the seventies, while people said I was in cahoots.

I also enjoyed that cigarette boat on later vacations, but now I was on a different kind of vacation, and I never gave a drug-dealer a ride in that boat. In other efforts, more toward my personal mission, I did give some OPEC sheiks rides in it, but I didn't tell them who gave to me the boat or how I got it. After setting Noriega as an example for the general public and for any subterfuge-agents to see, I left policing the DEA mostly to my friends in the CIA. But those are other stories.

By now, Norma had joined the others in the banquette, and she was laughing and joking as if she were alive. Theresa and Oliver and Mikey were joking with her and laughing with tears in their human eyes, and soon Lev followed the cheer. He left his conversation and joined us in the banquette.

“Any room for an old Slav,” he asked.

“You’re a pain in the butt,” I answered.

“Let me tell you a story,” he replied.

“I don’t know about that,” I had to answer. “The only story of yours I know about is more than a thousand pages long in fine print, in any language. We’re here for a vacation, not to listen to some old Russian ghost sob about his sense of purgatory.”

“This story isn’t about purgatory,” Lev answered. “Or maybe it is, but it’s about here, about the little ghost-town where we’re going, and I’ll try to keep it short.”

“I like stories,” said Norma Jean. “Although they all seem bittersweet.”

“Tell your story,” said Theresa. “I love your stories, long or short.”

“Story, story, story!” chanted Mikey and Oliver, grinning around.

“Okay, okay,” said Lev, and we focused out the noise around.

“Once upon a time,” Lev began, “in a place not far away or long ago, lived a beautiful princess. She was beautiful as the sun, but she didn’t know how beautiful she was, and so she wished to be a cowgirl. So, the first handsome cowboy who came along and saw her beauty easily swept her off her feet, and took her for his bride.

“Soon, however, she learned that being a cowgirl was not the same as being a cowboy, and quite quickly she found herself nursing a child and washing dishes and otherwise doing what any

other human wife is maybe-too-often required to do to maintain her tolerance in society. And that was while her cowboy rode the range as she wished to do.

“Her cowboy husband rode the range only to care for the cattle and fix the fences, and he loved his cowgirl as much as any man loves a woman, but she could never return the favor, in her despair. Her despair was that she’d realized too late that it was not a cowgirl that she wished to be. She wished much more to be a cowboy.

“She wanted the freedom of the range, the pride of work that came with wiping sweat from one’s brow with one’s bandanna, the power of destiny to make her own way. So, while she loved her child and had no antipathy toward her husband, she seized every opportunity to be out of her house, to be out in commerce, move up in society.

“Commerce and society, in the town nearest their ranch, the small ghost-town of White Oaks, was sparse. The county seat was but a few miles down the winding road from White Oaks and several-times the size of White Oaks, but even it had but one grocery-store. And, while the princess didn’t wish for Saks Fifth Avenue and could hardly name what she wanted, she wanted something and sought it.

“And, beyond taking her son to buy groceries, a visit she always enjoyed with great smiles, her freedom was most at the White Oaks Saloon. Of all her desires she could name, she found her way to satisfy but two, and both were with her neighbors. One was by the commerce of her grocery-shopping, the other at the saloon. One was sharing monetary wealth, the other just plain fun. And the second was more for herself.

“Or so she may have felt. At one of the weekly dances there, the blonde princess met a wild Mexican she felt to be more princely than her husband. She and the Mexican danced that night,

and they danced every Saturday night for weeks after, and the cowgirl's husband thought little of that, because he loved his princess, and they could afford groceries, and had a lovely child. Life was right and easy.

“So, while the neighbors weren't surprised when the cowgirl left her husband and her son to ride fences like a cowboy with the wild Mexican, the husband was devastated. He sat moping at home, staring out the screen-door of their little house, wondering what to do. So the moping turned to smoldering that threatened to combust.”

And fear now lurked in our alien hearts, as Lev looked around, at us.

## Chapter 12

### The Time Machine

But Norma sat quietly, as Lev continued, with this story.

“After a few days,” he said, “it did combust, externally.

The princess ran out of clean laundry and asked her prince to go to the house of her husband and child and pick up some of her clothes. When the wild Mexican knocked on the screen-door, the husband shot him in an eye with a .38-caliber Smith and Wesson revolver, no peacemaker. The bullet went through the Mexican’s head and out the back of his neck.

“Of course the husband went to jail, but the wild Mexican didn’t die. The husband was convicted of attempted murder, but the Mexican only lost an eye, and a lot of mobility. The husband remained demobilized in a prison cell for years, but the Mexican was walking with a cane in less than one year. No, I’m not kidding.

“The last time I was up there at the saloon, the princess was tending bar. She wasn’t wearing the Stetson I’d seen her wear before, and her hair was cut in a pageboy haircut, a little like Jackie Fits used to wear, not a cowboy-cut at all. But the wild Mexican was right there with her, sitting by the woodstove that heats the place.

“His cane leaned in the corner, and his shot-out eye was loosely shut. He didn’t recognize me, but the princess looked up

and named my poison, although I hadn't been there for nearly a year. The first time I saw the wild Mexican, he was standing next to the princess. I'd bowed to kiss her cheek, but I didn't do it. A glare from the prince stopped me dead. Dead in my tracks in that ghost town.

"Of course I was already dead. But I didn't see any point in making a point of it there, in that good-time-fiddling dancehall-Saturday-night. Then there was no reason to pick a fight with anyone, with either of those miserably happy creatures. I don't know what happened to the husband, but I'm sure the others are together, happy as can be.

"It's a strange place, that ghost-town. You'll see more tonight, and you'll see more tomorrow. Sundays, the best musicians of this cattle county gather in the front room of the saloon and try each other happily, while Penrod and Mary brew up some road-kill stew on that potbelly stove. Some things never get as dead as I."

The four of us tried not to look at Norma Jean. We were afraid this story of Lev's might turn her into a blubbering idiot. But, after a few seconds, I didn't hear any blubbering, and so I braved a look. Norma was staring into the table as I had seen Lev stare into the river. But I heard no sobs and saw no tears on her cheeks.

Oliver and Mikey also looked at the table and not at her. But Theresa was looking at her little blonde bowed head, and Theresa's thumbs were resting ready on top of her index fingers, as her hands rested ready on the table. She was ready at an instant to take Norma's little blonde head into her hands and hold her.

But Norma lifted her little blonde head and smiled around at all of us.

"Bittersweet," she said. "Bittersweet. That's what I said."

And now Lev was looking sadly down, into the depths of his own river.

But he perked to help perk Norma.

“That guy I was talking to at the bar told me he’s a treasure-hunter,” said Lev, looking up, at Norma and then at me. “He says there’s drug-money buried in these brown hills. He told me the newspaper here has reported a person who died in prison but never turned over any money. And he said there are other events like that that never hit a newspaper and that he thinks some of the money might still be in the hills.”

“What kind of treasure-hunter is that?” asked Norma. “Aren’t treasure-hunters supposed to be looking for gold doubloons sunk to the bottom of the ocean?”

“That’s what I wondered,” said Lev. “I could understand someone wishing to do something like that, for the adventure. But I don’t understand why anyone would want to hang around with a bunch of drug-dealers just to find out where to dig up some money.”

“Neither do I,” said Oliver. “It seems to me that people might wish to have some reason to live, some kind of productive purpose for their lives.”

“Or just for beauty,” added Mikey, “as Norma said.”

“Yes,” answered Theresa. “It’s like religion. People try to make religion into ritual or rules and totally ignore the sense of their own hearts, that the only worthy reason to live is to make others happy, and that it’s the only way to find happiness for oneself. Bob told this world that in his second commandment, saying it’s like the first one. But people ignore both commandments, by leaving out the second. Anyway, being happy for one’s neighbor beats the hell out of drugs. Does he have any kids?”

“No,” said Lev. “He said he just travels around with his wife in a camper-truck.”

“Maybe,” suggested Theresa, “he just likes to be alone with his wife.”

“He invited me to play golf with him tomorrow,” answered Lev.

“And no one’s with him here,” I added. “Are you going?”

“Hell, no,” said Lev. “We’ve got better things to do than beat a ball across some brown grass. Tomorrow’s Sunday, the jam-session up at White Oaks, and we’d better get back to the motel and change, if we’re going to the dance tonight.”

“I’m hungry,” said Norma Jean. “Can we eat first? I haven’t been hungry since I made that stupid choice in ’62. I can hardly wait to see if a ghost can enjoy a meal like I did when I was alive on Earth every day.”

“It wasn’t an entirely stupid choice,” said Theresa. “It was time for you to find new friends. So how do you like these other boys?”

“Lev’s a little ghastly,” answered Norma. “But I didn’t know boys could be so much like girls. Do you guys know if I’ll ever see Jimmy again?”

“You’ll see him again,” said Theresa.

“Good,” replied Norma, smiling again. “But I’m still hungry. What do they have here? Do they have a menu? Is it any good, Lev?”

“I know a better place,” said Lev, without a moment’s pause. “Just up the street, a little Mexican diner, the only other restaurant in town.”

“As long as I don’t have to wait tables,” said Norma Jean.

So we made the trek across the street and piled into the pickup, the girls in front with lucky me driving again and the other



boys in the back with a cooler Lev had filled with beer. And the pickup had no seatbelts. But what had we to fear?

The diner was just what a diner is, a long counter with stools, and banquettes opposite. We sat in one of the banquettes and ate tacos and cheese and chopped lettuce and beans like any self-respecting Mexican, and Norma didn't bother wiping her face until she finished eating. Then she looked around and grinned.

"Boy that was good!" she said.

Then, back at the motel, we duded up in cowboy clothes, to give the natives something to make fun of, and we headed up the hill. Lev insisted on driving, and the girls insisted on riding in the back. And I insisted on riding in the back, with them. They laughed more than the others. Dead or immortal, girls. Yes!

I was sorry Beatrice wasn't with us, but I didn't know how to explain to her what we were about, and I didn't think it would make her happier, since she was already happy, with her life. So I thought of her and sent her little brain-mail pulses to make her think of me and smile. We space-creatures can do that.

Up at White Oaks, past the winding road bordered with barbed-wire fence and dry brown grass and cattle grazing, we piled out of the pickup in dusk. The last horse was leaving, the last cowboy who had stopped there during the day for a beer, and neglected to go back to work. Anyway on that one day.

Lev tipped his hat to the departing cowboy and swaggered with his spurs jingling, into the saloon where Penrod was sitting at the table nearest the stove, playing poker with some cowboys, using nickels as chips.

"Uh oh," said Penrod. "Look what just blew into Dodge."

"Gi' me a beer," said Lev, sticking his thumbs in his belt-loops.

"You know where it is," said Penrod. "Mary ain't got time for you."

“I can’t see the cooler,” said Lev. “Where’d you get that bar?”

Lev had told me that the saloon didn’t have a bar, that it still had the old wooden drugstore counter like the one in the movie *The Grapes of Wrath* from which the kids had gotten the candy, through the kindness of the caretaker of a roadside grocery.

“Oh, somewhere,” said Penrod. “I stole it from one of these empty old buildings. I got tired of having people sit on the bar instead of at the bar, and so I got a bar they can belly up to. Who are those beautiful women you’ve got with you?”

“Friends,” said Lev, turning back to look at his entourage, his thumbs still in his belt-loops. “Norma and Theresa. The guys are competition, but not much competition. I think they’re city-slickers. You know how that goes. How are you, Mary?”

By this time, beautiful little Mexican Mary had brought him a beer.

“What do your friends want?” she asked.

“The same,” said all of us in unison.

“Easy to please,” said Mary.

“Let me do it,” said Norma Jean.

And she walked around the end of the bar to the cooler and opened it, with her two cool hands scooped four cans of Coors out of the ice and set them on the bar all at once, and popped the tops two at a time.

“There you go, boys,” she said. “You too, Theresa.”

She didn’t look around for glasses. Mary hadn’t given Lev a glass, and none were in sight, anyway. And then Mary, smiling at Norma and Lev, wiped her hands on a towel as though she’d done the work herself.

“How do we pay?” asked Norma, as we grabbed our beers from the bar.

“If you do it yourself,” said little Mary, “just leave the cash on the cooler, a buck a beer. But Johnny’ll be here any minute to tend that for the dance. Then we can relax and have a good time.”

And we did. The princess and the wild Mexican weren’t there, but the place was full of people young and old. No one shot pool, because none of the sticks had tips on them, and no one felt like dealing with the challenge of that. A cowboy named Curtis led a band of his own with his violin, and everybody danced.

Lev invented a Russian version of a Mexican hat dance, and he and Norma took turns endangering their hats with the nonsense of it. Lev started to tell someone how much at home he felt in pointed-toed boots, but he remembered just in time that his explanation would have required mentioning his experience with the hussars, of the previous century. But Norma Jean felt no need to explain anything.

Missing Beatrice, I didn’t dance much, but Mikey and Oliver danced with every woman and girl in the place. They invaded the bandstand, the little plywood platform at the back of the dancehall, and sang a duet of Kris Kristofferson’s song “Help Me Make It Through the Night”. After all, it was their wake.

But, come midnight, Norma and Lev closed the festivities. Lev borrowed Curtis’s fiddle and played “The Way We Were”, as Norma Jean sang it. And, after that, everyone was ready to go home and go to sleep, for whatever reason. Perchance to dream.

Going back to the motel, I drove again. And the girls sat up front with me again, as the other boys shivered in the back. Of course immortals and ghosts don’t need to shiver, but they wished to show their respect, their chivalry anyway. And, as the girls rode cozy in the front, the push-button radio played whatever they wished.

In the morning, late as though we needed dreams of our own, we rolled out and refilled at the little Mexican diner. I drove again, with Mikey and Oliver in the front with me, as Lev and the girls sat in the back enjoying the reason the state of New Mexico pictures the sun on its flag. Up the hill at White Oaks, we found no horses outside as it was Sunday, and inside we found people playing guitars and singing.

Not many, a few in the front, not in the back in the dancehall, but this was a different sort of celebration. Curtis wasn't there, but his girlfriend was, and she was the only person there we'd seen the night before. We nodded around and grabbed some beers and left the dollars on the cooler. And then, until a pause, we leaned at the bar and listened.

"Who owns that big brick house back there?" I asked, referring to a mansion on the slope behind the saloon.

I had a hunch it was residue of the gold-boom days and so might have some residual stories the people there enjoyed.

"Nobody knows," said one of the women there. "We just all live there. Maybe a ghost owns it. This is a ghost town, you know. Maybe we own it."

"Where's Penrod?" I asked.

"Looking for gold," said a young man sitting at the table between the stove and the musicians, not in a Stetson or cowboy boots but in ordinary clothing clearly needed laundering, and then he took a slurp from his can of beer.

"Where's Mary?" I asked.

"Home, I guess," said the woman who had reminded me that this was a ghost-town. "Who knows? They trust us! What are you all doing up here on a Sunday afternoon? Well, this guy's a pretty good fiddler, I hear."

Until then, Curtis's girlfriend's guitar had remained in its case, but now she took it out with some songs typed on paper with

no musical staff but with chords noted here and there. And then she laid the paper back in the guitar-case and began to strum and sing while looking down into the case at the paper. She showed no certainty of anything.

“What happened to what’s-his-name?” asked Lev, after the young woman ended the song. “The guy from El Paso.”

Lev had told me another story, about a rancher from El Paso who had come to Lincoln County with a young woman, hoping for the promise of the name of Carrizozo. He’d said the man seemed angry and alone while the woman seemed alone but not so angry. And he’d said he thought she wished with all her heart to make music.

“The first time I talked with the man,” he’d said, “was the first time I was up at White Oaks, and I told him I hadn’t ridden a horse in a while. It was a weekday evening, and he told me his was out front and that I could ride it, all I wanted.

“I had no intention of riding the man’s horse. But, in the interest of politeness and curiosity, I went outside to look at the horse, but no horse was in sight, as far as I could see. So I stood a moment in the setting sunlight and went inside and told him so.

“Are you calling me a liar?” said the man.

“I said simply that I was simply saying that I saw no horse outside, but the man continued in his profession that I had insulted him, and others there said I might do well not to hang around right then, and I’m too old for dueling now, anyway. I hope I always was, and so I left, for then. But I kept coming back.

“I liked this crazy place, and I liked that crazy man with his senseless logic. So, after a few weeks of tiptoeing around him, I walked straight up to him and apologized, although I didn’t know for what. And he took my offered hand, and we became regular conversationalists, and we drank one night at his home.

“That was when I got the hint of what the trouble was. Saying he thought I was too drunk to drive back down the hill, he suggested that I come to his little house-trailer on the rangeland he was hoping to develop, and there I asked him where his girlfriend was. And, telling me she was out, he didn’t say where or why.”

Lev had had also told that story with no explanation, as he tells all his stories with little explanation of the narrative, letting it stand on its own merit. So I considered the possibility that the man had invited Lev up because he was homosexual, and that his wife was with another man because she wasn’t. But I let the narrative stand on its merit.

I mean in my mind. And now I was hearing Lev ask the woman where the man was, and Lev was letting the narration turn into its own narrative. Lev was a master of stories, and now I knew how he did it, by seeing them everywhere.

“He went back to El Paso,” said the young woman. “I’m with Curtis now. Curtis is teaching me music. Curtis loves me, and I’m writing a song about it. I love it up here in this ghost town, and I’m happy here with my friends. Everyone here understands me.”

Norma didn’t say a word, and the saloon suddenly dimmed. The door to the road was open, and the afternoon New Mexico sun had shined through it on everyone, until that moment. The cloud that darkened the door was a man in a black hat limping on a cane, with a blonde woman behind him in the sunlight, in sandals and no hat.

“Hey, Lev,” said the man stopping his steps, and then he replaced his right hand with his left hand on the cane and patted a shoulder of Lev’s, and then he switched his hands again and limped on back to the stove, where he sat on a chair set alone beside it.

“Penrod asked us to come by and keep an eye on the place,” said the blonde woman, now the only woman in the bar not in a Stetson. “Hey, Lev. Nice to see you again. Are these people friends of yours?”

Lev replied to neither hey but asked the wild Mexican how he was doing.

“Good, thanks,” said the Mexican, “Gwen takes good care of me.”

“Hey, Lev,” said a boy now coming in from the sunlight.

“Hey,” said Lev, with a smile very bright for him.

But then he looked around the saloon again.

“Oh!” he said suddenly. “How’s Harlan?”

And he looked at the Mexican and the blonde and the boy and at everyone else, but no one there seemed to react, except the princess. She smiled at the sudden brightness of Lev’s question, but then she frowned, as suddenly. But then she smiled again.

“He’s still up there,” she said. “Why don’t you go get him. I haven’t seen him in a couple of days. Go get him away from those chickens. Yes. Go.”

Lev hadn’t told me about anyone named Harlan. But we took the princess’ momentum and piled into the pickup and headed further up the hill, past the blacktop onto gravel and off up a one-lane dirt-road, as high as we could go on land there. And we stopped in front of a ramshackle ranch-house with chickens running all around, where Lev leaped from the driver seat, and stared around.

“Maybe he’s in his shop,” he said, stepping into a shed a few yards from the house.

But, while he was in the shed, a man stepped from the house with a big grin on his face but an aura of just having been awakened, and no indication of any surprise.

“I hope they don’t kill any horses this year,” he said as Lev emerged from his unsuccessful foray into the shed. “I know how you feel about that. Who are your friends?”

“And this is Harlan,” said Lev after introducing us, “the greatest saddle-maker on Earth. Ask the chickens, but don’t ask the power-company. He does alright without electricity.”

“You’re showing us too many people too fast,” said Norma Jean. “Maybe that’s why no one can remember the names of the characters in your books. What’s that about killing horses?”

“It’s a tourist-attraction here,” said Harlan. “People care more about sports than they do about history. So every year we replicate a pony-express run with a race to White Oaks from Capitan.”

“And,” said Lev, “most years at least one horse is run to death. I’ve seen my share of cavalry charges, and I always feel sadder for the horses than for the humans, because the humans think it up.”

“But you make saddles to ride them,” said Norma Jean.

“I think it’s more comfortable for them,” answered Harlan.

“But why ride them? Why dominate them?”

“They’re my friends! It’s playing together!”

“Anyway,” added Harlan, “I like to make saddles, and I think of it as reincarnating the cattle, and I don’t ride much anymore. My kids do, but I don’t.”

“Where are your kids?” asked Theresa. “They don’t live up here, do they?”

“All over,” said Harlan. “They’ve grown up and gone their way.”

“But they follow in their father’s footsteps,” said Lev.

“Well,” said Harlan, “my son’s a trainer, and my daughter’s a jockey.”

“The winningest woman jockey in the world,” said Lev.



“Can we see some of your saddles?” asked Norma Jean.

“Sure, if you’d like,” said Harlan. “Come into my shop.”

So we followed him into the shed, where he showed us saddles of many shapes and styles and different kinds of leather. Some were plain English, and some were intricately tooled American, and one was of different colors. And that one, green and red and unfinished on a work-rack, was smaller than the rest.

“It’s a gift for a friend’s daughter,” said Harlan as Norma stepped to it for a closer look.

“Do you sell many?” asked Norma.

“Not many,” said Harlan. “But I get enough for one to last awhile.”

“What’s that book?” asked Norma.

Mikey and Oliver weren’t paying much attention, but they caught Lev’s look when Norma asked that question, and they caught Harlan’s pause.

None of us spoke, but Harlan picked up the book, a large leather-bound photograph-album tooled like some of his saddles. He moved it to the center of his workbench and opened it and began turning the pages. And speaking as he pointed at some.

The photographs, hundreds of them, were of him and Kim Novak, the beautiful blonde movie-star who had played so well a witch in the movie *Bell, Book and Candle*. None of what he said made much sense to the rest of us, all being about him and her and what she liked, and he didn’t say they were friends. So none of the rest of us said a word until we stepped from the shed when he closed the book and set it back aside.

“What’s this stuff?” asked Theresa, peering into an earthenware pot on a bench beside the door to the shed.

“It’s what I glue the saddles with,” said Harlan. “I make it out of sweet-potatoes.”

And then we bade the chickens goodbye and took Harlan down to the saloon. And then, after he got a big hug from Gwen, we drank a few more beers and listened to the drug-addicts play some more music. And then we bade farewell to all of them.

“Always a pleasure to see you again, sir,” said Harlan to Lev.

But the beer-slurping man in the dirty clothes was sitting on one of the benches outside the front door, one on each side behind the hitching rails.

“I know you’re a ghost,” he said to Lev.

“Yeah, well,” said Lev. “I thought that was you. Back here trying to rehabilitate yourself, huh! How’s that working out for you.”

“I still don’t understand,” said the sole remaining White Oaks ghost.

“Well,” said Lev. “Keep working at it.”

And, with that, we immortals and other ghosts left that ghost-town. Lev returned to New Orleans, and Norma Jean returned to Heaven. I flew Theresa back to Detroit and Oliver back to Atlanta, and Mikey on to Harlem for his grand finale. I returned the gooney-bird to Gene in the city named for angels and took a commercial flight back to Houston. And there I was very happy to see Beatrice again, and Quincy and Ben.

But, at the motel, before we split for other parts, we asked each other why we had made that trip, and why people do drugs and drink alcohol.

We immortals got nothing from it, and Norma and Lev had no ready recollection, but we each had an answer ready.

“Boredom,” said Oliver.

“For fun,” said Mikey.

“To be braver than usual,” said Lev.

“To be kinder than usual,” said Norma.

“To forgive ourselves our weaknesses,” said I.

“To forgive others’ also,” said Theresa.

But what could we know, we immortals and ghosts?

## Chapter 13

### Brave New World

Mikey, while enjoying the cheer that often goes with beer, kept it out of his religion because it interferes with serious work, and Mikey was nearly always very serious. So his next task was to gather in Harlem his supporters, those who had defected from the Nation of Islam for the reasons he had, and those wishing to join in a more peaceful organization. And there they planned their new approach.

“First,” he said. “I have to make peace with Oliver.”

So he flew to Atlanta with his Earthling wife and daughters and visited Oliver and Rachel and their children in their home. Rachel welcomed them, and the meeting began a long friendship between her and Mikey’s wife, a friendship they both would greatly need before the year was over.

Then, back in Harlem, he planned a speech he’d deliver at the Apollo Theater, a place Theresa thought important for its integration of African and American music.

In the speech, he’d announce his reconciliation with Oliver and announce the forming of his organization to displace the corruption of the Nation of Islam. But, meanwhile, under the guise of protecting the corruption from becoming widely known enough to threaten the corrupt leaders’ wealth, K. Buggen Goober was using his infiltration into the Nation of Islam to instigate

vengeance. Mikey's austere lifestyle and new preachings of the brotherhood of man were nothing to Goober.

"Look at all those daughters," said Buggen to someone no one knew anything about. "Don't those people know how to do anything besides procreate, breed? Why does he have a problem with his Nation of Islam brother being another wallowing rabbit? Well, it doesn't matter, because we'll buy one to kill the other."

Of course we also had our people about whom no one knew anything. And we opened all the doors through which Buggen and the Nation of Islam fell, right down to funneling their operatives into the Apollo Theater that night. So, as Mikey began to speak, the Buggen-Nation operatives created confusion in the audience.

"Get your hand out of my pocket," said one of them, leaping from his chair.

And then, as many in the audience focused their care on that incident, other operatives pulled from their coward clothing an array of weaponry ranging from pistols to shotguns. And then, as Mikey's wife and daughters watched him from the front row, the assassins opened fire and put a dozen bullets through his Earthling body, and a shotgun blast through his heart. So he died on the stage, covered with his blood, and his wife.

"He had come to me for reconciliation," said Oliver next day. "He was a sweet man. The world will mourn his passing, as I will mourn him. He always did the best he knew, and no one can do better than that. He died a martyr to our cause. To freedom."

And then Goober sealed the deal. He set up some defenseless people to take the fall to satisfy the public in general. And, to be sure the fall-guys fell within the law, he set up a trial much like the trials of the Scottsboro boys, but not exactly. The Scottsboro boys, though never acquitted, hadn't been executed and had been released, but the trial of these newer victims stood forever as it ended, frozen in infamy like a tomb for justice.

But, a few weeks after the killing in the theatre, Oliver and his family and many of his friends were on an airplane headed for Oslo, where he would accept the Nobel Peace-prize for the work he and Mikey had done for Earth this trip, from Theresa's beginning on that bus. And, as he spoke this time, he had all of Earth's attention.

Standing in Europe's Viking land like a sailor home from the sea, he spoke both of whence all that conquering had come and of whence it could go if everyone would only wish and work, stand up for what we all have in our hearts.

"I have a dream," he said with a hand on each side of that worldwide stand.

"I have a dream of Heaven, and it is not a large dream. It is a dream of small words and small people, but it is a dream of great spirit. It is a dream of friends of mine dead and friends of mine who shall live forever. I know that they shall live forever, for they are friends of yours as well as mine.

"I have a dream of a small woman, a small black woman sitting on a bus, sitting there in a small part of a big bus, a part of that bus set aside for small black women and small black men for a great white whale trying to swallow that small place only to feel not as small as that whale must feel in its paleness.

"In this large world, such small people are called a minority, but what a large word for such small people. And another large word for many small dreams is 'divinity', and I am a doctor of what we call divinity, but I won't speak of that to you today. No, today, I won't speak of the expansiveness of theology, but only of the expansiveness of the small dreams.

"I am a black member of the colorful minority of a great nation still writhing in the belly of the great white whale. And maybe that's right for democracy, but neither will I quote such

grand Greek words to you today in this small snowy nation across a sea from that nation. Instead, I will quote a white-man for the smallness of his words and the grandness of his spirit and the simplicity of his soul, and I will quote two great friends I know will live forever for the smallness of their words and the grandness of their spirit and the simplicity of their souls.

“The white man was a rich white boy who, in the first of what we call world wars on Earth, drove an ambulance on soil foreign to him.

“People that Harvard boy’s nation told him were friends caught him driving that ambulance trying to save lives, and they put him into a prison. I’ve been imprisoned, jailed many times though never for driving an ambulance, and I find striking that Harvard poet’s description of his prison. His jailers didn’t throw him into a small box of steel bars and concrete but into a large room full of many kinds of people. So, if you like big words, you might call it a microcosm. But the poet called it an enormous room.

“And that white-boy Harvard poet didn’t complain. He mentioned the stink and the sickness, and the rottenness and paucity of the food, but he did not complain. Instead, in a little book he wrote about that large room, he wrote about the people there and not about how poor they were. He wrote about the grandness of their spirit and the simplicity of their souls. And later he wrote only poems of love, never a discouraging word. In one, to my soul, he says the most important thing. And so I quote this line of his to you:

“‘Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands.’

“The poem is not a song of war or politics or stuff like that. It is the same song as the song of the wise king Solomon, who for all the grandeur of his temple found most beautiful the small roe breast of his lover which he wished to feed among the lilies, and

nothing has changed in the hearts of men and women, in the land of Solomon or anywhere else.

“For all the war in the Holy Land still, Tel Aviv has more bridal-gown shops per capita than has any other city on Earth.

“So, when I think of that small woman black but comely on that bus in Alabama, I don’t think of how much larger the bus was than she or how much larger the white whale was than she or how much larger the world where that bus might carry her was than she or how much larger the world of the white whale was than was the world she might have traveled then or might travel now.

“Instead, I think that she was black but comely, and then I forget that she was black, and that is why we’re here on earth, to find each other comely.

“We are not here to kill one another or covet each other’s land, but to find each other comely and propagate that comeliness in simple homes of honor for those homes, and the homes of our neighbors. As I said, I won’t argue complexities or rationalities of theology here today, but I will say that both the Bible and the *Qur’an* have enough words large and small to excuse anything we wish to do. So, why not look into our own hearts first, and then carry forth in our own small hands what we find best there?

“I, for one, suspect that what each, every one of us humans on Earth, will find there is the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments and the first and second great commandments of Jesus’, without our having ever read the Bible or calling it inherent conscience, or some bigger set of words some may prefer, instead of just calling it love.

“Grand spirit, simple soul, small words. Here is my second quotation.

“When that white-whale bus-driver threatened to have that small and black and comely woman imprisoned for simply refraining from giving up that small evening space on Earth to the



white whale, she held in her small and black and comely hands her purse nearly depleted from buying Christmas gifts that first day of December that year now lo those many years ago, and she said: 'You may do that.'

"Grand spirit, simple soul, small words! You may do what?"

"You may arrest me. You may push us around. You may set your dogs on our children. You may send your cavalry to trample us as we peacefully try to cross a bridge to freedom. You may imprison us by the thousands and keep our voices out of the law. But there is one thing you may not do, and cannot do. One thing.

"You cannot diminish the grandness of our spirit, the simplicity of our souls, our love. So, with those small words, with her small hands lightly clutching that nearly empty purse, that black and comely woman lit a light for all humanity, maybe even gave a bit of a tan to the white whale, to help him be a little normal.

"Third quotation. I cannot imagine our movement without either the peace of Mrs. Parks or the war of the Panthers. Both have been necessary, Mrs. Parks to show us the comeliness of her small hands, and the Panthers to show us the bloodiness of the alternative, the freezing rain spring showers should wash away. And another person black and comely preached the war much of his life, and late in that life of his on Earth was reconciled to the peace, and was killed at once thereafter. Was he killed for reconciling, for seeking final peace? If not, for what?"

"I suggest that he was killed, blown down and off this earth by bullets and a shotgun blast in Harlem, the capital of African America, for small words. Mr. Shabazz, after returning from a trip to Africa, during which he discovered that Islam in its homeland also had more room for brotherhood and sisterhood than what he'd

been calling the Nation of Islam did in the United States of America. So what did he say that was so bad, so unforgivable that he passed all seventy-times-seven chances of redemption, of Christian forgiveness?

“‘By any means necessary,’ is what he said.

“Grand spirit, simple soul, small words. Did anyone ask what he meant by that? Did anyone ask him what he meant by that? Did anyone look up in a dictionary what he meant by that? Did anyone consider, carefully in their hearts and minds, what might be necessary? My dear departed friend Mr. Shabazz did, all his short and happy life on Earth! He always asked, for all of us.

“How many humans know that that friend of ours, whether or not we recognize what a friend he was to all of us, spent more than half of a decade of his young life in the prison where Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for being called anarchists, charges as trumped up as the charges against them of crimes against the law, as trumped up as the charges against the Scottsboro boys?

“How many humans, for all their claims to identify humanity with compassion and reason, know who Sacco and Vanzetti were or who the Scottsboro boys were? How many recognize the name Shabazz or know that he left behind a wife and daughters? How many honor those daughters’ small roe breasts, in that falling freezing rain? How many honor their own breasts?

“What means are necessary? The peace of Gandhi in India before the internal strife that ended his life on this earth? The creation of a homeland for the survivors of Hitler’s holocaust, the oppression of those whose homes were on that land before, the suicidal terror of their retaliation? The peace of Mrs. Parks or the war of the Panthers? What means are necessary?

“Well, call me a romantic, but I wonder how the tyrannical imperialism of Rome before or after being called holy got mixed up in that small word ‘holy’. The means necessary is that all of us

admit what we find in our hearts, and so carry it forth in each of our small hands through any rain hard or cold that falls on us, across the sands of Arabia and the mountains of America, from sea to shining sea, all over Earth, to Heaven.

“I have a dream, a dream of grand spirit and simple souls, a dream of small hands carrying water, like Rachel’s at the well. I have a dream of spring rain raising lilies in the fields of battle, quenching the thirst for the silliness humanity calls things like glory and superiority. I have a dream of righteousness, clear and quenching as a mountain stream, humanity’s first and last fair thirst.

“And when that dream comes true, and I say when, not if. When that small and simple dream comes true on Earth, justice. I am simply saying the two syllables of that simple word ‘justice’. Freedom, justice for all, shall roll down like water.”

With that last phrase, Oliver leaned close to the microphone and fairly shouted. So the feedback screaming through the hall from that sixties Earth sound-system may have damaging some of the Nobel committee’s hearing aids. But Nobel speeches are records for history, and anyone who didn’t understand can look it up, and try again.

So Oliver had done what he could do this trip and said what he had to say, and so it was time for him to go on with Mikey to some other Roncesvalles, or whatever. And, symbolically, he finished this trip up in the Mississippi Delta, helping garbage collectors of the race he’d adopted for himself this time on Earth. And there we let one of the poor white people of that Bible belt blow Oliver’s Earthly brains out.

And we set Goober up to do that too, or I did. My connections through Skull and Bones to the CIA extended to the FBI. So we easily opened the doors for Goober’s operatives to

find that Ku Klux Klan lunatic James Earl Ray and see how he'd fit the task. Buggen had infiltrated the KKK, as he'd infiltrated anything he thought important or threatening to him. So Ray had only to accept some casual suggestions.

The operative suggestion was that the balcony outside Oliver's room in a Motel in Memphis was open to a rifle shot. And, excepting that the fop Jesse Jackson was there and used that proximity to weasel his way to prominence in the movement, it worked out well. Later, by following Oliver's example of adultery, Jackson became an embarrassment.

But it also killed his career. So his legacy would end with one statement: "I could 'a' been a contender." And, pertinently, that statement is in a James Dean movie filmed the year before Theresa's bus ride, and the film's title is *On the Waterfront*. That's where Jackson wished to be, on the front line of justice rolling down like water, rich and famous. The metaphors abound.

But, anyway, Mikey and Oliver went on, and Theresa and I went on, lonely. But, then, neither of us was entirely lonely, with Theresa living with her Earth family in Detroit and me with mine in Houston. So both of us fell back on that awhile, Theresa taking care of her mother and Raymond, and I trying to be a father for a while, though a little late. Lev helped me a little with the lateness. But not quite enough.

Years had passed, and Quincy was now at Harvard. I had had many heart-to-heart talks with him and had told him I had great expectations for him, but I'd never been specific beyond telling him Earth needed broad leadership. So, figuring business administration was more practical than economics, he chose Harvard over Yale because Harvard's business school was more reputable.

I didn't argue that he'd be missing out on Skull and Bones.

I figured that I could pass on to him my connections and that he'd make many connections of his own at Harvard. And that's what I told him.

"What makes a school's reputation and power isn't academic, Quincy." I said. "It's the people the school attracts, and so be sure your activities are often extracurricular. At least that's how such things seem to me."

So Quincy joined the cheerleading squad and drank a lot of beer. The cheerleading made sense to me for a career in politics, and I figured he'd get over the beer, sooner or later. So I didn't complain.

And also he joined the Air National Guard and went to flight school before he went to college. But Beatrice and I had to argue with him to keep him from going to Vietnam. Or rather we supported one side of his argument with himself.

"I love to fly, and I love this great nation," he said. "But using planes to kill people isn't quite my cup of tea."

And Ben agreed with that deciding factor. But he was very different from his brother, and I didn't see the difference developing. Academically, Ben performed better than Quincy, and he beat him at learning to ride a bicycle, though Quincy was three years older. And also he had more friends than Quincy did, and he seldom argued with me or with Beatrice, while Quincy often did.

And he worked part-time jobs while Quincy preferred to stay in his room and listen to music. And, while sometimes worrying about Quincy, we also loved music. So we thought he couldn't be all bad.

Sometimes his arguments seemed a little idealistic, impractical in the face of Earth behavior. But, with Beatrice being theological and me being alien, we had no problem with that. Yet it may have been part of the problem with Ben.

Beatrice and I loved each other because we faced the world from different perspectives but with the same desire to make it a better place for all the creatures here. So we sympathized with Quincy's idealism and will to find perfection. And we never found a way to talk with Ben.

So the first inkling I had of Ben's dissatisfaction was on a visit to Quincy in Cambridge. Quincy, saying he'd met a girl who was making him recite Petrarchan sonnets, had decided to stay in Cambridge that summer. So Beatrice and I decided that, if he wouldn't come see us that summer, we'd go there to see him, and meet the girl.

The girl was lovely, and her name was Laura. I guess that's where the Petrarchan part comes in, if not from other things. And we learned when we met her, not from Quincy with his sometimes taciturn ways, that he'd known her in school in Midland. Now she was at Radcliffe, but majoring in elementary education, to go back to teach.

And, in the spirit of all that, Quincy recruited his mother and the future mother of his children, although we didn't know that then, to go get some ice-cream. So Quincy and the women wandered off to Harvard Square and left Ben and me in Harvard Yard sitting on the steps of the Widener library. And I decided to use that opportunity to widen my understanding of him.

"Decide on a school yet?" I asked. "This Vietnam thing's going to get you, if you don't. Well, I know I don't have to tell you that."

"I'd go to Canada," said Ben. "Screw this country. But yes I have."

I'd never heard him say anything so vehemently, and I had no idea he held any animosity to anything, much less his country. But I tried to stay cool, and I tried not to drop my jaw as I stared at him briefly, and I didn't address the question of screwing his

country. I hoped knowing his choice of schools might give me a hint.

“Where?” I asked.

“UCLA,” he replied. “I want nothing to do with this preppy crap and this pseudo-intellectualism and all these hypocrites up here in New England pretending they want something more than the wampum those Puritans came here to get. You think I don’t know what you and Mom do, her teaching Sunday school while you go around destroying the environment sucking up oil for money so you can send your sons to these fancy hypocrite schools and be proud of yourself. UCLA is my ticket.”

Well, now that was a reply, but it raised more questions for me than answers.

“I had no idea you felt that way,” I said, with another effort at a placid look.

“That’s because you don’t pay any attention to anything,” said Ben. “You’re so stupid, you think I’m stupid. I know you told Quincy you have great expectations for him. And he’s so stupid, he thinks your expectations are high. I’m glad you never said anything like that to me. My expectations are higher.”

“What are your expectations?” I asked, with another failing glance.

“Higher than yours,” said Ben. “I’m highly intelligent, and so I know that most people are stupid. I bet you don’t know I failed the entrance-examination to Yale because it’s a stupid culture-biased test for New England preppies.”

“I didn’t know you took the test,” I answered, now unable to turn my head.

“Of course you didn’t,” said Ben. “You don’t have any of your great expectations for me. You’re like that phony jerk Alex Trebek, pretending he knows everything while the producers give him the answers. Everybody on that show is smarter than he is and

better-qualified for his job than he is, and that's how you are. You think you know everything, but you're too ignorant to know anything. You and Mom, the queen of denial, run our family like Jeopardy. It's the lunatics in charge of the asylum."

I was at a total loss in this. For now at least, I could muster nothing intelligent to say. So, groping and grasping, I said something stupid.

"Why UCLA?" I asked. "Isn't Alex Trebek from out there."

"That shows what you know," said Ben. "He's from Canada, but yes he lives out there, corrupting Hollywood with his hypocrisy. I'm going to California to get as far away from New England as I can, and I hope you and Mom and Quincy go to D.C. I guess that's where you're headed anyway, with your Republican politics and your token black friends. I'd rather be Governor of California than President of the United States.

"You think I'm stupid, but I'm a problem-solver. If Fits Jr. hadn't been assassinated, he might have gotten his brother Rudy to do something about how the home of Harvard and MIT is also the home of one of the worst public school debacles in this nation. In California, the best schools are public, from universities down to educating prepubescent illegal aliens."

The problem I was trying to solve was how my son and I had become so at odds without my knowing it, while we agreed so much on fundamental points of reason. So I could not but think of Mikey's and Norma's mothers dying in loony bins, and I could not but consider where this craziness, this disagreement that seemed agreeable to me, might go. By now, my Earth mother was living in a nursing home because she'd had a stroke, and I considered the possibility that Ben might be having some sort of stroke. He'd had some seizures early in his life, but doctors had said he'd outgrown the disorder. But, whatever was happening, I knew I couldn't stop



it in a minute. For now, I guessed, I'd have to ride along and watch. I could hardly think.

"Have you been accepted?" I asked. "How are you going to get there?"

"Of course, I'll be accepted," he answered. "They don't have preppy tests out there. And, if you won't pay for it, I'll get a job or scholarships or something. I'm a problem-solver. I'll figure it out."

"I'll support you," I said. "But not to blow up parliament or congress."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked. "Your sarcasm is sickening!"

And, in that weird note, Laura and Quincy and Beatrice reentered the yard.

"They'll fulfill your expectations," said Ben. "Like sheep marching to the sea. Buy them a Mercedes. I'll settle for an MG. I love open air."

He acquiesced in his mother's presence, but I nearly could see smoke blowing from his ears. And, the rest of the afternoon, beyond terse answers to questions straight to him, he didn't speak. And, except to keep the others happy, I tried not to smile or speak. I tried to figure how to speak to Beatrice of this.

"Ben says he wants to go to UCLA," I said, back at the hotel.

"I know," she said. "He'll be alright. Just give him time."

And I had never loved her more than I did as she told me of time that time.

So, the next time I had occasion to be in New Orleans, I took some time to ask Lev what he thought. Lev, despite our little tête-à-tête about beer, was still hanging out in the bars of the French Quarter, and we met at his favorite, Molly's at the Market.

We sat on high stools, at one of the high wooden tables opposite the bar, and talked.

“My son Ben’s driving me crazy,” I said.

“What’s his problem?” asked Lev.

So I told him the story and added a little.

“Beatrice and I named our firstborn Quincy because I knew he’d follow me into the Presidency of the United States, you know as John Quincy Adams followed his father John Adams, and Beatrice hoped so. And, because we’d sort our responsibilities somewhat with me mainly raising Quincy, we named our lastborn son Benjamin from Hebrew for son of the right hand. But we hoped each hand would know very well what the other was doing.

“And we hoped and waited to learn how we’d learn to handle that handing. And that, at least as far as I can see, is what’s most important. So what do you think?”

“That’s as far as I can see?” said Lev. “Is that what you’re asking?”

“No,” I said. “I’m asking you maybe to help me see a little further.”

“Oh,” said Lev. “Good, because I’ve been studying psychology.”

“Do you mean in Russia with Pavlov when you were alive?”

“No, I mean in Vienna with Freud, since I’ve been dead.”

“You ghosts really get around,” I said.

“Nevermind that,” Lev said. “Listen.”

## Chapter 14

### The Tin Drum

“Siggy,” Lev rattled on, “had plenty of lunacy of his own to worry about. For example, that thing about a phallic symbol being anything longer than it’s wide. When I talked with him, he was getting cancer of the throat from the cigars he was smoking, and still he couldn’t stop smoking them, then. Yet, if anyone asked him whether cigars were phallic symbols, he said cigars were just cigars. So he died, presumably of throat cancer, and Norma said she never saw him in Heaven.”

“What brought up that subject between you and Norma?”

“She was asking me about her mom. But listen now.

“Oh, before I forget. That reminds me of a very creepy guy I met in England, a Rhodes scholar from Arkansas, if you can believe that. He smokes marijuana without inhaling, and he likes to stick cigars in young women's vaginas, and he says he’s going to be President of the United States. That might sound far-fetched, but you never know what he might weasel, with an Oxford degree and no holds barred. Sorry for the insult to the weasels. I think he might be a clinger. You know about clingers.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” I said. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Anyway,” Lev continued, “with the possible exception of that creepy guy, I think Freud’s notion about penis-envy is way out of line with any actuality, but I think some of his stuff has some

rationality in it, and some of it a lot. For example, I think a lot of men love their mothers and are a little jealous of their fathers, but I don't know any that would go as far as Oedipus did, killing his father and marrying his mother, at least not on purpose. But one notion of Freud's that makes perfect sense to me is repression.

"Think about it. Is anyone going to think about anything that makes him totally despise himself? Of course not, any more than anyone is going to stick a needle in his eye unless he thinks it'll make him feel better by thinking he's getting what he deserves. I mean I can understand people not remembering anything they can't somehow reconcile in their conscience. Feel free to jump in if you're not following me here."

"What about Hitler?" I asked. "He didn't seem very forgetful."

"Hitler believed in what he was doing," Lev replied. "No one, not Hitler and not Jeffrey Dahmer, does anything intentionally without somehow feeling justified at the moment. Hitler somehow managed to think he was right, the master race, I guess."

"If he thought he was right, why did he kill himself?" I replied to that.

"Like sticking a needle in his eye," returned Lev. "He did that to punish himself for not getting the job done, the same reason some so-called Christians whip themselves. They're trying to whip their egos into shape, to show themselves that at least they don't like their sins, and so are better than their sins. In Hitler's eyes, his sin was incompetence."

"The bad news in that is that people can rationalize nearly any horror, but the good news is that no one ever does anything intentionally that he can't somehow justify in his own mind as being good. In other words, everyone's good, at heart. Get it?"

I didn't nod, and so Lev rambled on.

“So the purpose of psychiatry and psychology needs to be to clear up the rationalization while pointing out that fundamental fact. And Freud also called rationalization a defense mechanism and put it into psychotherapy to argue against repression to cure the person by making him an honest loving person. So now what do you think?”

“I still don’t get it,” I said.

“Okay,” said Live. “Then listen some more, back on the matter of memory. I also called on Otto Rank, Siggy’s buddy who said everybody’s fundamentally psychologically unsound because of the strain of beginning life by being squeezed through a vagina. He called it the birth trauma. Think about that.

“Trauma? There you are floating around in a nice warm womb, no wind or rain or need for teeth. Suddenly your head’s squashed, and you’re hanging by your heels like Mussolini with some big hand whacking your butt, and the temperature just dropped thirty percent. Think about what warm and cuddly means, and think about what alienation means. Oh, I forgot you’re an expert on alienation.

“Anyhow, put that memory stuff together with the rationalization part and remember that you can’t remember what happened before you could talk. Oh, there I did it again, forgetting you’re immortal, never been born. Well, take my word for it.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve been talking forever, but I’ll take your word for it.”

Lev’s learning of U.S.A. colloquialism surprised me, but I understood it.

“So nobody can remember the birth trauma,” he continued. “But everybody feels bad about it, because it was a real pain, most people’s first pain. So they spend their whole lives feeling bad about something they can’t remember. That’s why people are so crazy. See what I mean now? Now do you get it?”

Then I understood both his logic and that it was illogical. But I didn't tell him then that space aliens aren't the only people who live forever and that the reason for the birth trauma is for them to forget their past irrationality in order to try to find ways to feel good and eventually figure out that the best way to feel good is to make others feel better. Instead, deciding to invite him to our mission-review and let him know that then, I let him continue.

"Then," said Lev, "I paid a call on that other Freudian, Jung. Jung had a notion he called synchronicity that he said was the explanation of what he called the collective unconscious. And I thought that was the first step in the destruction of psychological science. Synchronicity is nothing but being in tune with cause and effect.

"I mean, we call it a chain, but it's more like a chain-link fence, or chainmail. There are no spaces in the universe, as even Einstein understood for all his abstraction and artificial complexity, and so everybody feels everything all at once. If someone drops a shoe in China, the air it displaces will displace all air, eventually the air you breathe right here. So not recognizing everything only comes from hodgepoding.

"Collective unconscious? We just share, whether we like it or not, and that's what's craziest about psychologists. They can't share."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "They're always talking about sharing!"

"They talk to hear themselves talk differently from other psychologists," Lev returned to that. "Some of them make some solid central sense for a while, but then they go off on their tangents. Freud defined sanity as the ability to love and to work, *lieben und arbeiten*. But the neo-Freudian Erik Erikson said it's the ability to trust. And, to me, they both make sense. In that regard.

“Love inspires work, and trust inspires teamwork. Without all of that, we’re all more alien than you are, alienated from our neighbors, alone in a sloth of despond. But psychologists and psychiatrists drive us all crazier by their failure at teamwork. They try to think they’re number one.

“Depth-psychologists promote psychotherapy, while behaviorists promote stimulus and response, while each decries the other’s approach, while the basic science is the same. A depth-psychologist, by getting his patients to cure themselves by facing the facts about themselves, rewards them with the notion that what they are is worth facing. Either way, it’s about making a person feel good about what needs to be done.

“But, if psychologists admit their similarity, they won’t get published. They won’t get professorships or have their names announced at seminars. The reason is that people name ideas for the people who create them, and so no two people can have credit for sharing an idea. ‘Publish or perish,’ those professionals say. If they agree, they fail.

“It isn’t failure; but they see it that way, because it pitches them into ego despair, because they themselves wish to feel worthy as well. And, for that, they need their names to be announced and praised. And, worse, it seeps into individual therapy.

“And the worst example of that is from another neo-Freudian. Carl Rogers called it non-directive therapy, making non-directive therapy Rogerian. What a non-directive therapist does is encourage the client to express himself openly, at first. Then the therapist cuts the client’s legs out from under him. He gives the client’s ego a square kick in the butt. Or the psyche.

“He makes the client feel invisible, out of the picture.

“What I hear you saying is . . . ,’ says the therapist.

“And then he finishes that sentence with something the client didn’t say at all, but rather with something that fits the

therapist's idea of what the client would say, were the client to fit the theories the therapist professes, were he to fit the therapist's claim to fame.

“So, for all practical or impractical purposes. the therapist leaves the client feeling alone in the room, except that the client feels he's with someone who doesn't think he matters.

“An anthropologist named Gregory Bateson formulated what he called the double-bind theory of schizophrenia. He said that people depart from reality when they can't reconcile their abilities with the demands they feel are placed on them, when they're treated as failures regardless of what they do. It's kind of like Freud's notion of repression, but it goes beyond memory to behavior, and to positive perception.

“The person, because he doesn't find staying in viable, really flips out. And, because, for many, therapy is last resort, Rogerian therapy tends to make people do that. When the client finds himself nonexistent in the eyes of the make-believing therapist, he has nowhere left to turn. The reason is that the therapist has already flipped out, for much the same reason. Then, also, the clinician can easily jump the desperate client's bones. In that last resort, the client is desperate for any attention. It can be screw or go crazier.

“Am I making sense to you now?” Lev asked.

“Yes,” I said “That stuff drives me crazy too.”

“Yeah,” said Lev. “And the first reason they do it is that, because we consider different better, to be a mental health professional of reputed stature, they need to think of people differently than other mental health professionals. And nearly all of Earth's leadership goes by the same motto. The notion that bigotry is best.

“And a psychologist showed that plainly to me when I asked him what he thought of the *Diagnostic and Statistical*



*Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*. The DSM is a sort of dictionary that that association periodically updates for mental health professionals to be able to use the same vocabulary when they talk about their clients' problems. It doesn't say how people get the way they get, or how to get them out of how they get after they get that way, but only offers names for symptoms and syndromes. In other words, it tries to be a tool for teamwork, for communication. A great thing, communication, I think.

“‘The DSM's no good,’ said the psychologist. ‘It's written by psychiatrists.’”

Then I nearly spit in my beer. But, instead, I rose from my stool to get two more from Maggie, the barmaid who drew the wonderful charcoal portrait of Yeats that hung on the wall behind the bar at Molly's, then. A print of it hangs there now, though Maggie left Mollies long ago, to open her own gallery. She took the original with her there.

“I thought you'd find that hard to swallow,” said Lev when I returned.

“Too bad about Yeats and Maude Gonne,” I said. “Too bad they didn't work quite well together, for their common cause, for Ireland. Too bad that keeps going on, and on and on, and on. I just don't understand such separation.”

“A crying shame for all of us,” said Lev. “But that's another story. So where was I?”

“Oh. As I was saying, because they can't get themselves to work together, because they care much less for their patients than for their own fame and fortune, mental-health professionals are mostly crazy. And another example is that, while I was studying psychology, I visited Stanford University because of its reputation for having the top psychology department in this country and because a professor there invented the IQ. And I made the mistake

of mentioning Rank to the Dean of the personality department. But that IQ business should have told me that was a mistake.

“We don’t study Rank here’, said the Dean in his cluttered scholar office. ‘This is what we do.’

“And he held before my ghostly eyes a big piece of green and white striped paper with holes in its edges and a squiggle line-graph drawn across it I guessed a computer must have drawn. My first thought was of the Himalayas, but my second thought was of embezzling accountants. I mean people penciling people to death.

“We don’t work with hypotheticals here,’ said the Dean. ‘We’re empirical.’

“So I had to leave, and I got out quickly. I felt no need to sit and hear him tell me what he didn’t hear me saying, if I told him that empiricism needs a premise, that no fact is an island, as is no man. I wished to point out to him that worthy subjects for empirical study might be the sensibilities of his theoretical predecessors. But I saw that, whatever he or I said, he’d hear me threatening his claim to originality.

“I might have told him I heard him saying that his fame and fortune was more important to him than the mental health for which he professed to care. But, you know, I’m not that kind of guy. I’m too easy-going.”

“I know!” I said. “But what has this to do with Ben?”

“Ben’s crazy,” said Lev. “For all those reasons.”

“You mean my son’s double-bound bigot in disparate despair?” I exclaimed.

“Exactly,” said Lev. “He thinks he has to be better or worse than his brother, and he can’t accept worse as an alternative. He sees you as a big-guy with power beyond being his father, and he sees you as favoring Quincy, another bigger guy. Ordinarily younger brothers get over that, because the youngest is ordinarily

pampered more in the early exigencies of comparison. I mean, because he's newer to the family, besides being younger and more needful, the younger is usually treated better than the older, at the beginning of the younger's life. But Ben was born when you were doing most of your post-world-war gallivanting, meeting people like Yasser and Mikhail.

"And, besides," added Lev, "I think he's gay."

"Gay!" I exclaimed, more loudly than I had to the double-blind diagnosis. "Are you crazy?"

Maggie looked with surprise. But the bar was mainly empty that afternoon. So she didn't say anything.

"Sure," replied Lev. "If I weren't crazy, I wouldn't be a ghost. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong, or that you should shoot the messenger."

"I'm not going to shoot anyone," I answered. "At least not today, and I welcome your views, crazy or not. Earthlings call the sanest Earthlings nuts, and follow such as Hitler. So please tell me more. You know I trust you. You're my friend. Ghost or not."

"Alright," said Lev. "Here's the deal. One thing no psychologist, however crazy he may or may not be, has postulated for his name is what I'd call the greener-grass syndrome, were I a mental-health professional, crazy or not. People want what they don't have.

"Yes, that defines the word 'want', which is often confused with the word 'wish', proving a theological theory of mine that the devil is nothing but disparate delusion. But what I'm trying to say now is that people wish for what they see themselves to want, whether they need it or not. And, while you were gallivanting, Ben wanted a male presence.

"Quincy also lacked your presence, but Ben was younger then and more formable, and Quincy had your presence at the comparable time of his life, when you were at Yale, studying at

home. Your telling Quincy you had great expectations of him but not telling Ben the same fired Ben's combination of problems into wacky-land, like a hair-trigger. A powder-keg doesn't need much spark to explode, and you're lucky the two of you were alone in Harvard Yard, with Beatrice and Laura somewhat away. Otherwise you might not know for years. Now he's pulled your trigger."

"He has indeed done that," I said. "Thank God for it."

"Any immediate ideas of what to do?" asked Lev.

"Not immediate," I said. "And I'm still not sure about the gay part."

"Well," said Lev. "Think about this. Consider why British male aristocracy seems so effeminate, if it isn't that Nanny and Mum take care of infant British children while Pop plays polo, and next they send them to sexually segregated boarding schools, for what behaviorists call reinforcement. And now, also on this side of the Atlantic, wait until the pre-boomers grow to the point that they achieve some power, after their fathers' absence for the duration of the war, the duration of their infancy.

"You know what I mean? Quincy is a baby-boomer, but he might have had a gay big-brother, if you hadn't taken my advice not to start your family until you came back from the war. Try studying that empirically, the difficult of collecting the statistics for that, because of the closet-skewing. Liberace and Little Richard and Rock Hudson may die in the closet. So I suggest that you get closer to your son Ben. I suggest that you help him fix all that. But that's just what I think. It's all on you to do.

"Anyway, the only problem I have with homosexuality is that closet thing. One kind of hiding leads to other kinds of hiding, another domino-effect. Dishonesty about one thing makes other dishonesty easier.

"So you two have to talk to one another."

“Thank you, Lev,” I said to him.

And then I thought a little more about all of it.

“I’ll do that as I can,” I said.

But how could I? How could I?

But the afternoon sun was slanting through the open window to the street. And Professor Big Stuff had come in and parked himself at the piano there at the front end of the bar. So I looked up and broke my focus and thought of another question.

“Why doesn’t he listen to music?” I had to ask then.

And Lev took more moments to answer than he usually did.

“This is going to be tougher to take,” said Lev, and he waited another moment.

“Didn’t you tell me that Beatrice’s brother and sister work at thinking they’re smart by thinking of ways to think other people are stupid?” he then asked. “And didn’t you tell me that her brother is trying to make a career of being a musical preacher? And didn’t you tell me that Ben told you Uncle Pete asked him to give him massages?”

And then I needed a few moments and used to obtain a couple more beers from the bar and nod to Professor Big Stuff while I waited for Maggie to bring them.

“Go on,” I said on return, not acknowledging that I knew what was coming.

“Well,” said Lev. “That’s where Ben got that stuff about how stupid everyone is, why he uses that way of trying to wash away his ego despair. As for the music, maybe he has a bad taste for it, or maybe he wishes to make better music with someone not his uncle. It’s a goddamned shame, since music is such a wonderful way of bringing people together, of opening up our hearts and minds to all. Goddamned pervert preachers. And they’re all over. They sneak all over. All around Earth. God damned!”

“What do you think their problem is?” I asked, despairing.

“Same as all we’ve talked about,” said Lev. “People don’t know how important they are. People are so preoccupied with their own insanity that they don’t see what their lives are doing to life around them. That problem is most preeminent with parents, and least excusable with credentialed mental-health professionals, and craziest with priests. I know we need to love and forgive everyone and help them. But if God damns anyone, it must be pedophile priests. What grotesque misnomer, pedophilia. I love children.”

“People say love is cruel,” I said.

“People are crazy,” said Lev.

So then I looked around the bar. Besides the portrait of Yeats, on the wall behind the bar were insignia of United States Marine Corps units. Professor Big Stuff banged on the piano and sang his own compositions of intentional total nonsense, with occasional profanity to keep up interest, in case anyone paid attention. A young man entered the bar in a dress that might have been appropriate for a character in *The Grapes of Wrath*. And, with easy grace and no flamboyance, he walked past us.

“Nice dress, Steve,” said Lev.

“Thanks,” said Steve, smiling at Lev and looking at me, and then walking on to the back end of the bar, where Maggie took him a mug of beer.

“What about that stuff about ‘Screw this country’?” I asked.

“Maybe Ben’s right about that. This country, for all its foundation on freedom, still screws people. I realize it’s democracy, but I also realize that politicians are in a position to guide in the right or left direction, and I realize that they have responsibility to accept advice from experts, from their betters.

“For example, you’re an economist, or so says your course-record at Yale. Immigrants founded this nation, with the excuse that they were fleeing oppression but with the reason that they could cultivate its resources for economic wealth beyond the natives’, and people here call their attitude the protestant work-ethic. But next they imported Africans to do the work for them.

“And now we’re calling Mexicans coming here willing to do that work wetbacks, although little of the Rio Grande is much more than knee-deep, and we try to keep them out. Next thing you know, the citizen bums afraid of anyone willing to do the jobs they’re too lazy to do will start trying to make a living by suing McDonalds for making them fat by letting them spend their welfare checks to eat dead cows and French fries. But the food stamp laws keep honest poor people out of McDonalds.

“They forbid using food stamps for food someone else prepares for them. But maybe the dishonest bums, the ones too lazy to prepare their food, will find a way to sue the people who freeze the dead cattle and cut the potatoes into the TV dinners the food-stamp laws don’t consider prepared. Maybe they’ll sue them for not putting signs on the boxes giving them information they could find at the public library, were the willing to work for their own welfare.

“‘Don’t eat me,’ a sign on a box might say to the homeless, before they microwave their TV dinners. ‘I’ll make you fat while you’re not paying attention, as you don’t pay attention to the records of the politicians for whom you vote on the basis of their promises. Since you’re not working for a living and are too lazy and ignorant to go to the public library and read books and newspapers, you may as well spend your time in the supermarket, reading boxes.’

“Any historian worth that name knows that the fat-cat lawyers who make a living off such lawsuits have been corrupting

economies since before the Pharisees. And any economist knows they contribute nothing to the economy, while honest work like picking cherries contributes much. And no one needs to read to know all that.

“He might be somewhat right about New England preppies too. Harvard’s Hasty Pudding, which is famous partly for deliberate sexual identity confusion, selected as its man of this year an obviously unconstrained drug-addict movie-star, and neither does anyone needs to read to know all that.

“But, still, communication doesn’t flow freely enough to the masses. Computers might cure that someday, with an international network anyone can access from a computer in his or her home. If that happens, the problem may soon be solved.

“But, until something like that happens, people like Jimmy Huffa will keep taking workers’ money for services broader communication would let them do for themselves.

“Anyway, we need aliens to show us how to work. Thanks for coming.”

Lev never learned. Dead now for three quarters of a century, wandering the earth as he wished and seeing all of it, he kept his fundamental ghostly values. He thought people should be sensible both to themselves and to others for everyone’s happiness. And that notion lit all his thoughts, wherever he went, whatever he saw. Was he still beating the horse Dostoevski said was dead?

“I’ll ask Ben if he’s gay,” I said.

“Ask him if he’d like to be governor of California,” said Lev. “I know you could do that for him, and his will is good and basic, however he shows it. He probably thinks the whole world is picking on him because he’s gay, and he probably hasn’t told you and Beatrice about it because he fears that you might too. If you show him he’s wrong about that, he might see that he’s wrong



about some of that other stuff too. And he might form a California coalition of fruits for fruit-pickers.”

“I’ll ask him about that too.” I said. “But not in those terms.”

“Fair enough,” said Lev. “Call it gay good work for all. Oh, and let him run on the Democrat ticket. I know your connections span the two parties, with Harriman and all. And it’ll help Ben know you’re not trying to push him into your mold.”

“You’re a pushy bugger in your old age,” I said to Lev.

“I don’t push any further than I can,” he answered.

Next day, I took an early flight back to Houston. I might have driven, but our Studebaker had long ago found its way to rusting in a junkyard, and I loved flying anyway. I was also an environmentalist, but that excuse wouldn’t wash economically or otherwise for a flight as short as from New Orleans to Houston. What did wash was the little extra freedom of thought, looking down to the silver cloud-tops.

And in Houston I took a taxi to our comfy home in our comfy suburban neighborhood, with its magnolias shading the street and the houses with bicycles lying on steps to some of the houses while Volvos waited in drives, and at home I kissed Beatrice and asked her where Ben was.

“He’s in his room,” she said. “A friend has spent the night.”

## Chapter 15

### The Sound and the Fury

With thoughts that complicated the situation more than thoughts of mine might have done before yesterday, I climbed the stairs and treaded the hall to Ben's room and knocked on the door and waited, feeling like the father I was.

"Just a minute," quickly came Ben's answer.

And I didn't smell marijuana or hear the toilet flushing.

"Oh hi Dad," said Ben, opening wide the door.

His friend was tucking in his shirt beside the window.

"I didn't mean to bother you," I said. "But I'm driving over to San Antonio this afternoon, and I wondered if you'd like to go along. I don't have to go, but there's something I could take care of better by being there than by telephone, and I'd like some company for the drive. Thought I'd let you know, if you'd like to go."

"Sure, Dad," said Ben. "I guess so. Whatever."

"About one then? After Mom fixes lunch?"

"Yeah. Okay. See you at lunch."

I don't know what got into the boy. He could have fixed a sandwich anytime, as he usually did. But he sat with me and Beatrice at our kitchen table and ate cheese and tomato sandwiches and Beatrice's wonderful potato salad as though we did that every

day and all day long and cared to do nothing else. He smiled and talked.

“I was thinking about majoring in drama,” he said. “But maybe political science. I guess, in the long run, there’s not much difference. Either way, you have to perform in front of people, and either way you can get your point across. I thought about medicine, but I don’t care that much for money. And I think it would be boring.”

“Well,” said Beatrice. “Whatever you do, don’t do anything boring.”

“Mom, you’re making fun of me,” said Ben, but still he grinned.

“No, I’m not,” said Beatrice. “We all need to feel for what we do.”

Ben seemed surprised at that, and I don’t know why. But, without Lev’s advice, and with Beatrice’s good wishing, we headed west across flat Texas, toward the city of Saint Anthony, and the Alamo. After leaving the house, neither of us said a word until we had filled up the tank and left the city. Our Land Rover didn’t belong on the Interstate, but the trip was too long for backroads. So we braved a little tedium and talked.

“Thanks for buying this,” said Ben.

“Buying what?” I asked.

“This Rover,” said Ben. “It was my idea. Remember?”

I didn’t remember, and I had often wondered why we’d bought it. It was our only car, and Beatrice wasn’t exactly a rugged outdoor type, at least not for the sake of ruggedness. I could have lied and said I did remember, but this wasn’t a time for lies, if any ever is. And so I simply told the truth to Ben.

“No,” I said. “I don’t remember why we got it, but sometimes I’ve sort of wondered why your mom would buy such a thing. We should use it for what it’s designed for sometime.

Maybe drive it down to Mexico. Do the Baja 1000 ourselves. Know what I mean? Kick a little dust?"

"Sounds right to me," said Ben. "Whatcha gotta do in San Antone?"

"Nothing important," I said. "It'll only take a minute. Your Uncle Harry's working a deal, and he wants a guy to see my face and shake my hand. I'll just do it and get out, if you don't mind waiting a few minutes. Seen the Alamo lately?"

"I don't mind," said Ben. "And I don't remember ever seeing the Alamo."

"You saw it the only time I did," I said. "You and Quincy and your mom and I drove there once from Midland. Your mom asked me if I'd ever seen it, and I hadn't. So she said we should, and she was right. At least I think that she is always right.

"How else can we claim Texas as our home?" she asked.

"So, the next weekend, we piled the two of you into that Studebaker we used to have, and we drove down. We spent the night in a motel."

"Now that we've seen it, we can remember it," she said.

"So how's it going with you and UCLA? Any set steps?"

"I'm accepted," said Ben. "I was going to tell you. Listen, Dad, I'm sorry I freaked out in Harvard Yard. I was way out of line."

"I'm sorry, Ben," I said. "I think I've been way out of line for a long time."

So we chitchatted pleasantly the couple-hundred miles to San Antonio. Ben drove and parked the Rover near the St. Anthony Hotel, where Harriman was having his little meeting. I did my little duty, which I had no big reason to do, and we walked to the Alamo. We took a quick tour inside and sat on a bench outside on the plaza.

And there, with trepidation, but not beating around the bush, I raised the subject.

“Ben, are you gay?”

“What?” said Ben.

He looked at me, and his face turned as red as the Azalea blossoms in the square, and there was no way I was going to repeat the question. The trepidation was now beating my alien self to death. And so I bowed my Earthling head to Earth.

“Yes,” said Ben, almost immediately. “Who told you that? Is that why you asked me to come here with you? What a bunch of holy hypocritical crap!”

He had looked away and looked back again and was still as red as the blossoms.

“A friend,” I said. “You haven’t met him. He doesn’t get to Texas much, but I’ve known him a long time, and I’ve talked with him about you and all of us over the years, and I told him about Harvard Yard. He said he thinks you’re gay, and he said he thinks it’s more my fault than yours. I mean, if it’s a fault.”

“Your fault?” exclaimed Ben, looking straight at me, without an ounce of shame or doubt in sight. “Do you think everything’s about you? I’m just gay! I am! Me!”

He turned away and looked up at the sun. But at least his blood was equalizing in his body. His outside color ebbed from the crimson of the azaleas to near the hue of the adobe of the mission, and I felt I had a chance to talk again. But, just as I opened my mouth, to say what I’d mustered up, he spoke again.

“Does Mom know?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Don’t you tell her!”

So now it was my turn.

“Why? Why not? Why haven’t you told her? And why haven’t you told me? Don’t you know we’re your parents and care

more about you than anybody can? You keep saying everything's no big deal, and then you freak out in Harvard Yard like everything in your life, and most of all your family, is a nightmare. Maybe being homosexual isn't a big deal, but not trusting us to care is a huge deal. Damn!"

Now I'd done it. Ben was weeping, right there in front of the Alamo. But soon he quieted, pulled out a pocket-handkerchief, and wiped his eyes. And, while I shook in my shoes waiting for others of his to drop, he blew his nose and began to speak again,.

"Dad," he said. "Oppression. I know how you feel about it as well as I know how proud you are that Aunt Theresa and Uncle Raymond are your friends. But I'm oppressed too, or would be if anyone knew the truth about me. Mom would cry her eyes out, and that would oppress me most. I don't want to hurt her."

"Alright," I said. "This time not a question. I'm going to make some statements, right in a row. You can keep your secret, but Theresa can't hide her color and wouldn't if she could, because she's a good person, and so are you. Theresa, like those two black leaders who left our earth this year, has spent her life on Earth fighting for people to have the right to be good and be treated accordingly, and not be oppressed by little deals. Your mother loves you, and I love you far more than any little deal, and at least as much as the big deal you've just mentioned. So I'm going to make a couple of suggestions.

"First that you tell your mother the first chance you get, and second that you run for governor of California the first chance you get. You'll have to wait quite a few years for your chance for the second, but your chance for the first will be as soon as we get home tonight. Incidentally, the first is a great expectation. The second is nonessential."

"Governor of California?" he asked. "I'd need your help, and I can't be a Republican."

“Run as a Democrat,” I answered. “If you and I work together, we can get it done.”

“Well,” said Ben. “We do have Uncle Harry.”

“Yes, my son,” I said. “A friend is a friend.”

“But why should I be governor of California?”

“A lot of gay people there need your help,” I said.

“What about all that church stuff?”

“Give her a chance,” I answered.

We ate on the road and reached Houston late in the evening. Ben parked the Rover in the drive, and we walked together into the house. We found Beatrice in the kitchen leaning on the counter beside the sink, her arms folded as though she were trying to think of what she should do next. And Ben didn’t beat around the bush either.

“Mom, I’m gay,” he said.

“So what’s new?” she said.

And she kissed him.

But I should give you more details of what I was doing during those years besides loving my family and hanging out with my friends while Mikey and Oliver were getting themselves killed. If I gave you all the details, you’d never take the time of your life to read this book, whether or not you could. But I think it essential to name some times and places and positions.

In 1965, while Linden was letting the Voting Rights Act slide through Congress while he slid Eisenhower’s advisory mission in Vietnam into a war, Tricky Dicky did his first widely observable trick toward sliding me into the presidency. He slid me into chairing the Republican Party of Harris County, Texas. It was a small steppingstone, but key.

But the next step was more visible. That party and people put me into the United States House of Representatives, as a

congressman for Houston. That's what I was doing while Mikey and Oliver were getting themselves killed, and Linden suggested that I step from the House to the Senate. So I ran, and I had a lot of support, with Cleve Powell as state editor of the *Austin Statesman* writing a huge feature about me. But my heart wasn't quite in it, and the House was enough for my résumé. So soon, finding other ways, I took another turn.

And also, Cleve's feature, though it was lengthy, was off-center. It was full of praise but for little things, pork-barrel types of things, and it embarrassed me. Lev told me he ran into Cleve later at the White Oaks Saloon, which is why I refer to him as Cleve while his name is Marvin Cleveland Powell. But Lev liked to call him Cleavon Howley.

Anyhow, Howley had become quite a drunk and had borrowed money from his father to buy the *Lincoln County News*, and he remembered little of his feature about me, but much of his having met Linden. He'd met him by covering the dedication of Linden's Presidential library, and he remembered one circumstance above all else.

He told Lev that, while he sat beside Linden on a sofa in a room full of people, Linden hardly spoke to him. But he said that, while Linden sat there beside him and talked to other people, he reached up and rubbed his neck, not Linden's own neck, but Howley's. And he also said it felt pretty good, considering all the stress he was under, there without a drink.

I don't know what to make of that, and so I make nothing of it. But I do make something of something else that was happening in this nation at that time. From the beatniks of the fifties, improvisational jazz had risen in popularity, along with the rise of civil rights.

It was more free than Dixieland jazz and more white while yet mostly black. And *Playboy* magazine, for its mostly white



audience, initiated an annual jazz poll to discover what jazz artists its readers preferred, and the female vocalist who won the poll each year from the fifties into the middle of the sixties was Ella Fitzgerald, who was black and sang scat but sounded quite white. Nina Simone didn't stand a chance.

And, in the mid-sixties, two female vocalists, one African American and the other Israeli American, rose to huge fame. The African American, whose name was Nancy Wilson, sang a blue note with flat clear sustenance to break a heart. And the Israeli American, whose name was Barbra Streisand, sang with the virtuosity of birds.

And somehow, among young and educated music-lovers, a debate arose. The question was of who was better, Nancy Wilson or Barbra Streisand. And Ben and Quincy took up the question between themselves but never decided on an answer. And each agreed with the points of argument the other put forth. Yet, while they couldn't decide, they felt they should.

"Why can't each be best in her own way?" I asked in our kitchen in Houston, around the Christmas of 1965. "Nancy Wilson sings jazz, and Barbra Streisand sings show-tunes. They both do both excellently, but mainly they stick to their niches and don't tread on each other, as the world seems to choose to think they must."

"That's a copout," said Quincy. "You have to take a side."

"No," said Ben. "Dad's right on this one. It's like that Mikey character who says he doesn't have a last name because most black people in this country got their last name from white people who thought they owned them. That makes sense to me, but his going around saying black is beautiful makes me sick. We're all beautiful in our own ways. Aren't we?"

"Sounds right to me," I said. "But Mikey didn't start that stuff about black being beautiful, at least not in those terms."

“But he preaches killing white people by any means necessary,” said Quincy.

“‘By any means necessary’ doesn’t necessarily mean killing,” I answered.

“Yeah,” said Ben. “Dad’s right on this one. The rottenest attitude humans have is that no one can win without beating someone else.”

I thought I was right, or I wouldn’t have said it. and I was proud of Ben for recognizing that the debate was essentially bigotry, though I didn’t know at the time his vested interest.

And Nancy Wilson soon bumped Ella Fitzgerald from the top of the jazz poll. But, after *Playboy* implemented Ben’s reconciling argument, Barbra Streisand quickly succeeded her. *Playboy* changed the name from “jazz poll” to “jazz and pop poll”. And soon Nancy Wilson faded from view, but I still love to hear them both, and I feel a huge loss.

It was hardly a battlefield, maybe insignificant either in the general history of Earth or the particular history of that decade, but I feel a loss by having no notion of how it should have cleared.

Should we have boosted Nancy Wilson with affirmative action, or Barbra Streisand by the same reasoning, because of the Holocaust?

I think neither, because I love music, and so I let it rest. But what breaks my heart, the loss I feel from that little exercise of democracy, is that the people of this land of the free generally subordinate even music to bigotry, to pick a side. For what?

But, whatever, I was busy balancing other things, oil economics and political power. Hitler was dead, and Oliver and Mikey were dead, and Mikhail was laying low but climbing quickly. Tricky Dicky was rearing his head again for the

presidency, and he'd win this time, we knew. On that there wasn't much to do. We'd done it.

But Yasser wasn't dead. And that side of the balance had more to do with the oil side than had my congressional position. And Yasser was buried so deep beneath the other Arab factions that we had no notion what might happen next, and we weren't in a position to do anything about whatever it might be, if we did know. So I paid a visit to Yasser in Damascus, wishing for the possibility of falling out of the plane and into enlightenment, as Saul of Tarsus said he did from his horse on his way to that old city, thereby learning not to persecute. Now, everyone in the area was up in arms, and reason wasn't in it, as far as I could see.

Though this was a score of years after the institution of the Israeli state, after the second war to end all wars on Earth, Fatah was still fighting Irgun. Menachem Begin had founded Irgun to terrorize the British mandate and any Canaanites not Jewish, and Yasser had founded Fatah to fight Irgun. And now the United Nations were calling Irgun Israel, while Fatah was buried in dust.

And Fits Jr. had thrown another monkey wrench into that works. He could not have won the presidency of the United States without endorsing the United States civil rights movement. And he could not have won without endorsing Israel as a state.

And Linden, while acted indifferently as Fitz Jr. did later, left that money wrench where Fits Jr. had put it. He signed things, to have the United States of America do things, like provide arms to Israel, though only by inertia. And the Soviet Union responded in kind for the Arab nations around Canaan, and so the world now had two arms-races.

One was between the United States and the Soviet Union for themselves. And the other was between the United States and the Soviet Union for the fight over Canaan. So dust was rising clouding every issue.

“What are you going to do?” I asked as Yasser as I drank more of that brain-buzzing tea at a café beneath the Damascus citadel.

“I have no notion what to do,” said Yasser. “It’s anarchy and confusion, everybody running everywhere and paying no attention to where they’re going or where they’ve been. The Israelis are saying your CIA is backing them, and I have to wonder what that means and whether it’s true. Do you know they’ve made Menachem Begin a minister without portfolio? What does that mean?”

“The CIA claim is bogus,” I said. “Linden may have given the agency some marching orders, but the order of the agency’s march depends on bureaucracy far deeper and wider than either Linden’s vision or his span of concentration. You know what making Begin a minister without portfolio means, just as you know my vision is deeper and wider than Linden’s. Begin will be Prime Minister of Israel someday, partly through this current march. I mean the march to bury you still deeper.”

“Yes,” said Yasser. “I do know, and I know that what we have on our hands is anarchy, chaos. Begin has some focus, and the legitimization of Irgun into Israel was but a temporary setback in his relative power. But, for the rest, I’ve seen some of those old silent movies of your country. This is global Keystone Cops.”

“Well, my friend, I know,” I said. “I just wish to say you’re not forgotten, not by people who care about everyone. Thanks for your patience so far. Please keep it.”

“If you were my lord,” said Yasser, “I’d ask you that question of the Israelis’ that drives me crazy. I’d ask you how long, but I’m not Israeli. I’ll wait.”

“Thank the Lord for that,” I said to him.

So, while Yasser kept up his little attacks in hope that the Palestinians not totally be forgotten in the chaos, he kept the attacks small enough to avoid any general sanction for large-scale military attack from Israel, but the attack came anyway.

In one fit, Egypt closed the Straits of Titan to Israeli traffic. Israel's responsive fit was to attack every Arab in sight, with the military might the United States had slid to them under Linden's indifference. And the Soviets, in this little part of the arms race, exercised more restraint. So, in six days, Israel tripled the land it occupied. And Yasser lay deeper in dust.

And meanwhile, back in the U.S.A., the dynamic or lack of it remained the same.

Tricky Dicky was running for president. He was a shoe-in, after all the screwing up Linden had done. Linden had kept his word and refused reelection, but the messes he'd permitted had also diminished the stature of his party, in the minds of any loving persons viewing the burning of babies in Vietnam. And, while no decent person wished to risk continuing that, Dicky thought he still must be tricky.

Fits Jr.'s hubris lived more in his pants, and the drugs he took for his back kept him permanently in desperation, and none of that came from his being a Catholic. But Dicky's hubris lived more in his desire to be loved for being a better person than he thought he was, and some of that came from his being a Quaker, though he was no Mary Dyer. Had he her courage of conviction, we wouldn't have put him into the Presidency. But, had he, he wouldn't have killed Robert Fits.

Oliver was right. When Dicky and Fits Jr. were both alive, they were both contenders for being the most dangerous person on Earth. And Fits Jr.'s brother Robert was a contender for being the most decent man on Earth at that level of political popularity. And, if Dicky was right, and Robert Fits had won, I'd have

suffered gladly. But inertia from what we did kept us where we were.

Fits Sr., also known as Sugar Fits, had been one of the most ridiculously dangerous men in the world. A son of Irish immigrants, untouched through all the corruption one sees in gangster movies about that prohibition era, he made his fortune during it. And, after prohibition, he found an ostensibly legitimate way to be corrupt, by selling the hooch-delivery-trucks he hadn't legally owned and by collecting dues from the drivers driving for the legal companies that bought them. The companies went along because they bought the trucks at bargain prices, and the drivers went along because they needed a job. And all of them, in that new beginning, had been in Sugar's illegal business.

From there, the step to organizing other companies into the system was a matter of salesmanship and breaking legs. The salesmanship was a pretense at acting in the interest of the drivers, and the breaking of legs came when the salesmanship didn't do the job. So Sugar Fits built a legal business on the capital infrastructure and human resources of his old allegedly prohibited business. And corrupt policemen and corrupt politicians also helped keep him corruptly corrupt on his corn-liquor-fed sugar.

And, altogether, they kept him legally corrupt, and earned him so much respect that he was Ambassador to England before his grand finale of having his son elected President of the United States, and having his family called America's monarchy.

He was Boston-born-and-bred. Boston, the cradle of liberally taking advantage of other people's weaknesses, the home of the Puritans' robbing the natives and hanging Mary Dyer for her courage of conviction, the home of a plurality of the pedophilic

priests of the Roman Catholic Church, was a perfect place for such as Sugar Fits.

We often think of Italians as gangsters and Irish as police, but prohibition tangled the two together. So South Boston with its predominantly Irish population and Boston's North End with its predominantly Italian population met at Scolley Square, which was near City Hall and the State House and Fanueil Hall and is now at the center of what Boston calls its Government Center. Evolution is a fascinating thing.

So Boston was a perfect place for Sugar Fits to raise a family, to establish a family tradition. And Rudy Fits, his youngest son, gets drunk and drives off a bridge with a woman he's picked up at a party and leaves her to drown while he runs for cover, dry clothes and political protection. I guess picking priorities is quite complex sometimes.

And another member of the Fits family beats a woman to death with a golf-club, and another kills himself skiing drunk into a tree. And the collection of American monarchists George Washington tried to evade burns candles on television for the poor Fits family cursed by tragedy wherever it turns. Oh woe is who and why I have to ask.

Then fast forward to the scion of the family, the young prince, Little Fits. He finds a magazine named *George*, and no one asks whether the name is for George Washington or for the crazy king George whom George Washington defeated. He marries a cocaine addict, and the American monarchists call her addiction recreational, and say it has nothing to do with him.

But, because they both die because the young prince flies himself and his young cocaine princess into the oblivion into which his father nearly sank all humans, none of that ever catches up with them on earth.

Hubris, I hope anyone would say, to fly or preside beyond one's ability, at risk and cost of others' lives. But, while Achilles was not a god and died a soldier, we call him a hero. And we burn more candles for Little Fits.

And still we lionize the son of Sugar Fits who drove the girl into the creek. The people of the cradle of the libertines who touted Frederick Douglas but let his people down to die elected Rudy to the United States Senate and has kept him there for forty years. I have to wonder how an unrepentant drunken glutton became an elder statesman.

But thank God the rest of the nation hasn't made him president. Not all people of the United States are like the electorate of Massachusetts, and not all cities of the United States are like Boston. And, also, not all citizens of Boston and Massachusetts and New England vote for hope of gaining from corruption.

Thank God this nation's grown from sea to sea, and back again.



## Chapter 16

### Vanity Fair

One afternoon on Castle Island, at the entrance to the old harbor where the Puritans had anchored their ships, Theresa and I spoke of manifest destiny as we ate ice-cream as the United States Ship Constitution sailed out to us on one of its now rare outings. But Castle Island isn't an island, as nothing is an island, eventually.

“Poor Mary Jo,” said Theresa, with tears in her onyx eyes.

“Poor Norma Jean,” said I. “Why do we keep coming back?”

“Because seventy times seven is infinity,” she replied.

“And because we know better than they. But more because some souls on Earth are honest, and all can learn, somehow.”

I recalled that my Earth family never offered praise. Except that, astounding me, my father once said I was a good-looking kid, and I didn't understand that. So I was remiss to my children this trip, being from outer space also and so not needing compliments from Earthlings, to foster my eternal values.

But their mother wasn't, and Sugar Fits must have neglected his second son more than I did mine. So the question might work many ways, and I can offer no other explanation of Robert Fits' sincerity, his genuine concern. Certainly, had he not quietly exercised some influence over Fits Jr., Birmingham

wouldn't have been enough to turn his hubric head in our direction, regardless of the success it gave him.

So, when things appeared as though Fits Jr.'s fictitious martyrdom might carry Robert into the White House over the head of Tricky Dicky, I turned my head away. Robert might willingly have done all we wanted from Dicky, and we'd planned no martyrdoms besides Mikey's and Oliver's for this trip, and so Theresa and I trusted the chance, either chance, either way. But Dicky wasn't into taking chances.

Taking inspiration from Remington Bosworth, Dicky had Conundrum research newspapers and homeless shelters to find a radical lunatic, a person who would do anything under any pretense of pretext while lacking the coherence necessary for credibility, and Dicky remembered something Conundrum had said about Bosworth.

"Poor schmuck," said Conundrum. "If he were intelligent enough to understand we were trying to buy his drunken intelligent soul, he might have sold it into the bin in hell where mine is. As it is, his soul will probably spin into oblivion, drunk or sober, lost. That's what we do to stupid people smart enough to care on Earth."

In that little scotch-soaked speech, Conundrum defined the basis for political corruption, the arrogance that makes despots of revolutionaries, Stalins of communists, Hitlers of socialists. Bob said it's silly to try to pull a mote from someone's eye while one has a beam in one's own. And Conundrum and Dicky had beams in all four of their eyes.

So Dicky had a fanatic, someone who had gone over the edge worrying about what Fits Jr.'s endorsement of Israel might do to Islam, kill Robert in a ballroom full of people and go to prison forever. And later Dicky reminded me of what Conundrum had

said in that cowboy club in the city of Saint Anthony. And he bragged about it.

“Hell,” he said. “You taught me all I know. You know that.”

So Dicky became president, and I met again with Mikhail.

Why did I meet Mikhail? The disappointment at war’s end! We hadn’t come to rid the Earth of Hitler. The human species worked together to do that for itself. The problem now was how and why. The disease, not the symptom.

As Joshua diminished the suffering of the children of Israel in ways Excellent Oliver never condoned, Truman defeated the Japanese in a way Excellent Delano never would have condoned. Then Truman and Churchill diminished the suffering of more recent descendants of Israel by supporting repetition of the methods of Joshua. It was fighting fire with fire, racism with racism, poetic vengeance.

Worse, those two world-leaders sanctioned Stalin in the leadership of most of Eastern Europe and much of Asia, thus hurting more descendants of Israel than they had helped by giving them again land that had come to be populated more by Semitic Arabs and Palestinians than by Semitic Hebrews or any other race believing in Judaism, and not by crusades or jihads but just by being there and having families. So, in that way, those two leaders relinquished to one racist regime more than they had taken from another! What in hell were they thinking?

So now, nearly a quarter of a century later, Mikhail and I met again on Montmartre, beneath the brilliant white dome of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. And, at the same table on the dusty cobblestones, we drank more of that brain-buzzing tea.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“As one might expect,” said Mikhail. “It’s going slowly. The Kremlin bigwigs respect me, even Brezhnev. But it’s a gerontocracy.

“It’s ironic how they work so hard at educating or propagandizing the youth but don’t give them a chance at the top. We’re going to have to plan on a schedule of Brezhnev’s life-expectancy. Then we’ll have to put in another sick old man.

“So we’ll have to set up a shoe-in who’ll die quickly. Then the instability of the quick turnover may shake up the other old men into making me next in line. They might think I’m indispensable to the circulation of their ideas. What do you think?”

“You know more about it than I do,” I said. “But it makes sense to me. Do you have anyone in mind, to be the interim sick old man? Do you have a plan for making him a shoe-in, like we did with that sicky Tricky Dicky? Well, of course, so who?”

“Yuri Andropov,” answered Mikhail. “I’m riding up in the KGB on his coattails.

After Brezhnev dies he can use his KGB power to get himself into the chairmanship after Brezhnev dies. And he’ll keep his KGB title long enough to die while promoting me to replace him there. And, after I help him die, the remaining gerontocracy will also look to me for stability. And they’ll find me more forthright with them. That is, than Yuri, one at a time. That’s how I deal with them.”

“Elegant,” I said. “Simple, direct. You’ve surely been thinking. Anything else?”

“Yes,” said Mikhail. “You’re going to have to get more global quickly. Your oil connections give you a pile of power in the first and third worlds, but I’m your only power-link to the second world, the so-called communist powers. Incidentally,

besides you and me, Yuri is the only person alive who knows you and I have met.”

“You’re a genius,” I said. “Keep talking.”

“Okay. The United States need to form a *de facto* alliance with China, mainland China. That’ll create huge tensions between China and the Soviet Union, and the loss of influence over those more than a billion of people will scare the hell out of our gerontocracy. That’s how unstable it already is.

“Easy to say,” I said. “How do we do it?”

“Piece of cake,” said Mikhail. “Get that Dicky dude to appoint you Ambassador to the United Nations. There, promote recognition of those billion-some people as a nation, while at home you get Dicky to pull out of Vietnam. Dicky isn’t buying into that geopolitical domino-theory business as Linden did, anyway, is he?”

“No,” I said. “He isn’t. You have a great way of cutting through the crap in what you read, and I like the ideological domino-theory you’ve just presented. But I’ll have to make it look like it came from within Dicky’s administration. Well, as much as I hate subterfuge, that’ll be a piece of cake as well. With icing.”

So I flew from De Gaulle International Airport to Dulles International Airport and paid a call on Dicky. I found him in the oval office with Klingmonger, his national security advisor. They were sitting in the Louis XVI chairs on opposite sides of the hearth. They seemed to me moping. I spoke first.

“Poker,” I said.

“What?” asked Dicky.

“Poker,” I repeated. “What’s with the poker-faces?”

“Quagmire,” said Klingmonger. “In a word. But it isn’t poker-faces. We really don’t know what we’re going to do, because we don’t know what’s in our hands.”

“Which hands?” I asked.

“Any of them,” said Klingmonger. “Vietnam, the Soviet Union, you name it.”

“What about China?” I asked.

“What about China?” asked Klingmonger.

“I mean, aren’t they part of the problem, all those more than a billion people?”

“China, Soviet Union, same thing,” said Dicky.

No fire was in the hearth. But the Swedish ivy on the mantel was blossoming, as Swedish ivy does when it receives a lot of sunlight, as this did through the windows from the rose garden. And, for more than minute, no one spoke.

“By God, that’s crazy,” said Klingmonger.

“What’s crazy?” asked Dicky.

“More than a billion people occupying a huge part of a continent while the world doesn’t recognize that they or their part of the continent exist, while the united nations of the world call an island off those more than a billion people’s coast by the name that large piece of the continent has had for nearly all of history. Meanwhile, the most powerful piece of another continent is bogged down in a quagmire in a tiny nation between, a nation whose name most of the populace of this powerful nation never knew until now, unless they read it from the bottoms of tin toys as children. No, Formosa, the tiny nation we’re calling China now when we’re not calling it Taiwan, is where the tin toys were made, not Vietnam. It’s so confusing. What a quagmire.”

“Yup,” said Dicky. “That about sums it up, except that you didn’t mention that the second-most powerful nation on Earth, which is another huge piece of the continent you mentioned first, besides controlling much of that largest continent, is taking sides with the billion, against our nation.”

And then Dicky pushed a button on the mantle beneath the Swedish ivy, and a woman opened the main door to the office and stopped in the doorway, folded her hands beneath her breasts, and waited without a word.

“Can we get a fire in here?” said Dicky.

The wonders of modern Earth technology. The hearth burned wood or gas and had electric ignition. A few seconds after the woman closed the door, we heard a spark and saw the gas ignite. And soon some logs were burning there.

“Very nice,” said Klingmonger. “I love this country.”

“What are you up to these days?” Dicky asked me.

“Not much,” I said. “My House term is closing out soon, and Linden has suggested that I run for the Senate. I made a commitment to the Texas Republican committee to run, but exigencies can change. Do you have another suggestion, Mr. President?”

“You made the suggestion with your question: What about China?”

Klingmonger looked at me as he often looked at people, with his index fingers pressed together touching his lips. But he didn’t wait as long to speak as the woman had waited in the doorway for Dicky to speak. He glanced into the fire briefly but then looked back at me.

“Yes, what about China?” he asked. “What can we do about China?”

“No,” I said. “Going to the United Nations would be political suicide.”

“Are you refusing your President?” asked Dicky.

“Hm?” asked Klingmonger, raising his eyebrows.

So I ran for the Senate but wimped out of winning that race, and Dicky and Klingmonger threw me into the briar patch of the United Nations. And there, to make a long story short, to

succinctly summarize a lot of senseless words, I watched the Taiwan contingency walk out in protest at the recognition of the billion people as China. And Klingmonger got the credit.

He remembered that I had initiated that conversation with the word 'poker'. And, through his accordant rhetoric while I'm a quiet man, Earthlings came to know the improvement of United States' relations with China at the expense of Soviet Union relations with China as playing Klingmonger's China card. And next Dicky did the other essential against the absurdity of the situation. He pulled us out of the quagmire in Vietnam. So we had cut two Gordian knots. They and I simultaneously. What a team.

But next we had to break apart the team. We, my team from outer space, had now to get rid of Dicky and Conundrum, but that cake was much easier to cut than the Gordian knot. The paranoia Dicky had shown in getting rid of Robert Fits reared its ugly head in his getting rid of himself, and Conundrum fell with him.

My personal rationalization for not keeping the promise of putting Conundrum into the Presidency was that the promise was contingent on Dicky from the beginning. So I was able to tell myself that it was Dicky's responsibility to hold those strings or drop them, and he dropped them, by himself. But my personal reason for pleasure in that failure was from Conundrum's character more than from Dicky's.

Yet it remains a conundrum for myself. For me, one conundrum about Conundrum was that he was as Irish as the Fits family. But maybe the step to betraying one's whole heritage isn't much more broad than the step to betraying one's party. Or maybe he was just broadminded, or maybe he was only totally a traitor. Of course he was a killer, but so am I. My motives are more social. But is that good enough?



But, whatever, we let Dicky cancel the promise to Conundrum by screwing up his Presidency, after leaving us from Vietnam. It was funny, watching that turncoat Conundrum flying around in Dicky's Airforce Two, as if he were doing something by shopping for souvenirs in Afghanistan as its king was being bounced as the Yom Kippur war was intensifying the problems in the Holy Land. Well, no it wasn't funny.

And neither are the Keystone Cops, if one needs police to do what police are supposed to do, and if they're all the police available. Dicky formed his own keystone cop-force to cop out of the keystone of the Presidency by breaking into an office-building to steal his opponent party's secrets, because he felt no worthiness in the secrets of his own, no trust or faith. And, of course, the capital cops caught the keystones of his corruption, and followed their scent to his oval office.

Then, after that bum-bumblng, after the real cops tracked the keystone, Dicky lied about his leadership of any of it, all the way down the line to the bottom of the well in which he drowned his Presidency, setting a precedent for corrupt corporate and political leaders to follow forever, if they wish.

Keep your corruption until you have no lifelines left, until you're dead. Never tell the truth, no matter what. It ain't over 'til it's over. Keep a stiff upper lip. Always be a crook. That's integrity. Power, virtue. Arrogance. Loss.

So, when the bumblng became public, I left my United Nations ambassadorship to accept chairmanship of the national committee of the Republican party. The party leaders besides Dicky thought my international stature and my ordinary quietness would lend some credibility and tranquility to the party in that time of Dicky's obstreperousness, and I needed to do that for the continuity of my remaining mission. That party was a tool of mine I couldn't just then drop.

So I rode its hobbyhorse until its other leaders accepted my argument that my credibility shouldn't suffer as it might in face of Dicky's end, until they accepted that I was in a position to do better for the party by getting back onto the world stage as a producing actor on it. So, while Dicky sang his swan-song while calling it an ode to victory, I was rediscovering my old homeland China, face to face. Dicky and Klingmonger sent me and Beatrice to befriend Chairman Mao.

It was clever card-play. The United States had not yet officially reestablished diplomatic relations with China. Officially, the United States were still fuming over the rise of Chairman Mao on the continent and the demise of Chiang Kai-shek on the island, and everyone who knew anything about the China-card game was happy at my willingness to go there as envoy without portfolio, because I also took there my Ambassador title from the United Nations. But little did they know.

Little did they know of me, that they were throwing me into my favorite briar patch of all eternity, and that I would understand Mao Tse-Tung better than could anyone else on Earth. Being immortal and having been Lao Zi, I understood very well why Mikhail and Yasser were taking so long to do what any neighborly person knew needed to be done. And I knew very well that Mao was in a similar boat.

If Mao or Mikhail or Yasser went away then, their absence would be filled by worse, by noisy greedy arrogance, futility. If they spoke too loudly too soon or acted too quietly too soon, they'd be gone too soon. Their slow solution would end in quick corruption. And I just might as well have stayed at home.

So I didn't stay at home. But, very much enjoying my present Earth home, I knew I'd feel a little homesick in my former Earth home, and I knew Beatrice would feel that more than I. So,

before we went, I asked her to call Quincy and Ben, to arrange a little family get-together.

By then, both Quincy and Ben were graduated from college. Quincy, although he had to struggle a little to do it, achieved his master of business administration degree from Harvard and was back in Houston waddling around in the oil-industry, as had I. Ben had opted out of graduate school, saying that UCLA had burned him out. But he was still in the city of angels, working for a bank.

Beatrice suggested that we have our parting get-together there, and she knew she didn't have to tell me why. Quincy was in Houston along with many of our friends, and none of us knew anyone anywhere near Los Angeles, except Dicky in San Clemente, and Ben of course. So Houston may have been a more rational choice,

But, because Ben might have thought we'd honed in on Houston for Quincy, we selected the city of angels for Ben. And Beatrice and I rented a car at the airport and drove to his apartment, where he and Quincy awaited us, with Ben's roommate, Chet. And he seemed to me an elegant and polite young man, and Beatrice smiled at me with her happy blink, when Ben introduced him to us.

"Anybody not had lunch?" I asked, although the time was 2:00 p.m.

All shook their heads and sank in their seats a little nervously, but Ben bailed us out, nearly literally.

"Onward and upward," said Ben. "Let's go for a ride."

"Cool," I said. "Where are we going?"

"Let's think about it on the way out," said Ben.

"Nice meeting you," said Chet as we arose, the rest of us heading for the door, as he stood still. "I'll catch you later, I guess."

“You’re not going?” asked Quincy.

“Not this time,” said Chet. “This one’s for the family.”

“You’re welcome,” said Beatrice.

“Thanks,” said Chet. “Next time, for sure.”

So we crowded out of the little stucco Hollywood apartment-house, leaving Chet picking up glasses from the tables in a quiet resolution that seemed to me gracious.

“Nice young man,” said Beatrice.

“He *is* nice,” said Ben.

“Crap,” said Ben, when we hit the sidewalk. “We’ve got a pickup, and Quincy flew. Why wasn’t I thinking?”

“No problem,” I said. “We rented a car.”

And I pointed to the Buick sedan we’d rented for such an exigency.

“Whew,” said Ben. “That’s a relief.”

And then, as with Theresa in Carrizozo, Beatrice and I climbed into the front, and the other boys climbed into the back. And, as I started the car, the CD player returned to life with a collection of Elvis Presley’s golden hits. Beatrice had bought it at the rental office.

“What’s that you’re listening to?” asked Ben.

“Elvis Presley,” said Quincy.

“Elvis Presley sucks!” said Ben.

“Elvis Presley’s dead,” said I.

“His music sucks,” said Ben.

“If you know his music,” asked Quincy, “why didn’t you recognize it?”

“I know enough,” said Ben. “Next thing you’ll be listening to country and western!”

“I like some of it,” said Quincy. “I don’t like everything Presley’s done, either.”

“Chet likes country,” said Ben. “But I don’t let him play it when I’m around.”

“How does he feel about that?” asked Quincy.

“He knows I love him anyway,” said Ben.

“So,” I said. “Where are we going? Any ideas yet?”

“Onward and upward,” said Ben. “Griffith Park. The observatory.”

“Good idea, Ben,” said Quincy. “I didn’t know you’re into outer space.”

“I’m not,” said Ben. “We don’t have to go into the observatory. I just like it for the view of the city, and it’s pretty quiet there.”

“Sounds fair to me,” I said. “Tell me where to turn.”

But the conversation lulled. Besides Ben’s directions, except an exchange between me and Ben, none of us spoke on the way. And that exchange was brief.

“Why a bank?” I asked.

“It’s easy,” he answered.

But we kept to our plan. We drove up the winding road to the observatory and parked near it but didn’t go in. Instead we sat on brown grass beneath some trees and looked at the city more florid below. Yet, still, none of us spoke, until some others sat similarly a few yards away, much as we had but laughing and speaking with one another in French.

“Listen to those people flaunting their French,” said Ben. “What a bunch of idiots! How can people be like that?”

“Maybe they think it’s the language most appropriate for what they’re saying,” I replied. “Or maybe they’re French.”

“Why are you always judging me?” asked Ben.

So it was good that we were used such that from him. None of us winced, and Beatrice and I turned to silence. And Quincy filled the gap.

“I’m not into outer space much either,” he said. “But I’ve thought about it, and that big bang theory doesn’t make any sense to me. I mean, if some big bang created the universe, and nothing existed before, what banged?”

“Elegant question,” I said. “I had no idea you . . . .”

But then I interrupted myself to look at Ben. He showed no sign of attention, but I had learned the hard way that his attention was beyond his signs. So I took another tack anyway

“What do you think happened to Elvis Presley?” I asked.

“He drugged himself to death on a toilet,” said Ben.

“His hand was too full of grapes, like a banana fish,” said Quincy.

“He didn’t drink alcohol,” said Beatrice. “Because he belonged to Jimmy Swaggart’s church. But maybe people taught him to use other drugs, or maybe his mother was too obese. Or maybe his father was away from home too much, driving his truck. Or maybe nothing happened to him that doesn’t happen to everyone.”

“Alright,” I said. “Try this one I’m trying to figure out. Consider the phrase ‘life as we know it’. What does that mean?”

“It means humanity,” said Ben.

“What about spiders?” asked Quincy.

“What about tomatoes?” asked Beatrice.

“Oh,” said Ben. “I thought you meant people.”

“Okay,” I said. “What about viruses? If we include them as among the living, what does that phrase mean, ‘life as we know it’?”

“I read somewhere that tomatoes cry when we cut them,” said Beatrice. “I listened once, but it sounded more like a squeak, to me.”

“That’s what I mean,” I said, for lack of anything better I could think to say. “What’s the difference between a cry and a squeak?”

“That’s what I mean,” said Ben. “Scientists say tomatoes and viruses are alive, but they’re not really alive. They don’t have feelings.”

“If they were really alive,” said Quincy, “sympathy-vegetarians would starve to death, if they have the courage of their convictions.”

“Sorry, Dad,” said Ben, now showing attention. “We’re picking on you. You’re trying to get at something. Spit it out. Go ahead.”

“Thank you, Ben,” I said. “I was just thinking about something I heard on television a couple of nights ago, on the news. It was an interview with someone from NASA about sending a spaceship to Mars. And the interviewer wanted to know why.”

“So do I,” said Ben. “People on Earth could use the money.”

“That’s for sure,” I said. “But, besides that, what bothered me was that the NASA scientist said we might find life there, because we might find water there with the elements essential to life as we know it. So I wondered about life as we don’t know it.”

And Beatrice moved a little closer to me and didn’t say another word about tomatoes. So, then, I was very happy that she knew my moods so well, and I was very happy that Ben had spoken up to let me speak my mood, showing once more that his

attention exceeds his signs. And now he was scowling down to ground as his brother gazed off into space.

“Now that’s what I call consideration of diversity,” he said. “Just because a creature doesn’t need oxygen or isn’t made of carbon doesn’t mean it doesn’t have any feelings. And just because it doesn’t cry doesn’t mean it has no feelings either.”

“You’re some hot tomato,” I said to Beatrice, with a hug.

“Now you’re picking on me,” she replied, with a snuggle.

And a vendor in the park was selling Frisbees. So we bought one, dubbed it a flying saucer, and threw it around awhile, dropping it often, to Earth. And, a week later, Ben was back at his bank, and Quincy was again immersed in oil, and Beatrice and I were above the Pacific, flying to China.



## Chapter 17

### The Good Earth

In Beijing, Beatrice and I found our quarters comfortable. Beatrice seemed to me to feel my pleasure in returning to this old home of mine, and she seemed to me to feel at home herself. Our Chinese house-staff moved around us with ancient grace not often on her side of the seas. And she felt their grace quickly and soon moved in accord.

Our official advice, from the State Department sinologists, was to stay in our quarters until we'd met Mao. But, our second day in Beijing, we borrowed bicycles from our house-staff and toiled where our whims took us, stopping to drink tea as we wished and to look more closely at anything that caught our attention. I felt a little ashamed of leaving Beatrice for my greeting from Mao on our third day there, but Mao made me feel a little better about that. His grace to us proved perfectly Chinese.

He seemed to know me from before. I presented him with a little green paperback copy of the *Dao De Jing*, and he presented to me a little red paperback copy of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*. I invited him to Texas, and he invited me and Beatrice to travel China, wherever we wished. He promised freedom and state protection for us in any of our travels there. And I took him at his word. And he kept it.

And that was pretty much the end of my official duty there. I wasn't there to take him to task for what he was doing to the Chinese people in the name of communism. So Beatrice and I spent most of our time there visited tiny villages and temples.

We visited the Shaolin Monastery, and we visited villages built of stones carried by hand from the great wall, leaving gaps and rubble for many of its four-thousand miles but leaving much of it both historic and beautiful.

"I wish the Berlin wall would fall so gracefully," said Beatrice.

"No Ozymandius am I," I begged, for hope.

"I know," she answered.

So, only our being there with my Ambassador rank was the play of the card, and so I didn't meet with Mao again until I had to leave again, and that was fine. Chinese leadership, because the Chinese have always admitted that they can't easily lead hundreds of millions of people, isn't corrupt in the sense that United States leadership is corrupt. So Chinese revolutionaries come and go, while most of their people remain the same. So Chinese leadership isn't as much corruption as acceptance of power. That is, ordinarily, it isn't as much greed as acceptance. Leaders can take, and so they do. The concept is very Chinese. It's very Daoist.

And Mao understood that. So his cultural revolution was mainly a route to a seat for himself where he could take as many first steps on journeys of a thousand miles as the others around him would and could permit. He was grateful for the step I'd taken, gaining his nation the name-recognition that was simply fair, and he was grateful for the economic-aid that could follow that. So he followed that step by opening as many doors as he could for other appropriately following steps. He was pleased to have us as guests, and there was nothing more that I could do.

So, after Dickey's paranoia stepped him out of his Presidency, I asked his successor to have me back for another line on my résumé and a closer focus on the state of the project I shared with Mikhail. So Gerald appointed me Director of Central Intelligence. And that brought me back to America.

"So you're going to be a spy," said Mao, in my second and final meeting with him. "Good. You seem to me to be a quiet man."

On inauguration day, when Dicky succeeded Linden, I was the only Republican to see Linden off when he flew back to Dallas from Dulles. But, when Gerald replaced Dicky, I was in China and had never met Gerald, despite all my Republican party ties and responsibilities. So, before succeeding Dicky's Maryland misappropriator Vice President, Gerald had been a man too quiet even to meet me. But, because whoever succeeded Dicky's mess couldn't be reelected, it didn't much matter to our mission. So my learning to like Gerald was a bit of a bonus.

When I first met him, on my return from China, as I sat in a Chinese chair in front of his desk in the Oval office, he fed me doughnuts he said he'd had flown in from the shop of a friend of his in Grand Rapids.

"Perks of the office," he said.

But, looking into his football-player face, I had a distinct impression that no special trip was made for that. He had a sense of irony that perfectly matched his big grin, and later I met the doughnut-maker, who was black. But that wasn't why what he said next didn't surprise me much.

"I'm going to pardon Dicky," he said. "That's a perk of the office I can't deny, or an honor to the office I have to accept, and it's diplomatically essential to continuing what he and you and Klingmonger have done. Klingmonger told me you helped him

conceptualize the China-card, and that's why I'm telling you what I'm going to do about Dicky, and why I accepted your request to direct central intelligence. And I'm also appointing Klingmonger Secretary of State. So you can keep working well together."

I had known my stature, in the party and now internationally, would have Gerald pass my request to Klingmonger for consideration, and I had known Klingmonger would tell Gerald enough of the story to produce the outcome Gerald explained in this first meeting between him and me. But what he said next surprised me a little.

"I'm a quiet man," he said. "I'm a team player, and I know how to delegate authority and how to accept advice from my superiors in expertise, regardless of their rank. So I'm not going to meddle much in what you and Klingmonger do. But I think we need to devote some resources to Afghanistan. I think we have a powder-keg there."

"I agree," I said. "What's your view?"

"Dumping the monarchy," he said, "was a stroke of genius, and not the doing as much as how it was done, fomenting rumors of a coup to prompt removal of the batteries from all the tanks in the country, except the palace guard brigade while the king was on vacation in Italy, and then using those twelve tanks to take over the country. It's a good thing so few Americans can spell Afghanistan, or someone might have reported in the media that we trained the commander of that brigade here, in the good old U.S.A."

"I thought that was kind of tidy myself," I said.

And, at that, he looked at me with that big grin, and then he laughed out loud.

"And nobody was hurt, either," he continued, "although I heard one of the tanks put a pretty big hole in the bedroom wall of the prince we spread the rumors about, and I heard his house was

about two blocks from our embassy. I heard one Afghan soldier shot a foot of his own, but I suspect that that's only a silly rumor. But, anyway, now things seem to me to be backfiring there. And the Afghans I've met seem wonderfully gracious."

"No question in my mind," I said. "Things are backfiring, and not for the people. Have you eaten the bread they bake there, in their little stone ovens hewn beneath their shops? It's as rich as these wonderful Grand Rapids donuts, maybe more!"

"Yes," said Gerald. "And I didn't choose my words 'powder keg' and 'backfiring' lightly. Afghanistan is as hard to change as China, a circumstance I have no doubt you understand. But, at the same time, Afghanistan is more volatile or explosive, less civilized, more wild. Most Afghans didn't much care that they had a monarchy, and they care less who dumped it. So what we've done with our coup is to open an inroad for Soviet influence. We were providing military training-aid, but mainly to train ourselves. And you know I don't mean mainly for military coups. I hope."

"To see how the trainees compare their equipment to ours," I said.

"Exactly," said Gerald. "And their equipment is nearly all Soviet, because the Soviets have been providing them military materiel-aid for years, while we've been restricting our aid to that training. Afghans are quite material people, and now Soviet influence dominates their government, the government we let happen with our coup."

"And that hotbed is between oil and the Indian subcontinent," I said. "As far as I can see and understand what you're saying, or what I hear you saying. And I hear you suggesting you have a solution, an answer in which all can work."

"I knew you'd see the signifying fact," replied Gerald. "So that's why I'm asking you to work with Klingmonger. You're the expert, and Klingmonger understands that."

I felt my plate already too full, but I did see the significance, beyond oil to imperialism.

England and France had figured out that, because military and economic aid would be cheaper than being the military and the economy of countries, they could more efficiently and effectively serve their commercial interests by soliciting support from governments to commercialize their countries, than by being their governments and paying all the overhead inherent in that from fighting the wars to feeding the poor, colonialism had nearly ended.

So colonialism had become archaic. That is, the French had relinquished Egypt, and the British had relinquished Canaan, and England had acquiesced at last to Gandhi's civil disobedience, etc. So it was a new world order.

Except that the Soviet gerontocracy didn't know it. And, clear as daylight, Gerald was right about one thing. Afghanistan was a political fireworks-display, and it had been since before the Afghans built their own great wall, to keep out Genghis Khan. Selling antique firearms remained a major source of revenue in Kabul, and tribes and other factions used antique firearms otherwise, to shoot anyone inhospitable, almost as a hobby. The Viet Cong guerillas had organized themselves for a purpose, but Afghans seldom sought either organization or purpose.

They were killing mainly for reasons westerners watch movies, for hope of a less boring world. And that attitude is how, on one of his pointless boondoggles, Conundrum could buy a Khyber rifle there. But I don't know why he did.

"What do you think?" I asked Klingmonger, calling on him at Foggy Bottom to congratulate him on his promotion.

And I was pleased to note that he didn't call my appointment a promotion, though he did say he welcomed the

opportunity to work more closely with me, and then he considered the Afghanistan question with a few seconds of his finger-pressing, and then he dropped his fat right hand to his desk.

“Piece of cake,” he assessed. “Wait until the Soviets escalate their interests to an imperialist level. Then boost the quagmire factor. Make it their Vietnam.”

One thing nice about working with intelligent people is that all you have to do to get them to do the right thing is to present the facts, unless they have a private interest in doing the wrong thing.

But, then, having such interests isn’t intelligent.

“Just don’t tell me what you’re doing,” said Klingmonger. “I’ll see it, anyway.”

I felt the same way, since a main interest of mine was to focus on Mikhail’s position, and I thought of Afghanistan as a distraction. But I also saw the situation as a serendipitous strengthening of our hand against the hardliners, if we could make them look like fools in a nation where poppies were the main cash-crop, where children didn’t wear diapers, so they could fertilize the land. And I also saw that doing that would be easy in a land whose people played football on horseback, using a decapitated calf as the ball. So I just had to use some of our Fits assassination tactics to create a little catalyst. But this time I did it quite overtly. I sent it straight to Congress.

I asked Linden to find me a drunken hardly conscionable congressman with some bravado and a little influence in appropriations and intelligence, and he found me a Texas Democrat named Charlie who perfectly fit the bill, and with maybe more bravado than we needed.

Charlie loved the idea. So, taking Linden’s suggestion as a cause of his own, he never had to meet with me. He pushed for appropriations for the CIA to do the job and traveled to

Afghanistan to try to oversee. So all I had to do was make sure my CIA friends knew what I wanted. And the rest is history.

And that was about it for Gerald's Presidency, all the major history of it. He pardoned Dicky and strengthened the positions of me and Klingmonger to keep the China-card face-up on the table. And he quarterbacked the play to turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam. And he imported wonderful doughnuts to the White House.

Me, however, I had to put out a couple of less international fires during Gerald's presidency. Because I'd been working closely with the agency most of that life, I didn't do much within the CIA in that short official-time as Director of Central Intelligence. So I took some time to settle some internal and personal dust, with a mixture of emotions.

First was getting rid of Jimmy Huffa, and that was essential to guaranteeing Gerald's successor. Fits Jr's reputation was still the strongest factor in the popularity of the Democrat party, and we had decided on another Jimmy to succeed Gerald. But, because Theresa had decided that on her own, I shouldn't say "we".

I just went along, beginning in a diner in Detroit, near the river and near the Renaissance Center, the site of Mikey's final speech this trip. To be able to discuss our more plainly eternal situation, we met without Raymond or her mother, but the meeting wasn't entirely formal. Theresa, although it was Saturday, ate a chocolate sundae while I ate a banana split.

"Norma'd feel at home here," said Theresa.

"Yeah," I said. "How have you been doing?"

"Fine," she said. "But I miss Pine Level, and I have an idea."

And she licked some ice-cream from her spoon with her lips and smiled looking at me while she did it. So I knew from that



that, whatever idea she was about to tell me, it would have to come about in fact. And her gaze was clear and bright and certain with no space there for doubt. It was plainly down to Earth.

“A Georgia peanut-farmer,” she said. “You need a President to fill in between that Grand Rapids boy and you. How about a Georgia peanut-farmer?”

And I knew better than to suggest that she might be out of her mind.

“I trust you have someone in mind,” I said, shaking my head.

“Jimmy,” she said. “Everybody calls him Jimmy, and I’m not sure he knows his name is James. After Fits Jr.’s and Linden’s and Dicky’s arrogance, that seems to me to be appropriate, to fit some bills long overdue.”

“Yes,” I answered. “That’s exactly what we need to follow Gerald.”

“Not only that,” she added, “but his mother loves him, and he and his wife love each other. He has a brother who drinks too much beer, but I don’t think many Earthlings will hold that against him, or against his brother.”

“How about his more public résumé?” I asked.

“Governor of Georgia,” she answered.

“That’s enough,” I replied.

“It’s more than enough,” she said. “I think it’s time to blow the diehard-segregationist southern-Democrats out of the water, and that should help Republicans as well. I’m still sick of how that Fits Jr. creep slided into the Presidency by hooking himself to Oliver’s coattails, and I’m still sicker of the southern Democrats, George Wallace, Lester Maddox, others. Hypocrisy still keeps their bigotry in their party.

“And now the cancer’s spreading to the party of Lincoln. That scumbag Strom Thurmond jumped ship like a rat, thinking

Fits Jr. and Linden's letting the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act slide through congress on Birmingham's and Selma's momentum were sinking his party's segregationist platform. Not much he can do by himself, since he's too stupid to have seen through his own leaders' hypocrisy, but others are following him. Already, Republicans have inherited the southern Democrats' reputation, and somewhat rightly so. Maybe Jimmy can inspire Democrats to sincerity, and Republicans will have to catch back up."

All that she said, over that chocolate sundae, chewing the cherry and the crushed nuts and stirring the whipped cream into the chocolate, as I saw the no-denyng in her onyx eyes. Theresa had wished to vote for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but the southern-Democrats and other segregationists had denied her that right through all his elected terms, but now it was her turn. And so her candidate would preside.

He could preside for just one term. But it would be for some grand accomplishments of which Theresa would be proud. Earth is a wonderful place for conversation, if its inhabitants would just take the time to listen to each other.

But there was no talking to that other Jimmy. He was too busy huffing, over how important he'd become by promising a better life to workers and getting paid for it, in the momentum of Fits Jr.'s father. He was now president of the union Sugar Fits had founded, and he'd huffed up his ego to the point where he thought he might soon be President of the United States. That was absurd, but he could be a spoiler, and he tried.

But our machine was in motion. Linden, who never did like Fits Jr., threw his influence for our candidate wherever he could, and Theresa still had her NAACP ties and was now working as a secretary to a Michigan Congressman, in the more-and-more-

motivating motor city, now more integrated than Manhattan. We knew we could do it, had the technology and hoped to rebuild, and had taken the steps.

But Georgia Jimmy wasn't quite a shoe-in. The southern Democrats considered him naïve but harmless, and they thought they could control him after he moved into the Whitehouse. But the Sugar Fits Democrats were depending more now on Huffa's labor-union and other such scams to win the vote. And, for the black vote, they were depending mostly on the Fits Jr. momentum. So, to keep some motes from eyes, we had to work to balance that.

But Huffa, having no campaign orders outside his ego, scrambled a plan of his own. He called on Jimmy, desecrating the quiet front-porch of Jimmy's mother's home outside Plains, Georgia. And there he offered Jimmy union-support, if Jimmy would place him second on the ticket, to be his Vice President.

Of course Georgia Jimmy, looking across the peanut fields, didn't answer. His only reply was to escort Huffa to his waiting limousine. But we didn't know what Huffa might do next.

"They call me a peanut-brain," said our Jimmy at a dinner-party in Atlanta, when another union-leader said he'd heard of such consideration. "But that guy's a cashew."

And I overheard that. Beatrice and I shared that dinner. So I buttonholed Jimmy after.

"Has he tried to contact you?" I asked.

"He came to my mother's home," Jimmy answered.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll see if I can do something."

"This is getting hard to bear," said Beatrice in our sharing.

Huffa huffed himself into extreme high blood-pressure when he heard what Jimmy had said about him to his cohort, and he decided to resort to his old tactics. And I, supposing that, because of his part in it, Huffa would never mention our meeting

about Remington Bosworth, but that was an underestimate of his audacity. His poker being nearly as bad as his ethics, he tried to bluff me.

Yet, though I didn't expect that, his means surprised me more than his intention.

He called Langley and got through to me by making absurd suggestions. Lev told me he'd once made his way to K. Buggen Goober' office at FBI headquarters by suggesting that he knew something about the relationship between the Cuban missile crisis and the Fitts Jr. assassination. And Huffa made a similar trip to me by telephone.

"This is Huffa," he said, when I answered the phone. "El Dorado, Wednesday, 2:00 p.m. You know I know something. Be there."

And then he hung up. And I had an intense urge to call Jimmy to ask him exactly how he felt about cashews. But then I thought through this whole part of the situation, which now extended over more than a decade, and I decided to make the meeting.

Again, 2:00 p.m., Wednesday, the club was closed, and Huffa sat drinking alone. The El Dorado hardly glittered now, looking as it had those years ago, but more worn. No musical instruments were on the bandstand. The club had become just another crummy bar. But again its front door wasn't locked. So I slipped in and sat at his table. And I waited for him to speak..

"You can get me on the ticket," opened Huffa. "I know a CIA director has connections bigger than his party, and I know that Republican klutz can't win. So, if you get me on the ticket, I'll be Vice President. If you don't, you won't be anything."

"Are you threatening to kill me?" I asked.

"I'm threatening to rat you out!" He answered.

So I thought the situation through again.

Maybe he was bluffing, and maybe not. But, either way, the world had had way far too much of his huffing. And, like Fits Jr., he was now out of control, and sooner or later he'd make himself more dangerous than he'd proven himself working his way up through his corrupt and often murderous concerns. So best was to get it done, I thought. And so I did, myself. Without Theresa.

"Listen," I said. "You have a choice. You may remember you told me that trash is a matter of opinion, relative to appropriateness, to being out of place."

"What's your point?" he asked, sloshing his dregs as he had those years before.

"My point is that my opinion is that you're trash. My opinion is that, as soon as I walk out that door, you'll follow me out and walk around back and climb into the dumpster with the trash waiting there. My opinion is that a trash truck will arrive a few minutes later, pick you up with that other trash, dump you in with some more, and crush you down, until you're dead. Then it'll take you to your rightful place."

"I didn't know you had such a great sense of humor," snuffed Huffa.

But, as quickly as he said it, a drop of sweat appeared on the bottom of his chin, and his drinking hand now sloshed the dregs in his glass as his will seemed to me not a factor. In a few seconds, his whole face was wet with sweat, and the glass collapsed in the hand holding it, and the hand began to bleed. So the blood mixed with spilled scotch.

"Damn!" he said, his voice now shaking too. "I hate it when that happens."

"Remember," I replied. "As soon as I walk out that door. If you wait any longer, you'll have some other guests, and they won't be as nice to you. And also remember that you have a family, and know that life doesn't stop here for anyone, except

you. You're right in your opinion that I have some connections. Some were your friends."

And, though he didn't speak again, I bade farewell.

I was bluffing, and Huffa is dead, and I went on to more important things. But that was not my favorite way to be, and I learned from it how humans shake when they're ashamed, and I don't mean Huffa's fear. I mean my shame.

I didn't feel I could face Beatrice that day, and so I checked into a hotel and drove to Ben's apartment, after I drove far enough into the Mohave Desert to switch in isolation the license plates on the rental-car, back to the rental-car company's.

"Dad!" said Ben at his door. "What a surprise!"

After the hugging, he kept smiling, staring at me.

"I can't believe it," he said, but then, "Oh, crap."

"Crap, what?" I asked. "What did you forget?"

"I forgot to tell you Quincy's got a problem."

"Oh, crap," I couldn't help but say. "What kind of problem?"

"Oh, no big deal," said Ben. "He was arrested, for drunk driving."

I looked at my youngest son in wonder and couldn't think of a thing to say.

"I'm sorry, Dad," he said. "I didn't mean its no big deal. I only meant to say he's alright. But he wants to see you and didn't know where you were and called here. He asked me if I knew where you were. As if you'd ever be here. But you are here. I'll be darned."

And then he laughed.

"Sorry," he said. "I couldn't help it."

"Can I use your phone?" I said, laughing because I couldn't help it either.

“Sure,” he answered, tossing me a cordless one from the bar-window to the kitchen.

“Where’s Chet?” I asked, as I pushed the button with Quincy’s name beside it.

“He’s at work,” Ben answered. “He doesn’t have bankers’ hours, like I do.”

“Thanks for calling, Dad,” said Quincy, when he answered the phone and heard my voice. “It’s no big deal, but I’d like to talk with you about it, if you can find the time. Of course I’ll understand if you’re too busy. Where are you?”

So I guessed he must have guessed that either his mom or Ben had told me.

“I’m at Ben’s,” I said, but I started laughing again, or something like it.

“I’m glad you find it funny,” said Quincy. “What are you doing at Ben’s?”

“I don’t find it funny,” I said, but I was laughing harder now, and Ben was looking at me like I’d at last lost it.

“Okay,” I said, getting as serious as a CIA director who had just killed Jimmy Huffa. “Where are you? In Houston?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Tomorrow soon enough?”

“Sure,” he said. “Thanks, Dad.”

Then, gesturing to Ben, that I was going to use the phone again, I pushed the button on it saying it was for his mom, and she answered it before its second ring.

“I’m going to stop in Houston on my way home,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “You’d better straighten that boy out. Where are you now?”

“I’m at Ben’s,” I said.

“What are you doing at Ben’s?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” I said, stopping myself from laughing again. “I’ll bore you with some of it when I get home. My meeting here went as I expected, and I just thought I’d stop and see the son of my right hand.”

“Well,” she said. “Don’t you give your other son the back of any hand.”

“I won’t,” I said. “I love you.”



## Chapter 18

### Huckleberry Finn

I had dinner that night with Ben and Chet in their apartment, and all of us did a lot of laughing, and Ben did all the cooking. But, at the hotel, the Ambassador, where Dicky had killed Robert Fits, and I had once seen Nancy Wilson sing, I checked WMN for news of Huffa and found nothing yet, then or the next morning. And neither did I in the newspapers at the rental car company at the airport or in any of the papers on the plane to Houston. So, if anyone missed Huffa, no one was admitting it, at least not publicly. So I shifted my focus to Quincy.

He had a big bachelor-condo-unit in a central-city high-rise, a unit into which Ben's and Chet's apartment could fit several times. And, answering the door and asking me to come in, he opened the door wide with his left hand while waving me in with his right. That gesture had become a habit for him and always made me imagine a cowboy hat in his waving hand. My sons were very different from each other. And each was great in his own way.

Then, as I plopped down on a big white modern sofa in the glare of the sun through the big windows and peered out into nothing but blue sky, Quincy picked up a newspaper from the coffee-table and stuffed it into a trashcan beside some bookshelves. But, instead of wondering whether the paper said anything of

Huffa, my thought was that the big white trashcan didn't look like any other trashcan I'd seen. And my next thought was that nevertheless it was adequate for hiding any news of Huffa.

"Want a drink, Dad?" asked Quincy. "Whoops. Not the right question."

"Alright," I said. "Tell me the story. I see you're up for it. But I'd like a beer."

Then Quincy looked at me much as Ben had while I was laughing on his telephone. But he went to his kitchen, which also had a window to the living room with barstools at it, and opened a bottle of Budweiser and set it on the window counter, not looking at what he was doing. And then he returned through the door to the living room, moved the beer to the coffee table and returned to the kitchen, and brought another beer for himself. And then he sat in a big white chair matching the sofa. And then he talked.

"I was drunk. I was driving. I was speeding. The police stopped me. I was alone and bailed myself out with a credit-card, after the four hours the police said it takes to get sober. I took a taxi home, because they impounded the car, and I tried to call you in the morning. Mom said you were in L.A. I called my brother."

"Anything else?" I asked. "You didn't hurt anyone?"

"No," he said. "I didn't hurt anybody."

"Is it going to happen again?"

"No," he said. "It isn't."

"Sounds simple," I said. "Why did you need so much to talk to me?"

"Great expectations," said Quincy. "I want to be part of what you're doing."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Twice, a problem. Once, a fluke."

But he didn't seem to me to take that answer as final, and so I went on.

“Can I ask you another question?” I asked.

“It’s what I hope you’re here for,” he answered.

“Whatever happened to that pretty girl Laura, the one you introduced us to at Harvard. We thought you were in love, and your mom was ready to start knitting booties and increasing our investment in photo-albums. I remember your mom asking you about her a few times later, but your answers were short. That’s years ago now, all of it, I guess. So I guess we gave up. What happened?”

“She went back to Midland. She’s the librarian for the high school now.”

“So you know what happened to her. I want to know more about you.”

“Oh, I guess I took your advice to heart,” he said. “Well, it wasn’t your advice. It was advice you said a friend of yours gave you, to get your feet wet before getting married. Okay, alright, I see your point, in this.”

“What point?” I asked.

“You got your feet wet in the Pacific Ocean. I got mine wet in a drunk-tank.”

“That wasn’t my point,” I said. “But I’m very happy that it’s yours.”

“Was that a Skull and Bones friend?” asked Quincy.  
“Have I met him?”

“No,” I said. “Lev is far beyond Skull and Bones and hard to find from time to time. I guess you might meet him someday, if he thinks it’ll do you some good. He advises me on how to behave in what many call polite society. I mean how to tread lightly among bigots and hypocrites. Thank God and your mom that you’re not one of those. Anyway, I’m glad we had this conversation. You’ll be alright. You are alright.”

“I’m going to call her,” he said. “Laura.”

“Good,” I said. “That’ll please your mother.”

And Quincy knew it pleased me too, and it eased my facing Beatrice, after what I’d done.

After a couple of days Huffa’s family and business accomplices admitted publicly that they didn’t know where in hell he was. The FBI made a serious search for him, to the extent of once visiting the El Dorado, but of course he wasn’t there. And they didn’t check the dump.

So only I on Earth ever knew what I’d done.

But few knew much about any of this. And the nation hadn’t forgiven the Republican party for Dicky’s doofusness. So Gerald was out, and Georgia Jimmy was in, and few would see the significance of that, either. And Jimmy was a genuine gentleman. And Roselyn was a genuine lady.

So, though their bumping me out of Langley was a mistake, I understand. Jimmy replaced me with an Annapolis buddy of his, an admiral who simply didn’t understand conversion, as neither do I on my best days. But, worse, the admiral tried to carry Jimmy’s ideals into the CIA, and the old operatives there bridled as they had at Fits Jr., but with the additional notion that an admiral should know better. Fits Jr. had tried to tell them how to do their job, but the admiral was trying to tell them how to feel about their job. They were soldiers following orders, and the one freedom a soldier has is that he isn’t paid to feel. So they particularly resented that coming from an admiral.

I, however, admired Jimmy’s and Roselyn’s ideals, which they dauntlessly tried to actualize through their Presidency, at the cost of their having no second term, as I knew they would. So part of why I asked Linden to do all he could to get them in was to actualize that idealism. And part was that they’d surely be out in time for Mikhail and me to move.

Jimmy's and Rosalyn's main ideal was feminism, and it was also their main road out of their presidency. A lot of people said Jimmy was another Fitts Jr., and that helped much in his winning of their Presidency, as my John Wayne impersonation helped me into mine. But claiming Jimmy was like Fitts Jr. was stupider than most falsehoods, being serendipitously false but grotesquely false. Jimmy got into a little trouble by saying in an interview for *Playboy* magazine that he had committed adultery in his heart. But Rosalyn was always in his heart, and together they did more for women's rights than has any other Presidency. I don't know if they knew the economics, but they went ahead.

How feminism cost Jimmy and Rosalyn a second term of Presidency is basic economics, supply and demand. Since the unemployment rate is based not on how many people are not working but on how many people are both not working and seeking to, encouraging women's confidence to seek employment increased the unemployment rate. And next, by finding jobs, women were able to buy more, demanding products they hadn't been able to buy before, and more production in general. So a result of all that was temporary pain.

Of course manufacturers couldn't catch up immediately, either for what the women most wanted or for the more generally desired products. So, as economists like myself basically say it does, the lagging of supply behind demand increased prices, what we call inflation. Thus, we had stagflation, inflation increasing at the same time as unemployment, a situation with no precedent, ever in history. And another of Jimmy's ideals didn't help the United States' economy much either. He worked with his heart for the Holy Land.

By Jimmy's diplomacy, successors of Ben-Gurion and Nasser, successors of the leaders who had inherited Egypt and Canaan from the French and the British, ultimately by way of the

rationality of ending colonial imperialism, mainly for economic reasons, met at Camp David.

The name of the site, reminding everyone directly participating there of events and persons important to the history of strife in that region of Earth, was of course symbolic. Christian scripture says the Israelite King David was a direct ancestor of Jesus' Earth father, and Zionists initiated the war of terror at the King David Hotel, killing 92 British and Palestinian Canaanites, many of them nurses. And Camp David was in a land named Mary.

So both the site and the participants reminded any reasonably attentive person of the long and hard history of the situation.

Representing Judaism at the meeting was the founder of the organization that had bombed that hotel, and now he was Prime Minister of Israel. And representing Islam was the President of the nation that had enslaved Israel, kicking the whole thing off. And Jimmy was a Christian, and one of the few persons I've known to live up to the claim. So people all around Earth called it a historic meeting. That's for sure.

Nothing ever came of it but words. But that meeting's words are carried now as banners, high memories of pretensions of the persons present. Menachem Begin, by then the Israeli Prime Minister, continued his Zionism in the face of plain sense and never lost a beat in his regression toward what the *Torah* calls the wars of Canaan. Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian President, died in a hail of bullets from people calling themselves Muslims thinking he had spoken too politely with that old Israeli terrorist. And Jimmy lost his and Rosalyn's presidency, while no American denied that he was a nice guy. So all are martyrs to the cause of peace on Earth or to their separate sense of life. As all Earthlings have been, millennium after millennium, day after day.

But many thought the economic woes of Jimmy's Presidency weren't because of that failure of diplomacy in the Middle East but because of his inability to control OPEC, the Organization of the Oil-Exporting Countries, and they were partly right. That is, most citizens of the United States neither knew nor cared enough to try to think of whence the economic woes had risen, but they knew they didn't have a job or that bread was costing much and that Ronny'd been in movies. So they dumped Jimmy to throw their economic prospects into bed with Bonzo.

So, somewhat quietly on the loud but soft coattails of Ronny, when we had Mikhail where he needed him to be to finish his part of our job, I became Vice President. So the last note before the finale was letting Ronny have the nominal Presidency, leaving me the possibility of sixteen years of *de facto* presidency and sixteen for our sons, were we to need that much more time. It was a forty-year symphony Mikhail and I and Skull and Bones had orchestrated well, within the peace and patience of Beatrice and our other friends, and we finished it excellently also, but not with no glitches, here and there.

The campaign went exactly as the party had planned it. Ronny and I ran against each other in the primaries, to give my résumé more popular recognition. I expressed disagreement with Ronny's economics, to the extent of calling his views voodoo economics, thinking of New Orleans. And then we made a public pretention of reconciliation.

The deal was to let Ronny run for President with me as his running-mate for votes from people who disagreed with him, to broaden our voter base as Fits Jr. did with Linden in the sixties.

And then the Presidency ran as we'd planned it, with me taking direct responsibility for the National Security Council, assuming *de facto* the responsibilities Klingmonger'd had officially had for Dicky. We put Texas friends of ours and others

of our choosing into powerful staff positions, and Ronny slept about twelve hours a night and in many of the meetings he attended. He left Bonzo's bedtime for little beyond making speeches.

So that was Ronny's main job. He was both an actor and somewhat sincere. So everyone loved him.

Lev, meanwhile, spent a summer traveling around the United States working on carnival rides. He had long wondered how Gypsies lived, and he had an affection for carousels, for horses going merrily around. So he put the two together for some fun, and he told me about it. And, at one fair, he saw Ronny deliver a speech.

"It was in Springfield," Lev said, "at the Illinois State Fair. I thought it was neat, because Springfield claims to be Lincoln's birthplace. You know, I should have come and tried to call on Lincoln while I was alive. He was a great spirit, a genuine poet.

"Anyway, Ronny spoke to a grandstand full of people, full of Illinois farmers. He arrived in a limousine, but he spoke surrounded by bails of hay, and he took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves before he opened his mouth. And then he told a joke.

"A traveling salesman,' he said, 'was traveling through this great state of Illinois, at 55 miles per hour, as is the law.'

"He pronounced that last phrase loudly, because a movement was on then to increase this nation's speed limit beyond what Jimmy's congress had set after the OPEC situation in the seventies. I prefer sledges and sleighs and troikas, myself. But that's just me.

"And,' Ronny said, 'the salesman saw a chicken in the road in front of him, not trying to cross the road but running down it in front of the salesman's car. And, as the salesman caught up with the chicken, the chicken speeded up.



“So the salesman speeded up. Forgetting the law, he followed the chicken. And again the chicken speeded up, and again the salesman speeded up. Then the chicken turned off the main road, onto a dusty side-road.

“The salesman slammed on his brakes and turned down the side-road to follow the chicken, but the chicken was now out of his sight, over a hill. After driving over the hill, the salesman didn’t see the chicken, but he saw a little house with paint flaking off it, and a man rocking on the front porch. And, his thumbs in the straps of his bib-overalls, the man was looking down the road in the direction in which the chicken had run.

“So the salesman stopped, parking his car in the farmer’s dusty drive, and rolled down his window and asked the farmer if he’d seen a chicken running past there at about 75 miles per hour, and the farmer said he had indeed seen it.

““Yup,” said the farmer. "It’s one of mine."

““One of yours?" the salesman answered. "Well, are my eyes playing tricks on me, or did that chicken have three legs?"

““Yup,” said the Farmer. "I breed ‘em that way."

““Why?" the salesman felt compelled to ask.

““Because," said the Farmer. "Ma likes the leg. The boy likes the leg. And I like the leg. I had to."

““Well, my goodness," the salesman asked. "That’s amazing. How do those legs taste?"

““I don’t rightly know," the farmer answered. "I haven’t been able to catch one yet."

“And,” said Lev, “After Ronny told that joke, he told that grandstand full of farmers that he was going to cut off their crop-subsidies, and the farmers rose to their feet and applauded and shouted as though they were at a rock-concert.

“I saw you a few weeks later,” Lev told me then, before I thought of something to say about Ronny’s joke, “at the Oklahoma State Fair, one morning before the fair opened for the day. We, my carnie friends and I, heard somehow that you were coming, and a game-agent called Jimmy the Jag had word that you were going to visit his basketball-joint. I know you remember, but I’ll tell you how it looked to us.

“Jimmy wandered all over the midway looking for a stuffed elephant to give you when you shot and made your basket, and he knew you’d make it because anybody could. The basket was so close to the counter that kindergarteners could. They made their money by giving out cheap prizes. The prizes cost less than the price to play.

“Carnies call games like that buildups. They sucker you into playing more by letting you trade the cheap prize in for less-cheap prizes, as you pay and play more until you have something you can brag about at home, but Jimmy the Jag just wished you’d make one shot. He just wanted to give you the huge stuffed elephant he’d found.

“So there we all were. I was sitting on the counter of a balloon-dart joint a friend of mine operated, and your secret service was sitting in a little train for taking people around the midway. In a panama hat, the carnival-owner led you into the roped-off area they’d arranged and up to Jimmy’s joint, and Jimmy handed you a ball. And you missed four in a row.

“I don’t know what your problem was, because I know how good you are at baseball and horseshoes, but you were embarrassing Jimmy, and that wasn’t easy to do. The word ‘jag’ is carnie jargon for people who have no conscience. And Jimmy had earned that name.

“So, when, on your fifth shot, at last you made a basket, Jimmy left the elephant where he’d draped it over his counter. He

reached up the wall, past the cheapest prizes, but not to the top row. He grabbed a Yosemite Sam doll and handed it to you, without a smile but with a grin. And your grin, as you turned to the television cameras, was your second expression there.

“And, a few yards away, your third was your second frown there, as you handed the Yosemite Sam doll to the carnival-owner, and I never told you about this, because it bothered me. What on Earth were you thinking about? What were you up to there and then?”

“I was up to the Vice Presidency,” I said. “When you’re Vice President, you behave as a Vice President. When I’m President, I’ll make some regulation-range basketball-shots on TV for you.”

But Ronny didn’t do subterfuge. He was called the great communicator more because he said what he thought than because of how he said it. And he didn’t even try to conceal his contempt for how I did his job, as he didn’t practice the pretensions now taught in college communication classes, but rather persuaded by sincerity.

That that was unique is ridiculous, and indicates our problem. Earthlings called it charisma, but it was sincerity, and horribly rare. Hitler was also charismatic, and sincere while his horror was far worse than silly. Hitler’s charisma killed millions in his lifetime and more by his inspiration later. Ronny’s died in his sleep.

And it needed to. Ronny, like Hitler, was a charmer. But, similarly, he called pacifists grass-eating know-nothings. I call that what humans call Hectoring, and it was Ronny’s main weakness as it was Achilles’, as it is of all people who treat war or anything else as though it were a valid source of private pride.

Mikhail, with that blotch on his head, had hardly any charisma. He made his way into position by subterfuge, by selectively agreeing with people whose presence he could hardly bear. But he did make his way into position, exactly as he'd planned he would, and right on time. That domino-theory of his worked well.

Brezhnev died two years into Ronny's Presidency. Andropov assumed Brezhnev's position, by promotion from his directorship of the KGB, and dropped off two years after that. So, by the end of my first term as Vice President of the United States, Mikhail was President of the Soviet Union. What a coincidence.

I won't bore you with the details of how we shuffled drugs and weapons to get the hostages out of Iran and the Sandinistas out of Nicaragua, but I will tell you that the means were better than alternative means and that the end was best for all, and I wonder how baby-boomers didn't see how those means were necessary.

Why didn't they see that the means were better than their alternatives, and why didn't they see that the lieutenant-colonel and the admiral and the civilian nominally in charge of the National Security Council fell from power for what I did, while the press was reporting that I was over all in charge?

The answer is that you, the people of the United States of America, form your opinions without paying attention. You insist, in your laziness, despite your freedom for education, that everyone has a right to his opinion, and you let democracy go to hell because thinking you're right is more important to you than being right.

And, meanwhile, I and my friends, who had no interest other than common decency and needed nothing from anyone, tried to help you clean your mess by methods always available to anyone.

We might have done more this trip, but the rules were that we couldn't stay longer than one ordinary life of yours. We can

come back for other trips, if we leave you a generation of your ordinary own to develop what we try to show you. But the best I could do, after you voted me out of your Presidency, was to hand you over to my sons, to do their best as well.

So I began my Presidency with that in mind.

On my inauguration day, after the last playing of “Hail to the Chief” as though I or anyone could lead a nation, while my darling Earth-wife was tending to our private quarters where we’d sleep in your Whitehouse, I called my Earth-sons to my Earth-office, yours shaped much like Arthur’s table. Sitting behind my desk, as my sons sat before it in French provincial chairs, chairs older than the Lady Liberty in New York Harbor, I thought of the French and the British, and the Italians and the Irish. And I thought of the Israelis and the Palestinians and the gangs of New York and L.A.

I thought of Afghans and Genghis Kahn, Tiananmen Square and Formosa and Red Square, the Tokyo tower and the Eiffel tower and the Empire State building, and the Watts towers and the depths of Dachau. And, wondering whatever happened to Amelia Earhart, I thought of love and honey and milk and ears that hear or don’t and harts as stags or does or fawns, and sea urchins and coral reefs and how the sky is blue, however we call colors, whatever we call. And I wondered why we call the sun yellow.

I thought of maple-leaves, and the seeds that spawn the trees, and of children making them scream, and I thought of how such play has produced saxophones, and how it all can turn to truth or lies. But, at hand, before me, were my sons, as impending actuality of the aroma of roses wafted into my Earth-mind through French windows, mostly closed now for the winter, waiting for the spring. At least my sons were not imagination.

“Welp,” said Ben. “You did it.”

“Yup,” said I. “We surely did.”

“How does it feel?” asked Quincy.

“Lonely,” I answered. “Thanks for coming.”

“Dad,” said Ben. “I know you talk to us and tell us how you feel, but you talk about so many things I don’t know what you feel most strongly for. I mean, I know you feel most strongly for Mom, but what about the rest of the world.”

“Well, you’re next,” I said. “Whether you know it or not.”

“We know it,” said Quincy. “He’s asking about your agenda.”

“Well,” I said, doing a little impersonation of Ronny, “Mikhail and I have to clean up this Cold War business, of course. But a model for that is something that’s been going on for a whole lot longer, millennia in the face of all of Earth.”

“The Holy Land,” said Ben.

“Yes,” said I. “And I don’t know what to do. The Civil Rights movement is on track, and I think I can get Nelson out of prison and into power, and get Noriega out of power and into prison. Idi Amin’s already out of everybody’s way. But what can I do in the Holy Land? What can we do there?”

“Our oil connections give you a lot of influence in that region,” said Quincy.

“Oil wells don’t dig nearly as deep as the trouble in Canaan,” I said.

“You’re funny, Dad,” said Ben. “Calling it Canaan. I like that.”

“So do I,” said Quincy. “What about what Jimmy started?”

“Those people are all gone, and nothing changed,” I answered. Well, no they’re not all gone. Jimmy’s still working at it, and Yasser’s still there and waiting for a fair and even chance. And, after all, I am the President of the United States, and I have

two sons who care as much as Jimmy and I do. So, do you remember you've agreed to govern California and Florida?"

"Yassuh, boss," said Ben.

"You bet," said Quincy.

"Well," I said. "We'll have to start working on that."

I looked at them, and they shrugged and nodded.

"Crap," I said, looking at Ben. "You know I don't remember ever asking you what you learned in school. Besides that I should have as your father, I guess it's important to how you'll handle being chief executives of the governments of two of the four most populous of the United States. What do UCLA and Harvard teach political science and business administration majors? Anything useful?"

Ben and Quincy looked at each other and grinned, then outright laughed.

"No, Dad," said Ben. "Don't worry about it. We wouldn't have known how to answer you, anyway. They teach a lot of details most of the students will never use in any job, and they teach some fundamentals that everyone should use in any job."

"That's right," said Quincy. "And you've given us some sound advice. You told us to be sure and involve ourselves in extracurricular activities, and I learned from my extracurricular activities that most of the students scoff at those fundamentals."

"That's right," agreed Ben. "Quincy and I have talked about this, and he says the leadership fundamentals he learned in the Texas Air National Guard are the same as what's in his Harvard textbooks, and he told me most of our nation's military ignores them too."

"It's good to have a brother," agreed Quincy. "I wonder if I'd get a different perspective from a sister, to help me understand our mom, and Laura. But maybe Ben and Chet can help with that too."

“I see what you mean now, Dad,” answered Ben.

“Hypocrisy is stupid and counterproductive. That is, it’s evil.”

“How about political science?” I asked.



## Chapter 19

### Pride and Prejudice

My sons looked at each other again but didn't laugh at that more etymologically fundamental question. They were caring children, their mother's sons.

"The same," said Quincy. "Ben told me his political science courses teach the same management principles I told him I've learned in business courses and in the Guard, and you know how much attention most politicians pay to them. And I'm sure they haven't changed since you were flying."

"I found," I said, in keeping with their tone, "that the military accorded more with our training when we were in combat. But tell me more about what you're calling fundamentals, and tell me how the students scoffed when they weren't in class. I'm thinking all of this might be fundamental."

I don't know how the language of this conversation turned so alien, to semantics so precisely cautious. I was thinking of the importance of the office, but I don't know how my sons fell into that line, into such basic lines of pretension. Neither'd shown so much constraint in school.

"One," said Ben, "is span of control. You know, recognition that one person's attention can't be broad enough to supervise all the other persons in the world. Attention and time are

limited, and not recognizing that screws everything up. It's why kings have councils and Presidents cabinets."

"How did your fellow students have a problem with that?" I asked, now wondering at Ben's mix of diction here.

"The face of it," said Ben. "They said that anyone who doesn't know everything about what everyone under him is supposed to be doing shouldn't be a manager. Simple stupid arrogance, I guess."

"I get a lot of that," I said, remembering Fits Jr. and Jimmy Huffa, and then thinking further of Hitler and Stalin, and then of Joshua and Saul of Tarsus and David and Goliath, and then of myself. "What else?"

"The bottom of that coin," said Quincy, "is unity of command. You know, recognition that trying to serve two masters screws everything up. If one boss tells you to do one thing, and another boss tells you to do something else, you have to be your own boss to choose which boss you'd rather have chew you out."

"How was that a problem for your school chums?" I asked, happy he was lightening a little also.

"The same face," said Quincy. "They thought that being a manager meant you should be able to boss around anyone under you. And, worse, they thought organization charts should be secret."

"I can see their point," I said. "If you delegate authority or take advice, you're not God. It's a good thing people like them usually either learn better or get stuck in middle-management, but it's a bad thing how much damage middle-managers can do. And another bad thing is how much damage people have to do to their own integrity to get around such arrogant ignorant jerks, or often just to do some decent work."

"And you're right. Both of those principles are from military tradition. Generals ordinarily directly supervise a staff of

fewer than a dozen, and chain of command requires that they don't give orders to corporals or privates, and also that privates complain first to the corporal supervising them, not run screaming straight to a sergeant or a general. And the organization chart of each United States military service is posted on walls of common hallways in the lowest-level headquarters, with pictures of commanders. I wonder if your classmates knew that. But I'm talking too much. I should be listening."

"No problem, Dad" said Ben. "You're just telling us what we told you. It's good for you to think out loud, and thanks for agreeing. And the answer is that my classmates didn't know it. I didn't know it until Quincy told me."

"They think patriotism is stupid," said Quincy.

I now felt like I was preaching, and I was pleased my sons were lightening, but I kept the tone to see what they would say, in their mood against those loads of crap.

"So they fight for nothing but their own success," I said. "I see such Machiavellian crap in high-level politics also, but not without pretension of being otherwise, and that takes a lot of cleverness. Being actually otherwise is easier and more powerful, besides more decent. Cleverness can be stupid sometimes."

And, then, at that, my sons of Earth bailed me out again, from my alienation.

"And that's the most fundamental of the fundamentals, I think," said Ben. "Setting the example. That's why your position, as what much of Earth calls the leader of the free world, is the most important on Earth. That's even cliché for American parents, or how they wish it be. It's an ideal that shouldn't be compromised."

"Wish it be?" I wondered. "Who talks like that?"

"That's right," agreed Quincy. "If you don't set a standard of excellence, parents won't be able in good conscience to wish

that their children grow up to be President of the United States, and adults might follow you into the dust, along with their hope for posterity.”

“Exactly,” added Ben. “Most Americans think all politicians are corrupt, and my fellow students followed that example, taught it to themselves out of class. They laughed about it, saying they should pretend to set a good example, but didn’t much need to.”

“That’s right,” agreed Quincy. “An extracurricular activity of mine was reading the book *In Search of Excellence*, which says that nothing is more fundamental to business than knowing in what business one is, knowing one’s primary mission.”

“And,” added Ben, “what my fellows thought was funny was their extracurricular idea that everyone is in the business of selling hogwash for money, that everyone’s primary mission is to fill his own pockets, to staff beach-houses with harems, e.g.”

“It’s like saying money can buy you love,” agreed Quincy. “That’s the example our fellow political-science and business-administration students said we can set to lead the world, because they think it’s what parents wish for their children.”

“They just need to look at Norma Jean,” said Ben. “An extracurricular activity of mine was reading a book about her. If people wish to know whether money can buy you love, all they have to do is look at her. But even Californians ignore that.”

“Yeah,” said Quincy. “I don’t get it, but I know that people pay a lot more attention to what they want than to what they need for their happiness, and so they wish to be like greedy miserable political and business executives.”

“And they set that example for their children,” Ben concluded.

“I miss our little house in Midland,” offered Quincy for us all.

Well, for then, I was content with them, and so I stopped my talk. I considered mentioning the pedophiles in the priesthood and the rapists at the Air Force Academy. Maybe hypocrisy and the drive toward oppressing others by one's wishes can carry anything one thinks one wants, all the way from the military to theology. "Onward Christian Soldiers" seemed to me a song to sing, but what my sons had said was sad enough for then. Yet Quincy had another thing to say.

"Smugness," he said. "The leader trait that they most sought was smugness. My fellow students wished most to be able to care about nothing at all for anyone else. They wished to be able to stick their fingers in their ears and eyes and noses and show everyone around them that *ces autres* are out of the question, that no one not a manager has a mind or heart worth considering. They wish to indicate that only they are in charge."

"Amen," said Ben. "I call it callousness. But there was something that I liked a lot in school. The poor kids, the ones there on scholarships, not because of their parents' money but because of their own brains, bought the textbook principals and studied hard. And we haven't mentioned the most important principal, communication.

"I know you were Director of Central Intelligence and that that's about secrecy. But the best way to get something done is to let people know what needs to be done and to let them know what they need to know to do it. Lies, secrecy, are for people who have something to hide, something of which they're rightly ashamed.

"Dishonesty is for people who have nothing right in themselves to offer, people who can't compete on an open plain. It's for people who ignore all, except what serves their private greed. It's for stupid people"

"I know," I said. "Intelligence needs to be shared."

“I know,” said Quincy. “I remember Mom reading *The Jungle Books* to us.

“I know,” said Ben. “I remember the Master-Words.”

“We be of one blood,” at least we three said in unison. “Ye and I.”

What an accomplishment, the culmination in my Presidency. The Soviet Union gone, and the Cold War done, with no shots fired. The wall was down in Berlin, and Solidarity was solidly up and in charge in Poland, and we got a few other little things done while we were at it. Theresa’s dear friend Nelson was out of jail and well on his way to his own Presidency in South Africa, and Noriega was in jail beneath the Miami federal courthouse, for example. And least of all was that the fat cat Idi Amin was in exile in Saudi Arabia. My OPEC friends at last gave him a place to wait to die.

Meanwhile, fans of Fits and ralliers for Ronny said it was all a coincidence, all that happening in those four years. They said that such changes occur no more quickly than the building of Rome, that events of one Presidency were at best momentum from previous Presidencies. Well, they were right in saying that such missions take more than four or eight years, but they were wrong in not looking to see how it happened, through all the currents not called Presidential.

We could have failed. When the Soviet hardliners kidnapped Mikhail, we could do nothing but rally our few powerful and reasonable friends in Russia to point out to the hardliners that their country had progressed to a point of no return, to the point where the only alternative to going forward was total political and economic chaos that would bring all the people and all the leaders into the dust there together.

So passing that crisis surprised us all, and delighted us profoundly. It delighted me to the depth of my soul, not only because it was key to my team's political mission this time here, but also because it showed that reason sometimes can prevail on Earth, that sometimes humans can find and make some reasonable sense. So I made a special trip to Detroit while that was going on, just to hold Theresa's Earthly hands.

But other glitches didn't fare so well. Charlie did well in turning Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam, but it promised to become Russia's. I had overreached in Kuwait, setting up Saddam Hussein to overween and give us a reason to get rid of him, a Soviet client. So the Soviet hardliners had pointed to that situation as an excuse to get rid of Mikhail. They called it American imperialism from his weakness.

So, while the American public of the United States was screaming for Saddam Hussein's blood, I had to stop that effort upon the reclamation of Kuwait. The alternative to stopping there would have been the Soviet hardliners' turning the Baltic resistance into another Prague Spring or Tiananmen Square. They might have argued to the United Nations that defending imperialism is better than initiating it.

Had that happened, I'd have had to be dead of Earthly old age without the Cold War won. So I set forth some initiatives in the CIA to pick up the pieces in Afghanistan and Iraq peacefully, but the glitches had already cost me my Presidency, leaving the next Presidency to follow through, or not. Presidents can't totally control the CIA, but they can throw some monkey-wrenches into its works.

That is, Jimmy's admiral did little damage, but a President might do more, if acting directly, as did Fitts Jr. And, though I'd tried that for the general welfare, still I expected Quincy'd have a lot of messes to clean. So, as a lame duck, I gave him a call.

“Come here, my son,” I said. “We have to talk.”

And we split seats as I and Gerald had. I sat behind the desk where Fits Jr. had sat as his son Little Fits peered from beneath it, for the cameras. And my son Quincy sat in the chair in which I’d sat accepting Gerald’s view and doughnuts.

“It would have been nice,” I said. “If we hadn’t had to let that sadist Saddam Hussein slide as far as we let him, in order to save Mikhail and the Baltic states from overthrow and invasion. And it would have been nice to have done it all without hurting the United States’ economy. And it might have been nice to serve a second term. But nothing’s perfect, some people tell me. And now you’ll have a mess to clean. How’s Laura?”

“She’s beautiful,” said Quincy.

“Is she afraid?” I asked.

“A little,” he answered.

“Are you afraid,” I asked.

“I’m more afraid than Laura is,” he said.

“Good,” I said. “You need to be. You don’t need it to keep you honest. You’ve always had the right compulsion in that direction. But it’ll keep you hard at work, and you have a lot of hard work to do. I haven’t done nearly enough.”

“You’ve done miracles,” said Quincy. “My generation rose with the Cold War as an ordinary fact of life. I don’t think anyone ever told me it might end before or without something like Armageddon. But here we are, and by no war.”

“I’m glad someone noticed,” I said, laughing.

“So, Dad, what can I do?” Quincy asked, not laughing.

“Alright, my son,” I said. “I’ll make a speech.

“First, Ben is going to be governor of California while you’re governor of Florida, for the two of you to earn some stature there, and that’ll be a piece of cake. And next, after that clingon



serves two terms as President of the united front of hypocrisy in this nation, you'll succeed him. And for that, if we have to, we'll steal the election."

"I hope we don't have to," said Quincy. "But it would be better than waking up in the morning to find that the President of the United States of America thinks he invented the Internet. Plainly that guy doesn't know what the World Wide Web is. Next he'll grow a beard to look like Lincoln. Or maybe sing Barbra Streisand songs."

"So you're already working at this," I said. "Paying attention and looking ahead."

"It beats driving around drunk," he said, scrunching in his Chinese chair.

But, though he laughed about the Gore guy, I didn't. My oil experience told me Earth needs to find other energy sources, but Gore's way was to gore corn from the mouths of babes, and he was bragging about that, calling it cleaning air. No one needed Watergate burglars or flights from outer space to know he was hoping to recruit such as Ben's and Quincy's school chums to do such as promote such while ignoring the undercurrents, the infrastructure of politics, human life on Earth. I hoped the earth would find a better option, and so I didn't laugh. Instead I suborned a means.

"That Internet business is important," I said. "It'll become the foundation of democracy, whether Clingon and his cohorts like it or not. The one thing they can't afford is free flow of information, and I expect them to try to stop that flow by trying to stop the company that actually invented the World Wide Web for the common people by making it more accessible and less expensively than anyone else could or would. That effort may trigger a slump in the stock market, but you can just ride that out.

No one can stop an offering essentially of truth. So think of Laura again, of you for her.

“You remember the Republican National convention in New Orleans, where I accepted the nomination for the presidency, but do you remember what my Vice Presidential nominee did on the Riverwalk, when I announced his part in the ticket?”

“Yes,” said Quincy. “He patted you on the back as though you and he were old school-chums, and he took off his jacket. His shirt was short-sleeved, and you didn’t look at him. You just grimaced. I remember.”

“You remember when that wacko shot Ronny,” I continued. “Did you know that the wacko’s parents were close enough to my Vice Presidential nominee to have had dinner at his home?”

“No,” offered Quincy. “I didn’t know that, but I told you I’m afraid, and I know you don’t tell me everything, but I know you had nothing to do with it.”

“I knew he was,” I answered. “So, considering all that, do you have a notion why I picked short-sleeve as my running-mate?”

“His parents controlled the media in Indiana, and he had no other ambitions, beyond his seat in Congress?”

“And I didn’t need a vice president,” I added.

“And you could keep an eye on him.”

“I could do that, anyway.”

“I see.”

And, then, I waited for Quincy to ask the most important question in this, and he did.

“He figured,” he said, “that, if Ronny had died then, you’d be President and required to find a Vice President. Then he’d come and tell you what he’d done, thinking you’d be grateful and banking on your being like Linden and Dicky. Someone who knows about you and Fits Jr. put him up to it, without telling him

why. Someone figured it out as I did. Not everyone's ignorant. Am I right?"

"Oh what a wicked web we weave," I answered.

"I'll be as honest as Ronny," he offered.

"Be as honest as Jimmy," I said.

"How do I try?" he asked.

"Do your best to build habitats for humanity," I answered. "If you do that, everything else will fall into place. Don't be like the people who've voted me and Jimmy out of office for fear of their temporary level of pocket change. That's the fundament.

"But, as for honesty itself, remember what I said about taxes and reading my lips. The fact that I don't have any lips is no excuse for the misrepresentation, but what may excuse it is that everyone should have known how silly the promise was, that Presidents can slow tax legislation, but never stop it. At least not in our democracy.

"But still it was an offensive thing to say, like Clingon's saying he smoked pot but didn't inhale. Anyone who smokes pot knows that was a lie, while many people who don't smoke pot believed it. So Clingon, by way of that lie, solicited votes from two classes of people who can't deal with the truth. The first of those classes is people who are simply stupid. The second is people afraid of the truth they find.

"A handbook to literature I had to read for freshman composition at Yale says the ability to recognize irony is one of the surest signs of intelligence and sophistication. And, whether or not that's true, anyone who thought I meant what I said about taxes lacks intelligence and sophistication, and so anyone trying to hold it against me is showing either their foolishness or their hypocrisy, not mine. Or partisan bigotry or all of the above.

"But, then, partisanship is nothing but a form of bigotry. So is feminism and male chauvinism, and so is any religion not

ecumenical. Did you know that the French word for bigotry is *sectarisme*? That's as in the words 'sect' and 'sex'. But I'm rambling, in Latin. I'd better get to the point. And to the line forward.

"I'm leaving the Presidency because my job in this life is mostly done. I'm letting Clingon succeed me because he isn't as overweening as Fits Jr. and so will listen to his advisors well enough not to screw up the world much while he screws up his own image enough to let you defeat his party next time. The economy will rebound under Clingon as it did under Ronny, and for one of the two main geopolitical reasons it did under Ronny, relative stability in the Middle East because of Camp David then and Kuwait now. The main reason then was the power of women, and the main reason now is the new world order that ending the Cold War has created, but the result will be the same.

"As for screwing up the world, the worst thing I expect Clingon might do is to screw up the operation I've initiated in the CIA to get Saddam Hussein out of Iraq without more war. You know I had to let him slide for a while because the alternative was to delay winning the Cold War until long after I leave this world. Soviet hardliners would have used our invading Iraq as an excuse to take a Tiananmen Square approach against the Baltic states. And, besides what that would do to the Baltic people, it would end Mikhail's influence. And it would end our pitching horseshoes here. But he won't pitch with Clingon anyway.

"But, anyway, here's how I expect things to go:

"Charlie's Mujahedin will win in Afghanistan, with the Russian realization of the futility of imperialism. Not even the United Nations or that vodka-swilling Yeltsin who's fallen into the void Mikhail had to leave for democracy will support invading Iraq, since Iraq isn't invading anyone outside its land-space now.

And you'll have to do some exaggerating to get the support of our forgetful compatriots.

“Reminding them of Saddam Hussein’s record and pointing out to them his atrocities won’t be enough to convince them that you should spend their money to oust him. He’s never posed an imminent threat to their lives, and now he’s hardly a threat to their gasoline prices, and the majority of United States citizens don’t care about discomfort not theirs. If they did, slavery wouldn’t have existed in this nation, and the movement your aunt Theresa launched mid-century wouldn’t have been necessary, and affirmative action wouldn’t be necessary now.

“So you may have to bamboozle your compatriots into thinking Saddam Hussein and the Taliban pose an imminent threat to them. Then, if you’re caught exaggerating, and your voters reject the fundamentals after you point them out, you’ll lose reelection. You’ll be a one-term president, like me and Jimmy and John Quincy Adams. But still you’ll have to do it to be right, compassionate, democratic.

“Few citizens care about any citizen not them. Your Aunt Theresa’s movement depended on dogs and fire hoses loosed against praying children in the face of Fitts Jr. But, in the face of the me-generation Clingon will foster here, your reelection may depend on more than people being buried with their hands tied behind their backs.

“Yes, I know, I’m recommending subterfuge. And I’m ashamed of it at least for the reasons you and Ben pointed out in regard to intelligence. But what else can you do in the face of a nation of ignorant lazy liars?”

“Chess,” said Quincy. “In chess you have to plan so far ahead.”

“Not so far,” I replied. “And never with so much at stake for all.”

“Too bad,” said Quincy. “Too bad some think their life is less than that.”

“Yes, and I have one last thing to say. Remember that a happy soldier is a bitching soldier. That is, the First Amendment is the main thing making the citizens of the United States the happiest citizens of this world. I’m sorry the temporary-pocketbook people replaced Mikhail with that vodka-slurping Yeltsin, but I’m glad Shevardnadze is president of Georgia. He was a great help to us, and he’s a genuine gentleman, and Georgia is his home. But I’m rambling again, reminiscing. And so I think it time for me to go.

“It’s time for me to go and spend more time with your mom, and I hope you see that the way to protect Laura’s life is the same as the way to protect yours and all of ours.

Remember that Jimmy builds habitats for humanity, and no one has tried to kill him.”

“Alright, Dad,” said Quincy, nodding. “But what about Clingon’s wife?”

“What about her?” I asked. “What’s her maiden name? Rhododendron? Rockefeller? Rothschild? Rubble? Rocky? Rock? Rah?”

“Is that free association?” asked Quincy, “Reality check, please, Pop!”

“It’s rude to answer a question with a question, too,” I answered. “But do you know that rhododendrons are named for Cecil Rhodes, who was no colossus? I know you know Clingon was a Rhodes scholar. But, anyway, here’s the answer:

“If Heather Rhododendron, who teamed with Rhodes-scholar Clingon to win the Presidency eventually for each of them, eventually owns up and dumps Clingon after his philandering gets him impeached, I’ll support her to preside. If she keeps pretending but does well in some lesser elected office before running for the

Presidency, I'll stay out of the contest and let her wile and demeanor prevail, if those qualities can. If she presents herself as a soap-opera wronged-woman, I'll make sure she never again sits down behind this desk. Certainly she knows what Clingon has done and what he'll do. She's been married to him for more than a score of years. She's lived with him. She knows him.

"No more lies. Don't read my lips. Hear my voice. No more lies. Some how. Some day.

"That's what I think. Women want a woman in the Presidency, and they need a good strong woman as a role-model for their daughters, not someone weak enough to need to depend on lies and the votes of women silly enough to think soap-operas represent Earth in general. Such clingonism is what I live to stop."

"Ben says he likes her," said Quincy.

"Ben said Fits Jr. really was King Arthur," I replied.

"He'll do well in California," said Quincy.

"I'll have to find him a diplomatic staff," I replied.

So, by that, I launched my boys' careers. I talked basics to Quincy and superficialities to Ben, and I stirred up dust in the minds of both and left them to settle their dust in their own ways. And, if they asked advice beyond my rambling, I usually told them to ask their mother. No one could settle dust as well as she. So I took a vacation. And so did Theresa. Somewhat.

Jimmy's Presidency had been just in time for Theresa, for her mother and Raymond. Her mother and Raymond, maybe feeling the world was in good hands with Jimmy, died of cancer during his Presidency. And, soon after they, her brother also died of it, leaving Theresa quite alone in the huge motor-city. But not very alone for very long.

She began quietly spawning a new generation of friends, another family of her choosing. She formed an institute in her

name and the name of her quiet husband, to raise the children they had never had, to understand what they'd built. The institute showed children their own worth and inspired them to respond to their worthiness worthily, with knowledge of their race's past and faith in, and understanding of, its future. So her focus for that Michigan congressman soon transferred to a spawning of her own.

And Early in that spawning of hers she asked a new firebrand friend to help her in the infirmity of her aging on Earth. Elaine, that friend, had worked with her in a sewing-shop, after she moved to Detroit and before she received the recognition she deserved, and now Elaine was helping her extend that recognition. And she also helped her rise far above pine level, literally and physically to heights above the river strait.

And she did it for everyone. She did it for herself, for Theresa's self, for our self. For the children.



## Chapter 20

### From Here to Eternity

Theresa's only physical wounds from her battle here this time came from a desperate product of the cause of our trip, from a young African American who snuck into her house to steal money, and then beat her for all he could get when she demurred.

Of course, her compassion spoke up for him, but nevertheless Elaine helped her move from that busy little house to a quiet grand apartment on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor of a building overlooking the river between the still hardly United States and Canada.

And that new aerie for her was appropriate not only from its being so high above the levels of the white pines of Michigan and the homes of Albion. Since Canada had been a promised land for many before the emancipation and for others during the Vietnam question, the Detroit River has seemed much like the Jordan. So Theresa enjoyed the peace, while she awaited the occasions of her last few actions this trip, as her hair grew white like an American eagle's. She enjoyed her high aerie, pointing toward our home. She sang with her little Singer she'd kept for sewing. She awaited the gate.

And, in helping Theresa win the fame she'd earned, Elaine also helped her toward her final grand event, a little something

beyond the fame, the legacy. Nearly at the end of the millennium which had largely defined itself by the century her life on Earth this trip had nearly spanned, the Congress of the United States of America awarded Theresa its Medal of Freedom. So then she made her most toppling statement against bigotry, against the hypocrisy that fed it. And she made that statement utterly silently, for the future. Parabolic, for ears that don't now hear, or aren't yet born.

Clingon and Cauchon. Comparing those names was compelling. Cauchon, calling himself a Christian, had burned Theresa at the stake a half-millennium before this trip. Now, Clingon, called by some who bought his baloney the first black president, placed her on a pedestal. Both he and Cauchon used her to support their hypocrisy. And both will be remembered for it. That's their legacy.

Theresa, giving Clingon a copy of a book of her legacy, an autobiography she'd written for the children of her institute and beyond, inscribed it for Clingon's mother, who had found her gate, the year before. And, when she presented it to him with words of blessing for his mother, he wept and thanked her. But he didn't weep for shame, and he didn't thank her enough. His best thanks were accidental.

When he used his position as the last President of the United States of that millennium to address those states to claim how he saw the state of their union then, while his congress was debating impeaching him from that Presidency for ruining the career of a young female intern in his care, rather than presiding over the fly of his own trousers and just saying no to that young woman's offer of adultery, he sat Theresa beside his wife in the gallery of the United States congress for all to see, showing his hypocrisy, worldwide.

His party, before emancipation, though later it preached integration for African American to vote for it, was the party of segregation,. And, after that, his party absorbed some sincerity from people its hypocrisy attracted, but Clingon fostered the hypocrisy, made it his brand, and festered in it. And that day with Theresa, he showed no people's state of union, only his own separate rot.

So the legacy of the last person elected in the last passed millennium to preside over the United States of America will be the opposite of Oliver's legacy of Moses.

Like Joshua's legacy, that irresponsible President's legacy shall instigate an ending, not a beginning. So he inadvertently helped hand on the legacy of Theresa's small and comely fingers. And, though silently, her timing also made sure of that.

But she had one small thing still left to do. Finally, she and Nelson, America and Africa, hugged for all the world to see, at the international airport of a city founded by French and named for its strait gate waterway, a city now full of people of all colors, freely for all time. In Motown, they caught the political revolution up with the industrial revolution, singing like her little Singer in her eagle aerie.

"Theresa," chanted Nelson, at home anywhere out of the straits of prisons, and maybe in them also in the breadth and depth of his soul. "Theresa!"

For all of Earth to hear and see, and Heaven.

So it was time for us to go. But Lev wasn't ready to let us. Back in New Orleans, he had to tell me one more story, to try to get me to stay. He knew how I felt about bigotry and the further alienation by which hypocrisy feeds it. So he told me a story of hypocrisy and alienation in the cradle of liberty.

This book, as I suggested at its beginning, is a tale of two cities. But I suggested that the two cities are New Orleans and Detroit. The French founded both, and both are now capitals of African American music and African American people otherwise as well, although they're separated nearly as far as north and south could separate two cities in the United States of America before the manifest destiny spread to Hawaii and Alaska.

But, whatever the symbolism, the manifest destiny of America is more often said to hinge from east to west, and so I've also mentioned martyrs in the cradle of liberty and the city of angels. So Lev's hopeful going-away-gift was a story set in the so-called cradle of liberty, while manifesting itself across the continent, to many cities outside those four.

After his study of psychology, Lev decided to look especially into how mental-health professionals treat the down-and-maybe-out, the citizens so derelict that they don't have a home, the most alienated of Earth's society. He knew that, because I was so far from home so much, that would interest me much. And so he looked around his Earth at that.

And he found in Boston, that cradle of American liberty, the home of Mikey's mosque and Oliver's alma mater, a homeless shelter named for the love of Saint Clare. It was a world-model homeless-shelter, a thirteen-story building a half-block from Boston Common in one direction, and a half-block from Boston's Chinatown in another.

Central to that short block, the edifice was of about the era of the Empire State building, and similarly of gray concrete but with fancy details. Big white glass balls in black bronze fixtures stood on an external otherwise uninhabited balcony a story above its entrance. And they were lit at night, and Lev knew not how or by whom they were electrified, by what power.

And neither did he know who changed the little candle-bulbs in the chandelier in the lobby. But, like the globes above the entranceway outside, the first thing that caught his attention inside was that brass chandelier. By now, he'd learned to keep his gaze uplifted most of his time here on Earth.

But, from time to time, he still looked down to keep from stumbling, along his path to help the monkeys in in the trees, ye and me. So, looking down, the next thing that caught his attention in that homeless-shelter named for *Santa Clara* was that nearly every person in the lobby was black, both the employees and the customers, called guests there. And, unable otherwise to be sure which were which, he addressed a fundamental request for direction to man with a metal-detector wand.

“Can I get something to eat?” he asked.

“Sure,” said the man, looking at the new dark-blue pinstriped Brooks Brothers suit and black leather Bostonian shoes Lev had materialized for the occasion. “But, next time, you’ll have to go through the metal-detector.”

And he pointed to a big box through which guests were walking. Some of them left baggage in a pile on the street-side of the narrow big-box gate, while others’ clothing suggested that they had nothing not on their backs. And some had things in their pockets that set off the alarm, and one had guitar strings, but no guitar.

“I’m letting you through now this time,” said the man, after wandering Lev, “because we don’t have much of a line today. But, next time, you’ll have to wait out front like everybody else. You didn’t get that suit here, did you?”

But the man wore gold chains, like some Lev had seen on some in less savory circumstances, and so he wondered about how people were hired to work there, what that shelter’s human-resources management thought might be resourceful, and for what.

“No,” said Lev, and he followed the wave of the man’s wand past a window where people were gathered talking to a smiling middle-aged blonde woman who was handing them envelopes and other packages, always with kind words.

“What’s that?” asked Lev of a woman who had turned away with an envelope.

“Mail,” said the woman. “You know, social security checks, whatever.”

“Do you have to live here to get your mail?” asked Lev.

“You think I live here?” asked the woman.

So Lev shrugged and smiled and walked on into the dining-room and joined the queue for food. Some of the others in the line talked with one another, but most stood silent and showed no attention to anything. Some young men and women, wearing aprons and rubber gloves, wiped tables and mopped other messes and carried trays from a cart near the exit to a window to the kitchen behind the cafeteria counter, and some of the people behind the counter seemed to Lev perhaps as old as he. And Lev noticed that the old people smiled more than the young ones but that all of them were very nice to all.

It was lunchtime, and the lunch was chicken *a la king* on mashed potatoes, with canned peaches for desert and a choice of milk or some fruit-flavored drink. And some of the guests asked for more than the servers served, and the servers smiled and said they were sorry they couldn’t comply. And they, the servers perhaps more than the guests, were plainly *désolés*.

“We have to be sure we have enough for everyone,” said to a guest an elderly lady with big blue eyes and a bigger smile.

“You’ve got plenty,” said the guest. “You all just make money off of us.”

But the little old lady just passed her smile to the next person in line, who was Lev.

“Thanks,” offered Lev, with his head and eyes lowered.

“You’re welcome,” she accepted, looking straight at him.

And an exception to the serving limitation was bread. The servers permitted the guests to help themselves to that, and some of them stuffed slices into their pockets. And another exception permitted them to help themselves to the drinks, but not to the cups. They had to leave the tables to receive more milk of that human kindness. And few of them did.

After lunch, and a little conversation with the people at his table, Lev took his tray and cup to the cart at the door to the street, but he left the dining room through the doorway to the lobby, where he again approached the man with the gold chain.

“Thanks,” said Lev in reply to the man’s chin-up look of inquiry. “Nice lunch. I wanted to see how people feel here. Where can I go if I want to make a donation?”

“Fifth floor,” said the man, smiling and pointing to the elevators.

“Can I help you?” asked a woman there behind a reception window.

“You’re Russian?” he asked.

“Georgian,” she said. “Are you Russian?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m Lev.”

“Ludmila,” she said, taking the hand he offered through the widely open window. “But I am called Millie.”

“What are you doing here, Millie?” asked Lev. “I mean in the United States.

“Working,” answered Ludmila, grinning with all of her blonde Georgian face. “I came here with my husband. He is a computer programmer.”

“He works here too?” asked Lev.

“No, in Cambridge,” said Millie.

“Well, Millie,” said Lev, “it’s very nice to meet you. Whom can I see about maybe making a donation? I had a very nice lunch downstairs.”

“I’ll get someone,” answered Ludmila. “Would you like some grapes?”

And she raised from beside her telephone a paper plate piled with purple grapes.

“Maybe one or two,” said Lev, taking a small sprig from the plate, and Ludmila pushed a button on her many-buttoned telephone.

“A gentleman would like to make a donation,” she said.

“She’ll be here in a moment,” said Millie. “Would you like to sit down?”

She gestured toward two chairs beside a small table outside her window.

“Would you like some more grapes?” she asked.

“No,” said Lev, sitting. “You’re very kind. Thank you.”

An African violet shriveled on the little table. And, after about a quarter of an hour, a very thin woman emerged from a hallway beside Ludmila’s little office and scowled at Millie. But she changed the scowl to a smile as she turned to Lev.

“I’m Bette Kroll,” she said. “I’m our Director of Development. What can I do for you?”

“Lev Tolstoi,” said Lev. “I’m thinking I might be able to do something for you. Is Kroll Polish?”

“Yes,” said the Director of Development. “But Bette isn’t. And it’s worse than that. My real name is Betty Sue.”

“Such a nice American name,” said Lev, all this in the process of taking her hand and rising from his chair and wondering what next.

“Would you like to come to my office?” asked Betty Sue.

“Your wish, my dear,” said Lev, “is my command.”



“Oh, you’re a charmer,” said Betty Sue, as she receded down the hallway as Lev followed, after exchanging smiles again with Ludmila, who was chewing a grape.

But, on the way, Lev glanced through the doors of other offices along the hallway. In the first was a thin white man behind a desk, talking with a young black man seated near the door, which was closed but had a window. In the second was a white woman, sorting envelopes while an e-mail program was open on her computer-screen, and a spider-plant shriveling on her windowsill. In the third was a white man punching computer keys, with sunlight streaming between open blinds of a window over a Christmas cactus, and a desk with little paper on it but obviously organized for work, and a print of Eichenberg’s *Christ of the Breadlines*, hanging on the wall beside the desk. In the fourth was another white man but with the blinds of his window closed and paper scattered everywhere, and obviously not organized for work. In the fifth was a white woman eating a bagel, while a pile of other pastries sat atop a pile of papers like a haystack all over her desk, and a poster of Jack Kerouac with a cigarette or a joint, on the wall beside her desk. And, in the last office before Betty Sue’s, an elderly white man closed the door to it as Lev and Betty Sue shuffled past on the carpeting of the hallway.

Betty Sue’s office’s door faced down the hallway. Pigeons perched on the sill outside its only window, to which Lev stepped to give Betty Sue time to sit, before he did. And a nest was on the outside sill with several baby pigeons in it.

“You even help find pigeons homes?” asked Lev.

“We do the best we can,” said Betty Sue settling into the chair at her desk and waiving Lev into a little chair near the window. “How can I help you?”

“Well,” said Lev. “I’d like to dispose of a million dollars by my conscience.”

Betty Sue's right hand fluttered on some paper on her desk. And then, with the same hand, leaving the other lying in her lap, she pushed a button marked "CONF" on her telephone. Lev didn't then know what CONF meant, but he later learned that it meant conference, and that one pushed that button to transfer calls to voicemail with no ringing.

"You've come to the right place," she said. "Mr. Tolstoi."

"Lev, if you please," said Lev. "Thank you for lunch."

"You had lunch downstairs?" asked Betty Sue.

"Yes," answered Lev. "Quite pleasant."

"Well, we do more than that," said Betty Sue. "We provide clothing and medical treatment and mental-health and substance-abuse counseling. Our seventh floor is a program for teaching life-skills, such as how to find a job and to make it a career, how to write a résumé and dress for success. We give them the clothes, and we teach them how to use computers, and we let them use ours.

"We have a day-center, where our guests can be out of the weather all day, and we use that also for triage. We don't operate an emergency night-shelter, but the City of Boston operates one with a hundred beds on our fourth floor, and our top three floors are 39 single-occupancy rooms with shared dining and kitchen and bath facilities and a nice little living-room with a television, for people who have been clean and sober for more than six months, and have a job. We're a whole-health operation, in the true spirit of Saint Clare. But we're ecumenical and leave no soul behind."

But then, as she took a breath, someone knocked on the door she'd closed before Lev mentioned the million dollars.

"Yes?" said Betty Sue, as though the word had two long syllables, and the door opened.

"Sorry, Bette," said another blonde head as it leaned through the door. "I didn't know you were with someone."

And Betty Sue smiled, and the head receded, and the door closed.

“How do you get your funding?” asked Lev, looking at the door.

“Private donations from people like you,” said Betty Sue.

“You don’t get government funding?” asked Lev.

“Surely,” said Betty Sue. “But people like you have to match it.”

“Do you develop the funding or the services?” asked Lev.

“I, myself,” said Betty Sue, “develop the funding, but we all work together. We’re all a team here, one big happy family. Here, let me show you something.”

She dug through the mass of paper on her desk and found a photograph and showed it to Lev. It was a picture of two persons’ heads superimposed atop two evening-gowns, one of the heads being of the elderly man who had closed his door on their passing down the hall, the other Betty Sue's.

“That’s our Executive Director,” said Betty Sue, grinning at the photograph and pointing to the head at the head not hers as she held it out to Lev, but Lev neither grinned nor took the pictured from her hand.

“Whose dresses are they,” he asked, scowling and finding nothing else to say.

“Princess Diana’s,” said Betty Sue. “Isn’t that wonderful? She donated them to us before she died, and we auctioned them off for a lot of money. Mo Vaughn, the Red Sox slugger, donates money to us also, and one season he gave us a thousand dollars for each of his homeruns. We called that homers for the homeless. There’s the check.”

She pointed to a Styrofoam check about five feet wide leaning against a wall.

“He brought his parents to visit us once,” she said. “And his father wept. Now, he’s moved to the city of angels, but we’re hoping he’ll continue his support.”

Lev wasn’t much into baseball, having been through too many wars to care much about sports. And, also having lost his fondness for royalty by the same pathway, he lapsed into silence. And Betty Sue had to struggle to bring him back out.

“Would you like to meet our Executive Director?” she asked.

“I’ll see if he’s in,” she said, without waiting for answer.

She rose from her chair and opened her door and knocked on the one the elderly man had closed, and a voice seeped singing through the door, after a few seconds.

“Who is it?”

“Ari, do you have a minute?” asked Betty Sue, opening the door and leaning in, as the blonde head had through hers. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Oh, sure,” sugary said Ari. “Come on in.”

So Lev rose and followed Betty Sue into that office.

“This is Lev Tolsoi,” said Betty Sue to Ari.

“Ari Hamm, our Executive Director,” said Betty Sue to Lev.

“Nice to meet you,” said Ari, shaking hands with Lev and grinning a wide-eyed grin. “Did you write *War and Peace*?”

“A lot of people ask me that,” said Lev, again not grinning.

“Lev is thinking of donating some money,” said Betty Sue.

“Good,” said Ari. “Sit down. Do you have any questions I can answer?”

Ari’s desk faced the wall at the end of the office furthest from the door. But, between the desk and the door, he had a round pine table with wooden and canvas director-chairs, and he gestured

to the table. So they all sat down, and Ari folded his hands, on the tabletop.

“I think Betty Sue has answered all my questions,” said Lev.

“Betty who?” asked Ari, looking first at Lev and then at Betty Sue, turning the beginning of a smile into a frown. “Who’s Betty Sue?”

Betty Sue pointed at her small roe chest.

“Oh, Bette!” said Ira. “I didn’t know your name was Betty Sue.”

“I don’t use it much,” said Bette to Ari.

“Well,” said Ari. “Good. I can’t think of a pun. I’ll have to work on it.”

“Well, alright,” said Lev. “Oh, I do have one question I thought of downstairs but forgot to ask Bette. Most of the guests I saw downstairs were African Americans. How do you deal with that? How about your employees?”

“Forty percent of our employees are minorities,” said Betty Sue.

“Yes,” said Ari, grinning again. “It’s all pretty black and white.”

“You’re so funny, Ari,” said Betty Sue, and Ari grinned again.

“Well,” said Ari. “If you have any other questions for me, just call Betty Sue.”

Lev looked at Ari to see if he was grinning at that, but he wasn’t. He was frowning at his hands, which unfolded as he rose from his chair. Betty rose as well, and Lev followed suit in wonder, wonder at how people could be so crude. Nevertheless, he shook hands again with Ari, and bade farewell to Bette.

“Ari’s wonderful,” said Bette. “He loves puns, and he sings at all our staff functions. Here’s a brochure that tells about

our programs in more detail and my card. So how do you like our little agency? Do we fit your conscience?"

"I'll have to let you know," Lev said to her outside both office doors. "I have to talk to my accountants. Taxes are important too."

"Of course," said Betty Sue. "Can I show you out?"

"I'll be alright," said Lev, turning away with no more delay.

The pastry person wasn't at her desk when he passed this time, but some crumbs remained atop the pile of paper. And the computer keypuncher was outside his office and closing its door. He smiled and nodded as Lev passed.

Lev smiled and nodded to Ludmila and received a smile and wave in return. And, just as he pushed the elevator button and turned back to her, the keypuncher spoke to her. He bade her goodnight.

"You are leaving for today?" asked Millie.

"Yeah," said the keypuncher. "*Dost vidania.*"

"*Dost vidania,*" said Ludmila, smiling again.

"Is there a stairway?" asked Lev.

"Right here," said the keypuncher.

And Lev followed him through a door and down the stairs. The keypuncher, swinging himself between the banisters, began taking the steps a half-dozen at once, But Lev stopped him with a question.

"In a hurry to get out of here?"

"Not at all," said the keypuncher. "I love this place. But my job's too easy. I ran out of things to do. So I asked my boss to let me take some vacation time for the rest of the afternoon. What the hell. It's Friday."

“What’s your job?” asked Lev, as they descended the stairs, now both in ordinary fashion, the keypuncher clearly in no hurry.

“My official title is Finance Administrator,” said the keypuncher. “But I do a lot of other stuff too, and I still run out of work.”

“I’m thinking of making a donation,” replied Lev.

“It’s a wonderful place,” replied the finance-administrator.

“Any qualifications to that?” Lev asked him.

“Some,” answered the finance-administrator. “How much time you got?”

“All the time in the world,” said Lev. “Do you drink beer?”

“Since I was two,” said the finance-administrator. “I practically breath it.”

By this time, they were on the street, and a slight drizzle wet the autumn air.

“Know a bar near here?” asked Lev.

“Sure,” said the finance-administrator, and he turned away from Chinatown and toward the Common, and they walked silent side-by-side until the traffic light on Tremont Street, where Lev broke the silence again.

“I love that Eichenberg print in your office,” he said. “It suggests that not all Germans have been French corporals. But one never knows about hypocrisy.”

“I know what you mean,” said the banister-swinger. “I inherited that print from my predecessor. But she also left a button stuck to a bulletin-board in that little office, saying ‘Don’t panic!’ She panicked and left in about a year, and I’ve been here almost seven. I kept the button too, as a *memento mori*. As I said, I love this place.”

“I’m the ghost of Lev Tolstoi,” said Lev.

“Good,” said the finance-administrator. “I knew, if I hung around *l’amore di Santa Clara* long enough, I’d run into someone like you.”

“Like me?” asked Lev.

“Someone bigger than the other people I know,” answered the finance-administrator. “I read *War and Peace* in Russian once. That book’s big enough by itself. It took me four months to get through it. I wore out a dictionary.”

“Most of my kids were born while I was writing it,” said Lev.

“I didn’t notice much change of tone as I read it,” said the finance-administrator.

“I’m a slow learner,” said Lev. “That’s why I’m a ghost.”

“You’re hanging around to clean yourself up?” asked the finance-administrator.

“I’m hanging around to try to let that happen,” answered Lev, matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, well I was Billy the Kid, and I have kids too.”

“I’m pleased to meet you again,” replied Lev.

“Yeah,” said the Finance Administrator. “I remember you from White Oaks before I found my way here. But I thought you might not remember me, and I see your point about letting things happen, not fighting things.”



## Chapter 21

1984

“But anyway,” said the finance-administrator as they approached the little cemetery at that corner of the Common, “the bar’s there, across the street. We can grab some beers from the bar and go downstairs to the vault for some quiet and privacy of you want. The place used to be some kind of bank or jewelry-store or something. Not many people go down there. But we can.”

The finance-administrator bought the first round as Lev waited by the steps down to the vault. At the bottom of the steps was a room with tables and banquettes and a small unattended bar outside a vault with a steel door that might well have done for a bank in Lev’s and Billy’s earlier time, or for Celtic crown-jewels or for a cask of Amontillado. They had the room to themselves and sat at the table most equidistant from the rest of the room.

“So, finance-administrator,” said Lev. “What are the qualifications? What occurrences make *Santa Clara*’s charity questionable? What’s the trouble?”

“It’s all quite basic,” said the finance-administrator. “Racial discrimination and fiscal corruption, and management too incompetent to hide the facts of that.”

“You sound like a typical disgruntled employee,” said Lev. “Except that you’re white, which makes the first thing you mentioned not your business.”

“I’m atypical in that I try to work for the guests and the donors and the taxpayers. I mean I’m typical in that the employment isn’t what disgruntles me.”

“Okay,” said Lev. “What does? What, exactly?”

Lev and Billy were tiptoeing around each other like heartbreaking new friends, as Jack Kerouac suggested all of us might well wish to do, while we stand or fall on less artificial formalities, forms that keep us out of others’ self.

“Exactly what does,” said the finance-administrator, “is that none of this will ever make the evening news, or wind its way into a best-selling novel. But I’ll tell you anyway, because I’m still trying to figure out who I am. So:

“To me, it started with how a white Republican administrative assistant behaved toward a black Jamaican receptionist. I love Ludmila, as I love Hoagy Carmichael and Ray Charles, and so I know that basic fairness and simple decency wouldn’t have opened the position Millie’s filled. But that proved to be the proverbial tip of the iceberg. As time went by, I noticed other things. I saw more against *les autres*.

“We have a transitional housing program on our top five floors. HUD, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, pays for most of it. And it started with a loan of about \$1.5 million we don’t have to repay if we keep the program running. Each year, over thirty years, the contract lets us write off a thirtieth of the loan. So, unless we screw up horribly, it’s a grant, not a loan.

“You can guess where I’m going with this. Boston is becoming famous for its big dig, maybe the biggest civil-construction cost-overrun in history, a project to dig tunnels and build bridges to speed-up traffic-flow in this city. And that project is progressing more slowly than the need for improvement, while

people are being caught wheel-barrowing cash out the Massachusetts capitol into their private bank-accounts.

“Our HUD project isn’t as big as the big dig, and the racism at The Love of Saint Clare may not be as horrible as the pedophilia in what Roman-Catholics call their church. But *Chiara* and her *Francesco*, took vows of poverty also in the name of the Roman Catholic Church, and bigotry is the main scourge of humanity. But anyway, at one point in my duties as Finance-Administrator, I discovered plain evidence of fiscal corruption, undeniable proof. And I showed it to my boss.

“It was plain and simple. It wasn’t enough to buy a new home, but it was plenty enough to furnish a room in a house. And, as I said, it was undeniable, plain facts of who was doing it and with whom, how and where and when.

“What do you think he said?” asked the kid.

“Forget about it, maybe?” offered the Count.

“Close,” continued the financed-administrator. “I don’t see anything wrong with someone getting a dining-room-set out of a deal like that. That’s what he said.”

“Who’s your boss?” asked Lev. “Pun-man Ari?”

“No,” said the finance-administrator. “Ari has no notion what I do, except that I give him more cash than he needs for taxi fare and don’t wheedle him for receipts. So that’s another form of petty embezzlement. Did he take you to lunch?”

“No,” said Lev. “I ate with the guests.”

“Good man!” said the finance-administrator. “I’m proud of you. I used to go down there for my lunch and carry it up to our staff dining room, until I got sick of the phonies that call themselves our executive staff. We’re supposed to pay a dollar for meals of the guests’ food, but they don’t. And yet they talk to the rest of us about how wonderful they are. So we pay the dollar and

have to listen to them pretend while we eat. It's both crazy and unappetizing.

“And you're lucky Ari didn't take you to lunch. He carries no more cash than he thinks he needs to squeak through a day, and he folds that ten-or-twenty-dollar bill into a rectangle about an inch the long way and hides it deep in his wallet, where he can hardly find it. So, if he takes you to lunch, you throw your credit-card on the table in exasperation, before he finds it and unfolds it.

“He has a Love of Saint Clare corporate credit-card, but he's afraid to go on record for anything he does. That's why he closes the door of his office whenever he hears anyone talking anywhere near it, and he hardly speaks a sentence in any other office either, before he closes that door too. And he writes his speeches and reads them, even five-minute speeches, even jokes.”

“What do you think he's afraid of?” asked Lev.

“Himself, I guess,” said the finance-administrator. “He's not afraid of being greedy, just of being caught. I heard him begging the Chairman of the Board to give him a raise. I guess he was afraid to close the door on the Chairman.

“I deserve more,' he said, 'after all I've given to Love of Saint Clare.

“It seems to me that giving to *l'amore* is a gift to oneself.”

“Have you ever told Betty Sue that?” asked Lev.

“I'm sure I have from time to time,” answered the finance-administrator. “I've worked with nearly everyone on that floor all the years I've been there. But I'm sure I haven't said it to Ari, because Ari hardly ever talks with me, except to ask for taxi fare or other reimbursement, from petty cash, unaccountably.”

“So, then, who is your boss, Finance Administrator?” asked Lev, frowning.

“The Director of Finance and Administration,” said the finance-administrator.

“What’s the difference,” asked Lev, frowning now at the finance-administrator’s grin. “Between a finance-administrator and a director of finance and administration. Do you lack direction they can favor or accept?”

“Pretty much so,” said the finance-administrator. “I do the billing and pay the bills and put the money in the bank and reconcile the bank accounts and allocate the payroll to our cost-centers to meet the demands of contract and grant stipulations, and I put the numbers from all of that into the books. Then I give my boss reports telling him what those numbers are, and he redirects them into formats that please the contractors and donors. In other words, his job is sales. Mine’s accounting.

“But he also makes most major purchases and signs the checks, although I write the checks for them. That gives him plenty of room for dining-room-set deals, and he often pays more than he must for services like our telephone system and our computer-network administration. Those are contracts he negotiates, and we could do in-house a lot of the work we outsource, better and less expensively. I could do most of the computer work we contract out, and I do a lot of it. Instead of calling the contractors and waiting for them to come around. But I suspect that my boss gets kickbacks from that.

“But the biggest possibility for kickbacks comes from construction projects, like the transitional housing program and our elevator and HVAC renovation, and the deputy director does most of that negotiation.

“And then there are consultants. We’re doing what we call a capital campaign. It’s a fundraising operation with its sole purpose raising money for construction projects, and we pay consultants huge amounts of money ostensibly to help us with that, and we hired an in-house Director for it. We pay the in-house Director less than we pay the consultants, and the Deputy Director

keeps a tight lid on her, and she's pretty sloppy anyway, but she's African American. She's the only African American manager on the fifth floor and our only manager not permitted to approve her department's expenses. Tokenism?

“And some of the construction projects are crazy to start with. When we started the capital campaign, Ari and the deputy director asked in a general staff meeting that all the staff submit recommendations for construction projects, and they implemented none of the suggestions. And a project that did make the campaign is to move the kitchen to the basement, and to extend the freight elevator to the basement to move the food from there to the serving line. That'll mean literally burying the volunteers and literally risking the lives of the guests. I'm talking about human resources and sanitation.

“And then there's the fact that, despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars we've spent on elevator renovation, we can't be sure our elevators are going to work on any given day, or in any given mealtime. In other words, in the name of capital improvement, we're planning to demoralize our volunteers, risk the lives of our guests by increasing the time between preparing food and serving it, and risk not being able to feed the guests at all some days. So, other than the possibility of kickbacks from more construction, I can't think of a motive for that project. And I'm trained in such matters.”

“Sounds to me,” said Lev, “that you're a screen, a naïve person set to draw attention. Have you said anything about this to the Deputy Director?”

“Sure,” said the finance-administrator. “She offers two answers. One is that we'll talk about it, but no later talk ever comes about. The other, when I argue a little, is basically that she's a manager while I'm not. That's her argument against the fact that I'm trained and experienced in such matters, while she

isn't. In other words, she thinks that being the boss legitimizes irresponsible authority. Yet she has a master's degree in social work. And that's the part that drives me craziest.

"The transitional housing program has coin-operated laundry machines for the tenants to use, and my accounting showed that no one was reporting the collection of most of the coins during the tenure of the first person we hired to direct that program. First, in that, I wondered why we were charging the tenants to use the machines, and second I wondered where the quarters were going.

"But, most, I wondered why we hired that director. He was supposed to be a social worker, there to help people get over their addictions, and become productive citizens. But he had tattoos and earrings, and he died his hair orange like a punk rocker, and he moonlighted as a bouncer in a bar. And we had to garnish his pay for support for his children. What kind of social worker would hire him?

"But the Deputy Director did hire him, and she didn't fire him for stealing the quarters. She fired him because he got us sued for not following due process of law in evicting someone from the transitional housing. Afterward, she said she thought it was horrible that someone would steal quarters from homeless people, but that was while she was eating their food without following our requirement for staff to pay for what of it they eat. If she did think she was a do-gooder, it must have been with the rationale you attribute to Napoleon, that he thought he deserved perks from making the world a better place, maybe like Pat Garrett.

"But she and Ari are paid well anyway. Her salary is higher than that of most general managers of full-service luxury hotels, and she couldn't touch the responsibilities of their job, either legally or socially, no way. And Ari, in the first year after he cried to the Board about not getting what he had given to Love

of Saint Clare, took out of there more than three times the deputy director's compensation for that year. And, also, I have to wonder what they do with their money, with or without kickbacks.

"If Ari has any children, they've long been on their own, and he and his wife rent their apartment, and he's been working at Love of Saint Clare fifteen years. In five years, at a salary about half of the deputy director's, I got myself out of credit-card debt from a bad marriage and saved enough besides to put 10% down on a condominium unit in Boston's outrageous real estate market. That 10% was about what my debt had been, and I mortgaged for fifteen years rather than thirty and managed to save that amount again in the next year. So I'm paying ahead on my mortgage while the deputy director takes payroll advances for vacations.

"And I, while I was saving all that money to buy my home, took vacations to Central America and the Middle East, besides to New Orleans for French Quarter Fest and to New York for New Year's Eve and the Belmont Stakes, still enjoying the wildness of White Oaks, though not the Lincoln County killing. And once, when I started to tell the Deputy Director about my trip to the Holy Land, she told me she goes to nice places on vacation. And then she turned and walked away.

"And she also said she found *Dr. Zhivago* boring, because it was all about someone walking miles in snow, and she was talking about the film, not the book. I wonder if she's read any of your books. Of course she hasn't!"

"Maybe she's jealous of Lara," suggested Lev.

"Maybe," said the finance-administrator. "She married someone she doesn't bring to Love Saint Clare functions, after both she and he were past the age most people marry. And she said her father criticized her impracticality, something about installing closet-rods. That marriage of hers has lasted years, but without children.



“And there’s plenty more weirdness. Love of Saint Clare donors paid for a champagne party to celebrate that marriage, here in this vault. I drank beer on that occasion, as the shelter’s clothing distribution supervisor emerged from a cardboard cake, with a rubber mask of President Clingon covering his face. A lot of people laughed, but I didn’t.

“I don’t know, but I think maybe that’s the answer. I think maybe it’s drugs, what they spend their money on. Love of Saint Clare has no drug-testing policy for employees, and my boss says the reason is that it would be contrary to the culture there, which is supposed to be to free people from addictions.

“Ari buys books on clinical drugs, saying they’re for his continuing education, and we reimburse him for them while we have no one on our staff who can prescribe drugs. The deputy director wears the same shoes to work several days in a row, and my boss wears the same pair of trousers to work more than a week at a time, and our human-resources specialist has a Jack Kerouac poster, on a wall of her office. And, to direct counseling, Ari hired a guy with whom he’d worked in New York.

And, during lunch in the staff dining-room that guy made speeches promoting legalizing drugs. And once, while his wife was out of town, he asked me to go out and have a few beers with him. So we went to Charles Street, the business street at the bottom of Beacon Hill, where I was renting an apartment then. And, after a few beers, we went to my place and ordered a pizza from across the street. And, when I returned from picking up the pizza, my apartment reeked of marijuana. I couldn’t not inhale the smell.

“I don’t know. But I know they all have serious ego problems. That Director of Counseling made no secret of the fact that he’d rather play piano in bars than direct counseling for a homeless shelter. And, adding that to Kerry’s contempt for

vacationing in troubled lands and Ari's argument that he wasn't getting what he deserved, you have what most often makes people turn to drugs, I think. Feeling the world isn't good enough for them, trying to escape from it, they run from themselves. And Ari may be the worst example of that bunch of people. He seems more than ready to sell his soul. And her too."

"Who?" asked Lev, still somehow paying attention to this tirade.

"Kerry Wordy," said the finance-administrator, "our Deputy Director. She smokes tobacco too."

"A nasty habit," said Lev. "Almost as bad as the snuff in Russia."

"Yes, a nasty habit," agreed the finance-administrator. "It's an addiction, and she's deputy director of an agency that's supposed to help people get over addictions. Substance abuse is the most common cause of homelessness, and Kerry not only smokes and drinks but also advertises both. She talks and laughs in front of the guests about needing a cigarette or a drink. She's supposed to be helping people get rid of their addictions. But she brags about hers. She gloats about it. It's crazy.

"She also arranged for an open bar at our staff Christmas party. I drink too, as you can see, but I don't brag about it or promote it, and I'm not a professional social-worker, although I try to work for society, to make us all social, no blame or shame. So, in the spirit of *Santa Clara* and the needs of the homeless, for the needs of the people most able and ready for social work, I didn't drink at that Christmas party."

And Lev told me that by then he was peering into the vault as into a river.

"Do you think all homeless shelters are like that?" he asked the kid.

“I don’t know,” replied the finance-administrator. “But I’ve heard that the Pine Street Inn is, and it’s the biggest homeless shelter in this city. I heard they had to fire their Executive Director for checking out porn on the Internet. And, if you think that’s funny, I’ve got something else weird to tell you.

“In my week in the Holy Land, I met but two Americans. One was a journalist at the church of the nativity, and the other was wearing a Red Sox T-shirt in a bar in Tel Aviv. I asked the guy in the bar whether he was from Boston, and he said he’d had my boss’s job for the veterans shelter here. He said his name was Finkle and that he was then teaching business courses at a Tel Aviv university.

“I couldn’t find him very credible, because he was drunk and bragged about having been drunker and planning to be drunker again, reminding me of Kerry Wordy. But he told me things that told me he knew some of what he was talking about, and what he mainly talked about was board-of-directors corruption. And the *Boston Globe* has reported on that shelter’s fiscal mismanagement.

“But, anyway, I had to think about how important the whole question is. Homelessness is how the strife in the Holy Land began, and it remains the basic issue as it was the basic issue in the Lincoln County wars and in the depression dustbowl: ‘This Land is Your Land’. Woody Guthrie! You know?

“And the name of that bar in Tel Aviv was M.A.S.H. The letters were in the shape of the stencil letter for the TV sitcom M.A.S.H. But under the letters were the words “more alcohol served here”.

“And yet I know the veterans shelter claims to let no alcohol in the door.”

Lev told me all that paled him, appalled him. Telling me his Russia was never so weird, he said he just sat there in that

cellar and listened as the ghost of Billy the Kid rambled on. About everyplace from Lincoln County to Vietnam, from Afghanistan to Formosa, from Israel to Birmingham, and back to Boston, to his little work.

“The racism points to that as well,” Lev said the finance-administrator said. “I think people are racists because they feel worthlessness in themselves, and so they’re desperate to think they’re better than other people. And I’ve never seen racism as rampantly hypocritical as in that institution of people professing to be social-workers, in the name of *l’amore di Santa Clara*. Here’s another example that points to the cause, if I see the fingers there. Keeping color from the dawn, you know?”

“Two of the tenants in the transitional housing program had several similarities. Both were physically disabled, one with a heart-disorder and one with a nerve-disorder, and both were receiving disability-compensation from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and indications strongly suggested that both were dealing drugs, to other tenants and guests of *l’amore di Santa Clara*.

“The requirements for entry into that program are that the client have a job and be clean and sober for more than six months and that they pay 30% of their income as rent and attend group therapy-meetings. One difference between those two tenants was that one was black while the other was white, and another difference was that the black one complied with those requirements much more than did the white one. But another difference was that the deputy director called the white tenant a nice guy and put him to work in our kitchen paying him more than his case manager, while the black one became the only tenant evicted since the departure of the tattooed bouncing program-director, for any reason other than nonpayment of rent.

“The written reason was the black tenant’s failing a drug-test, after being tested far more frequently than the white tenant while the white tenant paid no rent, even after we paid him to help in the kitchen. And the new Program Director, the one the Deputy Director hired to replace the quarter-stealer, claimed another reason. And it’s his reason for anything.

“Nobody ever said life is supposed to be fair,’ he says.

“I say life is supposed to be fair,” said the ghost of Billy the Kid. “And I’ve spoken up accordingly, and I’ll probably be fired from my dedication to *l’amore di Santa Clara*. And, if I am fired, I’ll speak more loudly, beyond the people directly responsible, by taking the issue to the court of public opinion I hope I’ve learned is more powerful than gun-slinging. I don’t see much attention to your pen, but maybe I can speak in smaller words. More concisely. More plainly. You know?

“But I’ve already taken it to my nearest equivalent on the Board of Directors and received no answer from him. I received an answer, but from Ari saying I don’t know what I’m talking about and shouldn’t bother the Board with operational matters. So my next step will be to submit a formal grievance, according to the policies promised in our employee handbook, but the answer will be another denial. I’ll be told that the policy is in the process of revision, as it always is. It’s a moving target.”

“Wait a minute!” said Lev. “How do you know that? How can you be so negative? Don’t they have to comply with whatever’s written?”

The finance-administrator shook his head and laughed and frowned.

“No,” he said. “They’re revising it. They’re paying their law-firm thousands of the donors’ dollars to revise it, and they’ll pay their law-firm thousands of more dollars to get rid of me, if they have to. That’s like the question of why audits don’t catch the

financial irregularities I see every day, and the answer to that question is in the nature of auditors and attorneys. Attorneys use the law to represent their clients despite the law, and auditors don't get hired if they have a reputation for finding irregularities. And here's another example from Love of Saint Clare, of how all that insanity works.

"The executive staff hired a consultant to train all the staff in diversity. The consultant came to *l'amore di Santa Clara* and spent many hours telling the staff how to get along with one another regardless of race, religion, etc. After all those hours, he made some recommendations, and the executive staff made a show of complying with some, but they eventually dropped or ignored all of them. So why did they do that?

"Two reasons. One is that, if someone tries to sue them for racial discrimination, they can say they went to all that trouble and expense to promote diversity in the workplace. The other is that they paid that consultant, who was a professor from Boston University, a wage that in a fulltime year would add up to about twice Ari's compensation for the year after he cried to the Board that he was under-compensated. University professors of social work ordinarily receive less than a quarter of that, and I have to suspect that this one kicked much of that back. It's a sucking situation all around.

"Then there's the board member to whom I presented my complaint and shall formally present my grievance, because he's the board's Treasurer while I'm our finance-administrator. His name is M. Mickey Muller, and I have to wonder already about someone who has a problem with displaying his first name, and I've proved already that he isn't someone who would throw Satan out of Heaven, as the archangel Michael did. So indications of ego-despair and irresponsibility keep ramping.

“But here’s more. When I began working for *l’amore di Santa Clara*, the Chairman of its Board of Directors was a Franciscan friar. Now the Chairman is someone I’m told has a lot of stock in Texaco, someone named King Jazzin. The deputy director’s name is Kerry, and the human-resources specialist calls herself Kate. I’ve grown to think of the three of them as the KKK. I think you see my point in that.

“But anyway, when the Franciscan friar left our Board to accept a position higher on Anthony's ladder, our Treasurer wandered the hallways of the fifth floor you visited, to solicit an audience. Before the audience of us, he proudly presented to the Franciscan friar an expensive golf-putter, and afterward I had to write him a check from general donations, to reimburse him for it! See what I mean?”

“Sure,” said Lev. “I see what you mean. What about ‘us,’ the staff in general?”

“The staff in general is great,” said the finance-administrator. “And *l’amore di Santa Clara* provides wonderful and noble services for the homeless, but that’s despite the executive staff. Most of the staff hates to go to staff meetings, even staff picnics and staff Christmas parties, because they’re sick of the obviously bogus speeches of top management and its toadies. Most of the staff regards Ari as a retarded buffoon and Kerry as an out-of-control control-freak and Kate Plate as a toady.”

“What about the Board of Directors?” asked Lev.

“The staff says they're snooty,” answered the kid.

“But, naïve or not, the us take advantage of executive lack of focus to do what we feel or think in ourselves is right. And, because management principles such as span of control and unity of command don’t exist there, that’s easy to do. Kerry, because she tries to supervise everyone, forgets most of what she tells anyone.”

“OK,” said Lev. “But back up a second! Who’s Kate Plate?”

“She’s what we call a human-resources specialist, and she personifies the executive attitude, as her title says she must. She told me the funniest thing she’s ever heard was a Monty Python skit mimicking the sound of Mary Stuart’s head bouncing down the steps of the tower of London. And one thing many of the employees complain about is her preaching anti-Catholicism in the staff dining-room. Founded by Franciscans of Boston’s St. Anthony’s shrine, Love of Saint Clare is now ecumenical on secular, from its Jewish Executive Director on down. But much of its staff remains true to the name, and truer to humanity than its legacy.

“Yeah,” said Billy. “The little despots make me sickest. They’re the worst of the French corporals. But let me give you one more example of managerial insanity. We have another HUD-sponsored program, that’s becoming famous by the salesmanship of its Director, who couldn’t administer his way out of a wet paper-bag. Like many sales-people, he talks a big show and easily forgets his promises, and so his subordinates resent his very existence. So they also act better by their own hearts.

“One thing that Director does right is staff his program mostly with graduates of it, but one thing he does wrong is treat them as though they owe him their souls for that. One example is that he published an article he called The Junky Whore about one of his life-skills instructors, who had come there to leave that life.

“Her job for *l’amore di Santa Clara* is helping people in that program dress for success, and she’s one of the most gracious people I’ve ever met, while she’s also intolerant of lack of integrity. No one asked her permission to publish that article, and she complained. So they’ll probably fire her too.



“And something else about that beautiful woman is her intense fragility. Outside her work and her now studying toward a graduate degree, she’s practically a hermit for fear of falling back into her old ways. If they fire her, she probably shall fall back into those old ways, and you can bet they’ll fire her anyway.

“To me, that’s horror. But the craziest thing about that program director, who has adopted with his wife some mentally-challenged children and tries to brow beat them into following his style of reasoning, is that he moonlights managing a skeet range. Think about that, considering the shelter’s Franciscan founding.

“Francis of Assisi is most famous for loving all creatures, and especially birds. And *l’amore di Santa Clara* talks and preaches and actualizes such, through its little honest people, with Clara’s spirit. But, meanwhile, the director of one of its largest programs operates a training ground for killing birds as they fly.

“But what can one expect? The Franciscan board-chairman was wearing a polo-shirt when he accepted the putter, and Franciscans donate millions of dollars to Love of Saint Clare. That may be good for *l’amore di Santa Clara*, but it by no means accords with Francis or his rules for his order.

“Francis forbade accepting alms beyond food and their basic brown garb. So, when the church offered him ownership of real estate for his order, he refused. Instead, he paid rent for that shelter, a basket of fish each year, fish his friars caught. But, then, if Francis loved all creatures, how about the fish?

“But I think you may be right, Lev,” continued the kid. “I mean about my being a typical disgruntled employee, like a typical disgruntled cow being led to slaughter or a typical fetus being aborted. Humans call humans beastly when they kill other humans, and they abort their own embryos. Beasts don’t do such things.

“And humans do it in the name of reason, which they say makes them superior to beasts. I think humans are inferior to beasts in that they’re the only species capable of trying to make lame excuses for doing anything they feel like doing. And I think being a boss takes that to a level one step lower.

“Most of us feel compelled to explain what we do, by stating reasons for our opinions that make us do it, but bosses seem to me to get to be bosses by hiding their reasoning as much as they can, putting them a step less reasonable than people who say they have a right to their opinion.

“And I think that’s the least rational, because it angers and alienates anyone more reasonable, because it means bosses accept no obligation to find reasons for opinions or to learn. What’s up with that, I’ve had to ask. How crazy can we get?

“I did some deeds in Vietnam as well. And I’ve learned since then that the United States Veterans Administration is a lot like Love of Saint Clare. I heard a V. A. employee say her employment wouldn’t be so bad, were it not for the veterans.

“And I also found that the Veterans Administration won’t hire criminals it claims to rehabilitate and otherwise assist in employment! Doesn’t it believe in its own social-work or care about other society? How’s that for bigotry and hypocrisy?

“But, still, as I said, a difference is that the little people working for *l’amore di Santa Clara* come there knowing and work there knowing full well the importance of whatever they can best do at that basically lovely place.

“So I posted the question on the World Wide Web, specifically regarding Love of Saint Clare. I posted it on an Internet newsgroup for nonprofit organizations. And the main reply was that I was fouling my own nest.

“I hope and pray the nest is mine. And so, if the nest is non-profit, I don’t see how I’m doing the fouling. That reply reminded me of monsters terrorizing children.”

“Yes,” said Lev. “I love ballet and honor that Clara is the heroine of *The Nutcracker*! How, if we can’t be fair and decent with adults, and we raise children?”

“Did you notice that this bar’s name is Remington’s?” asked the kid. “As in mass-producing rifles, and the Marine that killed Fits Jr.? Deep vault, huh?”

“Be the monsters real or not,” said Lev, “they shouldn’t be and needn’t ever be.”

## Chapter 22

### The Trial

“It all seems crazy to me,” rambled on this reincarnated Billy the Kid. “But it fits well here in Boston, with the Common having been founded as a sort of skeet-range for practicing killing the natives of this continent, and moving on to Mary Dyer and the big dig. And it fits well in the Roman Church, with the rich pedophile clergy and people kissing the pope’s ring as though it were a golden calf, with poor people ambivalently wishing their children to be both good and rich, and so to join the clergy to steal in the name of God. I have a tough time just naming things.

“Maybe you could call Kerry Wordy’s management attitude the Catholic work ethic as opposed to the Protestant work ethic, since Catholic clergy say the rest of humanity is too illiterate or too stupid to understand what they call the word of God, which greatly pissed me off when I was young, an Irish child. But, whatever you call it, it’s bigotry as crazy as the Israelites saying the author of the Ten Commandments told them to kill all the Canaanites and steal their land. Gee whillakers, Mr. Tolstoi!”

“You sound like a friend of mine, young fella,” said Lev, hardly grinning.

“I’m not the only person who reads history and thinks objectively,” said the finance-administrator. “But there aren’t many others on Earth.”

“But seriously,” said Lev, “do you think Ari’s as he is because he’s Judaic?”

“I’m not anti-Semitic,” said the finance-administrator, “although I am anti that term, because more Muslims than Jews are Semitic. If I were anti-Jewish, I’d point at Ari and say he epitomizes the stereotype anti-Israelites ordinarily present to excuse themselves, calling Jews pecuniary, greedy and cheap. But I’m not anti anything, except bigotry and hypocrisy and prejudice.

“So I have to say that Ari’s little like any other Jew I’ve met, and I’d be ashamed to own him, if I were Jewish. It’s as, in the same way, my new German ancestry makes me ashamed of owning Hitler, as I’m ashamed of those bigots calling themselves Christian in Ireland, because I was Irish before, but I’m ashamed anyway. Being human makes me part of it all.

“But what can I do? I think of Ira Hayes, the Puma United States Marine who helped plant Old Glory on Iwo Jima and drowned drunk in a ditch at home. Other citizens of this melting pot of huddled masses called him just a whiskey-drinking Indian. I call him another victim of the bigotry of colonialism, of greed like Ari Hamm’s. And it seems to me that ‘just’ is the key word.

“Where’s the justice? I remember that organizing the United States civil rights movement began with a promise that justice would roll down like water, and I think of Ira Hayes drowning in a few inches of dirty water in a ditch. Then I have to wonder how he and a huge proportion of others indigenous to this country became whisky-drinkers.

“Gandhi, an Indian who gave his life for his people didn’t drink whiskey. Ira Hayes, an American who risked his life for his people and for the people who beat him into being a hopeless drunk, gave his life at last for nothing. So I think of Woody Guthrie and his song of depression soup, saying politicians may have seen through it, had it been just a little bit thinner.

“I think of Guthrie’s protégé Pete Seeger, singing in the sixties and seventies along with the Civil Rights movement and the mess in Vietnam despite it, and I know people know those songs. Seeger sang of Ira Hayes, and he asked a question in another song that makes me weep every time I hear it. He asks who killed Norma Jean, and all of us did. And no one owns up.”

“That’s partly why I renounced my books,” said Lev. “The prejudicial references to people by their national origin, especially in *War and Peace*. And there’s but one Negro character in that book, and none of the other characters are sure he’s real. Anyway, what you can do is what you’re doing, not being a French corporal. If only all would stand and tell the truth.”

“Exactly,” agreed the finance-administrator. “That was my favorite point in your book, though sometimes I’m close to accepting your general premise that nobody knows what he’s talking about, not even you. I have a hunch that beauty and truth aren’t hiding and lying, and I strongly suspect that bowing out of being a French corporal isn’t cowardice. I mean, it seems to me that bowing out of being a French corporal is nipping it in the bud, if one buds out soon enough, before ugly sets in.

“I mean that stuff I did in Lincoln County could have been unnecessary, if the incumbent corporals had used the resources of their human integrity and never sold their souls for the promises of money the insurgents promised.

“So, to me, the craziest character at Love of Saint Clare seems to be the human-resources specialist.

“She says Woody Allen’s a genius. Woody Allen made a fortune promoting self-pity, and now people like that human-resources specialist feel sorry for him for screwing his adopted daughter. It’s like French movies, after centuries of ignoring Shakespeare in favor of the Aristotelian unities, intellectualizing the Hegelian notion of dialectical idealism into agreement with

Sergei Eisenstein's dialectical imagery, his montage theory of cinematography. I suspect that Eisenstein was right in his Zen notion that enlightenment can come from having your prejudices broken up by having your rationality forced outside the box, but the French intellectualize his theories back into the box. And the box, the intellectual subject of most French films now, is feeling sorry for oneself for being unable to love. Nothing genius in that, nothing creative, new.

"It's like that Clingon character who's supposed to be President now. What can people desire from that, other than to be able to say they can behave as he does, because he does and is the President? And, if that's why they voted for him, what do they desire for their children? Abortion?"

"A person could argue that that's a good reason for abortion. If kids are going to grow up with Clingon as a role model and their parents reinforcing that by telling them that they'd like them to be President of the United States, couldn't we argue that we may as well put all humanity out of its misery? What kind of parents are people who voted for Clingon? And the economy?"

"Anyone who's given any honest attention to history since World War II, which certainly should be the baby-boomers who have lived it and voted for Clingon, must know that the economic boom during Clingon's administration has come from the world stability from ending the Cold War.

"And anyone who knows basic economics knows that continuing it will require honest hard work, not the me-generation motivation Clingon's example has inspired. If the work-ethic keeps its current direction, no one will bother to produce anything. Except new excuses for litigation.

"Maybe Kate Plate will sue Love of Saint Clare for letting her steal too many of the bagels Starbucks donates, or maybe sue Starbucks for donating."

“Oh!” said Lev. “She must be the one with the muffins piled on the paper piled on her desk. She’s your human-resources specialist?”

“That’s what the other two K’s call her,” answered the finance-administrator.

“How did she get that job?” asked Lev.

“I don’t know,” said the finance-administrator. “Someone who quit, complaining about corruption, told me she got it because her husband’s family has a lot of money. She told me she left her last job because new management asked her to spend more time at her desk than she did at the water-cooler.

“Those weren’t her exact words, but that’s what they added up to. Must have been some job-interview, selecting her for *l’amore di Santa Clara*. She was there when we hired the quarter-stealing social-worker.”

“What was that last job of hers?” asked Lev.

“Human resources there too, she said,” said the finance-administrator. “For the *Boston Tab*. In most cities, most people consider ‘tabloid journalism’ an oxymoron. But in Fits city, with the big dig and the pedophile priests and a homeless-shelter named for *l’amore di Santa Clara* practicing racial discrimination, the truth is weirder than the fiction in the tabloids. So the *Boston Tab* is a respected newspaper.

“But the part I don’t understand,” said Billy, “is whether those people are heartless or only thoughtless. So that’s the question that troubles me most.”

“Only thoughtless, I hope,” said Lev. “They don’t seem to me even to think of their reputations. But I’m not sure.”

“And Hitler?” the finance-administrator wished to know as well.”

“The same, I think,” said Lev. “Ultimately, through complexity.”



“Okay, Lev,” said Billy. “Here’s what I want to know, about conserving and liberating. Do humans show their hearts when they weep for Bambi in movie theatres, or when they behave at their dinner tables as though that weeping of theirs is for the possibility that burning the flora may have overcooked the faun?”

“Whew,” said Lev. “I think that’s the fundamental question, and I don’t know the answer. By the way, how did you get your job, that position with such lovely possibilities, with those people of such untoward complexities?”

“That’s a long story,” answered the finance-administrator. “I just sort of fell into it after life of tumbling here and there, and then I fell in love with the place.”

“Tumbling how and where?” asked Lev.

“Okay,” said the finance-administrator. “I’ll try to make a long story short.

“You must know about the Lincoln County wars, and I guess you can’t but know what purgatory is, God throwing us back to try again to get it right. I was born again this century into a family that became so poor by the time I reached high school that I didn’t have a week’s change of socks. The other kids treated me like dirt, and I started feeling that dirt was my life, now or before, new or old. But, this time around, I tried to be more private, to focus more on my own self. I tried to dig my own way out of the dirt. Yes, I know what you’re thinking. I’m a slow learner too.

“At first, I tried to get myself killed again, hoping to get another ticket, one out of here. I jumped from roofs and climbed anything high, swinging from boughs as high and willowy as my embodied weight let me climb, but none of the boughs broke. And, when I was sixteen, I began traveling carnival work to get more into life where death is more possible.

And, when I was seventeen, I requested and won a Senatorial nomination to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point.

“Of course, with my knowledge of past life, I passed the tests. But my knowledge of my past life also told me I wouldn’t handle the discipline. So I turned the nomination down and I enlisted in the Army and volunteered for Vietnam, in 1966.

“That was when I was eighteen, and I volunteered for the most dangerous duty, but the Army said my abilities were more needed in the rear echelon. So I didn’t die as a snot-nosed lieutenant or as a combat engineer seeking explosives in dark tunnels. So I got out for a while and enrolled in college to try to find a reason to live.

“But that lasted about three weeks before I decided to hitchhike across the country to try to get myself killed that way. And that’s when you saw me at White Oaks, but from there I went back to where I grew up this time on Earth and married a girl, not because I wanted to marry anyone but because I thought she wanted to marry me, and we had a son. And, because everything I was doing then was random, I couldn’t get myself to hold a civilian job to support them.

“So I reenlisted. And then, returning to my morbid ways, I turned down an assignment to Paris to go to Afghanistan. But I managed there to suffer but two attempts on my life and a fall from a motor-cycle in which I broke a crash-helmet that was on my head only because someone handed it to me that day. And next I got stuck with an assignment in Indiana about two-hundred miles from my this-life hometown. So I left the Army again and went to college again.

“In Indiana, veterans didn’t have to pay tuition, and my wife got a job. So I didn’t have to worry about money, and I took

courses in anything I thought might interest me. My major was English, but I also took Russian and Piano, and Psychology.

“But then, when older than I’d died the other time, I took maybe a little too much to heart some psycho-babble from my psychology courses. So, with a notion of ‘entitlement’ to what I felt I was missing, I committed what I think is the worst crime against a person. And still I can’t say the word for it.

“And still I think it was worse than what I did in Lincoln County. I’ve always tried to think I’m a good person, but to me that meant doing what I thought was good for other people, but I didn’t consider in that what other people thought was good for them. I mean, in all those decades of being a ghost and trying to let myself be good enough to go to heaven, I hadn’t acquired compassion.

“But I surely learned it when I committed that crime. The next morning, when I woke up sober, I couldn’t get myself to get out of bed. I didn’t think I was worth being anything alive or dead.

“And what I was suffering wasn’t shame. It was guilt, and I felt that I’d never deserve to stop feeling it, if I were a ghost for eternity. But a friend of mine came by to go drinking, and I went because I dreaded the possibility of his feeling bad, if I didn’t go with him.

“So I trudged on through the legal repercussions, and my sentence was ten to twenty years in prison, but I got out after a little more than five. Part of that was for good behavior, and part of it was because of overcrowding in the prison, and the best I can say of that is that I tried to use the time well. But I didn’t do that for the reward.”

“I, a peckerwood on turf of many angry African Americans, could have been killed there easily. But, by then, I knew better than to expect any of them to expect sincerity from

any European American. So, by trying not to offend anyone, I also survived that.

“And my being what humans call governments call married during that dismantling of what I thought was my self didn’t help me try to get myself killed there.”

“So now I also suffer the guilt of sliding past all that.

“What did all that do to your marriage?” asked Lev.

“I may have gotten off, if I weren’t married,” answered the finance-administrator. “I defended myself in court, partly because my court-appointed attorney plainly wasn’t working to do it, but mostly because I was ashamed of having my family and few friends see me in court, and the attorney said he’d call character witnesses, including my wife. He didn’t bother to contact the people I listed as character witnesses, though he said he’d tried and couldn’t reach them, though many of them had voicemail. He didn’t try, and I was glad of that, but I never knew what he’d do or wouldn’t do.

“Anyway, the prison-time did in our marriage. In my fourth year there, my wife became pregnant by a friend of mine. But weirder than that is that she repented and joined the Mormon Church and divorced me because I wouldn’t join it with her. I read the *Book of Mormon* and had to wonder how a translation inspired by God of a book someone dug up in nineteenth-century New England would be word-for-word the same as a translation of the Book of Isaiah by scholars in seventeenth-century old England.

“And I put that question in a letter to my wife. But she replied that scholarship didn’t matter, and she said she’d have to divorce me because otherwise she couldn’t get something she said the Mormons called the patriarchal blessing, and I didn’t argue that the Mormon Church forbids divorce. Her church or she apparently had put rationality out of her questions, and I wasn’t with her to give her the hugs she needed to give her confidence in her sense,

and she also gave me reason not to bother to point out that scholarship wasn't question.

“Your letters are too long for me to read,” she wrote, leaving me wondering what she or anyone might say or do if I told them I was Billy the Kid, maybe what people said and did to Joan of Arc, but in some more modern way. Maybe they'd have subjected me to mental-health profession, instead of to religious disease. I bet you don't know Garrett killed me on Bastille Day. I don't expect that much attention.

“But, anyway, I spent most of my prison-time trying to learn. I made a list of about three hundred of the books my public education had told me humanity most respected, and I read them in chronological order in hope of aligning my attitude with the social development of Earth. Since the prison library was stocked mostly by prisoners' requests, few of the books on my list were there, but my wife sent them to me, for a while. She stopped when she got pregnant and joined the Mormon Church. I guess she then had too much else to do.

“Oh, but I knew her loneliness and poverty, and I know how the Mormon hierarchy takes advantage of other despair and ignorance and such to suck up tithes. She sent a couple of the kids Mormons calls elders and missionaries to visit me in prison, with their short-cut hair and their short-sleeved shirts and their clip-on neckties, and I tried to talk with them about the Bible. I tried to talk of better ways it tells.

“Yes,” said one. “The Bible's very deep.”

“Sure are a lot of black people here,” said the other.

“They're young,” said my wife, next time she visited.

“What about your own kids?” asked Lev.

“Two sons,” replied the kid. “They were in early elementary school when I went to prison, and I was too busy struggling not to starve to death after I left prison. So their mother,

and the Mormon she married rather than keeping me or marrying her third son's father, tried to raise them to be Mormons. My oldest son committed suicide, thinking he'd otherwise go to prison for pedophilia, and my youngest son works for the United States' Social Security Administration in a tiny town in Nebraska and thinks rave parties are sites of high philosophy and the epitome of camaraderie. They've both gassed themselves, or been gassed by others' gassing, in their separate ways."

"I guess I see how you've come to feel the way you feel about parenting," said Lev. "But how about the rest of your family this time around? Brothers and sisters?"

"The rest of my family resents my education. None of my siblings have graduated from college, and I'm an MBA now. And they also think the reason I asked them not to visit me in prison is that I resented them. I told them the reason was the same as my defending myself in court, that I was ashamed for them to see me there, but they don't accept that. Anyway, I can't talk to them, because they don't care to hear about the world outside themselves. All I have to do to run them out of a room is to mention *l'amore di Santa Clara*. I once wore a Love of Saint Clare T-shirt to a family reunion. And no one mentioned it at all to me. They conspicuously ignored it."

"Basically, their only interest in me is in their forgiving me. They liked me much more when I was in prison than they do now that I'm working for a homeless-shelter. Maybe they'll like me more after Love of Saint Clare fires me, but the last thing they'll do is understand.

I mean if they know about it. But, because I can't communicate with them, they won't. Well, maybe I can, but I haven't found out how to yet.

"But, still, I have a crazy dream of family life. Think of taking one of those rightly ramshackle antebellum plantation

houses in the Mississippi Delta and fixing it up into a foster home for the worst young results of the New Orleans public housing projects. I'd like to do that with a wife while raising a daughter of ours so lovely. Talk about a pipedream, in this life of mine! How can that come true?"

"So you're alone in this ghastly life of yours?" asked Lev.

"My youngest son and oldest living sister say I'll die alone, because I don't consort with them. That's the son who thinks rave parties are high philosophy, and that sister calls herself a Christian and says Joshua was right in trying to kill all the Canaanites, and she hasn't said anything to me since I sent her an e-mail describing how the Alabama government set the dogs and fire-hoses on the praying African American children in Birmingham. She lives in Tennessee but near the Alabama line.

"But I don't feel alone. Except when I'm with people who pretend. So I feel most alone when I'm with my family. And I feel most at home with homeless people."

"Well," said Lev. "You seem at least good company to me, but you called that sister your oldest living sister. Does that mean you have dead sisters older?"

"One," answered the finance-administrator. "An uncle molested her when she was nine, but the nearest she ever came to giving up on life was becoming a Star Trek fan, a Trekkie. She graduated from high school when she was 56 years old, the age in this life that I was last year. But that Christmas Eve, the last of the last past millennium, she died of a heart attack. I wonder where God has her now. The doctors said it was her first. First physical, maybe. Heart, attack. Humanity."

"Nothing wrong with Trekkies," said Lev. "They tend to remember much and judge little. I attended a convention of them in New Orleans, and I have friends more spacey than they are. I bet she never thought she had to forgive anyone anything. I bet

she never tried to claim that right. I bet she never called herself so good.”

“Not a snowball’s chance in hell of that,” said the finance-administrator. “You want to know what drives me nuts about almost everyone Love of Saint Clare pays to be professionals there, the counselors and social workers and psychologists?”

“A guess of mine,” offered Lev, “is that they say you’re a numbers person.”

“And, worse than that, a computer person,” replied the finance-administrator.

“Is that because you’re good with their computers?”

“They compute. I compute. Of course. How not?”

“You’re not afraid computers will steal your soul?”

“They’d have to have a soul of theirs for that,” answered the Finance-administrator. “They’re tools to leave Earth time for better things, and for quicker communication, for truth, beauty. Or so it seems to me.”

“I agree,” said Lev. “And I think you’re right that your story is quite long. And I still don’t know how you got your job for *l’amore di Santa Clara*. Finish that part, if you can in fewer words than *War and Peace*, or if you can’t. Computers can’t compute quite all of this. As far as I can tell.”

“Well,” said the finance-administrator, “after I got out of prison, I couldn’t find a job. I was up against both my criminal record and some of the residue from the stagflation of the seventies, and no way could I reenlist with a felony conviction. So I was on welfare for a while, until a friend from high school gave me a job at a motel she managed, and I went back to school for my MBA degree, mainly for the GI Bill money, and student loans.

But, even with that degree, the best job I could find was as a convenience store manager, because my friend was also a regional supervisor for the convenience store chain.



So I did what many people do in such circumstances. I became a drunk, abandoned my sensibilities. That is, as far as I could. But I didn't quite quit. Still I tried to win.

"Bumming through New Orleans, planning no destination I cared much to reach, I fell in love with the French Quarter. I got a part-time job in an elegant little guesthouse in the quiet end of Bourbon Street, and my high school friend back home in Michigan loaned me enough money to deposit myself into a little slave-quarter apartment on Dauphine Street. And, wonder of wonders, at last I felt at home.

"And that was before I learned that John James Audubon did most of his work on *Birds of America*, a book I'd checked out as a child from the public library in my hometown in this life, again and again.

"Each morning, as I closed the gate of my Dauphine Street house to walk to the work, I looked around. I saw the Creole architecture, the little Italian grocery across the street, and its bicycle parked out front for deliveries. And I felt at home.

"And I nearly developed a career. I went from my position as concierge for the little guesthouse to responsibility for all the computer systems in one of the city's largest convention hotels, in less than two years. And I married again.

"The friend from high school divorced and left her family to come to New Orleans and marry me. But I had no more reason to marry her than I'd had to marry my first wife. And this second wasn't nearly as honest or kind.

Thinking I was helping her out of one of her phony sob stories, I quit my job and took her to Colorado Springs divorced her there, but I won't waste your time with the details of that craziness. The bottom line is that I left Colorado Springs with a pile of student-loan debt from my MBA degree and credit-card

debt from that second marriage and less than a dollar in my pocket. And, drunk and homeless, I bummed America for two more years.

“Until I wandered into Boston. Here, I checked into the Veterans Shelter and there received a suit for job interviews. So I went to Accountemps, and Accountemps sent me to *l’amore di Santa Clara*, because my predecessor had quit. And, five weeks later, Love of Saint Clare bought out my Accountemps contract to keep me in my predecessor’s place indefinitely.

“And, five years later, I bought my condo. unit. And now, while paying me half again as much as my initial salary there, they’re about to fire me. They’ll fire me simply because I told them and no one else what they know full well they’re doing.”

“Why did you stay so long?” asked Lev.

“The place is important,” said the finance-administrator. “Also I have the hots for a hypoglycemic Roman Catholic theologian working there. She does whatever feels right to her, mostly helping with immigration, while she’s paid to council substance abusers. But the main reason I stayed so long is that the place is important.”

“The same reason you’re complaining,” said Lev.

“Exactly,” said the finance-administrator. “But I’m not going to become a drunken bum again. I’ve already fouled too many nests, and mine more than any other. And I’m just not going to do that anymore, as those news-grouper hypocrites do. I hope and pray I can now help to clean some nests. I’m trying.

“And firing me won’t stop my efforts. At last I found something I could do well with a sense of worthiness, and I feel like your character Pierre in *War and Peace*. I mean when he realizes that people pretending to be benefactors only try to benefit their own veniality. I wonder if Peter ever figured out Paul.”

“Some documents,” Lev answered, “suggest that they didn’t love each other as Jesus said we should love our enemies.”

Though Lev and the finance-administrator sat alone in the cellar, a waitress was keeping up with them and had brought them several rounds. And the finance-administrator's answers were far more than Lev's questions, but neither of them was ready to give up the night or the camaraderie of conversation. So the finance-administer offered a solution.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "want to see what drunk is? I mean drunker than we already are."

"I'm Russian," said Lev. "I think I know what drunk is."

"Want to see what Irish drunk is?"

"I haven't seen that," said Lev.

"Let's go to Southy."

"Why in hell not."

So they pushed back their chairs, preparing to leave. But, before they could stand, a man came fairly bounding down the stairs. His trousers were plaid knickers, and his cap matched his trousers but had a large puffy ball on top. In one of his hands, the man had two open bottles of the brand of beer Lev and the finance-administrator were drinking. And, in his other hand, were another bottle of beer and a putter.

"I overheard your conversation," said this apparition. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," said Lev, pulling his chair back to the table.

The finance-administrator didn't answer, but he also pulled his chair back to the table, as the apparition set a bottle of beer in front of each of them and sat, leaning the putter against the fourth chair.

"You know," said the finance-administrator, "you look like Bob Hope?"

"I get that a lot," answered the apparition.

“You even sound like Bob Hope,” added the finance-administrator.

“I am Bob Hope,” said the apparition.

“Who’s Bob Hope?” asked Lev.

“I am,” said Bob.

“He’s a comedian,” said the finance-administrator. “He goes around to war zones and makes the troops laugh. He’s been doing it since World War II. Too young for World War I, I guess.”

“Not by much,” said Bob. “I’m almost a hundred years old. I’m about ten years older than Theresa. You know, that woman who sat down on that bus in Alabama and wouldn’t get up. But I made a slight miscalculation and was born in England with a name that wouldn’t sell well here in the United States of America. So, having to clear all that up, I moved here to make a name for myself. Make a name for myself. Get it?”

“Yeah,” said Lev. “I get it.”

“So what are you doing here?” asked the finance-administrator.

“Like I said,” said Bob, “I overheard your conversation. If you’re going to Southy, I’d like to tag along. I know it’s dangerous there, and I know you two have given up six-shooters and heavier artillery, but I brought my putter.”

“What’s a putter?” asked Lev of the finance-administrator. “You said Love of Saint Clair bought one for that departing board chairman. But what is it?”

“That’s a putter,” said Bob, pointing to his, leaning against the chair.

“What’s it for?” asked Lev.

“Putting,” said the finance-administrator, beating Bob to the punch. “In golf. It’s a game, from Scotland. I guess that’s why Bob’s knickers and cap are plaid. The putter’s for rolling

little white balls across short grass and into holes, for exercise, for pride.”

“Why don’t you just kick them in?” asked Lev.

“Why did you write fourteen-hundred pages just to tell people they don’t know what they’re talking about?” asked Bob. “But I know it’s rude to try to answer a question with a question, and you can use a putter to beat people to death too, if you’re Irish.”

“Why did you go all over the world making soldiers laugh?” asked Lev.

“Nasty job,” said Bob. “But somebody had to do it. I mean the soldiers’ jobs, not mine. And I don’t mean they needed to do it or thought it needed to be done. I mean they had it to do, like your French corporals. I thought they could use a little chuckle. Besides, I like to keep track of things. Everywhere.”

“Alright,” said the finance-administrator. “I’m glad we got all that cleared up. Are we ready to go, before the subway shuts down?”

“What’s a subway?” asked Lev.

“We’ll show you,” said Bob.

## Chapter 23

### The Miserable

So they whistled past the graveyard and on across the Common to the Park Street T-stop and hopped the Red Line to Andrew Station.

“Homelessness is big business!” said a T-shirt on a young woman on the train. “But who’s getting the business?”

But, emerging from the tunnel, the finance-administrator led his *compadres* past the Li'l Peach convenience store across the street from the station and up the little street beside it and pointed out his condominium unit as they passed, on their way to the bars.

“I heard that part of your conversation, too,” said Bob. “Do you like your place?”

“The apartment I left to buy it was bigger,” said the finance-administrator. “And I felt like I was rattling around in it. This place is perfect for me, new wooden floors and fresh paint and a nice little wood-burning fireplace, and a little deck on the back for reading and getting a little sun in summer. Maybe some people need more. I don’t.”

“The only problem I have there is my upstairs neighbor. She’s a trustee in the condominium association, and she asked during our first meeting after I bought the place that someone else be, and I volunteered. I signed some papers, but she didn’t provide

copies to me, although I asked her to. But that's but a meagerly related problem.

"She resents. In that same meeting, she asked whether anyone liked flowers. I told her I do, and I suggested azaleas for that little bed there beside the steps, and she accepted that recommendation, or said she did. And she also has children visit her often, but she pulled up the azaleas before they could root, like a sneak-thief. The reason I know she pulled them up is that she told me she did. But not until I told her I'd planted them and that they didn't grow. And she seemed to me to be bragging when she said it.

"She likes to talk about law, as church Christians like to talk about medicine, and I guess she wanted another trustee to reduce her liability. But, when an attorney who owns a unit on the other side of the duplex rented it to an attractive apparently businesslike young black woman, she called him a slumlord. Appropriately, she's Irish and named for the mother of Jesus and the adulterer of Paris, peace in Canaan and war in Troy.

I don't know what her problem is, whether her mother enjoyed flowers more than her or what, but she reminds me of little old ladies who grow gardens and rail at children who get near enough to enjoy them.

"Bigotry and resentment seem to me to pervade South Boston, beyond its fame for racism. So the part I don't understand is like the part I don't understand about Israelis and Palestinians! After how United States citizens treated the Irish immigrants from the potato famine, how so little sympathy?

"But, of course, I may be wrong throughout. I'm not a ghost for nothing. Or at least I hope not."

"How are you going to make the mortgage payments after Love of Saint Clare fires you?" asked Bob.

“Maybe I’ll not be able to,” said the finance-administrator. “But I’m not going to sell my soul for mortgage payments. I hope at least I’ve learned that much on my way to Boston.”

“I’m thinking of the people leaving the wounded to take their furniture from Moscow before Napoleon got there,” said Lev.

“You know,” said Bob. “I own a lot of Texaco stock, and I have a friend who used Texas oil-connections to do a lot of good on Earth.”

“Do you know that Jazzin gent who chairs our Board of Directors?” asked the finance-administrator. “He seems to me to be dedicated to minimizing the good he can do, and he could do much, but his suits are tight.”

“No,” answered Bob, “I don’t. But he can’t be all bad with that name. Do you know a Lebanese owns the only bowling alley in Afghanistan, and uses it to collect a little intelligence on the side?”

“I did know that,” said the finance-administrator. “I didn’t spend ten years in the United States Army for nothing. Do you know twelve tanks overthrew the Afghan monarchy?”

“Who gives a crap?” asked Lev. “Where’s this bar you’re taking us to? Did you know I have a Texas oil-friend, too?”

“Right there,” said the finance-administrator, pointing to an unlit Budweiser advertisement above a dirty doorway.

By now, the finance-administrator had led his motley crew out of Ulster Street and onto Dorchester Street and across Old Colony Avenue. The Budweiser sign was the only sign on that little building wedged between two larger ones, and no name was on the sign other than Budweiser. Across the street, between the bar and the beach on the old harbor, was one of Boston’s under-maintained public housing projects. And, inside, the place stank of beer and cigarette-smoke and the sweat of homeless people.



The floor was of nicked-up unmatched asphalt tiles, and the walls were of veneer paneling, like in house-trailers. The ceiling was acoustical with holes apparently punched by cue-sticks, and with blue spots where the tips had hit but hadn't penetrated, and the barstools were as unmatched as the floor-tiles. But the bar was of mahogany and by far the cleanest surface in the place. And the place was full of customers.

And the finance-administrator stepped to one of the two tables there. They were large round tables, but a woman was sitting alone at that one, and the finance-administrator bent and kissed her on a cheek. And she said Hi and smiled.

"That's my Bill," she said. "Gas bill, electric bill, phone bill, . . . ."

"These are some friends of mine," said the finance-administrator. "Bob and Lev. This is Shirley. Mind if we join you?"

"No, sure," said Shirley, offering a hand to the others, while the finance-administrator went to the bar.

"Hey, Jim," said the finance-administrator to a man sitting at the bar.

"Hello, my friend," said the man, briefly looking at the finance-administrator, then turning back to the television in front of him high behind the bar, though its sound was down as the jukebox played.

"Hey, Jimmy," said the finance-administrator to the bartender.

"What can I getcha?" asked Jimmy.

"There are five Jims in here," said Shirley to Bob and Lev.

"The usual, please," said the finance-administrator.

"This?" asked Jimmy, touching the tap-handle for a beer called Natural Ice.

“Yeah,” said the finance-administrator, “and also two Buds and a Coors Light.”

“Bottles?” asked Jimmy.

“Yes please,” said the finance-administrator. “And also whatever John’s drinking down there. He looks like he’s running low.”

He pointed to a man at the front end of the bar, who looked older than both the first Jim to whom he had spoken and Shirley, though all three of them looked quite old.

“You mean Mr. Quinn?” asked Jimmy.

“Yeah,” said the finance-administrator. “And it looks like Jamie’s ready for one.”

“You want to buy Jamie a beer?” asked Jimmy.

“Yes, please,” said the finance-administrator. “How’s your life, Jimmy?”

“These viruses are kicking my ass,” replied Jimmy, drawing the finance-administrator’s draft.

“That’s because you’re a faggot,” said a fat man who until then had been sleeping at the bar on the other side of the finance-administrator from Jim.

“How’s it going, Jack?” asked the finance-administrator.

“Can’t complain,” answered Jack, taking a sip of his beer. “Do I know you?”

Jimmy, not replying to Jack’s reply or looking at him, set a pint of Natural Ice in a glass in front of Jamie on the other side of Jack from the finance-administrator and pointed at the finance-administrator.

“Hey, Billy!” he said, looking at the finance-administrator. “Did you just get here?”

“I’ve been here for hours,” said the finance-administrator. “You’re just not paying attention.”

And, as Jamie looked into his beer and didn't answer, the finance-administer turned to look at Mr. Quinn and raised his right index-finger to signal to Mr. Quinn that he was welcome to the beer for which Mr. Quinn had signaled thanks by looking at the finance-administrator and raising quakily his own right index-finger. And then, as Jamie took a long swig of his beer, the finance-administrator carried the bottles of Bud and Coors to the table and set them in front of their recipients. And then, as the finance-administrator turned back to the bar to get his draft, a man entered the bar and stopped in front of him.

"Hey, Tommy," said the finance-administrator. "Where's your dog?"

"He died," said Tommy. "That computer stuff you told me worked."

"I'm sorry," said the finance-administrator. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," said Tommy. "It made a lot of sense."

Then, as Tommy continued on toward the pool-table, which was so near the backdoor of the bar that some shots required either using a short stick or opening the door, the finance-administrator told Lev and Bob that one could tell a new customer from a regular by the choice in that, and he said the door was usually unlocked because of fire regulations and that customers went out back to smoke dope or whatever, and then he sat down at the table.

"There's a picture of Mark Twain advertising Dewar's Scotch in that frame," he said pointing to a poster beside the door, depicting the World Trade Center with some text beneath it, about how hateful Afghans are. "Under that newspaper poster.

"So, Shirley, how's it going?"

"Good," said Shirley.

"How's the cancer?" added the finance-administrator.

“I’ve got another surgery next week,” she said, after looking at her bandaged hand, which was in her lap as her other hand held her bottle of Coors on the table.

“Heard anything from Cheryl?”

“She’ll never come in here again,” answered Shirley.

“After you left, after you gave her that book, she threw the book at me. She was so drunk she fell down, right over there. Did I tell you what she did at the house?”

“No,” said the finance-administrator. “What did she do?”

“The guy told her all she had to do was not go on the third floor, but he caught her on the third floor going through his stuff, and he found some money missing.”

“She told me outside, the day I gave her the book,” said the finance-administrator, “that she’d been to court that morning to put a restraining order on some guy, and that he was there trying to put one on her. Is that what that was about?”

“I don’t know,” said Shirley. “But she’ll never get in here again. She was laughing, haw haw haw. You know how she laughs.”

“Yes,” said the finance-administrator. “I know how she laughs.”

“Who is she?” asked Bob. “Who’s Cheryl? What’s she to you?”

“She’s kind of a mess,” said the finance-administrator. “But I like her. So I asked her for a date, to see the American Ballet Theatre perform *Giselle* at the Wang Theatre, around the corner from Love of Saint Clare. You’d appreciate that, Lev.”

“Yes,” said Lev. “That’s one thing the French did for Russia, give Tchaichovski a *raison d’etre*, inspire Petipa. Stuff like that.

“And *Giselle*’s a ghost,” said Bob. “Did she accept?”

“Yes,” said the finance-administrator. “And she was talking about buying a dress for the occasion, hunter green, she said. But she backed out after I bought tickets for great seats, a couple of days before the performance. So I gave the tickets to Shirley and a picture-history of the American Ballet Theatre to Cheryl.”

“I gave the tickets to Johnnie, a friend of Jamie’s,” said Shirley. “I don’t know anything about that stuff. Cheryl said they might be worth money and wanted to scalp them. I told her the tickets were for her, not the money.”

“I don’t know anything about much,” said the finance-administrator. “She’s told me about two different men beating her up. I’m starting to think she likes that sort of thing. More than beautiful things like ballet.”

“I heard she might be in jail,” said Shirley. “That’s what I heard.”

“This country is crazier than Russia,” said Lev. “There we beat servants.”

“Did Johnnie use the tickets?” asked the finance-administrator.

“I don’t know,” said Shirley. “Ask Jamie.”

Now, Jamie was standing behind the fifth of the five chairs at the table, with two bottles of Bud and one of Coors in his hands.

“Mind if I sit down?” he asked.

“No, sure,” said the finance-administrator, as Shirley shrugged.

“Jamie Lewis, Liverpool, England,” said Jamie, shaking hands with Lev and Bob, after distributing the bottles of beer to them and Shirley, and he returned to the bar for the drafts for himself and the finance-administrator.

“Besides,” said Shirley, while he was gone, “she said she thinks you’re queer. She said somebody told her they saw you kissing Jamie on the mouth.”

“That’s not funny,” said Bob. “But it thickens the plot.”

“That doesn’t happen much in public in Russia,” said Lev.

“I swear I didn’t do it,” said the finance-administrator.

“England’s nothing but a colony of France,” said the Finance-administrator, after Jamie returned with the draughts and sat in the fifth chair. “England became a world power out of resentment of William the Conqueror. But that isn’t why I didn’t do it. I prefer the warm wet regression. Know what I mean?”

“Hm?” asked Jamie. “What are you guys up to?”

“You know,” said Bob, “you look like Rod Stewart?”

Jamie didn’t answer, except with a smile and a sip of his beer.

“He used to be a Rod Stewart impersonator,” said the finance-administrator. “He came here from Liverpool as a male prostitute, with that Rod Stewart stuff to help market him, and for the woman who recruited him, and married him.”

“A boy-toy,” said Jamie, smiling again and lifting his shirt to reveal golden rings in his nipples, besides a beer-belly befitting drinking beer for most of the last half-century.

“Now he blows up balloons for a living,” said the finance-administrator. “Or to supplement his third wife’s income as some sort of clerk for the Commonwealth.”

“How do you get paid for blowing up balloons?” asked Bob.

“I have my own business,” said Jamie. “Something Special. I do balloons for parties, bouquets for people in the hospital, singing telegrams, stuff like that. My second wife does it too and throws me her overflow, and I have a website Billy’s

helping me with, and I advertise in the Yellow Pages, those bastards.”

“The second wife was the boy-toy recruiter,” said the finance-administrator.

“What bastards?” asked Bob. “The Yellow Pages people?”

“Yeah!” said Jamie. “They overcharge me, and they keep trying to collect, and they put me in the wrong category, and they screwed up my web site. Billy’s helping me get them to fix my website, and he showed me they’ve got me in the wrong category.”

“Did Johnnie use those ballet tickets?” asked the finance-administrator.

“What ballet tickets?” asked Jamie. “Yeah! Of course! I think so.”

And, as the conversation rambled on, a short man with a black mustache and a camouflage hat with its brim folded down entered the bar and sat silently at the bar with his back to the table, and a few minutes later Jimmy brought another round of beer to the table.

“Hey, Tio!” said Jamie.

“Hey, Tio!” said the finance-administrator.

“What?” said the small mustachioed man, turning to the table.

“Come join us,” said the finance-administrator, dragging an empty chair from the other table, after getting a nod of approval from that table’s occupants.

Tio, looking a little reluctant, moved from the bar to the table, sat in the chair and set his bottle of Heinekens on the table in front of him, opened his eyes wide and smiled, and looked at each of the others, one at a time, left to right.

“Thanks for the beer,” said the finance-administrator.

“Thanks for the beer,” said Jamie.

“Tio’s a gypsy,” said the finance-administrator.

“I’m a gypsy,” said Tio.

“He’s from Romania,” said the finance-administrator.

“Romania,” said Tio.

“That’s like Russia,” said Jamie. “Same thing.”

“Romania isn’t Russia,” said Lev. “You British are worse than the French, maybe even worse than the Germans. How did you get here from Romania?”

Jamie grinned, and Tio declined to answer.

“It’s a secret,” said Tio. “I’m a spy. Everybody’s a spy. That’s why we have so many Africans and Russians in this country. She’s a Jap. Look.”

And he nodded toward a woman entering the bar, a dark-haired woman with a ring in her nose, and somewhat oriental facial features, maybe. The woman was remarkably physically weighty, and her T-shirt revealed her breasts to be below where a braier might hold them. And, speaking to no one, she walked to the restroom and went in.

“See?” said Tio, as she passed the jukebox on her return from the toilet.

“Up yours, Tio,” said the woman.

“How’s it going, Pauline?” asked the finance-administrator.

“Oh, Hi,” said Pauline.

“How’s your new marketing approach?”

“What?” asked Pauline, gazing away but stopping at the table.

“How’s your new marketing approach?”

“Fine!” said Pauline, now smiling at the finance-administrator.

“Still losing weight,” said the finance-administrator. “And no bra.”

And she lifted her T-shirt, confirming that indeed she was in no bra.



“Let’s see down here,” said someone at the pool table, and Pauline turned in that direction and repeated the display for a few speechless seconds, and then she sat at the other table, behind Tio.

“What can I getcha?” asked Jimmy from the bar.

“Water,” said Pauline, and she sank into silence.

“Jim,” said the finance-administrator, to the only other person now at that other table, not the Jim who had been watching television but was now gone, but a younger Jim in a freshly starched and pressed white shirt. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

“Who’s my girlfriend?” asked Jim.

“Cheryl,” said the finance-administrator.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” said Jim. “We’re just friends. I hear she’s in the shelter for battered women in Cambridge. That’s what I heard. I don’t know.”

And then another man entered the bar, a balding man in an undershirt, no outer shirt. And, before turning to the bar and telling Jimmy what he could get him, he stopped and stared at the finance-administrator. And then, after ordering, he turned and punched the finance-administrator in the ribs. And then he leaned back, staring again.

“You’re getting fat, Ralph” said the finance-administrator.

“Fat?” exclaimed Ralph. “You want a piece of me?”

“Which piece?” asked the finance-administrator, and Ralph laughed and walked on back to the pool table, where Jimmy had his beer waiting for him.

And then all at Shirley’s table quieted for a while until the next customer entered the bar and didn’t respond to the finance-administrator’s greeting.

“I told you about that, didn’t I?” asked Shirley.

“About what?” asked the finance-administrator.

“Cheryl asked me once, before I knew you were interested in her, who was the best choice in here, and I told her Freddy.”

“You didn’t tell me,” said the finance-administrator. “But I was here the first night she left with him. She was sitting with Jim here awhile, but then she sat with Freddy and left with him. He’s a good choice, I guess. He has property in Maine.”

“That’s important!” said Lev.

“It’s unimproved,” said the finance-administrator.

“Any oil under it?” asked Bob.

“He told me he’s just a friend, too,” said the finance-administrator, looking at Freddy now sitting beside Mr. Quinn at the front end of the bar.

“She’ll take you for everything you’ve got,” said a thin man with big eyes and camouflage combat-boots, who had come in and filled the seat at the bar Jamie had vacated, turning now to the finance-administrator.

“Donna says you’re a mook,” said the finance-administrator.

“I’m not a mook,” said the big-eyed man in combat-boots.

“Anyway, I don’t have anything,” said the finance-administrator.

And then, as the man in the combat-boots turned back to the bar, another man entered. And, after looking around, he walked up to Freddy and punched him square in the face. And then, leaving Freddy’s nose bleeding, he turned and left the bar.

Then Freddy, after looking at the man as he left, looked down the bar at Jimmy and then looked down at his beer as a drop of blood dripped into it, and then he looked at Jimmy again.

“I never saw him before in my life,” said Freddy as the finance-administrator rose from his chair and walked to Freddy.

“Jimmy,” said the finance-administrator. “You got any napkins?”

“I’m alright,” said Freddy, his own fist now at his nose.

The bar didn't use cocktail napkins. But Jimmy found some, maybe from past marketing wishes, and he took Freddy a few. And Freddy accepted the napkins and began holding them, one at a time, to his nose.

By this time, a third person had joined Pauline and Jim at the other table, and he rose from his chair and took a couple of steps toward the toilet and stopped, looking down at the finance-administrator, who had returned to his chair.

"How's it going, Joe?" asked the finance-administrator, of this man maybe as old as Shirley, one of his arms in a sling.

"Let it stanch!" said Joe. "It'll just keep bleeding if he keeps messing with it! Even I know that!"

"Tell him," said the finance-administrator, but Joe passed on to the toilet.

"I realize this is a combat zone," said Bob with his putter sitting idle between his legs at the table. "But I think my learning-curve has about peaked for it. Do you know of any other places?"

"Want to go to Kiley's?" asked the finance-administrator, looking at Jamie.

"These guys don't want to go to Kiley's," said Jamie.

"I want to go to Kiley's," said Lev.

"I want to go to Kiley's," said Bob.

"You're in charge," said Jamie.

"You're in charge," said Tio.

"All for one," said the finance-administrator. "One for all."

"But now there are five of us," said Jamie.

"I thought you were an engineer," said the finance-administrator.

"I can't do that kind of calculation," said Jamie.

"The Pythagorean theorem is too much for you," said the finance-administrator to Jamie, and then he told Lev and Bob that

Jamie had been a mechanical engineer before becoming a Rod Stewart impersonating boy-toy.

“Calculate this,” said Jamie. “Calibrate that.”

So they agreed to go to Kiley’s upon finishing that round of their beer. But, before they left, Christine and Raymond came in and did whatever they do in the toilet despite the pen-and-ink sign on its door proscribing more than one person being in it at once, but Bob wasn’t interested in that kind of combat. So they left.

“Do you want to go with us?” the finance-administrator asked Pauline.

“Where are you going?” asked Pauline.

“Kiley’s,” answered the finance-administrator.

“Not this time,” answered Pauline.

“Alright,” said the finance-administrator.

So they rose to leave. But they had to wait a few minutes, because little fat bald kidney-cancer Bobby and his big-breasted laughing girlfriend Pearl had come in, and Bobby had played “God Bless America” on the juke box, and everybody in the bar sang along with the CD. So, of course, the five musketeers had to join in that before their next battle.

## Chapter 24

### Catch 22

At last on the street, the finance-administrator led the way again, around the corner where a Cingular Wireless shop did a lot of business with the neighborhood drug-dealers, and past Kelly's to Kiley's. Kelly's, besides being a big bar, was a restaurant where prostitutes got themselves wined and dined before springing their profession on the johns. As poor as this neighborhood was, it had a lot of commerce.

And, on that walk, obviously having paid a lot of attention, the finance-administer let Bob and Lev know a little about that and a little more about the culture at the bar they'd just left, as well.

"Sorry, Bob," said the finance-administrator. "A lot of Irish revolutionaries used to hang out at the end of the bar where John Quinn was. I don't know what happened to them, but none of them go there much anymore. Assassins, terrorists, people like that."

"That's alright," said Bob. "Nice people there. How about Kiley's?"

"A few murderers," said the finance-administrator. "But not much political."

So, waving his putter in rhythmic flourishes, Bob strode on like Fred Astaire,

“So Jamie,” said the finance-administrator. “I heard you have a penis ring.”

“Who told you that?” asked Jamie. “Did Tio tell you that?”

“No,” said the finance-administrator. “Shirley told me.”

Neither Jamie nor Tio responded further to that, and Bob and Lev didn’t so much as laugh. So, excepting when Jamie stopped to express sympathy for a cat lying dead in the gutter, the five of them walked silently the rest of the way to Kiley’s. And the finance-administrator didn’t say how the cat or Jamie or the sympathy prompted him to speak.

“You know,” he said, “I just thought of something. You know that Bobby back there with kidney cancer? Well, there was another Bobby working part-time for *l’amore di Santa Clara* doing things like sweeping and mopping, and he had to go through dialysis daily besides having some other physical and mental problems, and he showed me what a little despot that Kate Plate is.

“Like Ari, she shuts her door a lot, always when she’s counseling employees in her responsibility as a human-resources specialist, except for Bobby. Him, when he was out sick more than she thought was good for Love of Saint Clare, she loudly berated with her door wide open. Loudly enough for everybody on that admin. floor to hear it.

“Why didn’t anyone do anything about it?” asked Jamie.

“I don’t know,” said the finance-administrator.

Kiley’s was a keno bar. It’s main business was sucking money out of poor people trying to get rich by gambling away what little income they had. So, as the five musketeers entered the bar, most of the customers were sitting quietly at tables, scribbling on their little keno cards with their little keno pencils, as they watched their chances on televisions hanging from the barroom’s ceiling. And the finance-administrator walked in first.

“Hi, Peggy,” he said to the barmaid, a young woman smiling at him.

“Hi, Bill,” she said. “What can I get for you and your friends?”

“Two Bud drafts, two bottles of Bud, and a Heinekens, please.”

“You got it,” said the young woman, quickly going to work.

“Peggy won four-million dollars in the lottery a few years ago,” said the finance-administrator, motioning to a table near the bar. “Do we want to sit down?”

“My husband won four-million dollars in the lottery,” corrected Peggy, as she moved quickly about behind the bar, gathering the beer the finance-administrator had ordered from her.

“She’s usually wearing a big diamond engagement-ring,” he said, looking back at her left hand.

“There’s your chance,” said Jamie.

“I don’t think so,” said the finance-administrator.

“I’ll buy,” said Tio, stepping to the bar ahead of the finance-administer, to accept the order as the others sat.

“I’ll get the next one,” said the Finance-administrator, looking around.

At a table nearer the back of the barroom, in a section stepped a little higher than the section before the bar, a thin bald man with several front teeth missing sat with some people looking more able to do conventional business, and the finance-administrator looked at him and back to Lev and Bob before speaking again.

“That guy spent five years in Walpole Prison,” he said loudly enough for the man to hear him.

“You again,” said the thin man, not grinning or smiling.

“He’s going to kill you someday,” said Jamie.

“Maybe,” said the finance-administrator. “Maybe not.”

“How do you know he was in prison?” asked Bob.

“He told me,” answered the finance-administrator.

“Where?” asked Lev.

“Here,” said the finance-administrator.

“Why?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know,” said the finance-administrator. “Maybe he wanted to impress me. Maybe he wanted to scare Jamie.”

“You don’t seem afraid of much,” said Bob.

“Allah’s will,” said the finance-administrator. “Or yea though I walk. However one says it, that’s the way I feel. Cowards die a thousand deaths. Etcetera.”

“This place sucks,” said Bob. “All these people wasting their lives wishing for something they wouldn’t know what to do with if they had it. At least those people at that other bar talked with one another.”

“I agree,” said the finance-administrator. “I can never drink more than one beer in here. I just stop here on my way to Whitey’s, so I won’t be too sober when I get there. But I can’t finish a beer in most Boston bars.

“You finished a few in Remington’s,” said Lev.

“That’s because we were talking about something besides sports or each other’s Saabs or how much money each of us is going to make than are others or which rich or famous people condescend to speak to us or how smart we are, having gone to Harvard or someplace we can argue to be better, or less pretentious.

“In New Orleans, I spent most of my spare time in bars, and I had a reputation for being one of the most interesting conversationalists in the Quarter. But, in Boston, I almost never went to bars, until I found the one we just left. Most of those people are just trying to get by.



“A little like Remington Bosworth, they’re just looking for a job, any way to be worthy, genuinely important. Remington’s seems to me to be a fitting name for a bar, referring to mass production of firearms for people to be able kill each other more cheaply, and so feel their power over others more cheaply, while philosophers say paradox is rare.

“Mark Twain, I guess trying to say what I’m trying to say, said: ‘And you are but a *thought*--a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!’ So, what do we do? Quit?”

“So we’re going to Whitey’s?” asked Jamie.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” said the finance-administrator.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” said Tio.

“They have bottles of Rolling Rock for \$1.50,” said Jamie.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” said Tio.

“I like the bars in New Orleans, too,” said Lev. “Do you like Molly’s?”

“Which Molly’s?” asked the finance-administrator.

“At the Market,” answered Lev.

“It’s my favorite,” said the finance-administrator. “Do you know Maggie? The barmaid who drew that portrait of Yeats behind the bar?”

“Sure,” said Lev. “But she doesn’t work there anymore. She opened a gallery of her own and took that portrait with her. Just left a print.”

“Good for her,” said the finance-administrator. “The other Molly’s is more like Whitey’s, but darker and smaller.”

“The Molly’s on Toulouse Street, said Lev. “Just off Bourbon. Do you know Maya, the barmaid there? Tall thin graceful black woman?”

“Sure,” said the finance-administrator. “She worked at Kagan’s before legalizing gambling forced it closed, the punk bar on Decatur Street. Maya, I think, is a national landmark.”

The walk to Whitey’s was past a public housing project. But, though newer than the one across the street from the bar were the group grew from three to five, it was now defunct. So, in the darkness of its defunctness, Tio said he had to pee and did it behind a big steel telephone-switchbox, while we others waited.

“This really pisses me off,” said Jamie.

“He should have done it before we left the house?” said Bob.

“Tearing down this housing,” said Jamie, looking at Bob and then at the finance-administrator. “My brother Georgie still lives in Liverpool, and he lives on the dole better than I do here with my business. You don’t know what the rent is for the dump Laurie and I live in. This country sucks.”

“Love it or leave it,” said Bob.

“I love my wife,” said Jamie.

“Take her with you,” said the finance-administrator.

“She won’t go,” said Jamie. “She’s afraid of flying.”

“So here we are in the dark,” said Lev, “pissing and moaning.”

“You don’t understand,” moaned Jamie, now pissing behind a tree.

“I understand,” said Lev, “that the American Henry James wrote about how much more complex European mentality is than American mentality, and I understand that the complexity is all bologna. The complexity of the English and the French is in their making excuses to hate other people or feel sorry for themselves, while Americans and Russians mainly just try to get along. That’s why Dostoevski’s more popular in England and France than I am.

“He promotes pitying dirt-bags because their feelings and failings are more complicated than honest people’s. Some Americans say they prefer Dostoevsky, but that’s because my books are too long, for them. But they’re so long because, trying to explain the obvious, I repeat myself. Try to explain how blue is the sky.”

“I don’t read,” said Jamie. “I’m a sex maniac.”

“Yeah, right,” said the finance-administrator. “Why don’t you have any kids? You told me shaving pubic hair is sexy, and you’re too lazy to go on the web enough to check out porn. My hunch is that, if you like mounds of Venus shaved to look like refrigerators, you must like tits made of silicon? What’s the difference between silicon-chip sex and silicon breastfeeding? But I guess it’s all natural, since silicon comes from sand.”

“Sure,” said Jamie. “Do you think I’m stupid? In my business, you have to know the difference between latex and Mylar. You can’t take latex balloons into hospitals anymore. I know that stuff. I’m an engineer!”

Whitey’s, on West Broadway, had a big pool table. And it had unfinished wood floors and a long mahogany bar, but it was no fancier than any of the other bars this motley crew visited that night. And, like the bar on Dorchester Street, it had no sign out front or anywhere else indicating its owner’s name, but perhaps for a different reason. The other bar was nearer to Whitey Bolger’s headquarters. But people said Bolger owned Whitey’s.

But, whichever or whatever, at Whitey’s the five musketeers sat at a table behind the pool table. And the finance-administrator brought the Rolling Rock beer from the bar, distributed them around the five, and sat down. But he quickly stood back up and put quarters on the pool table.

“We’re playing for twenty dollars,” said one of the players.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” said the finance-administrator, and he left the quarters and sat back down, and then a small dark-haired woman came and tapped him on a shoulder, and he looked up at her and smiled.

“Hi, Donna,” he said.

“Long time no see,” she said, also smiling, at all at the table, hardly showing that she was missing a few front teeth, and then she returned to the bar.

“You’re up,” said the pool-player.

“Did you win?” asked the finance-administrator.

“Yeah,” said the pool-player. “You got twenty bucks?”

“I’ll hold the money,” said Donna, leaving her barstool again, and the pool-player and the finance-administrator each handed her a twenty-dollar bill and turned back to the table.

“Rack ‘em,” said the pool-player. “It’s my table.”

“He’s no hustler,” said the finance-administrator in an undertone to Lev. “He talks too much, and he worries too much.”

“Don’t you worry,” said Bob. “I’ve still got my putter.”

The finance-administrator stayed just a little ahead of the pool-player and sank the eight ball with one other ball left on the table, and Donna fairly leaped from her barstool and handed the two twenty-dollar bills to him, grinning.

And both she and the other the pool-player shook his hand.

“Good game,” said the pool-player. “Play again?”

“I don’t want to push my luck,” said the finance-administrator, and he sat back down with the rest of the musketeers and resumed drinking Rolling Rock, after telling Lev he’d never been in a pool situation so amateurish.

“I haven’t played much pocket-billiards,” said Lev.

“Excuse me, Mr. Kid,” said Bob. “But it’s getting late in the evening, and I have to ask you a question I know Lev would

like to ask as well. In your wandering since that sheriff killed you, what do you think you've learned?"

"That's easy," said Billy, returning his stick to the rack. "I even have the words. Guns blazing, swords swiping, ways to die. Cancer rotting, pills poisoning, drugs dragging, how to die. The best way to die is alive, standing up or sitting down for what you feel in your heart. The worst way to die is failing faith, by feeling sorry for yourself. Your self is good God, whom you know in your heart. It's that simple, I think."

And then he leaned in his chair back against the wall, but suddenly he stood again and picked up his beer and strode to the bar, where he sat on a stool beside a beautiful young woman with wild black hair and a visage as Greek as Aphrodite's.

"Hi, Kelly," said the finance-administrator. "Why aren't you shooting pool?"

"I was," she said, "but I can't afford to lose twenty bucks."

"Don't lose," replied the finance-administrator.

"That's easy for you to say," she answered.

"Hey," said the finance-administrator. "Want to go to a big society function?"

"A society function?" she said, looking at him with obvious interest.

"Yeah," said the finance-administrator. "You know I work for Love of Saint Clare, and they're having their annual fundraiser next week at the Fairmont Hotel at Copley Square. It's a lot of rich people showing off how generous they are to poor people. Free champagne reception, and dinner in the grand ballroom."

"What day?" asked Kelly. "What time?"

"I don't know," said the finance-administrator, pulling from a pocket the invitation he'd received at work that day, and handing it to Kelly. "That's the invitation. You tell me."

She took the envelope and opened it and read the date and time aloud.

“I can do this,” she said. “It sounds like fun. I’m good at mingling. I have a black dress I can wear, but it’s full-length. Will that be alright?”

“Anything you’re in will be alright,” said the finance-administrator. “Where can I pick you up? I mean, where can I find you?”

“Here,” she said. “Meet me here.”

“Alright,” said the finance-administrator. “I’ll be here an hour before that time. So we can have a drink before we go. So we won’t be there too early.”

“Alright,” she said, and she offered the invitation back to him.

“Keep it,” said the finance-administrator. “So you won’t forget.”

“I won’t forget,” said Kelly, and she stepped from her stool.

“Leaving?” asked the finance-administrator.

“Yeah,” she said, tucking the invitation into her purse. “I have to go to work in the morning. I have a new job, and I don’t want to get too messed up.

“Oh,” she said. “My mother calls me Ned. I don’t know why.”

And, before returning to the table, the finance-administrator watched her graceful walk, past the pool-table and on out the door to West Broadway.

“Whoa,” said Jamie. “Did I just see what I think I saw?”

“She’s half your age,” said Lev.

“I didn’t ask her to marry me,” said the finance-administrator. “Anyway, if Love of Saint Clare fires me, it looks like I’ll go out in a blaze of glory. Beautiful, isn’t she.”

“That’s a nice note for closing the evening,” said Bob.  
“I’m at the Park Plaza. I guess I can get a cab out front to there.”

“Me, too,” said Lev. “I have to be in New York tomorrow. It’s been a pleasure meeting you gentlemen.”

“I’m going to Shenanigans,” said Jamie. “How about you, Tio?”

“No problem,” said Tio, and he looked at the finance-administrator.

“I’ll walk you there and take a taxi home,” said the finance-administrator.

From there, Lev told me, he went on to New York. Everything’s always early for ghosts, since they don’t have to sleep and can go anywhere they wish to go on less than a breath of air. His little submission now was to see how homeless people are treated in homeless shelters. He’d seen the revenue side of them. Now for the expense side.

So he spent the rest of that night wandering the streets of Manhattan, talking with anyone else he found on those streets after the bars closed. He found most of them to welcome conversation, as had the patrons of the bar on Dorchester Street. But he found few of them able to articulate their needs. Winning the lottery was a common goal.

“Nobody ever said life is supposed to be fair,” many of them said. “So you have to sneak and steal. You have to hustle like a politician, if you want to get what you want. The only other way is to win the lottery. And what’s the chance of that?”

“What would you do if you won the lottery?” asked Lev.

“Hell, I don’t know,” was the most common answer. “I’d think of something.”

“I’d shoot it up my arm,” was another popular answer.

And then, upon the rising of the sun between the skyscrapers, Lev made his way to the New York City Homeless Haven, near the World Trade Center. Persons with whom he'd spoken in the night had told him where it was, and they said it was the biggest homeless shelter in the city. And they also said it was the oldest they knew of.

"You can get lunch there."

"You can get clothes there."

"You can get med's there."

"You might be able to sleep there, but I wouldn't."

"Why not?" asked Lev.

"They'll think they own you," was the common answer.

Waiting for morning business hours, Lev talked with persons who had slept there that night and were now turned out to fend for the day, and maybe to sleep there again that night, if they wished to, and were lucky. Beds were too few for all that were willing to obey the rules for a night of clean sleep, out of the weather.

"I heard they have too many rules in there," said Lev to some coming out for the day to try again what they could. "Is it worth it for supper and breakfast and a night's sleep inside?"

"The game in there is easier than the hustle out here," was the common answer. "And I'm tired, sick and tired."

So Lev tested the game. He went inside, when the doors reopened in midmorning, and he told the first staff-member he saw that he thought he must be crazy, and that he needed some help. He said he needed some professional help.

"Sit down," said the staff member, after wandng Lev for weapons. "I'll have to call upstairs. We get a lot of crazy people here."



So Lev sat in the fiberglass chair with chrome-plated legs the staff member indicated and listened as the staff member called upstairs.

“I’ve got a guy down her who says he’s crazy and needs professional help,” said the staff member. “Just a minute. I’ll ask him.”

“What makes you think you’re crazy?” asked the staff member.

“I don’t know whether I’m crazy or they are,” said Lev.

“He says he doesn’t know whether he’s crazy or they are,” the staff member said into the telephone.

And, after waiting for a response, he looked at Lev again.

“He looks like some old crazy Russian or something,” he said. “I don’t know.”

And again he waited for the response before he look at Lev again.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll send him up.”

And, looking at Lev, he pointed toward a door.

“Up those stairs,” he said.

At the top of the stairs was a room full of more empty fiberglass chairs with chrome-plated legs. And, in one of them, at a small desk near the stairway, at an end of the first row of the stairs, sat a small black woman. On the desk were a telephone and a two-way radio and an open issue of *People* magazine the woman was reading. And she didn’t look up from the magazine until a few seconds after Lev emerged from the stairway.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“The guy downstairs sent me up here,” said Lev.

“Have a seat,” said the woman.

And, as Lev sat in the chair nearest him in the front row, the telephone rang.

“Yes?” said the woman, answering the phone. “Yes, he’s here. Okay.”

And she rose from the desk and put her hands in the pockets of her slacks.

“Go through that door,” she said to Lev, nodding to a door in front of him, and he went through the door into a short hallway with several doors leading from it, and a man emerged from the only one that was open and motioned for Lev to go through it.

So Lev complied. And the man followed him and motioned for him to sit, in still another of the fiberglass chair with chrome-plated legs, this one beside a desk against a wall. And then the man sat behind the desk, in still another of those chairs, and looked at Lev.

“What can I do for you?” the man asked Lev.

“I think I must be crazy,” said Lev.

“What makes you think that?” asked the man.

“I’ve been reading newspapers,” said Lev. “The President of the United States got a head-job from an intern in the Oval Office, a 21-year-old female intern. And, after the whole nation found out about it, the National Organization for Women supported him, and so did the National Education Association. And the President’s wife says it takes a village to raise a child. It seems to me it takes a world. So I must be crazy.”

“Mm hm,” said the man behind the desk. “Go on.”

“I thought that was enough, but there *is* more. Barbra Streisand sings like a bird and complains about victimization of women, but she sings ‘Happy Days’ to support that President. I loved to hear her sing that song when she was that intern’s age.

“Then, speaking of Barbra Streisand, there’s what’s going on in the Holy Land. Barbra Streisand’s Jewish, and she said in Madison Square Garden that we’re all different and that it’s crazy to think we should all be the same, and the Holocaust was the

worst thing that ever happened to any people, because too few people agree with that. But other Jewish people are saying Palestinians don't have a right to their homes. And the United States government, under that President and others, supports that.

"And Christians support it, too. Jesus said the thing second in importance to loving God is loving one's neighbor, but Christians say Jews have a right to kill Palestinians and destroy their homes and take the land for their own homeland. Oh, and both Jews and Christians say they believe in the Ten Commandments, which command against such stuff."

"Mm hm," said the man behind the desk. "Go on."

"Okay. Then there's the pedophile Christian clergy. Jesus said Heaven is made of children and that to go there we must become like them, presumably referring to their lovely innocence. Then those priests do that to them, and all I read in the newspapers about how the Catholic Church responds is calling it a crisis in the church, not a crisis in the children. I haven't read of one priest saying he's sorry or wrong, and the law prevents charging church leadership with responsibility, even if it's proved.

"The church dumped the Archbishop of Boston for his complicity, but he's still a Cardinal of the Church. And he's never said he's sorry for his part, and the Church replaced him with someone who spent his early days in that Church in a parish in the Dominican Republic where the other one was at the same time. And other priests are saying it's because he's good at conciliation.

"Conciliation. The Catholic Church doesn't need conciliation. It needs reformation, purification, revolution, cleansing. It doesn't need another kiss on the Pope's ring, worshiping the golden calf. It needs honor of spirit.

"At least that's how I see things, and so I must be crazy, because I'm alone. The poor should be lifted, not solicited to

support the church in its corruption. The children should be honored as the ideal spirit of the poor and everyone else.

“But maybe it’s vocabulary. Maybe we do all that through reason through our education, through abstraction as Hercules killed Antaeus. Casey Casum, the host of the playing of America’s Top Forty tunes each Sunday morning, tells us to keep our feet on the ground but keep reaching for the stars. Hercules killed Antaeus by lifting Antaeus’ feet from the ground, but he turned him into a constellation, for our watch.

“Abstraction, rationality, weird! How do we use the term ‘anti-Semitic’ to mean disliking Judaic people while most Semitic people are Islamic? How do we use the word ‘catholic’ to refer to the Roman Catholic Church as though Rome were universal, universal being what our dictionaries say ‘catholic’ means? How do most humans claim reasoning as their superiority to beasts while few humans know what they’re talking about? And the mess doesn’t stop with the craziness we call religion.

“How do we use the word ‘gay’ to refer to homosexuals, as though heterosexuals aren’t cheerful? How do we use the word ‘marriage’ to refer to the relationship between Clingon and Heather Rhododendron but not to refer to loving unions of two men or two women? How do we use the word ‘sportsmanship’ to refer to wife-beating and spitting on umpires in the big leagues while we send a 12-year-old boy to jail for spitting on a policeman? How do we call such ball-players role-models, and how do we call Clingon a president? Apparently he can’t preside over his own zipper!”

“What I hear you saying,” said the man behind the desk, “is that you resent other people’s success, while you’re struggling from day to day to stay alive. We have many people here with lives as difficult as yours. You’re not alone.”

“Whatever you’re hearing,” said Lev, “what I’m saying is that, either all that stuff I just pointed out to you is crazy, or I am.”

“I understand your hostility,” said the man behind the desk. “What is it that you would like our shelter to do for you? We have a lot of programs here.”

## Chapter 25

### The Scarlet Letter

“Just a straight answer,” said Lev. “What would you say if I told you I was fired from a homeless-shelter after working there for more than five years, for complaining about how the shelter’s executive staff treats African Americans?”

“Did that happen to you?” asked the man behind the desk.

“I’m offering a hypothesis,” politely responded Lev.

“Everyone has a right to his or her opinion,” said the man.

“So why would they fire such a person?” asked Lev.

“They have a right to their opinion,” said the psychologist.

Lev shuddered in the plastic and steel chair, but he went on anyway.

“What would you say,” asked Lev, “if I told you I’m the ghost of Lev Tolstoi and went barhopping last night with Bob Hope?”

“Who’s Lev Tolstoi?” asked the man.

“I am,” answered Lev, remembering.

“Do you have a substance-abuse problem?” asked the man.

“Not as long as I can afford vodka,” answered Lev.

“Alcohol is made of carbon and hydrogen and oxygen. That is, what humans breath and drink to stay alive, and what you scientists say is the basic element of life. And, although Americans have told me vodka’s made of potatoes, it’s made of wheat and rye, like

the staff of life, bread. I don't understand what you mean by substance. I don't abuse life, anymore."

"Well," said the man behind the desk. "I see no basis for a diagnosis that would justify prescribing medication you could sell on the street to buy vodka, but we can help you if you're willing to help yourself, and so here's my answer as straight as I can make it. Until you reevaluate the possibility of your having a substance-abuse problem, my recommendation is that you get involved in our employment-counseling program. Do you think that might be interesting to you? What do you think?"

"I could sure use some work," said Lev, thinking his work wasn't done there yet.

"Good," said the man, writing on a little pad of paper on the desk, and then he tore off the sheet and handed it to Lev. "Take this back downstairs, and give it to the reception-person. He'll tell you where you can go for the employment-counseling. I wish you luck, Mr. Tolstoi."

Lev followed the instructions and found himself on the fourth floor of the building, amid a lot of people chatting and smiling and eating muffins and drinking coffee. The receptionist there, a very nice young black-woman, asked him about himself as she filled out a form, and neither did she indicate any recognition of his name. She took him on a tour of the floor, showing him a room full of computers with people busy at them and a room full of clothing, where a very pretty woman with flaming red hair was measuring someone. The black woman told Lev she could get him into the employment-counseling program in a few weeks, but that she might be able to get him a little work sooner, and she showed she wasn't lying, at least about the second part. She introduced him to a young man who told him he had a request for a security guard that very evening.

“It’s plain-clothes, they said,” said the young man. “If you don’t have a suit, Rosemarie can fix you up. But you’ll have to shave off that beard, if you want this job. You can do that down on the second floor, and take a shower. Is that too much to ask?”

“No,” said Lev. “That’s great. Thanks.”

“I love your beard,” said Rosemarie.

“That other guy said I’d have to shave it off,” said Lev.

“Oh, what a shame,” said Rosemarie. “It’s beautiful.”

So Lev dematerialized his beard. And, in the suit Rosemarie had fitted for him, and in clean underwear given him on the second floor after his shower, he made his way to a security agency. Another client of the shelter, a relatively young African American man, showed him the way.

“I’m Rodney,” said the man, as they headed out the door with the subway tokens the shelter provided to get them where they needed to go.

“Lev,” said Lev, shaking the hand Rodney offered.

“I used to be famous,” said Rodney as they talked about their situation. “A bunch of cops beat me up, and somebody videotaped it. Next thing I knew was Andy Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Lev. “I’m kind of famous, too. I wrote some books in Russia, but they’re too long for many people in this country to read.”

“Yeah,” said Rodney. “Span of concentration. Nobody here remembers what they read in the newspaper yesterday, or at least I don’t. I didn’t read the newspaper yesterday, as far as I remember. How’d you get to the Big Apple?”

“It’s a long story,” said Lev. “I guess you could say I’m driven by curiosity. I’m trying to figure out what’s going on in



life, if you know what I mean. I mean, sometimes I think I should have died a hundred years ago, or maybe did.”

“Yeah,” said Rodney. “I know what you mean. I’m a drug addict, but I don’t like being a drug addict, and I don’t know anyone who likes being a drug addict, and I know a lot of drug addicts. But I just live from day to day, mostly.”

“Why did the cops beat you up?” asked Lev.

“Beats me,” answered Rodney, and he shook his head and laughed, but then he continued. “Couldn’t have been the drugs, because white folks do that. I guess it was racism, but nobody’d admit it was, like nobody’d ever admit that racism is the reason the first naked tits on network TV were slaves in *Roots* or the reason the first naked pubic hair in *Playboy* was on a black woman or the reason the first naked people in a magazine in a public library were Africans in *National Geographic*.”

Maybe the cops believed that stuff about black men having a big you-know-what and were jealous. Maybe they think we’re animals but not dumb enough or think I’m hung like a horse. Ask why any honkies do what they do. I don’t know.”

“You from here?” asked Lev.

“Nah, L.A.” said Rodney. “After my fame went away, and I healed up from having those cops kick my head in, I went back to the doping. And I was sitting in a bar in Watts, and I heard Frank Sinatra on the jukebox singing ‘New York, New York’. A line in the song got my attention, and I robbed a convenience store for the travel money. So here I am, in the Big Apple.”

“Which line of the song?” asked Lev.

“I don’t remember the exact words,” said Rodney. “That was longer ago than yesterday’s newspaper. But it was something like, if I could make it anywhere, I could make it here. I figured I might be able to make it somewhere. So I came here.”

“If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.’ is the line,” said Lev.

“That’s what I said,” said Rodney. “I remember it was something like that.”

And by that time in their conversation, they had walked to the security agency.

“Didn’t you have a beard this morning?” asked Rodney.

“Yeah,” said Lev. “They said I had to shave it off.”

“Bastards,” said Rodney.

“But I needed this job,” said Lev.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Rodney as they stepped into the elevator to the security agency. “It’s a good thing security doesn’t have anything to do with security. Or they’d have to pay more for it, and we’d have to eat shelter-food to get to sleep tonight, again. It’s a well-kept secret.”

And, in the agency’s reception area, Rodney introduced them and grinned at the little black female receptionist. But, as they filled out some forms she gave them and waited for the next step in the process, they kept their thoughts silent. And that step was a man calling them into an internal office, one at a time, Rodney first.

“We’ll run security-checks on you later,” said a man behind a desk in Lev’s turn. “I’m glad you’re white. They told me they hoped we’re an equal-opportunity employer, but I hope you’ll keep an eye on that guy. All you’ll have to do is stand in the back and look like you know what you’re doing. Mostly you’ll just have to look mean and not talk if you don’t have to. You’ve got plenty of time to get there. Don’t let that black-guy get drunk. Here’s the address. You’re in charge.”

Lev didn’t say a word during that interview. And the man showed no sign of caring about the void. Then he pointed down the hallway to the reception area, where Lev found Rodney waiting

there, still silently. And then, after Rodney gave another but littler grin to the receptionist, the two of them silently left the building.

“You never know,” said Rodney on the street. “One of them might like you. It’s playing the odds, and I need a good woman. I need that more than I need to win the lottery, and the odds have got to be better.”

So Lev gave a laugh that didn’t sound ghastly and then showed Rodney the address.

“Holy moly!” said Rodney. “The Apollo Theater! Who are we guarding? Marvin Gaye, the Pointer Sisters, Tina Turner? Ike Turner needs guarding. That jerk-wad. Jive turkey.”

“What’s the Apollo Theater?” asked Lev.

“What’s the Apollo?” shouted Rodney. “Don’t you know it’s been show-time at the Apollo since the year Theresa was born? Do you know who Theresa is, the bus in Alabama? Now, she’s a good woman!”

“Do you know it’s rude to reply to a question with a question?” asked Lev.

“You honky white-boys can get very weird sometimes,” said Rodney.

After the subway-ride uptown, they entered the theatre and reported to the woman whose name was on the slip of paper with the address. And, with nothing resembling a smile, she gave each of them a long look. But she led them into the auditorium.

“The audience is going to be mostly women,” she said. “Don’t stare at them. Just stand back here by the exits and look like you know what you’re doing. If you’re with the media, somebody’s going to get sued. Well, I guess you’ll have to do.”

She was white, and so were nearly all of the women who soon filled the lower seats of the auditorium, quietly brushing past Lev and Rodney. Rodney and Lev looked at each other across the

width of the center tiers of seats and shrugged. But they didn't grin.

Both stood in their shelter-suits, their hands folded in front of their genitals in what public speakers sometimes call the fig-leaf position, as both kept their eyes mostly on the stage, doing what they were told to do, with no smiling.

And then, with the women settled in their seats and reading the pieces of paper handed them at the entrance, the lights dimmed as the curtain rose. And then the woman who had led Lev and Rodney to their places walked to a podium in the center of the stage. But she stopped beside it.

"Ladies," she said, "the First Lady of the United States of America."

At that, all the women in the auditorium stood and roundly and soundly and loudly applauded as Heather Rhododendron strode to the podium past the receding other woman and stood behind it smiling in a bright blue pantsuit and her yellow hair pulled tight and tied behind her head with a bow as blue as her patent-leather middle-height heels.

And, then, placing both of her hands on the rails of the lectern as the other women sat before her, she stood there in the stage-lights and waited for the sound to subside.

"You are women," she said, "and I am a woman."

And, to that, the applause arose again, and subsided.

"Most Americans are women, and yet men have more power."

And she paused. But the women didn't applaud at that. They sat silent, waiting.

"Power," said Heather. "They have more power. And we must ask ourselves why they have more power, while there are more of us than of them in this democracy. Deceit is the answer,

because deceit is power, if one uses it right. And I am here to show you how to use it. I will use my husband as my first example. I'll start with him.

“Don't start with me,' he might say, as I'm sure many of you have said to your husbands, in your desperate defense against their coming home from work and trying to impose on you the lessons they learn each day in their workplace, from which they do everything they can to exclude you. So, today, we will start with him, my Clingon.

“People, men and women, vote for expressed ideas, not for experienced actualities. My so-called husband, with a record of being a philandering jerk, took the Presidency from the primary player in the winning of the Cold War. And our nation's preeminent women's organization and our nation's preeminent educational association supported him after he admitted to the Congress of our nation that he was a philandering jerk, that he'd had physical relations commonly called sexual with a female intern in the Oval Office, and questioned the definition of 'is'.

“That is, he admitted that he couldn't preside over his own zipper in the room in which our nation most expects its President to preside, and the people of our nation gave him credit for the economic prosperity that arose largely from the stability that winning the Cold War produced through most of the world. But forget about him.

“Let's move on or rather back to other recent history. Let's ask why the people and especially the women of the United States of America, supported Fits Jr., while he was taking the world toward nuclear destruction like a fast freight down a dead-end street, while cheating on his wife. So now let's move back forward again.

“Why did Ronny get credit for winning the Cold War, while he slept about twelve hours a day, besides in cabinet

meetings? Why did Ronny get Christian votes for closing his eyes and claiming to pray, before calling peaceful people ‘grass-eating know-nothings’? In other words, why do people suck up to hypocrisy?

“Ladies, the answer is simple. Ronnie was an actor, and Fits Jr. and my husband were young, relative to other Presidents. And they all made nice speeches, while their voting public was too lazy to read the second pages of its newspapers each day, and too stupid to remember the first pages of the papers of a week in the past. But the question is what can we do about it.

“And the answer is that we need to take that tack as well and give no quarter. We need to take advantage of the weakness of men in their desperation to think they’re tough while women have the power of the water that carved the Grand Canyon. And we need to take advantage of the weakness of women who have fallen for men’s nonsense.

“We need to take advantage of everyone, because we need to have the power, for the greater good. And we have precedents to follow, pioneers in taking advantage of the weakness of women, to give them back their strength. I’ll name a few.

“Princess Diana gained her popularity and her power by marrying a prince, and she kept her popularity and her power by divorcing him. She sucked him in, pleasing the fairytale idealists, and she spit him out to show those idealists that she didn’t need the prince, because she could be as ruthless and faithless as any man. And, after she spit him out, she jet-setted around the world with nobody-knows-how-many men in tow.

“And, by occasionally visiting poor people and talking about their situation, she made so much of a claim to humanity that her death driven by a drunken man created more headlines than did the nearly simultaneous death of Mother Teresa.

“Mother Teresa. You don’t have to sacrifice yourself like that. You don’t have to go to the black hole of Calcutta and help people. All you have to do is dress yourself fashionably and talk about doing good, preach doing good. Mother Teresa was a victim of the trickery of men’s religion. You are too professional to fall for Christ.

“Princess Diana married to become a princess and remained a princess, stealing power from a foolish man who didn’t consider the future, who didn’t consider that he couldn’t take her power back, not even in divorce. Her man, her prince, lacked the tactics we must learn to overcome men, the strategy of Winnie O’Malley. So let’s look at her.

“Let’s look at Winnie O’Malley. She has a boyfriend and a talk-show and a magazine titled by her monogram. She’s never married, and that boyfriend is hardly a part of her entourage, and yet she’s one of the wealthiest women on Earth. And none of what she does, mainly making a fortune by amateur psychobabble, has any substance.

“To sell her silly magazines and silly television-talk to people who otherwise might be spending their time and money on Tupperware, she’s staying just short of the silliness of supermarket tabloids. but bounding full length into the silliness of soap-operas. I mean she sucks bucks from the women who voted for Fits Jr. and my husband because they’re cute. I mean the weak women I mentioned before. The soap-women.

“And now Winnie’s taken a page from the book of Diana, the goddess of the hunt. She’s made a trip to Africa and arranged a Christmas party for some poor children there, and she says that trip defines her existence. She says she might go there again, because that trip revealed to her her *raison d’etre*, as though her life of winning billions weren’t it as my husband’s Vice President says he’ll grow a beard to look like Lincoln.

“But the best part is that she not only takes advantage of her own sex but also of her own race. She’s very successfully training black women to be as silly as the traditionally white soap-opera-women. Rather than teaching them that black is beautiful, she’s teaching them to think silly is beautiful. So she can control them. That’s leadership.

“Remember Mikey, the black Muslim. He was so silly he committed crimes blatantly, to be able to afford to straighten his hair, and buy zoot-suits. But, unlike Winnie, when he got caught, he became honest and was killed. Winnie’s profiting by getting others to straighten their hair. And she’s profiting immensely. So she’s right for real!

“Do you see the pattern? Look at Margo Slick, unmarried also but making a fortune advising homemakers. Margo has been charged with the crime of insider-trading, and the soap-opera-women are saying the charge has nothing to do with what she did but rather is because she is a woman on a man’s Wall Street in a man’s world.

“Truth is that her market is the worst of the soap-women, women who watch her on television and shop at K-Mart for the same reason, because they have no taste. They’re trailer trash, people who rent furnished mobile homes because they have no taste or money to determine their own décor. Margo will be convicted, because the real world has no room for people who eat like pigs, however they garnish. Yet we need their votes.

“Of course, we can beat the likes of Ronny, who’s in love with his wife. And my husband Clingon beat the Viagra husband of the soap-opera-wife who ran the American Red Cross, even without having to point out the corruption in the American Medical Association, and those soap-opera charities like the Salvation Army. But we have to stand together as women, more than we did



when that soap-opera wife tried to win the Republican nomination, with paint on her face.

“The reason the Republican soap-opera-women didn’t support her was that they resented not being contenders themselves. But they made excuses like saying she’d had too many facelifts for herself or wore too much of the makeup they tried to make work for themselves. She was too much like Tammy Fay Bakker, too able to afford being too much like them. So, for our chance to rule, we have to stand together.

“We have to stand together, regardless of party, no matter what. So I’ve invited you powerful women here to show you how to be more powerful, by carrying the message of empowerment to all women, from yourselves to the soap-women. Showing the steps of Diana and Winnie to the soap-women will show them how to be more successfully ruthless and greedy and corrupt than any man, by feeding them their poison.

“If you can do without marrying, like Winnie and Margo, do. If you find a way to power through marriage, do that without a qualm. But be sure you marry a noisy jerk, like Diana’s prince or my husband, or Fits Jr. Don’t marry a strong silent type like Eisenhower, who wouldn’t have screwed around at home. Don’t be a Mamie.

“Eisenhower had the strength to stay faithful, until he found himself alone on foreign shores. So marry a man who will make a fool of himself for the first dumb blonde actress or ambitious intern who comes along. Or marry a man who has no interest in you anyway. So you can divorce him on grounds of incompatibility. After you bleed him.

“Jackie Fits’ mistake was in not accepting Linden’s offers upon her husband’s death. Had she been as ruthless as Linden, she may have been the first female President of the United States. But no one in this room is a 21-year-old intern or a dumb blonde

actress or a birdbrain singer like Barbra Streisand, whose idea of feminism is nail-polish and calling my husband's Presidency happy days, like the NOW and the NEA.

"And neither was Jackie Fits. Yet, instead of using Linden, she married another old man, for nothing but money. So we, you and I, the professional women of these United States of America, must lead women by their noses to the power they deserve. They, by our leadership, will learn as children. And here is my next step toward that.

"I will write a book, and its most important part will be how Clingon wronged me, how I am a soap-opera wronged-woman. And, from that, many women will vote for me because they're silly enough to believe that crap, and many women will vote for me because they admire me because they know it's a load of crap, and some men will vote for me because they're horny buggers, and I'm kind of cute. And, slimy or not, I will glide on the tide of that deceit into the Whitehouse, and anyone in this room could be next. Except those two guys in the bad suits in the back, hiding their crotches. They're here to protect us, because we have better jobs. And they don't stand a chance."

Neither Lev nor Rodney moved their hands when they heard that, just bore out the craziness to get their day-labor minimum-wage, and neither did they move their hands as the women left, with none of them looking at either of them, as they passed within inches of them.

None of the women looked at them until the woman who had placed them called them to her.

"Thanks, guys," she said. "Maybe we'll use you again."

But, back on the street, Rodney and Lev looked at each other and guffawed, and then Rodney became philosophical on that concrete sidewalk in Harlem.

“Of course, it takes a village to raise a child,” he said. “But does that excuse parents from being parents. Does it excuse their passing off their parental responsibilities to their village, or to a boarding-school as I guess a lot of rich people do, if we can call people like that rich? With that rationale, or whatever you call it, won’t the villages kick that job up to the United Nations, eventually. And then won’t the United Nations have to kick it back down. But how, if families can’t, can the world unite families?”

“Why can’t we all just get along?” asked Rodney.

Because the security agency had closed for the day, Rodney headed off to find a meal and shelter for the night, but Lev didn’t need that and had one more item on his New York agenda. He headed off to Bill’s Bar, where hung out the staff of the Wired Media Net, the most responsive name in news. He wanted to find out why the media so misrepresent.

But there, excepting Frank Grubbs sitting alone at a table in the middle of the room, he saw no one he recognized. He knew Frank had been an investor and executive for WMN and had hosted a program in the traditional evening-news time-slot, but he thought he’d left WMN to head a dot.com startup with a website promoting exploration of outer space. And, seeing Grubbs’ moon face reflecting light from a Tiffany shaded fixture above him, he thought of that but approached the table.

“Aren’t you Frank Grubbs?” he asked, offering to shake his hand.

“Pretty much so,” said Frank, accepting the handshake from his seat.

“Mind if I get a beer and join you for a minute?” asked Lev.

“I guess not,” said Frank. “And Bill’ll bring you a beer.”

On his way to this bar, Lev had rematerialized his suit into a better fit for this situation, and he pulled out the chair with a manicured hand, which he laid on the table, after he sat. And Frank looked at the hand and then into Lev's face.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I thought you were exploring outer space," said Lev. "Just curious."

"Dot.com," said Frank, looking away to Bill, who was approaching with a menu. "Flash in the pan. Bubble about to burst. What can I say?"

"Just a Bud, please," said Lev to fat Bill, who stood beside the table, not offering the menu but holding it ready at the bib of his apron.

"So you're back at WMN?" asked Lev, as Bill receded without a word. "I've been traveling. Haven't seen much TV lately."

"Back in the saddle," said Frank. "Influencing Earth in my little way. Not much of an audience in outer space anyway, that I could find."

"I have some pretty spacey friends," said Lev.

"So do I," said Frank. "Is that what you were curious about?"

"Not about space-aliens," answered Lev. "But, about influencing Earth, yes. I'm curious to know the thought behind your approach to presenting information to the public. Oh, and I'm also curious to know why none of your famous staff is here."

"I can't answer that second question," he said after looking around the room and shrugging. "I didn't come in here much before I invested in the dot.com. I started coming in when I came back, because I thought I might need some dynamic reestablish of myself. A lot of them came in then, but it's been like this since a few days after. Maybe they're afraid of me. I *am* powerful."

“You *do* have a rather leading approach to talking to people,” said Lev. “If what I’ve seen of you on television is how you are off-camera.”

“You have to lead,” said Frank. Jack Horner, WMN’s founder, keeps a plaque on his desk that says ‘Lead, or follow, or get out of the way.’ And that’s what WMN does, leading people down the primrose path to thinking their weakness is acceptable. We lead, and they follow. It’s basic.”

“Basic?” said Lev. “You think that approach is basic?”

“I don’t think,” said Frank. “I know. It’s basic, fundamental, foundational, essential. If people aren’t led, they fall by the wayside into a ditch and drown in their own stupidity. Let me give you an example.

“The government doesn’t lead. It grubs for votes, and so we newsmakers have to lead for it. The example I’ll offer is the rhetoric on terrorism, which the presently presiding administration calls the war on terror. Most of the other news networks call it the war on terrorism, but only WMN calls it what it is. We call it the war on radical Islamists. We call a spade a spade.

“You see, everybody else is afraid to offend anyone. So they generalize and blur until no one knows what they’re talking about, because they aren’t talking about anything. So we lead, just as Mayor Gayle did against the blacks in Montgomery, with rhetoric that’s both accurate and pointed. Gayle called Oliver and Theresa and the NAACP negro radicals, and the phrase served three purposes.

“First, it avoided allegations of racism that would have come from using the other ‘N’ word. Second, it pointed to the fact that what they were doing was trying to change the norm, the world order the rest of us have come to know and love. Third, it didn’t specify all negroes, only radicals. And, for propaganda, that third was best.

“And now the same is true of the phrase ‘radical Islamists’. The word ‘radical’ carries its negative connotation without going to an inaccurate extreme like calling Sacco and Vanzetti anarchists. The word ‘Islamists’ works well partly because it isn’t a word, because Muslims use the word ‘Muslims’ to convey the meaning we’re better conveying with the word ‘Islamists’. That is, because it’s our word, we can use it to mean anything wish it to mean. Because we coined it, we can define it.

“And the way we define it for the public is to use it in particular contexts, and those contexts always show that what we mean by the phrase “radical Islamists” is ‘terrorists’. It’s a basic propaganda method, as basic as Thomas Paine’s using the phrase ‘common sense’ to refer to his rationalization of the American Revolution. Paine, because he was too common to be a monarch, had a fit that ironically left the Fits family to show us how things should have been, had we the courage or craziness of dragon-slayers, instead of the mundaneness of monarchs.”

“What in his hell is he talking about,” Lev wondered as Frank grubbed on. “His jabber’s like a jigsaw puzzle.”

## Chapter 26

### The Red Badge of Courage

“All leaders do it,” continued Frank frankly. “Including the Israelis. Anyone with half a brain knows Zionists are radical, in the denotative sense of the word ‘radical’. As were Israelites both before and after before David called his base Zion, Zionists today are a basically nomadic people trying to settle down on land occupied by less nomadic people, with total disregard for the less nomadic people’s rights our Declaration of Independence says are unalienable, to stop being quite so nomadic

“How radical can one get? And then there’s their method. Menachem Begin formed his organization Irgun to terrorize anyone occupying the land three religions call holy. And, when some of those people tried to retaliate, we called them terrorists.

“We called them terrorists because we sympathized with the Zionists because we identified them with the six million Jewish persons the Nazis slaughtered a few years earlier and because that also makes calling Zionists radical politically incorrect. So, with United States help, Irgun became legitimized as the state of Israel, with Menachem Begin eventually its Prime Minister. It’s basic propaganda.

“And, in the present case, we can get away with our lame name-game of calling Muslims Islamists not only because the word’s new and ours to do with as we choose but also because of

what some people calling themselves Muslims did. That is, they murdered more than 3000 Americans in one morning, and sympathy for that would be radical for real. So that lets us radically use that word.

“Most Muslims in Afghanistan have less to do with Fatah than most Jews in New York had to do with Irgun, but we can propagandize the identification for the greater good, as Thomas Paine propagandized for America’s greater good.

“See what I mean?”

“I see what you mean,” said Lev, recognizing at least the internal logic of that piece of the puzzle. “Do you think other news networks try to take that approach, or do you think WMN is far and away the world leader? I mean, do you think you’re supremely competitive?”

“You learn quickly,” said Frank. “That’s another propaganda approach we take, in interviewing people on television. Your A or B question is like asking me whether I’ve stopped beating my wife. It’s what lawyers call a leading question.

“My answer is both A and B, and another person’s answer might be neither A nor B. But you didn’t offer either of those choices, and politeness requires answering a question asked. So you left me with a choice of being wrong or rude, and you closed with a conciliating question. Of course I must say yes.

“Of course your question was rude, but polite people don’t think two wrongs make a right. So we can be as rude as we wish to be in our interviewing-tactics, because most of the rabble that watches television is too rude to know we’re being rude, while many of the people we interview are refined enough to try to comply with the rules of etiquette, or struggle to. And yes that goes to the question of whether other networks do it.



“Look at morning television, what you see on WMN and all the other major networks. You see cooking and clothing and dog-and-cat stories and stories of children dying of cancer. And, for the clothing to fit, you see stories of how not to get fat from the cooking.

“Why do you see that then, in the morning? Because we media professionals know that most of the people watching television then are goofy women. And, if you watch all day, you’ll see a bell-curve of goofy-women influence-programming.

“Because it’s before most men leave home for work, the first hour of a morning talk-show is more like the evening news than the second hour, and the curve culminates with the afternoon soap-operas, the ultimate in goofy-women programming. Then it subsides into the not quite so silly programs such as Winnie O’Malley’s. Then it passes on to the news-shows.

“The first news-shows are generally local, because women care more about local news than about national or international news, which is why their place is in the home. The next news is the network news, which is national and international because most men are home by then, and because the goofy women are in the kitchen. And next comes primetime entertainment, which is for relatively goofy men and women, because not-so-goofy men and women have better things to do with their evenings than watch television. So that’s how that goes. It’s quite standard.”

“So you’re saying all networks are the same,” said Lev.

“No,” said Frank. “There are nuances, even within one network, that come from personalities. For example, the only thing insincere about Warren Gentry on ABC is that he’s not out of the closet sexually, while nothing is sincere about Barley Tuner, on the same network. So, because important people pay less attention to Tuner, he belongs in a closet and is more closeted than Gentry,

and people on other networks imitate Gentry's lip-smacking, while they're unable to emulate his substance.

"You see? Personality differences are inevitable! Gentry, because his personality is too admirable for many people to be able to imitate him, may be both the most respected and the most resented news-anchor,. He nearly never expresses judgments, and he almost always ends his show with something upbeat, spiritually inspiring. And no I don't mean 'spiritually' in the phony sense of some particular religious bigotry. I mean he leaves us with appreciation for life and a motive to make ours better.

"The reason he can do that is that he *is* sincere and *does* appreciate life. The reason Barley Tuner can't do that is that he has the Clingon spirituality, the lack of appreciation that leaves one thinking one has to be slickly pretentious to think or move at all. In other words, Barley Tuner doesn't know what the definition of 'is' is. His approach to reality never gets past the definition of 'seems'.

"Maybe the best example of Tuner's expertise is his promoting literacy by saying he read as a child by sneaking a flashlight beneath a blanket. Important isn't whether he did, but whether he convinces his soap-opera audience of his sympathy, and he can lie for that for any advertiser, because he knows what business he's in. When the world learned that Strom Thurmond had fathered a daughter by a black maid, Tuner agreed with the daughter's lawyer that that wasn't hypocritical.

"If you're a smart guy, you must see how such exemplifies Tuner's expertise in our business. If people would read, they'd know that television is essentially out-of-context sound-and-sight bites. But they don't read and won't, no matter how many lies we tell them. So Tuner's profession profits by his cliché pretension.

"And you might also note that Gentry nearly never broadcasts outside his own time-slot, while Tuner's all over the

clock. I can stay in my own time-slot because I'm an executive and a major investor. Gentry stays in his because it's where he belongs, and that's clear. Tuner does well everywhere, because he belongs nowhere.

“It's a matter of integrity, and what makes WMN the far-and-away world-leader is that we recognize that, or at least I do. We recognize that most people by far are more like Tuner than like Gentry, and we use that fact as a marketing-principle, from hiring to programming. And we adjust to keep up with the times.

“WMN began as more like Warren, but now it's more like Barley. We've gone downhill, but not without reason or motive or careful consideration. We've gone downhill because the peoples of the United States of America have gone downhill because the economy of the United States of America has gone uphill. High unemployment forces people to earn their keep, while low unemployment permits people to be lazy and greedy, to be bums and beggars. Downhill is where one digs or pans for gold.

“After the weird stagflation that came from discharged Vietnam veterans and women demanding liberation and jobs, and then finding a few jobs more quickly than supply could increase to meet the demands of their new domestic income, both of those demographic sectors worked hard and well to create the productive prosperity of the eighties.

“And, after the weird brief downturn that came from the oil uncertainty that came from letting Saddam Hussein slide in order to save the winning of the Cold War after the Gulf War, the increase in world unity that came from winning the Cold War permitted economic prosperity nearly all the way through the nineties.

“So people became fat and lazy, hardly having to work to earn their prosperity. So WMN and the other networks catered to the greed and ignorance of the fat-cats and couch-potatoes that

most of the United States population became, what people appropriately called the me-generation. But now we need to take another tack.

“As I said, we have to take the lead. We have to inspire those couch-potatoes to get off their butts and get back to work, at least while they’re at work. If we don’t, the only way anyone will be able to make a fortune in the first decade of the new millennium will be to win the lottery or sue someone, ways to wealth too touted already. From the standpoint of the general welfare, both of those methods are robbing Peter to pay Paul, and both inspire more laziness, less productivity. So WMN is going to have to pick up the lead to create some socioeconomic changes.”

And then, lifting his moon face from his martini, Grubbs smiled at Lev.

“Makes sense to me,” said Lev. “How are you going to do it?”

“I already told you,” said Frank. “Sincerity has nothing to do with it. Had it, the Clingons could never have made it into the Whitehouse, much less kept the support of the NOW and the NEA, after what Mr. Clingon did to a female intern in the Oval Office.

“Speeches count more than deeds, even when deeds are thrown into people’s faces. If things go as they stand, Gentry’s experience as an investigative reporter is less important than his unwillingness to cater to soap-opera women. Gentry types come and go, while Tuner types rule. And we’ll rule by propaganda.

“We’re going to magnify antipathy toward everyone in the Middle East who isn’t Jewish. Because those people are the Semitic nations with all that oil beneath their land supporting their sand, we’ll create a new domino-theory. We’ll promote the notion that Iraq should follow Kuwait into our hands, and so on to Saudi Arabia. And, besides gaining control of most of Earth’s oil, that will recreate the Vietnam cycle.

“But let me clarify that part of it. Now, since the advent of our all-volunteer army, most of our young military men and women are hardly military. They jog in shorts and sneakers in the morning, not in the combat regalia in which they’d have to move in a military situation. They’re there mostly for economic reasons.

“They’re there because they couldn’t find a better job, or because they couldn’t afford to go to college without the money our government gives veterans for that, after they spend less time in the military than they will in college.

“So, as things stand now, those young pansies will cry their eyes out and write to their congressmen if they have to spend a year in a combat zone as did millions of their predecessors in Vietnam. And, of course, they won’t know of the duration of predecessors fighting World War II. That’s all now history.

“And, if WMN can instigate that domino approach, we’ll have to reinstitute the draft. The interim result would be making soldiering essential, breeding a generation of worker bees, with a work ethic not protestant at all. And the End result would be oil-wealth and productive citizens guided by a nation of Jewish bankers. And, using dynamics Aristotle couldn’t conceive of in his logic, we’ll carry it through in basic ways. He wasn’t basic enough.

“You sound Russian. Sergei Eisenstein, by couching this in terms of Hegel’s influence on Marx through the word ‘dialectic’, defined what France came to call the montage theory of film-editing. Throw incongruity at people, and they feel forced to resolve, and they resolve in the direction most readily at hand.

“Our reporters talk a lot of nonsense, but the ax in the middle of it is little plain statements of what we wish to be remembered. And we use Pavlovian psychology, rewarding our audience by giving them sexy-looking reporters to look at, and we

don't have to pay our reporters much, because they're parrots. They only need to pronounce what teleprompters tell them.

"We hire reporters who don't know the difference between Muslims and muslin, and show it by their pronunciation. That is, because our reporters are as cute as our trusting greedy or lazy yuppie or downie audience is lazy, knowing doesn't matter. And we get away with it because those airheads don't know the difference either.

"I learned that in high school, without being taught. When an English teacher tried to teach Melville's symbolism in *Moby Dick*, the students told each other that no one could think up all that stuff. So, then, I understood that people can talk themselves out of anything difficult, and into anything easily offered.

"We require only enunciation, not knowledge that 'Thames' doesn't rhyme with what our recruits are, which is lames. They're lame-brained parrots, and the few members of our audience who know the difference get their reward by thinking our reporters are stupider than they are, and that's what they most want. Generally, even more than sex, people want to think they're smarter than other people.

"Why, I mean, do we have so many brands, of automobiles or Levis, or whatever? Kleenex and Coke became generic references because slopes can make them as well as we can, and now do. Think of Barbra Streisand and Julie Christy, and you'll see.

"Barbra Streisand was the most beautiful singer in the world when she was barely old enough to drink outside New York, and she hasn't improved. Because she doesn't know how beautiful she is, she makes a fool of herself trying to be smart, trying to direct not only movies but also national politics. And Julie Christy, who played Lara in *Dr. Zhivago*, a part you should appreciate if you're Russian, was the most beautiful woman in the

world to see before she had her face plasticized into flacid blandness, because she didn't know how beautiful she was.

“Remember Nancy Wilson, Barbra Streisand's main competition in the sixties? She was beautiful both to see and to hear, and she made a few recordings and appeared on a few album-covers and left her legacy as that! But few people have the strength to leave the stage before they waste away or obliterate themselves.

“It's basic because it's obvious to anyone who looks, and we can keep it secret because human nature is to look for things less obvious, and another obvious thing people ignore is that the thing that makes popular music popular is mostly vocal articulation, singers making sure the audience discerns the words.

“In other words, it isn't about the music, as Picasso's *Guernica* isn't art for sight's sake. Picasso's *Guernica* is popular because it's easy to talk about, but articulation of words in music goes further. Singers have to force themselves to articulate, and that forces them to reinvent their voices, to begin anew.

“So it's a little like the question of what one would have done then if one knew then what one knows now. The forced reinvention draws into the voice what one feels now, and so it sucks in the heart and spits it out, but no one says so. Christina Aguilera admires Etta James and sings like an eagle of Christ.

“But she doesn't say why. She doesn't say how she learned. If we know Etta James, because that younger singer said she admires her, we know Christina knows why and how Aguilera learned. But, because she'd have to answer the most important question in her claim to beauty, she won't be less oblique.

“If she knows she's beautiful, why does she poke holes in herself, tattoo herself? Why does she hide herself behind things that have nothing to do with her self? And how does her beautiful

audience call such hiding beautiful? It's the same as the question of why women use makeup. We big men beat them down to it.

"Maybe Julie Christy didn't plasticize herself but only powder-puffed herself before she played an Alzheimer's patient beautiful in old age, and maybe Barbra Streisand sings beautifully in the shower, but my job isn't selling beauty or truth, but selling ugliness and lies, and that's easy.

"It's easy because civilization is fear of itself.

"Yup, WMN plays on weakness in the same way brand-names sell, in the same way art sells by what critics say about it. Nobody understands art, and fashion is only fashionable if its price is high, if you don't buy it on sale. Art critics say nothing about aesthetics, and Marlin Brando is attractive, fat or not.

"I know I'm rambling, but let me give you a parable I hope will make my point. This is an anecdote one of our prospective reporters told me in an employment interview. Her name was Deborah, and it should have been Delilah.

"She said she'd been a cub reporter for some little rural Kansas newspaper and, having begged permission to cover the Oscars while she was on vacation in Los Angeles, had stood among the rabble and waited for the stars. She said that, on seeing Clint Eastwood, she rushed through the barricades set to keep out the rabble and knocked down into a flowerbed some bearded little man who was walking with the actor.

"I'm so pleased to meet you,' she said she said to Eastwood, grabbing his hand.

"Yeah,' she said Eastwood said, and she said Eastwood turned away and handed the little bearded man up out of the flowerbed, and her punch-line was that the little bearded man was Steven Spielberg.

"Well, I think she was lying, but I wouldn't hire her anyway. With that mix of humility and name-dropping in her



anecdote, she was too smart. You have to be in control of the rabble, and you have to use the rabble to do it, and smart people don't follow well, whether or not they're honest, but especially if they are. And, although we focus on that fact, making it an overt managerial marketing policy, we're not the only people who do it. Look at the A.M.A. Look at doctors.

“We did a story about a medical-school course that teaches bedside-manner by teaching horse-training. Horses basically don't trust humans, and so to train them you need first to establish their confidence in you through gentleness. So we have doctors training patients to give them their money. Now have I made myself clear?

“And don't forget how the pharmaceuticals companies team up with the A.M.A. to create new names for people to be hypochondriacs about. If you sell a new name, you can sell a new way for people to act on their hypochondria, and people think they're smarter when they have a new word in their vocabulary, and they don't mind paying for it.

“To be succinct, we play on people's ignorance and arrogance, and we're not alone. Look at Cathy Lee Gifford and Wal-Mart. It's business as usual.

“Ms. Lee is out, and Mr. Walton is in. So the popular media don't point out that Wal-Mart's claim to selling only American products is bogus, that Wal-Mart's management is more directly and intentionally involved in un-American sweatshops than Cathy ever imagined possible, in America. It's ignorance and arrogance.

“And that's another example of our getting away with what we do because people hardly read. If they read the labels in the clothing they buy at Wal-Mart, they'd know what I'm telling you. But instead they look at pictures in People magazine, because it's easier. And because it isn't about people but about how people'd

like to be. And that's rich and famous or sick for pity. With minimal work.

"Marx said religion is the opiate of the people. But what most people call religion is conflagration of peoples, inspiring people to burn each other down, often for their land. *People* magazine is the opiate of the people of the United States, confining conflagration to fighting and mauling each other to buy brand-name remainders on sale at the mall.

"We put one of our hires we thought was a bimbo in the Middle East, but she did her homework and reported so objectively that we had to move her to the Hollywood beat, where the news is all soap-opera, stuff she couldn't obstruct. We're pretty sure she'll leave us soon, but she has no place to go! To work for Turner?

"Of course we put some ugly bimbos in conspicuous positions, to keep people from accusing us of what we're doing. Horner calls that tokenism, and I call it bimboism nevertheless, after Marilyn Monroe and Horner's wife. And after Candy in our war in Vietnam.

"Have you seen the movie *Candy*?

"Setting the tone for marketing for the last quarter-century of its millennium, it played a bunch of established actors against an actress who never became established, to capitalize on the counter-culture theme free-love from both sides of the question.

"And it's tokenism like putting Ronny into the presidency. It's easier to elect an actor than it is to elect a functionary, because functionaries are more interested in functioning than in preaching. So the marketers of political parties or whatever seek someone silly enough to sit back and let the functionaries perform the functions of the office, while the ostensible actors act like they're acting, making speeches to accept the accolades.

"Anyway, nothing's serious. That's why I've put my protégé Smiles Cryin into the soap-opera time-slot. I realize that

the reason he never laughs, and the reason he advises and ridicules the experts he interviews, is that he's paranoid-delusional. But that's what people want, encouragement to advise and ridicule experts, to think they're smarter than people they feel are smarter than they are. Cryin is an easily acceptable serious adult role-model, to soap-opera women and sillily serious men.

“Our reasoning for not sending him to Iraq was partly that we knew his paranoia would freak him out anywhere that might be thought a valley of death, and partly not to alienate pacifist women. We gave him a little trial in the first Gulf War, and the fireworks shied him so far from a window during a broadcast that a woman had to take his mike from him, to keep it on camera. So now we let him freak out as an armchair advisor to our generals who've retired from war to our armchair. We know both women and war.

“We put him into the soap-opera time-slot because news can't compete then. I mean we let Cryin give excuses to men at home in that time slot, men who can't find a job and are looking for excuses. That's a minority market-segment, but it's grown since Clingon's example turned economic prosperity into the me-generation, giving people an excuse not to try to earn the pay they haven't needed to earn. WMN knows what's happening, and we do what we can to make sure we profit, no matter what.

“The key to money-mongering journalism is making people think whatever we present pertains to them and is on their side, or at least pertains to the neighbors nearest them in geography and culture and race who are like them, to make them think they can be like the people we present favorably. The only reason airing life and death in remote places sells is that it helps people think they're more compassionate than they are, and that's because they know in their hearts that compassion is good. But the reason Moses and Jesus have failed to carry their plain and simple

message to humans is that humans easily lie to their hearts for pride.

“So we do things like interviewing our own reporters in the middle of a hurricane named for Columbus’s queen, in a truck advertising our affiliate television station there and a home improvement company paying us for that advertising. And, to focus on that advertising on our truck while making our effort seem heroic, we pretend we lose our audio connection to the site. As I said, we’re pretty smart.

“It’s like Yasser Arafat grinning in Beirut while Israel throws every pyrotechnic they can at him to burn him, and like Richard Pryor developing a comedy routine around his heart attack. It’s as funny as a heart attack, and it sells like Pryor’s joking about setting himself afire freebasing cocaine. It’s all about desensitizing, by drugs or otherwise. Like Christina Aguilera and Tammy Fay.

“Christina has her nose-rings and tattoos, and Tammy has her eyelashes and other makeup. People flee themselves, and the most responsive name in news responds to their desire by encouraging their flight, giving them a place to turn. Fashion and art are nothing but the audacity of living only on words and excuses sales people use to make people think they’re being fashionable or artistic.

“It’s like people dressing in what they call their Sunday best to go to church. They don’t read the Bible carefully enough to know or care what it says Jesus said about the lilies of the field. And preachers, because it might diminish their parishioners’ pride in being there, don’t preach it.

“‘Fashionable’ means being one kind of monkey to think you’re better than the next monkey, and ‘artistic appreciation’ means the same. And, in case you’re judging us, the most truly artistic or fashionable people are like Hitler, people who set trends

substantially and materially. WMN just follows trends as it follows politics, but we emphasize trends toward our pocketbook, toward profiting our investors.

“Cryin is our version of the *Boston Globe*. Have you ever noticed that the *Globe* has no Sunday funnies? There’s *Dilbert* and lame nonsense, no *Peanuts* or *Barney Google* or *Beatle Bailey* or *B.C.* or even *Donald Duck*, only *Dilbert* and what’s lame. It’s the Boston debacle of claiming to be smart by denying anything that’s good in life. The way to make people laugh is to show them something more miserable than they.

“And so we made Smiles funny in that way. Nothing is less funny than a lawyer, and so we had our main airhead legal preacher give our small somewhat sophisticated audience some irony recently. We had our coke-freak Toby Lyin, whom we present to the world as our chief legal-expert, call our paranoid-delusional Smiles Cryin 'Counselor'. Cryin took that craziness as a compliment.

“And I had to laugh at that myself. But the funniest thing about that is that few of the people of the United States of America, whether they’re lawyers or psychologists or priests or common laborers, remember Cryin’s cowardice of a decade ago, or Lyin’s predictions of a week ago. If they did, they’d know we’re no more expert than they are.

“Anyway, we sell such failures funnily, funneling funds to us rich whiteys. For example, when that hurricane named for Columbus’s colonizing queen was threatening the coasts of the American colonies named for England’s first post-interregnum king, we ran a story showing clean-up kits from the Salvation Army. We had our reporter say the kits were huge and show one in a box, and the box containing the kit was about big enough for a mop and a couple of rolls of paper towels. We said they were huge. Huge!

“Now that’s funny. And funnier is that we ran a story on the same day with a police-chief bragging about arresting black people because they averted their eyes from officers. Anyone who considers what white people have done to black people in this land of the free for a half-millennium must know that that’s quintessential racial profiling.

“Who you looking at, boy? That’s hilarious to anyone with a sophisticated sense of irony, but hardly any of our audience is African American, and less of it’s black. So we don’t care who finds it funny. And neither do our advertisers.

“We’re neither historical nor hysterical. History is about names, and the electorate that makes up our audience looks at names, not at what all’s going on or has gone on. Our market blames Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein for this or that because their names remind them of specific memorable events. Our present President’s father quietly accomplished more than anyone to achieve the biggest event of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but he did it by many smaller events, not one fell swoop.

“Next thing you know, some actor will run again to govern California, and he may be an alien. And, if he’s an alien, he may pronounce the name of that state a little more like most of its population pronounces it than do the Anglo-descendent politicians leading the state at the time of this hypothetical revolution. So the Anglo competition might ridicule the pronunciation and try to further defame the actor for sexual misbehavior, as though that’s unique among politicians. And many double standards could be involved in that, but what if the Anglo party were the party of Clingon, seeking to say the other party is as degenerate as they.

“But, as things stand now, in the United States of America, none of it would make any difference. In the dawn of this millennium, the citizens of the United States of America have become like the citizens of the decline of Rome, and they’ll elect a

groping governor to feel better about their own futile groping. And they'll defend Saddam Hussein for the same reason.

“Our market, the electorate of our nation, doesn't remember or learn history. Instead, it pays attention to braggadocio and preaching, and so we give that audience that to which it listens. We give them paranoid Smiles Cryin, and we subordinate to him an ignorant modern soap-opera woman, to keep up with the soap-opera trends.

“Soap-operas are now trending toward angry revolutionary women. So we feed that trend while keeping our angry arrogant ignorant co-anchor subordinate to Smiles, having her suck up to Smiles' stupid sarcasm, the attitude of the unemployed man. So we cover all the bases, leaving no sucker behind. P. T. Barnum has nothing on us.

“And Hugh Hefner has nothing on WMN for harem-building. Horner, our founder, bagged Barbarella and converted her from a peace-creep into a hard-body, sucking a generation of women out of flowers and fresh air and into mechanical gyms stinking of men's sweat. Not even Tuner can touch my and Jack's plums.

“We're commercial. Maybe the best way to get people to vote for people and issues, rather than for parties or other separate racings, is to be an ambiguous candidate. Ideal might be a movie star who promotes pro-choice on a Republican ticket. More perfect might be a pro-life candidate running as a Democrat.

“And, because we're professional marketers, we know all that But we leave it alone, not because we're objective journalists, but for our investors. Being neither politicians nor journalists, we spin for the advisors who pay us most, or we make them think we do. As our founder said, don't follow.

“We're testing a new approach. Shep Blitzkrieg, our most celebrated reporter, is going to try making every issue racial. And

he'll do it by finding Uncle Toms willing to sell their souls for fame and fortune, and having them argue the culpability of black people in the news, against white devil's advocates.

“White people have the money, and bigots have the energy. So we'll fuel the bigotry and get the money any way we can. And, because it presents both sides, we can get away with it by calling it objectivity! What can be more objective than blacks condemning blacks?

“You seem to be a smart guy. The WMN slogan isn't ‘the most responsive name in news’ for nothing. You should understand what I'm saying. You must see it's dog-eat-dog. I mean people-eat-people. You must see it. It's very plain. Is it clear?

“From Jack Horner's power-freakiness down to Shep Blitzkrieg's desperation to extend his fifteen minutes of fame from anchoring our reporting of the Gulf War that nearly cost us the Cold War, and on down to the plentitude of such as Smiles Cryin and Ms. Killer Blips taking pharmaceuticals to the next marketing level, how can it not be clear?

“Why all the fuss about steroids in sports?’ we had Killer ask to answer that question while giving the loser men at home an excuse to lose a little more of their love and life by spending their unemployment-checks on drugs we advertise instead of beer.

“Killer earned her name when she laughed while saying Whitey Bolger answered a charge by saying that no one had asked him whether he'd done it. But my personal favorite was when we sought an injured Santa, and found one who'd fallen from a float in a Thanksgiving Day parade, so we could have Smiles give one of his rare smiles. We had him smile saying he hoped Santa had a health insurance clause in his contract. Insurance, pharmaceuticals, big money.



“And we gave Smiles a day off and had Killer say he was out getting his caffeine into a higher gear. So we get money from Starbucks and all the pharmaceuticals companies from Advil to Valium, not to mention the legal insurance gamble that takes more from the poor than it gives to the pharmaceutical companies, or the illegal similar destruction of sports and blue hair in Las Vegas. Of course the pharmaceutical companies have the technology to create new diseases and pump them into Tylenol to become heroes by providing the cure later, after some people have died from their cause. But, because I’m not a soap-opera woman or a would-be sportsman, that’s not my problem.

“Smiles helps foster athletic cowardice while, because we know women still make most spending-decisions for the home, Killer helps us drag women into a new version of the days when they sucked up coffee in their kitchens after their family was off to work or school

“But our best public service from Smiles Cryin came from our having him say a woman had walked away empty-handed, when she forgave a child who had killed her daughter, and placed the blame on the child’s mother.

So we know the market. We know that the outside chance that the World Wrestling Federation inspired that boy to kill that little girl isn’t worth compromising our WWF profits. Life, as any fool knows, is far more complicated than that. So we pick simple ways.

“Marketing means avenging adults, to suck their bucks from them. WMN is successful because we know what business we’re in. We’re in the business of leading anyone not at my end of our daisy chain down our primrose path.

“We lead the paying public, bimbos and snot-nosed chauvinist yuppies, and Blitzkrieg leads our pack by pronouncing ‘*nom de guerre*’ as though it rhymes with ‘gooier’.

“So maintaining Shep’s fame alone will lead the public into whatever ditch or feeding-trough we wolves desire.

“I mean we top dogs.”

Lev had sat silent for some time, looking not into a river, but into this swamp, but now he spoke.

“I think,” he said, at last, “that sympathy speaks for itself and so doesn’t need training, and that anyone who needs to be trained in bedside manner doesn’t care and so isn’t likely to be a care-provider. So, yes, I think you’ve made yourself clear.

“Christina Aguilera is a lovely and powerful name. And I hope the sensibility that chose that name shall take your ring out of her nose, by showing her she is as beautiful as she sings she is. For Arafat and Richard Prior, life may need to be funny for vastly different and similar reasons, vastly different and similar.

“For Smiles Cryin and condominium association trustees, life has room to be simple and plain, but they’re crazy anyway. The difference between them and people who can live up to a name like Christina Aguilera is the difference between heartlessness and courage. And you’re on the wrong side of that difference, at least by selling that wrong side. You’re selling sawdust into Earth’s transmission.

“It’s the economy, stupid. And the electorate of the United States of America is who’s stupid. They voted Clingon’s predecessor out of office because they don’t have the span of concentration necessary to understand history past what’s in their pocket now, to understand that the economy is a huge ship and can’t change course in one presidency, much less in one election year. And they reelected Clingon because they don’t consider the future of their children, much less the effect of the Clingon example on any present day of their children’s lives. And that ignorant electorate is your market.

“Do you have a glossary for misrepresenting? I watched one of the experts you hired say the majority of southern democrats is black, and I’m thinking you might call that the consultant method of hypocrisy. I see you begging compassion for owners of million-dollar homes burned in wildfires and for rapist and wife-beating drug-addict sports-so-called-heroes and for drug-addict movie-stars claiming now to be enjoying caffeine, and for pedophile priests. I have to think maybe you might call that the wish-not-want method of hypocrisy. How many methods of hypocrisy do you define?

“If the Taliban and the Ba’ath party are radical Islamists, were the inquisitors and the persons who burned Saint Joan radical Christianists, and how about the pedophile priests and the Archbishop of Boston? Mr. Grubb, the answer is certainly not, because those people aren’t Islamic or Christian at all. If you wish to call someone an Islamist, you might do it to me. I’m not Islamic, but I sympathize with Islamic problems. And people like you are everybody’s problem.

“You remind me of the movie *Ordinary People*, about people who can afford psychotherapy and marriage-counselors. You promote compassion for the neurosis of that rich pedophile adulterer Woody Allen, while children of Calcutta and Crete and California and Cockney counties are dying of your lack of compassion. You present the horror of the masses as footnotes.

“My personal disfavor comes, as much as from anything else, from your trying to kill Santa. Santa Clause is a myth whose truth is in generosity with joviality, while you cry and smile trying to debunk that myth from our children, to replace it with increasing monetary wealth for people who are already monetarily wealthy by capitalizing on sickness and silliness.

“I see your motto as ‘This little piggy went to market.’ Mothers say that to their children, to teach our children the beauty

of life from head to toe, while you turn it into a mission to snort up anything you'd stuff into your facetious face. The business you're in is corncobs in corncribs to feed death to pigs and cows and breed children to your private satisfaction.

"In other words, I hear you saying that you can't make money by telling the truth, because people are stupid, and so you lie. Rather than leading or getting out of the way, you're following your audience into their ditch and calling it yours. You're a sad little man, Mr. Grubbs. Truth, beauty, frightens you.

"No, the sick in Africa won't pay your telecommunication bills. Yes, helping the more-moneyed would-be princesses and popes and political power-mongers will. And so they trust you, trust you to tell them what they need to know to be happy.

"And the worst is what you say is best, smiling while children are crying and dying, to sell to your nationwide worldwide audience that a mother should avenge her child against another mother's. WMN is worse than its WWF.

"Betraying trust isn't a viable response to anything. Thanks for being frank with me, but you're slimier than grubs. And, alive or dead, I'm here to prove that to humanity.

"I'm here to stop the profiting from ignorance."

"You're dwelling in the past," argued Grubbs.

"I'm praying for the future," answered Lev.

## Chapter 27

### Green Mansions

And he didn't say goodbye. He left New York immediately and flitted back to New Orleans. He sat on the moonwalk, held his head that would never hurt a hare's foot anymore, and stared deep into the river.

Children dying of cancer as entertainment. Churches calling themselves Christian using sickness to raise funds, rather than teaching the faith that could eliminate sickness, as Jesus said. Women being goofy enough to swallow that crap to think liberation means being as goofy as men! What was this world coming to?

Lev thought Frank was right about the deterioration of morality since the seventies, since strife like what he was promoting now had produced a renaissance of art and social conscience, but he thought Frank was wrong in calling the economic segments of the problem basic, fundamental, essential.

So he prayed to God that Freud wasn't right about penis-envy. And, wandering the French Quarter on his way to this pondering, he ran across a gay parade. Men were dressed in women's clothing with balloons in their blouses. So he prayed to God that males not suffer from mammary-envy.

Lev prayed to God that we all could appreciate ourselves and each other for whatever we are, as long as we're honest and

fair. Lev prayed to God that we all could just get along. Lev, on the levee, prayed to God.

And, the morning of the day of my departure from this trip to Earth, I found him there. I was there to meet Theresa for beignets at the *Café du Monde* for a little conversation before we lifted off for our employee review with Bob. But first I sat beside Lev, as I had lo those relatively few years ago, as he looked up from the river.

“Earth is a mess,” said Lev, “and I don’t see it getting any better. Things are happening here that I couldn’t have imagined when I was writing *War and Peace*. Things are becoming more complicated, and people are using the complication as excuses for ignoring both the complication and the basics. It’s crazy.

“Look at the stock market. The safest bet isn’t in the electronics that could sort out the complexity, but in pharmaceuticals, in drugs. Some people use illicit drugs to escape their doubt in their understanding or their value, and others use prescription or over-the-counter drugs for about the same reason, hoping for painless self-destruction.

“Look at the television advertisements for painkillers. They preach improvement in physical performance by numbing the pain rather than by getting rid of the cause of the pain, the same attitude that makes people cokeys in Hollywood and on Wall Street and in the slums from New York to L.A. It’s leading everyone into a ditch deliberately.

“And women, who are generally the most faithful, fall into it also. The woman with the issue touched Jesus’s garment and cured herself with her faith, but now women put their faith in pharmaceuticals to cure their issues. And they complicate their issues by believing in the soap-operas through which the pharmaceutical companies push the drugs.

“And, as always, it’s worst for the already poor. Young black kids see a chance to escape the drug-death in the gang-death of the ghettos by becoming professional athletes. Then, when they succeed, they find that their success involves using another set of drugs to compete in another kind of gang, with umpires to alienate instead of police.

“I lived through most of a century in Russia, and now I’ve been dead through most of a century in the United States of America, and so I’ve seen people of both east and west traveling down the primrose path to self-deception through artificial complication, people ignoring what they could see through any attention to history.

“Here, in this so-called land of the free, I’ve seen the party of Lincoln become the party of Strom Thurmond in the face of the hypocrisy of Fits Jr. and your friends Linden and Tricky Dicky.

“So I think I’ve figured out what my problem is.

“1400 pages. I wrote 1400 pages saying most fundamentally nothing, except implying that people can’t solve the problem, that they don’t know what they’re talking about. Well, they can, if they simply stop the self-denial and artificial complication. Jesus said the kingdom of God is within us. The devil is denial of our hearts. We can look, and see.

“We can, if we try, each of us, honestly. One thing I did right in *War and Peace* was to define the mystery of the loneliness of ugly, with sickness and fatness being curable by faith far more meager than a mustard seed, although I didn’t understand it at the time. I called some of my characters plain and had them marry gallant dashing people.

“People many might call ugly do marry people many might call beautiful and remain married happily ever after, while other people use their notion of their own ugliness as an excuse to

become uglier and hateful and therefore hated, dying silly miserable deaths by sort of self-righteous martyrdom.

“Some of them manage to think of themselves as spiritual, seeing themselves as Christ-figures by wholly missing the point that Jesus was able to die on the cross because he had more faith than a mustard seed and so suffered not through the nails but through compassion for hateful resentful people such as those people, princes or paupers.

“Anyway, I need to tell you about someone I’ve not met in all my life and death, but have I’ve heard and seen nonetheless. She’s a child of light, a young woman who sings for all, that she walked before she crawled.

“Her given name is Melissa, which means the sweetest, the best of honey. Her family name is a grand ancestral name as old as Stuart in the highland home of Mary queen of Scots. She is, in deed, a child of light.

“She’s a lesbian rock star. ‘Lesbian’, from the Isle of Lesbos, is more mythical and true than ‘gay’, as that latter word refers to homosexuals in general. And Melissa, strutting her stuff on the stage seems to me to be more mythical and true than any other human I’ve met, in these disparate states since I ran from my wife into death.

“To begin, at least this time of hers on Earth, she was born on a river. She was born on the Missouri river, which dumps its misery and happiness into this river that carries dust from many rivers. Another of those dumping rivers is the Ohio, where some unnamed miserable has had people for more than a century singing of the walk he took with his love before he murdered her because she wouldn’t be his wife.

“Melissa sings similarly. She was born in Leavenworth, on the Kansas side of that river. And one of the songs she sings tells



of all that means to most raised there and born away, and to many who only look that place up in a book. What she sings is what America, the land of freedom from responsibility and duty, means to this old Russian:

‘Past the Wal-Mart and the prison, down by old V.A.  
Just my jeans and my T-shirt, and my blue Chevrolet.’

“Grubbs was right about Wal-Mart. It claims to sell goods made only in America. But, while Americans manage it to support that claim, many of the products that company sells were made in oriental sweatshops under conditions illegal in the United States of America.

And that prison in Leavenworth is one of the oldest and least civil of United States federal penitentiaries. And that old V.A. there is one of the oldest and least civil of United States Veterans Administration hospitals. And Jeans and T-shirts, to anyone born in the U.S.A., need no further definition from me. And neither do Chevrolets, blue or not.

“But I heard a street-musician here in New Orleans singing that song but replacing ‘Wal-Mart and the prison’ with ‘women in the prison’, and I think his editing might be truer to Melissa’s myth than she is. When I saw and heard her in the Fleet Center in Boston, I thought she might be a reincarnation of Joan of Arc. But surely Saint Joan didn’t strut like that, and so Melissa may be more like Achilles’, I guess.

“Anyway, I feel Melissa’s present life on Earth isn’t her first, and I feel she’s always been a warrior. She closed that concert in the cradle of liberty with a song asking that her shield might be lifted from her, that she might go home and fight here no more. And all her singing strikes me as coming from Valhalla. The Valkyries are also women.

“Her themes, like the themes of most great poets, range from war to requited love. And she sings of religion, and she’s the

only poet who has made me feel any sympathy for the crusades, but all her songs say to me Valhalla, or maybe more the Elysian Fields, home from war, at last. She cries for peace.

“A schizoid homeless man I met in Florida near the V.A. medical center at St. Petersburg called her the screaming bitch from hell, and male homosexuals I’ve met have called her the big dike. But she’s a tiny woman, and she herself has cried in a song that hell isn’t hers. And another of her songs tells of Christian repentance.

“In it she proclaims her love of that ideal and bewails her inability to live up to it. She bewails betrayal such as Peter’s that caused Jesus more suffering than nails ever could. And that’s none at all to a believer, a person of faith:

‘The spear in your side is me,’ she wails.

‘Please,’ she begs. ‘Let it rain down on me.’

“Maybe it’s only me, but her lyrics make me think I’ve heard them before, somewhere, sometime. But I have no memory of where, and so I can attribute that feeling only to the power of myth, facts beyond knowledge. So I wonder how a lesbian rock star, in the face of judgments about anyone so rebellious, can sing of peace.

“And now she lives in the city of angels, trying to raise children fathered in a woman with whom she no longer lives, by a product and producer of the sensuality of the seventies. Once mainly doing whatever it takes to raise a song to the top of the pop-charts, her fame now comes mostly from interviews in which she answers questions mostly about her domestic life, trying to defend it. And she does the interviews with makeup filling the scars of her nails on her face.

“Most stockbrokers’ domestic lives are far freakier, if they have any domestic life beyond powdering their noses to hide the cocaine redness, or paying ‘marriage-counselors’. But they’re not

great poets, and so hardly anyone pays any attention to them, except their money-mongering employers and clients. But now neither do many besides money-mongers and women who rebel as Melissa does pay much attention to Melissa.

“My sensibility says that this child of light, prancing on stages like Achilles before the walls of Troy, in the manner we now attribute to the family-person Hector, sings the best I understand on Earth, the most truth that I know:

'All the way to heaven is heaven,  
caught between the spirit and the dust.  
All the way to heaven is heaven,  
deep inside of us.'

“And yet behind her singing wail the pipes.”

“I first heard of her,” Lev went on, “from a French Quarter barfly. I don’t have a car with a car radio or an apartment with a stereo system, and jukeboxes don’t tell names as they play. So, ordinarily, I have to learn names from people, their names or others’, face-to-face.

“The barfly was a retired hotel-accountant, and he told me he’d first heard of her from a young woman he’d seen walking up Royal Street as he was returning from the bars early one morning. He said the young woman was walking across the street from his apartment, her head bowed above the weight of a large duffle. And he said he asked her whether she had a place to sleep that night.

“No,’ he said she’d simply said.

“You can stay at my place,’ he said he’d answered.

“Where,’ he said she’d asked.

“Right there,’ he said he’d answered, pointing at his balcony above where he stood at his gate.

“Okay,' he said she said as simply, and he opened the gate and followed her through it and directed her up to his door.

“Inside, she carried her duffle into his living room. And, before setting down her duffle, she looked at the books on his shelves. I've seen his books, and they're the most reputable ever written, two of them mine and in Russian, I'm pleased to say.

“Nice collection,' she said, and she set down her bag beside his desk.

“Drunk, so late, he hardly looked at her. He told her he was going to bed and that she could sleep with him or wherever she liked. And she said she'd sleep on the sofa.

“I don't like to cuddle,' she said. 'Do you have an extra blanket?'

“He was too drunk either to think of or to bother with folding out the sofa, which was a sleeper sofa. But he gave her a blanket and a pillow he kept for the possibility of doing that. And she thanked him and sat on the sofa.

And he undressed and fell asleep in his big empty bed, and didn't wake up until late in the morning, when the sun shined through the French windows to his balcony. Then, finding her still sleeping on the sofa, he saw her face and a foot extending bare beyond the blanket. But, though he found her face quite pretty, he didn't awaken her or watch her sleep.

“Instead he did what he usually did. He opened a can of beer for breakfast. And, after drinking a few more cans of beer, he went for a walk and drank a few more beers at Molly's. And there he spoke with some of his fellow barflies. But he said nothing to them about the young woman sleeping on his sofa. And, late in the afternoon, he returned and found her still sleeping.

But, as he entered the room, she awoke and sat up.

“That was good,' she said, rubbing her eyes. 'I hadn't slept in three days.'

“Want a beer?’ asked the barfly.

“Sure,’ she said, and she thanked him.

“What’s your name?’ he asked her, after handing her the beer.

“Raenise,’ she answered, but he thought she’d said ‘Renée’.

“They talked awhile, and he didn’t ask her much, and he found much of what she told him vague. She said her mother living in Slidell and that her father living in Colorado and that she had a daughter who lived with her mother. But all she said of why she hadn’t slept in three days was that she had no place to go. And he didn’t ask her to explain any of that further.

“We should eat something,’ she said, after drinking several beers.

“He told her his place wasn’t well-stocked for entertaining. And, suggesting walking to the little old A&P store a few blocks down Royal toward Canal, she said she’d cook if he’d buy. And, though he wasn’t hungry, he accepted the proposal.

“Before they left, she looked through his cupboards and into his refrigerator, and at the store she bought some staples but also some bacon and chicken-livers.

The cashier rang some of the prices too high, and Raenise noticed that and demanded correction. And, back at the apartment, she cooked the bacon and chicken-livers in some manner the barfly didn’t watch. And she wrapped the livers in the bacon and called what she’d made rumaki.

“Whatever it was, the barfly enjoyed it. And, after they ate it from his coffee table, Raenise washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen, and then she took a can of beer for each of them to the living room and sat on the floor. And, then and there, leaning back against the sofa, she quietly sang a long song about happily living family life on a farm. And she showed no sign of leaving.

“And, though, on his recommendation, the barfly’s sisters had scheduled a visit there from Michigan next day to enjoy French Quarter Fest, the best time there in the Quarter’s best weather, the early spring with relatively little rain, he had no problem with Raenise staying

“The sisters arrived in the evening, in a taxi from the motel they’d booked in Metairie, against his recommendation. And, though Raenise was sleeping again on the sofa, she sat up when they entered the room as she had for the barfly the day before. And the sisters stopped and stared.

“‘This is Renée,’ said the barfly, and Raenise didn’t correct him, and neither did the sisters offer to shake hand with her, after they watched her sit up.

“‘Nice to meet you,’ said Raenise.

“‘We’re hungry,’ said one of the sisters. ‘Where should we go?’

“‘Coop’s has good food,’ said Raenise.

“The sisters looked at her again with no word or smile, but the three of them and Raenise and the barfly went to Coop’s anyway and ate a very nice spicey Cajun shrimp-dish Raenise recommended, but Raenise broke a tooth, a front one.

“‘Oh,’ said Raenise. ‘Maybe I can sue them. You’re witnesses. You saw it.’

“She put the broken-off piece of the tooth into a pocket of her jeans, and none of them said another word about it. They were all out for a good time.

“‘Where did you meet Mickey Rourke?’ asked one of the sisters, and the barfly led them past Molly’s to the Déjà Vu, in the opposite corner of the Quarter.

And there the barfly introduced the sisters to the bartender and another barfly.

“This is Ed,' said the barfly of the other barfly. 'He flies model airplanes and bakes bread.'

But the five of them sat at a table, not at the bar. And the sisters drank cocktails while Raenise and the barfly drank beer. But Raenise arose and returned to the bar and spoke a few minutes with Ed.

“He’s going to bake you a loaf of bread as a souvenir,' she said to the sisters as she returned to her chair at the table. 'He said he’ll bring it here tomorrow night.'

"One of the sisters complained about the color of her cocktail. And the bartender, who was majoring in chemistry at the University of New Orleans, fixed it. And, the next evening, the sisters went to the casino.

“But, because neither the barfly nor Raenise cared for gambling, they stayed at home. And, the next evening, the loaf of bread showed the barfly exactly what Raenise was. But first, seeming to him a little angry, she told him her name.

“How about if I call you Rainy?' he asked.

“That’s nice,' she said. 'I like nicknames.'

“And the anger disappeared in a broken-toothed grin.

“Oh!' she said. 'The bread. I’ll go get it. Do you want to go?'

"He declined, and she went alone, and she didn’t return until late in the night, after the barfly had gone to sleep in his big bed. Her stumbling in with the key he had already given her, and slamming the door and turning on lights, awakened him. So he arose and found her sitting on the sofa with a bruised arm and a knee cut and bleeding. And she was cleaning a crack-pipe with a paperclip. But she interrupted that to look up at him.

“Why did you let me go alone?' she asked.

“Oh, Rainy,' he said. 'I’m sorry. I am sorry.'

“It’s okay,' she said. 'It’s not your fault.'

“She said nothing about the crack. But, touching her cut knee below her rolled-up pantleg, she said she’d fallen down crossing a street. And then she rubbed the bruise on her arm with the palm of her other hand. But then she looked up again.

“But look,’ she said, grinning. ‘I got it.’

“She arose from the sofa and stumbled to the kitchen and returned with the loaf of bread wrapped in tinfoil in a brown paper bag.

“We have to put it in the refrigerator,’ she said.

“The sisters accepted the loaf of bread, but they did their tourist-shopping without the barfly or Rainy. They checked in with them from time to time, but they declined to leave their souvenirs in the apartment, as they did their other tourist deeds.

“I’m not leaving this stuff here,’ said one, looking at Rainy.

“But soon they were gone, and Rainy was still there. While despairing of her crack trouble, the barfly found her full of delight, delighting him and others. She introduced him to some of her crack connections and took him once to buy some of the stuff, and everyone the barfly met with her seemed to love her. And, telling him to take care of her, they said they were glad he could see what she was.

“From time to time, over the next few weeks, Rainy took off all of her clothing and joined the barfly in his big bed, and then they did what that suggests, but she never slept in the bed. Saying again that she didn’t like to cuddle, she slept only alone on the sofa, and she never folded it out. The barfly found that sad, but pushed for nothing.

“And, one night, a rainy night, Rainy told him she had to go out for a while. He reminded her of her having admonished him for letting her do that alone before, but she said it wasn’t what he thought and that she’d be alright! So what could he do?



“And, less than two hours later, she returned. She was soaking wet, but she was smiling and looking not the least for wear. And she grabbed a beer and sat on the sofa.

“I heard her,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t see her, but I heard her.’

“Who?’ asked the barfly. ‘Whom did you hear?’

“Melissa,’ she answered. ‘I heard Melissa Etheridge sing.’

“Not having money for admission and not asking the barfly for it, she had stood in the pouring down rain in the street outside the House of Blues, to listen to Melissa sing inside. And so I had to look her up and see what charm was there.

“But,” said Lev, “this story has no happy ending, as far as I can see. Soon, the crack-head Rainy began stealing money from the barfly’s wallet, and the barfly felt he had to let her go. So one night, picking up her key up from the coffee table, he told her so.

And, without a word, she took a shower, put on clean clothes including a T-shirt of his, and loaded her duffle and went away. And he never saw her again and never sought her, but neither could or would he ever forget her, as he slept alone in his king-size empty bed. As he heard the Quarter’s music through his windows, as he heard the calliope on the Natchez mornings, on this muddy river.”

And yet,” said Lev, “such stories are a dime a dozen, here on Earth. Here’s another one I heard from a carnie while I was working carnival. But, not to wear out my welcome, I’ll try to tell this story more succinctly. Better, I’ll let you have it exactly in the carnie’s words. He composed it into a lyric waltz. And he sang it to me.

He sang it acapella as a bunch of us drank beer one night after the show closed.

A flower she was, sitting alone

In a hole where somebody puts crazies.  
Alone she was, while she should have been  
With her kind in a field full of daisies.  
Ramona, a flower, smiles sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.  
Ramona, a flower, smiles sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

One of the crazies took her out of there  
To the wider wide world of a carnie.  
Now she sat alone in the cab of a truck,  
While he robbed kids with his blarney.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

Children were born. After years she had friends.  
She moved through the weakness around.  
She gave herself up to the crazy things,  
To the sad silly loss they had found.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled crazily now, not seeing the beauty she is.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled crazily now, not seeing the beauty she is.

Carnies, not seeing her wide blue eyes,  
Took what they wanted from her.  
Her children ran wild and learned the same things.  
They were born too long at the fair.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

One day a man saw the beauty she is  
And offered to take her away.  
But she said, "I don't know anymore what I want,  
But you're not what I'm wanting today."  
Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly at me, not seeing the beauty she is.  
Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly at me, not seeing the beauty she is.

Who knows what she saw from her sad sweet smile,  
Before learning those carnival ways,  
Or what will become of her children and her,

If they take her sweet beauty away.

Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

Ramona, a flower, smiled sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

Her blue eyes and small hands as she stands in the light

Are something she may never learn.

They're the dance that the rest of us can't even want

In the blindness that keeps us from her.

Ramona, a flower, smiles sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

Ramona, a flower, smiles sadly still, not seeing the beauty she is.

“That carnie told me that one night the crazy who had fathered Mona’s children caught her adulterating in a common shower the carnival company hauled along with them. He said it reminded him of a Rod Stewart song.

“You’ve been screwing him all along,’ wailed the crazy. ‘Haven’t you.’

“No,’ said Mona, now wrapped in a towel, outside the shower-trailer.

“If I listened long enough to you,’ sings Rod Stewart, ‘I’d find a way to believe that it’s all true. Knowing that you lied straight-faced while I cried, still I’d look to find a reason to believe.’

“The carnie said the crazy wept then and there. But surely he didn’t find a reason to believe in himself, or much in the young and flowering Ramona, whom he called Dummy. But, at least, he didn’t leave her, desperate as he apparently was.”

“You know,” said Lev, “that the word “carnival” comes from Roman for farewell to flesh, and you know that it now means a festival of debauchery before fasting for Lent, Mardi Gras in New Orleans being maybe the most famous example. But few carnival workers know that, and fewer of them fare well for flesh,

their flesh or others'. And hardly any of them take a break for Lent.

“Think of Jamie, that Boston Rod Stewart impersonator, telling us and perhaps himself that he didn’t read because he’s a sex maniac. More likely, considering his sexual preferences and the depth of his swigs of beer and his having been some sort of engineer, his reason for not reading is that he he’s burnt his brain out on drugs. But then a question is which is more moral or ethical or compassionate.

“That carnie told me Mona’s husband didn’t use drugs, though most carnival workers do and rob children mainly to pay for that. He said he was addicted only to money and Mona, and that a drug-addict carnie one evening literally beat him down to the ground and dragged him through gravel in a driveway because of that, because he didn’t do drugs and was addicted to Mona. So I guess that druggy carnie may have been an effective warrior, and may have been an effective money-monger or politician, had he intelligence beyond his resentment. So the trouble with humanity seems to me to be that we don’t know what we want, top to bottom, rich or poor. We wish to feel we’re better than our neighbors.’

“I’ve learned for myself that many carnival workers can’t or won’t use social security numbers. But their main difference from most of us is that they work more hours for less money, because they can’t compete with most of us in claiming worthiness. But, worse, we wish to feel better than our lovers.

“Yet that carnie said Mona and her husband stayed together, and I personally hope they grow old together, learning. I hope they grow old together flowering to peace. I hope we all somehow do that.”

“It’s so simple, I think. If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, all things shall be possible to you. But, instead,

people lack the faith to look into their own hearts to see the seed of goodness there ready to sprout and flower and fly. So they spread their dishonesty beyond themselves, and then receive what they expect, the same in return. The desperate excuses eat them alive.

“Peter sank like a stone in the Sea of Galilee, for lack of faith. For lack of faith, he denied Jesus three times before the dawn of the day of Jesus’ crucifixion. Yet people say that he not only is but should be the rock on which the churches calling themselves Christian are built, with their lack of faith.

“I asked a person calling herself an evangelical how she reconciled that, and she said nobody’s perfect. She said we must love each other for our failings, and that only by such forgiveness could there be a church at all. She said that was the message of Jesus Christ, and I quoted Fits Jr., against that notion.

“‘It may not happen in a day,’ he said in his inaugural address, ‘It may not happen in a week, and it may not happen in a month. It may not happen in a thousand years. But let us begin.’

“She was a Wellesley graduate living in South Carolina. So I figured she was more in line with Fit’s Jr.’s more famous demand in that speech. I mean his saying we should give more to government than we get from it, contradicting Lincoln’s notion that government of and by and for the people shouldn’t perish from Earth. And that supports a return to feudalist monarchy contrary even to the ideals of Arthur of Camelot.

“‘In other words,’ I settled on saying to that person for then, feeling unsuccessfully parabolic, ‘whether or not anyone’s perfect, it seems to me we all can try to be. As far as I can see, using imperfection as an excuse for more imperfection is the ultimate in faithlessness, and not Christian at all.’

“‘But that person replied by calling me unforgiving and saying that thus I’m unforgiveable. And, not seeing that forgiving

must be forgetting, I couldn't answer. I couldn't imagine what she thought was repentance.

“So, not seeing myself getting anywhere for that person by reasoning, I was sure I'd get no further by shrilling and shrieking my argument at her. And so, choosing to keep her in mind, while I moved on to further thought for different media, I forgave that trespass while remembering my debt to alleviate it. And I didn't find funny that my name's near the front of that word.

Lev, leave, levitate, lift lightly.

“Well, that's it. I'm sure that's it. I know that's it, and I dearly miss the feeling of the presence of Sophia and our children. They loved me, and I treated them so badly, and I'm sick of this wandering, but still I don't know how to get to heaven.”

“You just have to feel that,” I said, as Lev again took his bearded face in his blooded hands and bowed his head again to gaze into the river. “And you have to feel that eventually sense will sink into all the hypocrites, on Earth and elsewhere.”

“I feel it,” Lev answered, “as Russia and all Earth has suffered and is suffering for such. Lenin agreed with my naiveté and tried to carry Marx's irrationality into Russia, and instead stepped us from our feudalism into imperialism, as England and France stepped centuries before. Now the nations that learned the futility of imperialism are carrying Russia to capitalism. But, I know, it's only history.

“I feel, and I know, that communism wouldn't have a name, if people always shared. At the bottom of all Marx's and Lenin's rationalization was the simple and perfect ideal that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, to be happily at peace. But few men even love their wives, now after all those lessons.”

So the sun, lowering on our lesson, settled into one soul. And, rosie-fingered, old Sol was also setting below the river, trying

to rise to touch more. And we wouldn't see her again this trip, or again feel the touch of this trying, for all your eternity. But, at least, we had levitated Lev, and that was something.

Maybe not forever, but for someone, for now.

“Theresa and I are leaving tonight,” I said to our new old friend. “I’m going from here to meet her at the *Café du Monde* for beignets, and you might want to bid farewell to some of your friends at Molly’s. You can ride with us to Bob’s conference center for our mission-review with Mikey and Oliver, and Norma Jean will be there too. If you meet us in front of the Cathedral at nine, we’ll give you a ride that far, and you can sit in. You can ride the rest of the way with Norma.

“By the way, Barbarella worked for us for a while, before we had to send her oblivious to a mystery-life galaxy after little Jack Horner suckered her with his sailing-ships. No, I mean his yachts, boat-racing for pride. She blew her mission.

“Anyway, we’ll welcome you to ride with us, if you feel you’re ready. I have a hunch Sophia will be glad to see you again. Maybe even your children will.

“Thank God,” said Lev. “I’ll see you then and there.”

## Chapter 28

### Lord of the Flies

Lev lumbered off in his dark serge suit, past the saxophone-player as a passing freighter moaned a lonesome tone in harmony, beneath the afternoon sun sparkling its wake. I watched him as he crossed the trolley-tracks on his way to seek his friends, and then I followed him as far as the *Café du Monde*, where I found Theresa waiting. The sun was starting to set on this crescent city, beyond us and beyond the maybe not-mighty-enough muddy river. But we were savoring our last hours of this visit to this earth. For all her faults, we love her.

“I have to tell you,” said Theresa, “about a conversation I had with someone the last time I was in New Orleans, for the dedication of that statue of me.”

I nodded, saying nothing, and Theresa began.

“There was a hurricane-warning. Everyone was asked to stay off the streets, and I was sitting in the common parlor of that little guesthouse on Esplanade Avenue where I’m leaving my baggage now, which I like because it borders the world beyond the tourism here, and because of what it says of time. Its architecture is Creole but simple enough to seem perhaps a modern copy. It pleases broadly.



“It was morning, and the coffee and pastries were out, and I was relaxing in a Louis XIV chair, feeling no need to be anywhere else, as I do right now. A woman entered the parlor, looked at some brochures on a table there, piled some pastries high on a plate, and poured herself a cup of coffee. She parked her plate and saucer on the table beside me, and sat down in the chair on its other side.

“This is a beautiful old Victorian house,' said that woman with a physical stature resembling the pile of pastry on her plate, 'and so nicely period-appointed.'

“Aback, I didn't say a word.

“My husband was Italian,' she went on, 'And I'm Jewish. But I'm more British in my taste. So I go to England whenever I can since my husband died. He was a doctor but died of cancer.

“I am sorry for your loss,' I answered. 'Traveling must help you in your grief.'

“Oh', she said. 'It was long ago, and I don't get to travel much. I have to work for a homeless-shelter to make ends meet. Family and friends mostly finance my travel.

“My children take most of my money,' she added after a bite of Danish. 'They're old enough to support themselves. But they still depend a lot on me. They don't like to work. They drive me crazy. Kids!'

“What brings you to New Orleans?' I had to ask.

“Some friends, some relatives of my husband I used to work with, told me they were coming,' she answered. 'I told them someone where I work now used to live here and talks about it all the time, and they asked me if I'd like to come along.'

“Did your friend live here long?' I asked, wondering why not now.

“He's not my friend,' she answered. 'He's one of the most disgusting people I've ever met, and we're going to fire him when

I get back. I think he might have said five years, working for some hotel, the Clarion maybe. Something like that.'

"Do you know why he left?' I asked her, wondering still more now.

"Maybe he was fired here too,' she said. 'He said he'd been bumming around the country for two years before he came to Boston. He told me once that he went there for the history. American history is all that's there. I told him that.'

"Yes,' I answered. 'The Pilgrims and the Puritans came from Europe and pretty much made America, after they got the Indians out of the way. I wonder how Martin Luther would have felt, had he known what he did for America, all the way from Worms.'

"Exactly,' she said, her mouth full of Danish. 'You're funny.'

"Why are you firing that guy?' I asked, now even more curious, and aback.

"He thinks I'm a racist,' she said, after swigging some coffee.

"That's ridiculous,' she added. 'I'm a knee-jerk liberal. I always vote Democrat. That bigot Bill voted for George Bush. He said he voted for Carter against Ford but voted for Reagan because Bush was his running mate. I told him I voted for Carter both times. I always vote Democrat. I'm not a bigot.'

"I didn't answer. To say that, she had paused without eating or drinking anything. But, thinking she might continue without prompting, I stood to get another cup of coffee.

"Want some more coffee?' I asked, pausing politely, as I now always try to do.

"Yes,' she said. 'Please. And would you mind getting me some more pastries?'

“And she held up her plate with a partly eaten doughnut still on it. So I took the plate and filled it for her, piling it as highly as she had. And, after the two trips I needed to carry the two cups of coffee and the plate of pastry, I sat down again. And, after digging out the partly eaten doughnut and swallowing it, she continued talking.

“Me a racist. It’s ridiculous. He’s a Republican. He voted for Bush. He told me Lincoln was a Republican. I told him that, if Lincoln were alive today, he’d have voted for Clingon. He had no answer to that.”

“Lev told me about a homeless-shelter in Boston,” I interrupted Theresa to ask. “Did she say its name?”

“Love of Saint Clare,” answered Theresa. “For *Chiara*.”

“Yup, that’s it,” I said. “Lev went barhopping with its finance-administrator, the ghost of Billy the Kid. He meandered there after we saw him at White Oaks.”

“Tell me how the stories match,” said Theresa.

And, after a sip of her chickery coffee, she continued.

“For a moment,” she said, “hearing the wind and rain outside, I thought of leaving her to her imaginings and walking down to the river to watch the wildness, to wash myself of her nonsense. But, feeling a little like the wedding-guest buttonholed by the ancient marine, I sipped some coffee as she swigged some and continued.

“I like you people,’ she said. ‘I admire your rhythm. I love those little Kewpie dolls tap-dancing on Bourbon Street. We walked up there yesterday with umbrellas, and they were dancing in the rain. And I love your southern accents. I call it the voice of America. Me, a racist!’

“Why does he think you are?’ I asked, shuddering.

“Well, he says it’s because of the way we treated a black receptionist. She wasn’t really a Negro, but she was black, darker than you. She was from Jamaica, and we treated her very well.

“We gave her that job, answering the telephone. It was an important job, with board-members and counselors calling. I don’t know what any black people have to complain about in this country anymore. We gave you your freedom and still let you work for us. And we take care of you at Love of Saint Clare.

“Bill’s crazy. When Mother Teresa died, right after Princess Diana died, I said in our staff dining room that I wasn’t sure Mother Teresa should be canonized but that I was pretty sure Diana should be, for all the traveling she did to raise awareness of the world’s troubles. And Bill picked up his tray and left without finishing his lunch.”

“Yeah,” I said, interrupting again. “Lev said he had a pretty good time barhopping with him and someone named Bob Hope and that he said he’d probably be fired, for trying to restart the Lincoln County wars.”

“Makes sense to me,” said Theresa, nodding. “But wait ‘til you hear what this strange person said to me next. Interesting name, Bob Hope. Very nice name.”

“I think so, too,” I said, shrugging, and Theresa went on.

“That’s what I’m talking about,’ that person said, ‘*Noblesse oblige*. I don’t know where Mother Teresa came from, but Princess Diana was a princess. She didn’t have to do anything for you people or any other poor or sick people, but she traveled the world doing all she could for you. Mother Teresa just stayed in Calcutta, or Bangladesh, or wherever. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after all. We need to get it right.

“And there’s his stupid name, Billy Lee. I told him that stupid name shows breeding in the South or the rural Midwest. He’d told me he’s from some nowhere tiny town in Michigan

called Coldwater, and he's spent all that time down here. It's no wonder he's a Republican, and he says he's not a Republican. He says he's independent.

"Can you believe that? And he thinks there's something wrong with what Clingon did with that floozy intern. I asked him whether he thinks the President of the United States should be held to a standard higher than the rest of us, and he said of course he did. And he said he would have voted for FDR but not for Truman and those bombs.

"I told him Roosevelt had a mistress. I told him they all do, because that's how politicians are, and you can't change that. But then he said the only thing Fits Jr. ever said that made sense to him was that, although things might not get perfect in a thousand years, we could start working at it now. I don't remember Fits Jr. saying that.

"It sounds like some kind of Chinese notion, like a journey of a thousand miles starting with a single step. Maybe Truman bombed those Japanese so we wouldn't have to listen to Confucius. Billy Lee said Lincoln died to keep people from using the word "breeding" as I did. That's got to be some kind of Zen Buddhist silliness.'

"Yes,' I said when she paused for another bite of Danish. 'Orientals do have a slanted outlook on life. You must have treated that Jamaican receptionist very well.'

"It wasn't how I treated her,' she said after refilling her mouth and swallowing. 'It was how our Republican executive secretary treated her. She, the secretary, was the only administrative-assistant we had, and she couldn't do everyone's work. So, if anyone other than management asked her to do something, she'd excuse herself. With the appropriate explanations of course. So they'd go to the receptionist.

“What Billy Bob or Lee, or whatever he calls himself, complained about was that we didn’t give the receptionist flowers on Secretaries Day. I told him it was a management decision the Deputy Director made under my advice because we didn’t wish to upset the administrative-assistant. I thought that answered his question, but he apparently didn’t think so. He just kept picking away.’

“What’s your job at that homeless-shelter,’ I interrupted to ask.

“I’m the human-resources specialist,’ she answered looking at me.

“Where does the funding come from?’ I now felt need to know.

“Mostly from government contracts, but a lot from private donations.’

“Do you know the demography of your private donors?’ I asked.

“The single largest group is female senior-citizens, little old ladies.’

“When she said that, she looked at me again and smiled, with crumbs at the corners of her mouth. And my desire to get out into the rain and wind and be washed of that was deepening by the minute. But I had to hear more of this story of philanthropy in the cradle of liberty. And I hadn’t asked the most important question.

“Did the receptionist ever complain?’ I asked.

“Yes,’ answered this human-resources specialist, 'but not about the flowers, and not about doing secretarial work while she was a receptionist, which I might have considered a somewhat legitimate complaint. I guess she wanted to be more important than she was. And we’d put her in such a nice place.

“What she said was that the administrative-assistant was rude to her and always came back late from breaks or lunch and

sometimes wasn't around when it was time to relieve her for her breaks. Part of their jobs was to relieve each other for lunch and breaks, but the administrative-assistant's duties were more important than the receptionist's, and sometimes they took her away from her desk, and she was rude to everyone. As I said, she was a Republican, but employees complained more about Billy Lee than the receptionist did about the administrative-assistant.

"We had a very nice girl working in funding-development, and she told Billy Lee about how George Bush was in cahoots with the Arabs and was trying to ruin Alaska by drilling for oil there and about how Republicans don't care about a woman's right to choose.

"But Billy Lee said the Bushes' experience and connections in the oil-industry put them in a position to deal with the situation however it needed to be dealt with and that he thought children would choose to live if they had a choice, that women had the right to choose not to get pregnant, and that people should take responsibility, for their choices.

"The poor girl was so upset that she came to me nearly in tears to tell me what a chauvinist Billy Lee was. And, when I told Billy Lee he needed to be more careful, he said he'd been careful enough not to start that conversation with the poor girl. But next he said he wouldn't have a problem with her going somewhere out of there to screw things up.

"So I asked him what he had against her, and he said she didn't do her job and was making an administrative mess that might take years to clean up, and a few weeks later she quit. And now he's got her replacement talking about messes she's having to clean up. Well, maybe Billy Lee was right about that part. But he should have been nicer.

"He's so insensitive. I was telling him about my allergies once, and he said he doesn't have any. Everybody has allergies,

but some people are too insensitive to know it. His idea of sensitivity is feeling sorry for my cat when I had her spayed. I felt sorry too, but I can't have a bunch of little kittens around. I have feelings too, you know.

“And once when I was hungry, I went to the staff lunchroom and heard him through the door talking about me, after he heard me talking about my kids. He said I shouldn't feel sorry for myself for my kids' following my example. I teach my kids to be sensitive, sophisticated, like me.

“I know you can't get anywhere by saying what you think,” she added. ‘And I know my kids' problem is that they don't have a father. So I don't try to meddle with their lives. I try to leave them alone.’

“I was having a tough time with all of that conversation,” said Theresa. “But some of it was trying to figure out whether this ‘human-resources specialist’ knew what she was saying. And, at that point in that craziness, I figured out that she didn't, because she didn't care to. She was simply irresponsible.

“So how did you handle the receptionist's complaint?’ I interrupted, sick of her stupid self-pity, seeking some kind of closure, door-slamming, on her.

“We handled it as professionally as we could,’ she said, looking away from me and then straight at me, seeming suddenly bored, then interested. ‘The Deputy Director and the Director of Finance and Administration and I discussed the problem and met with the administrative-assistant and the receptionist in our main conference-room.’

“She paused then, but that was for a bite of a doughnut, and then she continued, still chewing.

“The administrative-assistant said she didn't know what the receptionist was talking about,’ she said. ‘So we asked the receptionist to explain, and the receptionist said she'd already



explained. So we asked her to explain for the administrative-assistant. but the receptionist got up and left the room and slammed the door behind her. So, the next time I saw Billy Lee, I told him how unprofessionally she had responded to our efforts. But he just frowned at me.

“But we didn’t just drop it. The next Secretaries Day we gave her flowers. We delivered them late, because I had to send them back several times because the florist wasn’t making them enough more subdued than the administrative-assistant’s, as I requested. And the delivery would have been later if I hadn’t given up and subdued it myself. I professionally pulled some flowers from the receptionist’s bouquet. And I found a nicer vase for the administrative assistant.

“But the receptionist did get flowers that year, and it proved that I was right all along. The day after the flowers arrived, the administrative assistant resigned with one week’s notice, and she didn’t show up the last day of the week, for her going-away pizza-party. She called and said she threw her back out.

“And that shows how insensitive Billy Lee is. But, at the cost of an employee, we thought we’d solved all of his problems. But we were wrong again about him.

“A few months later, he started complaining about how the deputy director was treating a black tenant in our transitional housing program, and that was after we paid a college professor more than \$40,000 to train our staff to make recommendations for diversity in our workplace.

“We paid the professor \$250 per hour to hold meetings with our staff and help us set up a committee to continue to meet without him. I chaired the committee myself, and I did everything I could to encourage participation. But the committee soon folded, for lack of enthusiasm. I don’t know why.

“Diversity? I even tried to get us to celebrate Jewish holidays! Our Executive Director’s Jewish too, but even he didn’t participate. And, soon after that, Billy Lee submitted a formal employee grievance accusing me and the Deputy Director of racial discrimination. So that’s why we’re firing him.

“One of his complaints was that we hadn’t implemented the professor’s recommendation of merit-based pay increases. I spent more than enough time on the diversity committee, and I earned my nickname for how much work I do. I don’t have time for an administrative load like that.

“And then he wanted to know why we eliminated two black persons’ positions and no white person’s when we needed to cut costs. Those people weren’t doing their jobs, and we have reasons for everything we do, anyway. We do very well what we do for our mission. We are, as I said, professionals.

“And he’s ridiculous. We pointed out to him that nearly 40% of our 90 employees are minorities, including two caseworkers and our new administrative-assistant. He asked what percentage of employees on antebellum plantations were minorities. What, in his weird world, does that have to do with it?

“Billy Bob’s so stupid he doesn’t understand the social sensitivity of Woody Allen. He probably has no compassion for Michael Jackson or Pee-wee Herman. If he did, he’d know he has allergies, like everyone. How ungentle!”

“And then, said Theresa, “I had to go and cleanse myself. Whatever it was, antebellum residue or new-age sewage, I dearly needed to go for a walk in God’s wind and rain, wash myself of this dust, this crumb. But I had to ask politely now one more question, the question that measures audacity, against shame.

“What’s your name,’ I intrepidly asked.

“Kate,’ she said. ‘It rhymes with plate. That’s my nickname, Kate Plate. People call me that because I work so hard,

because I keep my plate full. You should see my desk at work, like a haystack. I don't need a grievance on it.

“But Billy Bob calls me a little dust pot, when he thinks I can't hear him.

“And that's another crazy thing about that Billy Lee character. Our deputy director's first name is Kerry, and our board chairman's first name is King. So Billy Lee called us the KKK, as if a Democrat human-resources specialist and a master of social-work and a major Texaco-shareholder would be that kind of people. Kerry and I voted for the Clingons, not for that fascist family that's trying to get back into the Whitehouse now. Billy Lee's a Republican, like Strom Thurmond. Did I mention that?

“But what can you expect from someone named Billy Bob. He has no class, the *déclassé* Appalachian hillbilly creep. He drinks beer. I drink merlot.

“And he turned up at our annual fundraiser with a girl half his age dressed better than some of our donors, and the two of them drank Budweiser from the cash-bar while polite people were waiting for their dinner-wine. That was weeks ago, and people are still talking about it, about why a woman so young and beautiful would have anything to do with boring boorish old Billy Lee. He's going to find out how fair life can be.”

“Well, Kate Plate,' I said. 'I'm going for a walk. This weather won't keep me from the river. There's nothing better than wind and rain to remind a person of power and peace. I pray you'll find peace from your troubles.'

“We tried to tolerate him,' she said, hardly hearing. 'But now we're getting even. Who's going to hire someone who's been fired from a homeless-shelter named for Saint Clare? He'll be homeless himself again soon, after his unemployment benefits run out, and he can't make his mortgage-payments.'

“So you'll teach him a lesson?' I asked.

“If he’ll learn it,’ she said. ‘But white trash never learns. They’re worse than you people. You’re not really going out there, are you?’

“But I did go out,” said Theresa. “In the wind and rain. I walked down to the levee, where you and I and Mikey and Oliver used to sit and talk of times to come, and I looked into that great muddy river as you told me our friend Lev did, as it kept carrying its thousand miles of dust to the sea, and I hoped somehow the dust would settle, everywhere, sometime, at last. I could not but think of a line from a popular American song I heard with African rhythms: ‘The Mississippi delta was shining like a national guitar.’

“Paul Simon, in the sixties, sang against the war in Vietnam. Two decades later, that white-boy named for both founders of Roman Catholicism went to Africa to borrow the rhythm for that song he named for Elvis Presley’s home, Graceland. It’s a shame that life can’t all be like music, like Paul Simon and Hank Williams and Elvis Presley learning from other people’s music and making it their own. But some Africans and African Americans said Simon was stealing from them.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard that song, but I know you’ve seen that big green cast-iron plate down by the moonwalk, like the one at my bus-stop in Montgomery commemorating me on one side and Hank Williams on the other. The one by the levee commemorates LaSalle’s sallying here for the sun-king, and it’s in English on one side and in French on the other, back-to-back like Oliver and Mikey at Roncesvalles. We’ve made much of LaSalle’s trip many times ourselves this visit here, back and forth between Storyville and the Motor City. And we’ve done it more easily than they, flying as one can now here.

“Oh but I’m telling you things you already know. But, then, what if these Earthlings told themselves the things they must

already know. Mr. Simon didn't steal anything, any more than we stole the wind between here and Detroit. It's a shame all life isn't like music, with everyone owning it all at once, as much as they wish, and wholly.

"You know, my dear long-traveled friend, the weirdest thing about that person Kate Plate was that she seemed to believe she was a good person. At least Cauchon and Clingon were honest enough with themselves to know they were evil. I don't think I've ever been as disgusted as I was with that Kate Plate.

"A homeless-shelter named for *Santa Chiara*!" Theresa exclaimed, her head bowed and shaking beneath her beautiful braided hair now gray with the time of Earth. "A human-resources specialist! Kate Plate, hypocrisy perfectly personified! How can Earth still have such people on it? How long, O Lord?

"You know, too" she tried to answer, "that it's been forty years since I sat down on that bus in the birthplace of the most official effort to bigot this land of the free, in front of the Empire theatre where honky Hank Williams had entertained so well, singing of cheating hearts in mournful strains he'd learned from his black mentor.

"And it's been forty generations since our friend Francis tried to teach these Earthlings that, if they befriend wolves, wolves will befriend, in return. And it's been forty centuries since Oliver led those Earthlings out of Egypt and gave them those Ten Commandments to tell them how to keep such situations from recurring. Yet the sins keep being passed on and on.

"Forty years," said Theresa. "Oliver learned what forty years is, wandering in that wilderness as the people kept missing the point. He told me that that's why now he just does his part of the job and gets himself killed, rather than hanging around as you and I have this trip to Earth.

“Earth,” she answered. “This earth. The killing beast of this earth is bigotry, and all it takes to kill that beast is to starve it of the hypocrisy that feeds it. That poet Keats, before dying fighting for a nation not his own, said it right and simply:

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’--that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

“Yet and still,” she said. “nobody on this Earth seems to know it, after all these millennia. Boston is the craziest place I know in this whole universe, for the vast contrast between what it claims to be and what it is. Besides calling itself the cradle of liberty, it named its capital hill after the reference in the Sermon on the Mount to a city on a hill as a beacon to all the world, while the actuality of Beacon Hill is to know it needs to hide beneath a bushel, or beneath a rock with slime and slugs. Boston is at least the capital of the hypocrisy of this country, if not of the hypocrisy of the universe.”

“I don’t know if I ever told you,” I said now. “But my first motive for joining Bob’s enterprise was to fight the hypocrisy of those crazy clingons.”

“Yes,” answered Theresa. “The Ku Klux Klan of the Thirteenth Galaxy. At least, in New Orleans, people don’t pretend not to be corrupt.”

“Meager recompense, don’t you think?” I asked her.

“It breaks my heart,” she answered, looking down.

So there we were, in New Orleans near the end of our road here this time, Theresa and I eating beignets and drinking coffee with chicory alone at the *Café du Monde*, as we gazed at the grand gold equestrian statue at the fork of streets in front of us, of the maid of the older Orleans Theresa had been so gloriously those

seven centuries ago, as traffic passed on either side of it, as the river flowed by, behind us.

From where we sat we could also see Molly's and the French Market, the azaleas around the statue of Old Hickory, and the cathedral. But the projects weren't getting any better. What does faith tell?

"I'm glad we're going home," said Theresa. "I miss Mikey and Oliver."

"Me, too," I said. "How do you think we've done this trip?"

"Alright, I think," answered Theresa. "The future is bright, and your boy Quincy's doing alright."

"I'd ask you if you really think so, if I didn't know you always say what you think! Do you think he has the focus?"

"He's a little too prideful sometimes," she answered. "And he wants too much to vindicate you, for your being voted out of office after you did so well for his species who voted you out. But yes his focus is right and quite whole, and his heart is almost always in the right place, and that's what's most important. And he loves Laura."

"Yes," I answered. "Laura and Beatrice, what a pair. I'm no Dante, and he's no Petrarch, but those two Earth-women are right for their part. 'Inspirational' is the word here, as you well know."

"'Family values' is another phrase here," she answered. "There's far too little of it here, with people preaching killing babies for no reason other than avoiding taking responsibility for a choice of theirs, and calling it the right to choose! How about the choice of the children?"

"And it's bad on the other side also," I said. "People preaching killing for vengeance while calling themselves conservative and Christian! How about conserving the seventy

times seven chances of redemption? Do they think they can judge which life is sanct? Do they think they're Christ? Or God?

"Well," she said for Mikey. "Yasser and Ariel are setting a somewhat calm example. They're old soldiers tired of war, trying to calm their factions to come to right. With yahoos like Netanyahu and Saddam Hussein out of the way, things might go more smoothly now. We must just keep hoping feeling grows faster than thinking."

"Yeah," I added for Oliver. "The fat-cats and pop-psychologists of these United States of America have no clue to the cause of that massacre on September 11."

"Yes," answered Theresa. "Vengeance is a vicious, vicious cycle."

"Yes," I replied. "Look what they did to you in Rouen. But you sang as you burned to ashes. You were so beautiful. You still are."

She smiled and bowed her head. She always did that well, with her chin up like a young soldier. But then she frowned again.

"But, you know," she said, "something terrifies me. What troubles me most about that Kate Plate is how old she is. If an adult falls so easily into the clingonism, what might the children of the me-generation do if Quincy sends them to war?"

"I'm terrified of the possibility that they might behave more badly than the people from whom they're supposed to defend *les autres*.

"With what might they choose to fill their plates?"

"That terrifies me, too," I said. "But it's time for us to go. We have our rules, as you well know."

"Terrorism!" she said. "How terrible!"



## Chapter 29

### The Fire Next Time

This is how peace stood on Earth, that time we had to leave her. In Earth-time it was April, before the Maying or the summer solstice of the wife of the king Roman god, before the July of Caesar or the dog days so August, knights or days, august or not, dogs or not. Before that falling or rising September, this is how it stood in the heritage of humanity, in humanity's inheritance, outside itself, self-alien. It was the cruelest month, with its sweet showers. It was Easter, 2003.

At nine of the clock of that part of Earth *post meridiem*, we strolled through Jackson Square. The azaleas, not rhododendrons, bloomed to bid us farewell, as Old Hickory high on his horse waved his hat, as though her were bidding farewell to the people he'd evicted from their homeland. In front of St. Louis Cathedral, Lev sat waiting for us on a bench until, as Theresa sat on one side of him and I on the other, Mary Stuart Queen of Scots beamed us up, to our waiting ship, to sail away.

As war still stood on Earth, as wind kept moaning through the pipes, while claiming grace amazing!

How long, oh Lord?

So maybe now I should offer you some cosmology, the actual order of your universe. The first thing you need to know is

that it's vast, and the second thing you need to know is that the variety of life is also vast. Some people outside Earth are physical and so somewhat like Earthlings, and some people inside Earth are nothing but thought and so less constrained than Earthlings who read books, as you do. But easier for you to understand must be the hierarchy of the physical divisions of the stars, the dispersal of the galaxies to array conscience, to place peace and its alternative.

All in all, there are fifteen galaxies, including the Zero Galaxy where God feels most at home. Life as an open mystery exists in the second through the sixth galaxies and in the eighth through the twelfth galaxies. The seventh galaxy, in the middle of those ten galaxies of living mystery is what English-speaking Earthlings call Heaven. It's in the middle because people can come and go from there.

Persons can stay in Heaven for eternity, if they wish. But often they get antsy and wish to go on visits to loved-ones still in the surrounding galaxies, or wish to travel back to a previous place of their life to get something right they feel they got wrong before. If God or Bob thought they needed to do that, they wouldn't be in Heaven. But sometimes good people have more shame than necessary.

The fourteenth galaxy is where people go at the end of a mystery life, if God or Bob feels they don't deserve to go to Heaven. There they suffer pangs of conscience in proportion to how inconsiderate they've been for others' happiness. In other words, the fourteenth galaxy is everyone's worst nightmare.

But the fourteenth galaxy doesn't quite kill a person's spirit. When the person's spirit becomes so burdened with shame, with so much despair of conscience that the person simply can't bear it anymore, the person bursts to one of the mystery-life galaxies again. And there the person gets another chance.

What makes the mystery-life galaxies mysterious is that most of the people there have no memory of their previous lives, only a vague feeling of the shame they realized in the fourteenth galaxy.

And also, to expand the possibilities of the retries, God creates new life in the mystery galaxies. But, in case you're wondering, the reason God created life is that she was lonely, being the only person and the whole universe, all in herself and of herself. Being love, she felt a need for other lives to love, and so she created the galaxies and created people with some creativity of their own to make themselves loveable.

So she made for herself a challenge, and she increased the challenge for herself and her people by creating the thirteenth galaxy, where the clingons live.

Clingons are people who don't make it to Heaven after 490 lives, people who just keep being bigots and hypocrites over and over. Seventy-times-seven times. Of course God could solve the whole problem by obliterating all the galaxies and all the people, but she's a hopeful romantic and no kind of quitter, and a firm believer in freedom. So she lets the clingons do their worst, but she curbs them a little by way of people like Theresa and Mikey and Oliver and me.

Our home base is the first galaxy, where Bob rules unquestionably. But I'm sure you've noticed that the numbering of the galaxies isn't chronological. In fact, they're not numbered at all, since they pre-exist numbers. I've given them numbers for your reference. Because of who and what you are on Earth.

Anyway, after Mary beamed us up to Theresa's waiting ship, we skipped off to the seventh galaxy to pick up Norma Jean, and on back around to the first galaxy for our mission review with Bob, where Mikey and Oliver were waiting for us.

And there, after Theresa parked her ship off-site, we materialized in Bob's conference-center. Bob's conference-center was a replica he'd built of the hill over the Sea of Galilee on Earth where he'd delivered the Beatitudes. Christians call it the Mount of Beatitudes, and Judaic people call it Karn Hattin, but it's beautiful either way. With its wildflowers and the mist over the lake, Bob keeps it always spring.

"I don't understand cathedrals and building-funds," she once said to me. "This is so much more beautiful than hewn stone or molded gold."

So, gathering among some boulders beneath three old eucalyptus trees at the very top of the hill, Lev and Norma Jean and Mikey and Oliver and I each took a seat on a separate rock, to wait for Bob to begin.

On another rock, two lizards were making love in the spring sun, but none of us knew whether we'd met them before.

"Isn't that pretty?" said Norma Jean. "Where's Theresa?"

Theresa had disappeared without my notice, as far as I could see.

"Over there," said Mikey, pointing toward a little blue flower.

"The flower?" asked Lev, following Mikey's indication.

"Just this side of it," said Oliver. "Go and look."

I still didn't see her, but I knew what they meant now.

"Go over there," I said to Norma Jean. "And scoop up a handful of the soil just this side of that little blue flower."

So, without question, she did and stood and peered into her hand, in which now was a little grass and some eucalyptus seeds, and a handful of the dust that the topsoil was on this sunny afternoon.

“Open your fingers just a little,” said Mikey, “and shake out the seeds and the dust and blow out the grass and see what’s left.”

“Oh there she is,” said Norma Jean, finding left in her hand a tiny shining polished black onyx reflecting Bob’s sun, and she returned to her seat on her rock, holding Theresa in her hand.

“So where’s Bob?” asked Lev.

“There,” said Oliver, pointing to the rock with the lizards on it.

“The lizards?” asked Norma Jean.

“No,” said Mikey. “The rock.”

“Good thing the lizards were there,” said Lev. “We might have sat on her.”

Mikey and Oliver laughed out loud at that, and so did Lev.

“You’d better not sit on my lizards,” said Bob, hardly a voice but more a sweet mood, exuding from the sun-dried rock beneath the sparkling lovers, their tongues flitting out to lick each other’s neck in tiny tender flashes.

“You know, you sound like Bob Hope?” said Lev.

“Don’t kid around,” said the rock.

“You do sound like Bob Hope,” said Norma Jean.

“You can kid around all you want to, kiddo,” said the rock.

“I never noticed lizards are so pretty,” said Norma Jean.

“Thanks,” said Bob. “I made ‘em myself. Well, let’s get started. I heard your conversation at the *Café du Monde*, and I concur. So we don’t need to repeat any of that, but I would like to say that freefalling out of that airplane as an eighty-year-old former-President of the most free and powerful people on that planet was a nice touch.”

“Thanks, Bob,” I said. “Even that yahoo Clingon was impressed.”

“I know,” said Bob. “That’s what he said: ‘I am mightily impressed.’ I wonder how impressed he’d be if he knew you’re immortal and know it.”

I bowed my head in shame, but Bob glowed up a little.

“It’s alright,” he said. “You did a good job. All of you did well, excellently. Norma, you’re a beauty, and Lev gave great advice to Mr. President in how to handle receptions, besides being a great barometer of the problems. But that’s what troubles me most about your mission, that you all did well but accomplished little. What in hell is it going to take to get God’s Earth-people to love each other?”

“I mean, look what God does. People are total scumbags through 490 lives, and the worst thing God does to them is call them clingons and ostracize them from others. Then look what Earth-people do, putting a person in an electric chair after one act of desperation, and often doing it in the name of God. What can the religious right be thinking?”

“What Earthlings commonly call the religious right is sacrilegious and dead wrong, blasphemous bigotry thriving on hypocrisy. Such Earthlings say they read the Bible literally, but they don’t forgive anyone anything, much less promote a seventy-times-seven-count repeat-offender law, as God does. And, if they did read the Bible that literally, it would be 490 counts and then pull the switch, to vindicate their weakness.

“And then there’s that homeless-shelter in the name of our friend *Chiara*, acquiescent from her love.

“What can those alms-thieves be thinking?”

“The only difference between a beggar and a thief is that a thief doesn’t ask. Both are in the business of getting something they haven’t earned, and the executive mismanagers of Love of Saint Clare both beg and steal, and by means far beyond those of beggars and thieves for whom they’re supposed to be caring. The

homeless people beg and steal from any people anywhere while the do-good marketers selectively beg and steal from generous people and in churches. They're worse than the gangsters calling themselves union-leaders. And in the name of *Chiara*? For holy shame!

"I had a lot of hope for the World Wide Web. I hoped it would be a means to spread truth, beauty. But I've discovered an Internet newsgroup moderated by someone coincidentally called Bette, like the director of funding development of that homeless-shelter. I don't know about Betty Sue, but that other Bette's notion of moderating seems to be protecting the begging and stealing. She professes her newsgroup to be for nonprofit, while she lives up to her last name, which is Craven. That is, as in cravenly cowardly, afraid of truth. And she's a woman?"

"The fire next time," said Bob, "won't be for a nineteen-year-old French girl or for six million Jews indiscriminately. It'll be for every liar on Earth, and now I don't know anyone on Earth whom that could exclude, and that clingon claiming to have presided over the land of the free is one of the worst. His making a question of what the definition of "is" is shows that the definition of his existence is obfuscation.

"Earthlings are a mess. I chose the Israelites to show them I love humanity by leading them out of Egypt to their former free nomadic life, and I told them reward for their goodness would be a land of milk and honey, and Oliver told them nothing different. But, as soon as Oliver left them to come home, they treated Canaanites worse than the Egyptians had treated them, and lied about Moses.

They took it upon themselves to violate the most important commandments for goodness I'd given them. And they're still doing it, after I went down there myself, partly to remind them that the humble of heart shall receive the land I promised them. And, if

the sin is being black, that religious right cuts that 490 times to forgive to zero. And none of it could happen, were it not for lies. How much can even God forgive?

If all people were honest with themselves and with one another, they'd never be able to blame one another for anything. And then forgiveness, because all people would thereby find the compassion that makes it unnecessary, would be unnecessary. But I don't know how to stop the tide that's running now, except by fire next time, except by conflagration.

"But that would be fighting fire with fire, an eye for an eye. And, if any honest people remain and see that I did that, they might interpret it that way and fear me more than they fear their own failings, which is one stupid part of the problem already, and they'd start the cycle again. All of us know God knows better.

"How can Earthlings read the Bible and sell their souls for pride? The answer is that the crassness of humanity is in its capacity for hypocrisy, its ability to hide its soul from itself, in its mind. If he or she will look, every human can see in her or his own heart that religion is loving one's neighbor, that salvation is nowhere on Earth, except in compassion. Yet Earthlings build golden calves and hobbyhorses and bandwagons and bury their souls in their worship of those idle idols.

"Colonialism! That's what Europeans called taking America from its natives.

"Settlements! That's what Israelis call their colonialism in the land of Canaan.

"It's a sad testament that we need a drug-addict beaten indefensibly in a city named for angels to ask Earthlings why they can't all just get along, the saddest part being that the question was original enough to be attributed to that one person.

"I guess Sugar Fits' momentum still rules in Boston. I can't see how else a brother of a mob hit-man on the FBI's ten-



most-wanted list could be Chancellor of the Boston branch of the University of Massachusetts. Part of Fits Jr.'s legacy is that he was the first Roman-Catholic President of the United States, and so part of his legacy is that the Archbishop of Boston had to resign because of a pattern of priest pedophilia that's thrived for decades after the Fits Jr. Presidency, while the Archbishop pretended to look away, as voters looked away from dear Norma here, or gloated in admiration.

“What Hitler did was human, not beastly. What Clingon did was beastly, not human. One of the weirdest things about how humans think is that they attribute human attributes to beasts and beastly attributes to humans, and as sick as saying the Holocaust was beastly is trying to excuse Clingon's conduct by saying he's only human. Unlike most beasts, who neither would nor could kill millions of their own species but screw whomever they can whenever they feel like, humans kill proudly for sport and are mostly monogamous and confine their coitus mostly to beds. But, then, on the other hand, oral sex is mostly human, except a little sniffing and licking to find the more productive way to making love and more life.

“Some of that silliness comes from more of that illiteral reading of the Bible. I said humans shall have dominion over the beasts, but I didn't say it's a good idea. And I said faithless Peter would be the rock on which my church would be built, but I didn't say that was a good idea either. A fact is a fact, and a judgment is something else.

“Then there's what Earthlings call economics. In the land of the free, since relative world peace created relative prosperity to the point that people don't need to work more than a third of their time to feed and clothe a family, humans are looking to lottery tickets and lawsuits for their primary hope for wealth. They're scared to death of foreigners, people from less free and wealthy

lands coming to their country to take their jobs by being willing to earn their keep, rather than suing McDonalds for letting their greed and laziness make them fat.

So now the main danger to the United States is the decadence that comes from complacency. It's the me-generation leading the nation into the ditch, as did Rome's. And, Theresa, your conversation with Kate Plate pointed to that. Besides much else.

“Lev, I don't expect people to know what they're talking about, but I wouldn't have a problem with their paying enough attention to the obvious to understand that history is a long process, and that part of it is economic cycles. The simple fact that a Presidency at best initiates cycles for the future of economic and other history, rather than creating them out of hand, shouldn't be hard to convey. A Presidential term is at best some building blocks.”

But then Bob paused. By then, all heads had bowed, but in that second of silence, all heads came up, except Norma's. Even the lizards stopped licking and looked around at the others there. But slowly Norma raised her head and looked at Bob's rock.

“What's the matter, kiddo?” asked the rock.

“What's the big deal about being dead?” asked Norma. “I haven't had much of a problem with it, except that I missed my mom and Jimmy and his mom before they came to Heaven. I visited them before, but it wasn't quite the same.”

“That's the whole thing about death,” said Bob. “But I don't like to talk much, since hardly anyone listens to me anyway. Even some of my best operatives lose their hearing from time to time, like Oliver with Rachel. So I'll let Theresa explain that to you. She likes your hand. You'll understand.”

“You already said most of that,” said Norma Jean, feeling Theresa’s warmth in her hand. “I mean, what about life? I mean, what if you’re full of love and things don’t go quite right, like star-crossed lovers? I mean, what if you’re still alive after your lover has passed into the night, so darkly you can find no light to find him or her?”

“You mean like Tess of the d’Urbervilles,” said Bob. “That’s a special case, and Tess answered it rightly. In such a case, everything goes beyond war and peace and anything sectarian. All the goodness of the living blends with the goodness of the loving, so all that’s left is love, no difference.

“All marches on in the grandeur of the spirit, the love of God. God was sad, because he was alone, and so she created you to love. So the special people, like Tess and Theresa, have no way of dying.”

“When will there be another mission to Earth?” Norma also wished to know.

“That’s a tough question,” Bob replied. “What troubles me most is the hippies of the sixties. Sympathy arose on Earth for the dead burnt babies in Vietnam, and Earthlings began to speak of love and peace. But more Earthlings turned that compassion into an excuse for sexual promiscuity and drugs.

“With that hypocrisy, they spawned a new bigotry, a division between debauchery and sensibility that the so-called baby-boomers still celebrate, and turned into the clingonism called the me-generation, a generation later. While you all were doing the best you could, Earthlings were creating more problems.

“How could Joshua have done what he did, and how could Gandhi have been assassinated? How could Hitler’s atrocity have turned into the situation raging in Canaan now? We could blow them all to kingdom come, but that isn’t a method of mine. It isn’t, because it isn’t good. And neither is subterfuge.

“Good helps those who help themselves, and most human Earthlings devote their lives to self-destruction. At the rate things are going, the thirteenth galaxy will be full of Earthlings soon, and we’ll have to form another galaxy for the rest of the screw-ups in the universe, no matter what good we do, I guess.

“So,” said Bob, concluding, “the question is what’s the use.”

“A quitter never wins,” answered Theresa, shining from the warmth of Norma’s hand. “Anyway, there’s your prayer, your saying that praying for anything other than God’s will shows no faith in God, no faith that God knows what we need before we do. I mean I understand you to have meant that telling God how to run his universe is the ultimate arrogance, the ultimate taking of God’s name in vain”

“God bless you, my child,” agreed the rocky voice. “We just have to keep doing what we find in our hearts and hands to do. I guess I worry too much sometimes, but there is something now to watch on Earth.”

And Bob went on, as Norma’s tears flowed to her hands.

“Humans speak and write of things that happen around Earth as though they were separate incidents, but they aren’t. The strife in Canaan may be the oldest ongoing piece of the problem on Earth, but it’s only a part of what humans do all around that world, from the Yankees to the Angels, from Ireland to Iraq.

“Like the situation in Ireland, the situation in Iraq involves many factions while the main division is between sects of a religion with the same founder. In Ireland, Catholic Christians are fighting Protestant Christians. In Iraq, Sunni Muslims are fighting Shiite Muslims. That part is bigotry, and there’s more.

“Your boy Quincy is invading Iraq with many motives. One is that he wishes to vindicate you for having been voted out of his office for not invading Iraq. That, of course, is no worthy

motive, and hardly either is his motive to have Iraq share more oil than France's contracts with the current regime requires.

“But a worthy motive is how Saddam Hussein and his sons treat the citizens of their nation. Yet, in the eyes of citizens of the United States, neither is that sufficient motive, because it doesn't hurt people here. So Quincy is using the excuse that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction able to hurt them.

“The free people of the United States don't care that halfway around Earth a ruling family practices rape and other torture for fun or that that regime kills people by hundreds and buries them by thousands in mass graves with their hands still tied behind their backs for their assassination.

“But they do care if the regime may be able to send anthrax halfway around Earth through the mail or send a nuclear warhead halfway around Earth on a missile. They care about that because they're trying to enjoy their freedom halfway around Earth from there. So what if Quincy can't prove the weapons exist?

“He can show that they have existed there and that Sadist Hussein is showing plenty of indication that he has every intention of developing them in the future. But, for the me-now generation of the land of the free, the future seems as distant as the other side of Earth. So neither do they see that consideration as valid motive.

“And neither do they see the connection between your Star Wars project and developing nuclear missiles in Iraq. So Quincy is likely to be voted out of your office for invading Iraq for the posterity of all of Earth, as you were voted out of his office for not invading Iraq for the posterity of all of Earth. That you did it to end the Cold War is far beyond the scope of their attention.

“Earthlings say they agree with my notion of brotherly love, but many of them interpret that phrase so literally that they leave out sisterly love. So hardly can they see the scheme of things

broadly enough to see that humans halfway around Earth are their brothers and sisters. And who cares about a bunch of rag-heads?

“You do. You see, as John Donne said, before his love for Anne Donne undid his clerical career, that you’re all a piece of the main, as is each Earthling. But, lovely Norma, I’m evading your question, from the rare pleasure of talking with you.

“No one knows better than you, Norma Jean. The most democratic nation on Earth could have nothing to fear if the majority of its people cared more about their neighbors and their self than about excusing their inability to be married and using their democracy to elect such presidency. Learning that is how you went to Heaven.

“So the answer to your question lies in whether humans’ heads can ever accede to their hearts. Iraq and Canaan, America and the cedars of Lebanon, and each crying or smiling human heart, are all microcosms much larger than Earth. So, now, I’ll try to be succinct, to answer your caring question.

“How shall Earthlings deal with the situation in the Holy Land? The answer lies in the warm small hands of one tiny human living in West Virginia. A residuum of that hippy thing was a fine singer singing that West Virginia is almost Heaven, and dying trying to fly, maybe on drugs. Almost Heaven?

“Not even close! Remember that the Virginia colonists named their colony for the virgin queen who decapitated the catholic queen Mary, the chief engineer on your flight here for this meeting, whose head and heart are still hers, of course. And remember that powder originally only in China now calls most shots all over Earth.

“Heaven isn’t taking shortcuts through psychoactive substances, not even through alcohol while it’s called moonshine in Virginia and made only of what humans need to breath and

drink to stay alive and what chemists call the basic element of life, and it isn't dying of black lung disease in or out of the mines for carbon beneath the Virginias.

“Heaven is in the spirit of a poor child of the hills and foliage of West Virginia, who joined the army for a ticket to college to be able someday to teach kindergarten. The question is whether she eventually will grow to the grandeur and beauty of those hills and that foliage and her ambition. Or will she fail the test God has given her.

“Injured in battle near Baghdad in the mess in the Middle East, she'll become what people who call the United States of America might well call America's sweetheart. By risking her life to earn her right to help children, she's earned that title. But her injury shall gain her questionable fame.

“The question is whether, as the United States' most responsive name in news suggests, she'll use the wealth that will come from her fame to wallow, rather than to do what she can for the children.

“So that child of America may be the last French corporal.”

## Chapter 30

### A Handful of Dust

On September 11, 9/11 in the first year of this millennium, suicidal murderous desperados toppled towers of trade and plowed into a pentagon of power. Others died in an empty field, foiled by some brave souls who refused to go darkly. Calling 911 could bring no one to help much any of that. No one, from Earth, could answer well.

Yet great things happen on and above Earth every moment, from heroic hearts anywhere, ordinarily inexplicably, in many ways. Earth's books are full of fiction and fact and of myth and history, and we enjoy fiction and myth while telling ourselves that fact and history are more important. So, because they let their heads hide their hearts, hardly any Earthlings recognize that paradox

How, for example, can history tell us what a rich preppy was thinking, floating alone in an ocean a half-century ago? How can history tell us what happened to a persecutor of Christians riding on a rural road for that purpose two millennia ago? How can history tell us whether the God of Moses wrote the Bible, or the scribes of Joshua? How can history tell? And how not?

More, however, I want to know what we're doing today, we humans of the United States of America, the most powerful nation on Earth. If it's all about war, why do more sports heroes



commit violent crimes than do soldiers? If it's all about peace, why do so many of us watch football on Sundays?

If it's all about family, why do we call those sports-heroes role-models, and why don't we say Hector and not Achilles was hectoring? If it's all about love, how do questions like these arise, like a Phoenix hiding from the sun? But, who gives a crap, as we deny federal funding to a day-care center?

Why did we deny federal funding to a day-care center that's proven its social acceptance since the beginning of the second war to end all wars? Could it be because it's in an African Methodist Episcopal church, the church of Rosa Parks? Could it be because this book is wholly fiction?

Nothing in this book before this chapter has happened, but everything in this book has happened. God's name isn't Bob, but in New Orleans I knew a man named Bob who thought he was a brother of Jesus' and, dressed in a sheet and carrying a mop-handle for a staff, went on a pilgrimage to Biloxi.

That A.M.E. child-care center is in New Orleans, fictional or not.

"Holy Walker to Biloxi" was the headline in the *Times-Picayune*.

"I told them exactly who I was," said Bob, when I showed him the article in the newspaper, which said he'd refused to identify himself when the police arrested him for walking in the middle of interstate highway 10. Jesus' parables didn't happen, but they all keep happening. But what does it matter?

Some may say this book distorts history, and others may say it corrects history. More are likely to say nothing, because they won't read or because they don't bother with history, or because they don't care. I'll answer them all by saying that this book is fiction, but I'll also tell them all that the spirit of this book is fact and that this book accurately represents the spirit of

humanity over the two millennia before and after people began to call Jesus the Christ, and I'll tell them that myth is truer than fact. And I'll show them that our myths are more about war than about peace, that so are the books we most commonly call scripture, and that so is our history.

Historically knowledgeable people know the Bible wasn't compiled into what people now call the Bible until long after anyone who had walked with Jesus was dead, and so they might say the Bible isn't the word of God any more than is any other word anyone might write. So some historians become atheists.

But historical authenticity needn't matter to anyone who has the truth in his or her heart. From the heart, the mind falls easily in line, and the soul then rises in easy grace, if we don't kick against the prick, mindlessly or heartlessly. Jesus said that, except loving God, nothing is more necessary than loving one's neighbor. Yet neighbors calling themselves Christians readily kill neighbors who don't. Oh what a parabolic paradox!

The Bible is most famous for two qualities: its goodness and its contradiction of itself. Of the contradictions, the one most horrible may be the Torah story of Moses violating half of the Ten Commandments against an entire race descendant from Abraham, and doing it before Joshua initiated the genocidal robbery in Canaan. That is, the contradiction between what the Bible says God commanded, and the deeds of the people it say he commanded. How does a paradox become so parabolic?

A historical contradiction these millennia later is the one between something that happened near the end of the last past millennium in so-called communist China and something that happened near the beginning of this millennium in Palestinian Canaan. In China, a young man stood in front of a communist tank and is remembered now as a symbol of humanity's fight for civil

rights. In Canaan, a young woman stood in front of an Israeli bulldozer and barely made the next week's issue of *Time*.

When the young man stood in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square, the Chinese driver stopped. When the young woman stood in front of the bulldozer in Gaza, the Israeli driver crushed her. Here's some more fact, myth, etc.

Kenneth Clark, a prominent American psychobabbler of the time of the culmination of the United States civil rights movement of the twentieth century, said that loving one's neighbor is psychologically burdensome.

Was he right? Senator Joseph Moakley said: "Everyone I knew growing up in South Boston was baptized, issued a union card, and enrolled in the Democrat Party." That grotesque testament to bigotry and corruption is engraved in stone, marking the change of the name of a park on Boston's Old Harbor, from Columbus Park to Joe Moakley Park.

My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

The so-called Republican Party responded to the sixties shift in the so-called Democratic Party's vote-solicitation strategy by changing the party of Lincoln to the party of the politicians deserting Governor Wallace's sinking ship.

That is, the party of Abraham Lincoln changed to the politics of Strom Thurmond. So, Senator Moakley dies of cancer on his side of America, and President Reagan dies of Alzheimer's disease on his side of America. I don't know how two Irishmen can be so divided from one another, party-to-party and coast-to-coast. But I know it isn't all about the French. It's all about bigotry!

“So,” you might ask, “why all that harping about soap-opera women? Isn’t that bigotry, that stressing and straining to see women in a negative light?”

“I don’t think so,” I’d say to you. “And the reason is in the Old Testament, in the book of Proverbs. It’s in Proverbs 18:1: ‘Through desire a man, having separated himself, seeketh *and* intermeddleth with all wisdom.’”

The way I see it is that I expect that from a man, but I prefer not to expect it from a woman. I see that as an observation that mankind is generally bigoted against himself, and I prefer to hold women to a higher standard. I try to hold leaders of nations to a higher standard because of the responsibility of their positions. I wish to hold women to a higher standard also for that reason. But more because they’ve shown that they have it in them. They’ve shown that truth through all of storied time. And so I hope they won’t be cheap as men. I mean as hypocritical as they.

But why listen to me? As far as I can tell, I acquired my information from forty years of watching television in a nuthouse, after defending myself in a court of law after committing the most despicable crime I can imagine.

Remembering breaking a football-helmet someone loaned me to ride a motorcycle in Afghanistan, by falling off the bike and onto a rock, I think I might be in a coma. And, remembering hitting a car head-on as I drove home drunk from a court-appearance and driving on with no further notice of the incident, I think I may be dead. Or maybe I’m from outer space.

But, anyway, I’m obviously alien.

But, if I’m alien, how did the twenties roar so much? Wasn’t the movie *Born Free* about lions, and weren’t Marilyn Monroe and Malcolm X and the junior Martin Luther King and George Herbert Walker Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev and Yasser Arafat born in the 1920’s, and don’t lions roar? And didn’t Leo

Tolstoy die in the previous decade, the one in which Rosa Parks was born to us? Oh what a web anyone can weave from the details life presents! Oh what a web of chainmail.

Oh, what a web of mail Richard the Lionhearted, the Plantagenet king called *Richard Coeur de Leon*, must have worn crusading while Robin Hood and his merry men with Little John and Friar Tuck stood on the Island of the Mighty defending his return, against the John they forced into the Magna Charta.

That, at least in mythic hope, was the end of futile feudalism for the sake of the maid Marian.

But underline the maid Marian, and think of the children raped, boys and girls, yours. Think of another movie, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, about that sort of thing. Out of Carolina, as though such depravity is particular to Appalachian geeks and not pertinent to moneyed geeks from the cradle of liberty to the city of angels, from Rome to Sri Lanka.

But, anyway, now a more trivial question. The CNN reporter who anchors his network most of our afternoons raised to his audience the question of how to pronounce Porsche. The answer he offered was that a family was named Porsche, but that it doesn't matter! Does he think families' names don't matter, or that families don't matter, or what?

A minute on the World Wide Web might have told him the Auto Union engineer Ferdinand Porsche fostered that brand and the Audi trademark through his engineering, and a moment of inquiry on the anchor's production set surely might have raised someone who knew enough German to tell him how Dr. Porsche pronounced his name.

Is that trivial? Or is it fundamental? Is it trivial whether Ferdinand is a Spanish name, or whether Dr. Porsche was Jewish? Well, maybe it seems trivial to you, but is the doctor's life or yours trivial enough for you to let news announcers blow it off for

nothing except their separate selves, sucking your integrity out of yours and into theirs?

Is it trivial that the same CNN anchor in the soap-opera time-slot tried to make vengeance the main issue between a mother whose son, emulating commercial television-wrestling, killed a daughter? When the daughter's mother forgave the son but questioned the motherliness of his mother, the anchor said of the daughter's mother: "So she gets nothing." Define "trivial".

I don't know. I don't understand. I don't understand what's wrong with NAFTA, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement. I hear politicians of the United States of North America saying that what's wrong is that trade should be fair and not free. I don't understand any difference between fair and free, while I do understand poor people saying that it isn't fair that freedom doesn't feed their families, while I don't understand politicians twisting their own words to delay the sharing fairness freedom cannot but ultimately bring. I don't understand what politicians do.

I don't understand our greed for private wealth or power while Earth has more than enough wealth, for every human to have more than he or she needs, if we'd share it. That is, what's fair is fair to all of us on Earth or off it, and politicians must of course see that. So I do understand fairness, and by that freedom, justice. Freedom, justice, for all. That's what we say. But what are we?

Who are we, this self of you and me, with my unwillingness to get up mornings? Who am I, to be angry at my neighbors for their anger at me, while we all awaken in the middle of the night or when the clock-radio comes on, remembering to do all that stuff again, in face of death? And who are you, in all the wealth of Earth, in the glory of life?

I know a woman whose family name is Linda, Spanish for beautiful. She's Jewish, and her family was ostracized from Spain

during its “inquisitions,” and her given name means Rose of Sharon, and she’s well-fed but ill-tempered, these centuries later! So how, in Spain or Germany or anywhere else you know on Earth or off, do such transitions happen?

So what are you going to do with our self, with his or hers, with yours, with mine? Are you going to use the short time you think you have on Earth to stack up some Cadillacs, cars named for a French imperialist against native Americans, autos admired by African Americans calling them hogs? Or are you going to be worth more than ignorant arrogant desperate disparity?

Yet, on a later broadcast, that soap slot CNN anchor expressed agreement with an e-mail from his audience. The viewer complained that television reporters use the word “basically” to refer to rhetoric that’s by no means basic. Basic, fundamental, is beauty, truth.

Yet, while truth doesn’t come from someone who’s too lazy to take a minute for conversation or for button-pushing to be sure he’s telling the truth, CNN anchors such laziness with the slogan “the most trusted name in news”.

The only people who trust CNN are people as ignorant as that anchor, and people who hope watching CNN will educate them to the point that they can buy a Porsche, while remaining as ignorant as that advertising anchor.

And here’s another fact, from the *Boston Sunday Globe*: “Wayne J. Oliver of Fall River was ticketed in Freetown on Feb. 25, 2002, for driving 40 miles an hour in a 35 m.p.h. zone.” Mr. Oliver is, of course, black.

And the *Globe* didn’t report that until 2003, as part of an editorial. I wonder how Mr. Oliver’s doing now in this millennium! And whom does he trust?

How trivial are you?

Some may call this book judgmental. But neither facts nor fiction are judgmental in themselves. I've simply said how I see things and hardly once said how I feel. So any finding judgment from this book must find it in and of themselves. They need to find it in their hearts not mine. But they must look.

But rarely do we look. English-speaking Earthlings who use the word "really" are people ordinarily referring to things not real. And those who use the phrase "true fact" are used to presenting as facts things that are not true. That is, those people are liars, and they must be most English-speaking persons.

The bishop who replaced Cardinal Law as Archbishop of Boston because Law disregarded law was respected for conciliation and reconciliation, and that's the general approach of humanity in the face of caught corruption.

Rather than change the situation, humans load up a few scapegoats and profess the lies again, cyclically. And more of such is saying priest pedophilia is a crisis in the church and not that it's a crisis is in the children. If anything is Satanic on Earth, it must be priests molesting children.

So let's ask what Jesus would do. Jesus said that Heaven is made of such as children, and neither Law nor any of the convicted pedophile priests has apologized to the children. They've apologized to other parishioners and to the church in general, but not particularly to any child. So, in their fear of mundane law, they still deny the crime itself.

And Massachusetts law, the law of the pilgrim-founded commonwealth that founded Thanksgiving as a holy day, protects the church and its leadership from prosecution for responsibility. That is, law made on Beacon Hill in the cradle of liberty protects Law from the law. That is, that state protects the church, and whom may we thank for that?

God? The church, the state, you, us? Whom?



Oh and on and on. Clingons, being role models for sleaze, set the example for sleaze in ancient Rome and in modern America. And setting the example is the most important method of leadership, in the military and in commerce, and in families.

Yet, United States Air Force officers fly like birds and raped women on their primary training-ground, following and setting the example of their clingon commander in chief.

And on and on! How does Barbra Streisand, singing more like a bird than those Air Force officers fly, reconcile her having said in Madison Square Garden that she desires that all people should get along together despite their differences? How, on Manhattan, does she reconcile saying that with Joshua's effort to kill all the Canaanites, and how does she reconcile her decrying victimizing women with what Clinton did to that female intern? But, more basically, how do any of us reconcile hypocrisy?

And, still more basically, how do we reconcile ourselves to it, and how do we justify our reconciliation?

Of course clingons are many on Earth. Roman Polanski, wanted in the United States for molesting an adolescent girl and hiding from the charges in France, directed *Tess*. He based the film on the English novel *Tess of the Durbervilles*, about a rich man molesting a poor adolescent girl. So Polanski got richer and thereby gained in acclaim, as no one complained. The United States has laws against profiting from crime. But Roman's on the lam, not where he needs to pay. But who cares?

Count Leo Tolstoy didn't care to be a count, although the culture of his country called it his birthright. He preferred accountability to being a count, and so he wrote one of the longest books ever written, in an effort to show his love. And he showed it partly by saying that people don't know what they're talking about, not even the count. Thank God he didn't live long enough to see

what Stalin made of communism. Or to see what mental-health professionals are doing in their pretensions.

Another example of what mental-health professionals are doing in their pretension is a study to discover whether promiscuity is biological or psychological. One doesn't need a doctorate degree in a mental-health profession to know that promiscuity comes from the same psychological disorder that caused Napoleon to wish to rule more than one country. It's about pride of conquest as a measure of personal superiority.

That kid named Billy, in the twentieth century after Jesus' crucifixion, spent 5 ½ years in the world's largest walled prison, and the first thing he learned there was that prisons aren't correctional institutions. Even in the United States of America, prisons are not the correctional institutions the various governments of the United States and their federal government call them. They're institutions of vengeance, wherein the staff is corrupt and hateful, like the inmates.

Even the mental-health professionals there preach first that the inmates have no right to their service, to any hope of a better life than being a brunt of vindication. So those who don't die there return to society worse for the wear, most of them similarly seeking vengeance. If they didn't before.

That kid Billy, whether or not he was incarnated new or anew, spent those 5 ½ years fighting to correct himself by the professed standards of mankind, while officials demanded that he waste that time, taking jobs other inmates needed and desired, stamping license-plates, printing flyers, etc. And, after the retribution of homelessness that society in general requires regardless of lessons, he spent 6 ½ years working for a homeless-shelter. And there he discovered that the executive staff was more interested in its fame and fortune than in the fortune of its guests.

He discovered that the Lincoln County war was nothing near to ended, however over.

But he did his work there well for *l'amore di Santa Clara* and didn't complain, until he discovered that the bigotry of those executioners went beyond aggrandizing themselves. It went to denigrating anyone not like them, different from them in any of the ways the law of the United States of America proclaims should not be cause for discrimination. Creed, race, sex, etc.

And, finally, finalizing his employment there, he complained about the racial discrimination, first to the executive management, then to the board of directors.

And it went far beyond the exigencies of money, or greed for private wealth. So, the executive management and the board of directors agreed to fire him, to turn him loose to be homeless again, and more angry. So, having been an honored soldier in the United States Army before he committed that crime in that life, he sought reemployment assistance from government and civilian nonprofit agencies responsible for such help. But they also turned to retribution, and so the kid turned to the court of public opinion. He wrote a book you won't accept because it is too true.

But, before being fired, before being blown out of the box as he may have blown others out of it as Billy the Kid against the corrupt merchants of Lincoln County, he spent many Friday evenings in Coyne's Bar in South Boston trying to figure out why homeless people and public-housing-project-dwellers spend much of their tiny bit of money there, and he didn't find a reasonable answer until after Saint Francis House fired him. The old man named Jim, who every open afternoon sits on the same stool to watch television there, told him he should have kept his mouth shut.

"I guess you've learned your lesson now," said Jim.

"A coward dies a thousand deaths," Billy did not answer.

I told you Lev asked Billy how he managed to suffer that corruption of *l'amore di Santa Clara* so long. I said he answered that he believed in the ostensible and somewhat actual purpose of the shelter, but that he had another reason, too. And I said he said the other reason was that he had the hots for a hypoglycemic Roman Catholic theologian who worked there doing whatever she felt she should do, going with the flow of what she felt she could best do, what her life made her feel most able to do. But I didn't say we might well call her acceptance of what God had made of her life more Chinese than Roman.

Jim of the bar didn't ask Billy how he'd done so many things, so many little things. So Billy didn't tell old Jim that he hadn't watched many soap-operas or attended many sporting-events in that life of his on Earth, as he didn't tell him that Earthlings invented sports to train citizens for war, or that tragedy preceded comedy in classical Earth drama. So, of course, he didn't even think of telling him he was Billy the Kid, and he didn't tell him he'd mostly only watched as have I, or that all of us should first do that, before we preach. And he didn't tell him he was we, as we didn't tell him he and we are leaves of grass. We don't sing loudly of our self. We sing light like rain.

And neither did we call Jim a French corporal. These days, I'm reserving that term for such as the human-resources specialist with the Jack Kerouac poster on her wall, and for others who try to excuse voting for corrupt politicians, or to excuse any other part of their own corruption, by saying all politicians are corrupt. The corrupt politicians themselves, like the executive management of Saint Francis House, I prefer to call American corruptorals. That is as Hitler was a German corruptoral.

But who cares about Billy the Kid? As I said, we can't keep track of every little brat in the universe. We can't keep track of every meager member of a homeless shelter, either homeless or

employed. The Kid is one of those microcosms for our minds, if one considers the Lincoln County war as much like any war, if one considers courage of conviction, dedication's part in that. That is, if we consider judgment, arrogance, killing, lying. That is, if we consider how all fits together. And its price.

And, if we do, degree is no excuse, and the argument that one's subterfuge is in the interest of a greater good either now or sometime down the road is exactly the same as Hitler's and Napoleon's. I don't know which part of me to present first, or which part of you you find most important at each of your moments. But that must be plain to any honest sense, the distance from a little deed to greater good, or grander self.

But, again, of course, this is all fiction? Who killed Norma Jean and *Jehanne de Domremy*? Why pick on the French for using the word "on" as though it means "we" or "everyone"? Is the actuality that other peoples feel so, but don't say such so plainly, an excuse for blame? Perhaps the French are not such hypocrites?

We wrote this chapter only because the ghost of Leo Tolstoy happened to run across the ghost of Billy the Kid, and me. That is, we fell together in neighborly attention to much else. So you may wish to skip the rest that's here. But we'll move on.

The executive management of Saint Francis House must have known they weren't in the business of helping the homeless, that they were in the business of begging and stealing for their own aggrandizement, and the Board vetted their placement there.

So clingons apparently pervade the universe. But was Billy the Kid a child? Of course not!

He was a murderer in one century. And, in his next chance, in the next century, the last of that millennium, he was worse. And his method for seeking retribution was to seek the wisdom of the millennia of humanity before his life on Earth, and he responded to

what he learned from that by trying commercial hospitality, and he quit that for alienation. Then, silly or sophisticated as he was, he went to work for a homeless-shelter for more money than he'd ever earned. And he hardly wondered.

His salary increased notably, while he implemented the principles he'd learned in prison and college and the Army and in ten years as a respected hospitality professional, in his effort at retribution. And still, while he expressed the principles loudly at every opportunity while the people increasing his salary violated every principle themselves, he hardly wondered. He thought that perhaps they knew he was a convicted felon and thought his morality accorded with theirs and that his industry was out of desperation. That is, he thought they thought he might be one of them, not meaning what he preached.

Can you guess another answer?

But maybe it's all just beyond me. We don't, as I've insinuated, pay attention to every little brat in the universe. Maybe the CIA operates homeless-shelters as breeding-grounds or recruiting-agencies for jobs like Lee Harvey Oswald's. I know the United States Government paid Billy the Kid and other drunks well in Afghanistan to be incompetent while its overt mission was to collect intelligence. Perhaps it's a vast conspiracy on all wings. Maybe no one flies on wind. Or maybe nothing's matter?

Death to Smoochy? When I feel as though I'm part of everyone, of all life and all races and species on Earth as I hope goodness is in Heaven, I wonder about O. J. Simpson and Michael Jackson and Woody Allen and why people praise them, never looking to see how they grew from their parents, to be money-mongering grandiose beggars. I wonder why we support them wrongly but not rightly, and of course I wonder at their influence on children, their children and ours. How do the sins pass on?

*Death to Smoochy* was a movie that hardly moved anyone, a film at the beginning of this millennium about corruption called nonprofit. I can give reasons for its hardly moving anyone, reasons like greed displacing self-interest, general clingonism. But I won't understand how my species has no faith or knowledge in or of its self. And I won't understand our lack of care for our children.

Ed Norton starred in that film, presumably acquiring his name from the sewer-worker whom bus-driver Ralph Kramden browbeat when he wasn't too busy browbeating his wife, shaking his fist in her face and threatening to knock her to the moon, in the fifties TV sitcom weirdly called *The Honeymooners*. Maybe it was called *The Honeymooners* because no children were in the show. Except ours watching.

Who kills Smoochy? Who kills any neighbor? Who is killing you, making you divorce your childhood sweetheart for someone who can help you buy a larger or smaller or faster or slower automobile? Who is having you take headache-medicine or heroin so you'll feel better than you would were you not trying so hard at such, while you have your happiness at hand, while you ignore your heart? Aliens? Who?

How can anyone kill Smoochy if Rush Limbaugh remains in our air? At some point, we have to realize in ourselves that drug-addicts and wife-beaters and child-molesters and murderers need treatment, and that we need honesty to treat them. We need to recognize that our weaknesses are not our strengths, not rush to admire others' weakness, to excuse ours. We need to humbly work at what we feel.

So what and how was Billy the Kid's income as he hung out in that boomtown? The Bob who tried to walk to Biloxi down the middle of an interstate highway was a bouncer for a gay-bar on

Bourbon Street! And his family, by common Earth-standards, was wealthy.

But he told me that, after men he took home left his one-bedroom apartment on Dauphine Street, he found five-dollar bills beneath his bed. And he worked part-time restoring paintings for the New Orleans Museum of art, once a Michelangelo. And over the hearth of the apartment hung an El Greco portrait while in the hearth was a gas space heater. And, in the complexity of life on Earth, Bob called me a mud-pie.

But, meanwhile, I love the maples of Michigan and Massachusetts, and the white sand of the keys off Belize, and the black rock of the Kabul Gorge. I love Cajuns and Chinese, red-beans and rice. I love Mondays and Sundays.

According to Tolstoy, Commander-in-Chief Kutuzov, the prince and general who preferred to let Russian weather defeat Napoleon and his imperial army, rather than sacrificing more of his tired depleted troops to do that job to no positive end beyond praise for himself, said to his troops in the presence of thousands of French prisoners of that war: “While they were strong, we did not spare ourselves, but now we can even spare them. They too are men. Eh, lads? . . . . But after all is said and done, who asked them to come here? It serves them right, the bloody bastards!”

I can hardly think of a clearer expression of the spirit of bigotry and vengeance that would not be necessary were all of us always to carry the spirit of fairness and sympathy that quotation expresses as clearly. And the answer to the question of who asked them to come here is that the emperor Napoleon did, as it might have been the president Johnson or any other leader putting his or her pride in front of his or her people’s welfare, while rationalizing such egocentrism as for the greater good, and calling on people to pray for that nonsense, as though good God would take such a side.



It's taking advantage of God's letting people live by their hearts.  
Yes? No?

The Ten Commandments. The Sermon on the Mount.  
October 1066; May 30, 1430. May of 1876, west of Fort Abraham  
Lincoln. November of 1965, two Sundays before Thanksgiving.  
The Boston massacre, the storming of the Bastille, Gettysburg.  
The church at Shiloh, Pearl Harbor and Nagasaki, the mists of  
Avalon. The World Trade Center and the Church of the Nativity.  
Mother Teresa and Father Geoghan. Jimmy Swaggart, Pat  
Robertson. Beginnings, endings. What?

Whom or what do you believe, Teresa or Diana? William  
Bonney or Ned Kelly? Jesus Christ or Cardinal Law, Carter or  
Kennedy? East or west or north or south, left or right? Whom do  
you trust? Your heart?

“Hurrah!” shouted the Russian corporals, to all of  
Kutuzov's little speech.

Cut us off?

I don't understand partisanship, as I don't understand how  
black is either more or less beautiful than white, and I don't  
understand how homosexuals are called gay. One's hope of being  
gay must diminish when the leader of one's nation says that one's  
love isn't as sacred as William Clinton's for Hillary Rodham after  
he showed what his love “is.” And a dear friend of that kid Billy's  
in New Orleans was homosexual and killed himself, blew a bloody  
hole in his head as he sat beside his partner on their sofa, in their  
home they'd shared for years.

It was a shotgun house, but the suicide was by pistol, if it  
was a suicide. Homosexuals' commandeering the word “gay” is  
like Jews' commandeering the word “Semitic”, though not as  
extreme or as tragic. The Episcopal Church, in considering  
whether to appoint a bishop, worried about his homosexuality but

not about his being a divorced father of two. What is anyone trying to gain?

The biblical proscription against homosexuality is in the Old Testament and vague and not as directly attributed to God as are the Ten Commandments. It's in the book following them in time if not in commonness of sense or sensibility, while the biblical proscription against adultery is specific and plain, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Where is anyone looking to find?

In the Old Testament, the proscription against adultery is in the Ten Commandments, which the Bible says God directly delivered to Moses. In the New Testament, it's in the Sermon on the Mount, in the same chapter as the Beatitudes, directly attributed to Christ. The Bible says Jesus told his disciples in that sermon that divorce causes adultery on the part of divorcees.

What kind of pastor would commit himself to that, and why does the Episcopal Church ignore divorce or adultery or deserting one's children to publicly proclaim that a person's homosexuality doesn't disqualify a person who's done all that, from becoming a bishop?

You might ask how homosexuality is important anyway, and the answer is in the oxymoronic paradox of that word. "Homo" means "same", while "sex" means "different". But I've learned you don't get it.

We must exact with Barbra Streisand's words: "My idea of a perfect world is . . . a world in which all of us are equal, but definitely not the same!"

For us, but more for children, for the lambs.

But lo so many words! Francois Marie Arouet, in his little book *Candide, ou l'Optimisme*, which he wrote more than a century before Tolstoy wrote his huge book *War and Peace*, said

all Tolstoy said and more, and more plainly. And he was French and wrote in French for France, and yet Napoleon arose as Hitler arose in the face of Faust. Yet, in the end, I believe optimism shall prevail, and that's why some kid wrote this one more book. In the face of the failure of Lev and Voltaire.

From France to Russia and from England to India, fiction has been foisted on us. From England, consider *Tess of the Durbervilles, a Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*. From an Englishman with a childhood in India and a wife from the New England state named for green mountains, and years of life in all three places, consider *The Jungle Books*. In length, between *War and Peace* and *Candide*, are those two books. But, however mining feels, diamond sparkles more than coal.

Anyway, forget this book. Here's your reading assignment for the term. Read *Candide*, *War and Peace*, *Tess of the Durbervilles*, and *The Jungle Books*. Read them in that order, and read them once again in that order, the order of their modernity. Then, having done that, read the Bible and preach what then makes sense to you in it, as do all Christians and Jews, anyway. If you do that, you'll lose any need you might now have for the *Qur'an*, or for Joshua or Saul of Tarsus.

But you won't do that, and Patrick Henry McCarty will be run out of South Boston on a rail. Readers of this little book will ostracize him from membership in his condominium association. They'll exorcise him from his trusteeship.

Massachusetts, the home of Harvard University and the biggest-writ signature on the Declaration of Independence, is now spending tax money to threaten prosecution of people for not wearing seatbelts, to deprive them of their freedom to walk through the valley of death not fearing evil. And Massachusetts, the home of the Puritans, has with its seatbelt statutes

against prosecuting church officials for condoning anything, crimes against children, crimes against freedom, anything.

Ethics and philosophy are weird subjects, especially when called theology. That Episcopalian was appointed bishop, not despite being homosexual but because he was homosexual in a church founded for the purpose of adultery, for divorce for Henry VIII. And, among all its words around the subject, the most trusted name in news reported not one word about the effect of the divorce on that Episcopalian priest's children.

In human life, a question far more important than all of Tolstoy's explicit philosophy is why Sonia and Denisov didn't marry. Or maybe they did, and that's a question gone with the wind, like the question of whether Rhett gave a damn about Scarlett, in the end. My faith says endings are but new beginnings.

Time is abstract, or at least expressing it in numbers is. But, nevertheless, we look upon the end of one millennium as a beginning of a new millennium, and we can well ask what lessons we've learned from the old one and are showing in the new one. So, let's look at the first three years of this third millennium, A.D.

Despite the wonders of modern electronic technology, the world's main money city and its main motor city lost electrical power, simultaneously. In response, the most trusted name in news advised people to stock up on bottled water and to visit [redcross.org](http://redcross.org) and not to be too extravagant with their air-conditioning. How about the people who can't afford bottled water or computers or air-conditioning and don't have enough income to stock up on anything? That is, how about the people most hurt by that situation the air-conditioning caused? Let them eat cake?

Most of the humans to whom I've raised the question of why Rachel Corrie has received so little honor say she had no

business being there. I wonder what business a movie actor, whose main claim to fame is being outrageous in his profession and his life, had in Iraq defending a regime that quelled disagreement with it by burying people in mass graves without bothering to loose the ropes that tied the people's hands while the corporals' bullets entered their brains. And more curious is that the same actor played in a film saying that love makes subterfuge and being smart unnecessary.

The problem is sense and sensibility. The problem is that humans, for all our claim to being superior to the beasts we eat in our ability to reason, are generally too insensible, too insensitive to reason, or too lazy. Instead those humans fulfill their need to think themselves good by picking a side someone told them was good and then desperately rationalizing any excuse to stay on that side. The problem is that, by being like Kate Plate, most people are more like Hitler than like Moses.

Humans talk about voting on the issues, but few of them care enough about politics to know the difference between Honey Fitz and Sugar Fits, the difference between John Francis Fitzgerald and Joseph Patrick Kennedy. Few know the difference between George Herbert Walker Bush and George Walker Bush, and fewer the difference between John Quincy Adams and John Adams. Is ignorance the ideal of human society, after all these millennia? Is ignorance the present epitome of its reason?

How many Kennedy fans or African Americans know whether either Kennedy assassination occurred before or after the Civil Rights Act or the Voting Rights Act, or before or after Dr. King delivered his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial? Yet those events are benchmarks for both of those sets of United States citizens.

How many humans have read *Le Mort Darthur* or *Das Kapital*? How many have read the *Qur'an* or the Bible or *Wealth*

*of Nations?* How many citizens of the United States have read the Declaration of Independence?

A main benchmark of humanity is in Canaan, the bigotry there in the Holy Land. More than three millennia ago, Israelites and Philistines invaded that land simultaneously. Now, the Philistines are largely forgotten, because their name has evolved into the designation “Palestine”, and because their race dissolved into the general population of the land. That is, as most history and culture is largely forgotten.

The Israelites, because their religious beliefs have both supported their claim to the land and kept them separate from the general population, because their religion is also the foundation of more recent religious beliefs called Christianity, and because they wrote for themselves, aren’t forgotten. And the next step in this process of bigotry was the founding of Islam, about a half-millennium after the Crucifixion. So then Jihads, and then Crusades, and now Zionist and Islamic terrorism.

And those last two paragraphs tell simply what happened, in names for or against God. And one need not travel so far into the past or away from the United States to find the worst example of bigotry born on hypocrisy. We’ve hardly mentioned Ireland in this book, but Ireland is that worst example.

There people’s killing each other in the streets isn’t because they’re of a different race or religion but because they give themselves different names for worshiping the same person, that humble forgiving loving savior. So, whether Jesus is fiction or myth or God, both of those Irish factions are grotesquely perverting his message. They’re plainly and horribly ignoring his beatitudes. And, worse, his second commandment!

However, nothing human is simple. Now, complicating this horror story has been Hitler, and what calls itself the most trusted name in news perpetuates it. Hitler slaughtered six million

members of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, creating enough sympathy for them to make sympathy for most of the present populace of Canaan insignificant in western-world consideration. So, while those people, who now call themselves Palestinians, try to defend against their displacement from their homes to create a homeland for the Zionists, the most trusted name in news calls them “radical Islamists”.

Yet, wonderfully basically, the government of the United States doesn’t try to call the most horrendous and so least justifiable act of that effort at defense terrorism. The United States government calls its effort to stop the cycle of greed and revenge the war on terror, while the terror is in the cycle of greed and revenge, whatever religion, whatever reason. The terror is in bigotry, in our thinking we’re better than others, and that thus we have more right to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness than the next person. And the terror won’t stop until all of us stop the hypocrisy of calling it religion.

But both bigotry and the hypocrisy that feeds it are so endemic to humanity that the last decade of the second millennium after Jesus was called the me-generation, and cheating and lying ramped to high regard from California’s Stanford University to the United States Military Academy in New York, coast to coast. Stanford was the site of the most-praised graduate school of psychology, and West Point was the site of Benedict Arnold’s ill repute. So, a question is: What’s this world coming to?

And, of course, in that question, is how the Roman Catholic Church began its third millennium of existence supporting pedophilia. The excuse the church rationalized was that letting the truth be known would do what it did, undercut the reputation of the church as something good. We honor courage of convictions, while the church by which many millions of us measure our

morality crassly claims cowardice of convictions as sensible, as just and good. And we call it all effective business management.

The most trusted name in news betrayed our trust in that as well. After the priest most accused of those grotesquely unfatherly horrors was defrocked and imprisoned and strangled in prison by an inmate who had been molested as a child, CNN continued to call that monster Father. And it professed sympathy for him.

And the craziness of words, particularly the word “religion”, marked the fortieth anniversary of King’s dream speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

A judge, in the city where Rosa Parks gave Dr. King the opening to express his dream, ordered that a monument to the Ten Commandments be removed from the justice building of the capital in which George Wallace drew his line in the dust.

Religious or not, the Ten Commandments speak the decency any honest person finds in his or her heart. And, whether or not God gave them to us engraved in stone, someone wrote them for us in a book to which each of us has access. No one sues against tax-paid monuments to Jefferson’s reference to a creator endowing each of us with unalienable rights, and no one sues against “In God we trust” on our coins, our little federal reserve monuments to mammon. If not clingons, who? You?

Yes, you. It’s your world, life and death, eternity. So, having referred much to myth and heart, now I’ll ask what myth you hold in your heart. Norse myth, the myth of the whitest of all peoples, says that the only way to go to their version of Heaven is to die in battle. And it says that, if you happen to die peacefully, perhaps as a fond and caring grandparent, you’ll be thrown to the discretion of a female deity inferior in that mythology.

Remember that Joshua died of old age, and then ask yourself how happy you are, with whatever you think you have or



feeds your head or heart, and then ask yourself that question: Which myth does your heart prefer?

And, amid the gay-adultery question, the most trusted name in news presented in its coverage no person not politically or religiously motivated toward the question. CNN, in other words, in its presentation to its trusting audience, totally left compassion out of that question. And it does the same with war and peace, and so does every other frankly grubbing network. Yes, the most trusted names in news are irresponsible, heartless.

Yes, lo so many words, but where can it stop? And where can I, and where could Homer or Tolstoy have stopped, in this mythological world? But I'll stop after reminding you of one more parabolic paradoxical myth ingrained in myth in this millennium.

Lev pointed out the mythological aspects of a lesbian rocker. So now, while asking ourselves why which is more popular, let you and I compare her to a male rocker of questionable sexual orientation. That is, let's ask why we throw the myth of money more at one than we do at the other.

The male rocker is as famous for his prancing as he is for his singing, for what he calls his moonwalk while he calls himself the king of pop. And, while he may sing more sweetly sometimes, his lyrics lack the depth or height or breath or substance of the Lesbian rocker's. Yet you give him more of your money.

Could that be because he's more like Achilles, while the lesbian is more like Hector? And now, after the lesbian rocker lost her last close bid for the top of the pop-charts by coming out of her sexual closet, more than prancing on a stage is in that question. The male rocker has been charged legally with pedophilia.

But maybe it's still the prancing. The lesbian sat quietly in upholstered chairs while she discussed her sexual orientation in interviews on television. The male rocker, immediately after his

indicting court-appearance, pranced before the crowd outside the courthouse, atop his limousine, to their cheers, his fans'.

Yet homosexuality isn't a statutory crime while what we weirdly call pedophilia is, and surely most Christians or pagans would call pedophilia more destructive, more contrary to our norms of compassion, more contrary to love. In other words, most humans would call the male rocker's behavior sicker than the lesbian's.

Yet, because more people give him more of their money, we have to ask about sickness beyond his. And both the question and the answer for society in general may be in the answer from that person claiming evangelism while saying being Christian means learning to gloat about not being perfect. That is, instead of repressing our memories of our deeds for which we might feel shame, we call them good and grand and gloriously audacious.

So, if a rocker hangs his own child by a tiny foot from a balcony stories above pavement, the rest of us can say that there but for our shame could go we, or better me.

And another curious thing about the pop-rocker is that the Nation of Islam supports him. Remember that Malcolm X began his activism with the Nation of Islam and that a means he found necessary, for continuing his activism for the short time remaining before someone killed him, was to leave the Nation of Islam. And remember that his reason was that the nominal leader of the Nation of Islam was accused of harem-building. And note that part of the notable behavior of the black male rocker is that he tries to make himself white. So consider the somewhat Freudian hypothesis that oppressing others comes from despair of oneself.

But shouldn't our compassion be for all? Maybe Wacko Jacko just likes to cuddle, as wife-beating football-players apparently like to huddle! His father admitted publicly to having

beaten Jacko when he was a child, and so maybe Jacko's wacko because he feels about children as he says he does.

He says he loves children, not sexually but to give them the cuddling he didn't get when he was a child. But, then, maybe the cuddling went too far, with his need for cuddling motivating him to seek reciprocation from the children, in wrong physical directions. So doesn't this hypothesizing just suggest he needs treatment?

But what treatment is someone so perverted and monetarily wealthy to receive in a world where the most prominent psychologists and psychiatrists gain their prominence and price by the same kind of sickness, a drive to be prominent by any means necessary, to assuage their own feelings of worthlessness?

I remember my sister, the one our uncle molested when she was nine, the one who asked me to take her to the bar where I met Mickey Rourke.

Mickey Rourke was a tattooed poor-kid before he starred in a movie in which his character sold his soul and forgot about it, in the voodoo of Algiers across the river from New Orleans.

"I know who I am," he keeps saying through his character in the film, and I hope we all do know who we are, deep in our hearts.

But let me tell you a distantly related story that may seem trivial, unless one sees how much like most of us it is.

A news announcer named LaPierre begged for a break from a Boston cold-snap. His broadcast was for a Boston radio station, but he was broadcasting from St. Augustine, Florida. Caught, he said he wasn't lying, but he was certainly misrepresenting. Mustn't he have known there is no difference?

Oh what a web life is on this rich earth. LaPierre, Lev's Pierre, *Saint Pierre*, so alike. Saint Augustine was from Algeria, whose administrative center is Algiers, though not the one in Louisiana, or on a river. And the name of the bar where I met

Mickey Rourke was the Déjà Vu and its owners patented a drink they called the hand grenade. They, Pam and Earl, have sold that bar, but now they own one they call the Tropical Isle, and it's in the hottest part of Bourbon Street.

But why did I bother saying this, in the face of the question of who has done the most killing, in New York or the Holy Land or anywhere else, Israelis or Palestinians? The why is because you bother to support your pipedreams more than you do the huddled masses that are your neighbors. Lo so many words, and mainly yours about you.

What, in hell or anywhere, are we trying to do? What is popular perspective, in this one more new millennium? What are we homo sapiens reasoning, thinking, seeking? What are we fighting against? Why are we fighting? Which way is up?

Betraying trust, because trust is the least strait gate to responsibility, is the worst betrayal. And the money-monger news-media don't even pick a side. Except the side of mammon, in the name of objectivity.

A teacup in a tempest.

## Epilogue

### *Discours de la méthode*

So we did it again. My friend Lev couldn't stop trying to explain, and so he ended his discourse on war and peace with more pages of redundant explanation than anyone would care to read. He'd already said it all in the previous thousand pages, as did I before my last and longest chapter here. But, in his epilogue, Lev didn't mention his ordinary people. I shall, because that's all we are, ordinary people, alien or not.

That bears repeating, and trying to foster fair-sharing has been my method, through all my life of strife and ease. I don't mean I've chosen that mission as mine, but rather that it's fallen upon me through the grace of the same cause that gives you your opportunities and obstructions. So choices still compel me, noisily and quietly.

For example, if I have to pick a side, I'll pick Moses against Joshua. But, if Hitler were to rise from his grave and repent to stand beside Rachel Corrie, I'd welcome him and stand with both. And, if Rachel were to rise from her grave and stand beside Hitler to avenge herself against Israel, I'd leave her alone in that insanity. That comes from rationality I can't deny, although it's often denied and decried on Earth.

Another biblical fact is that the great direct ancestor of Jesus' who wrote the Psalms sent a man to die in battle so he could

commit adultery with the man's wife. Another historical fact is that the man called the father of the nation that calls itself the land of the free, and the principal author of the declaration of that nation's freedom, each owned hundreds of slaves. And yes they knew full well what they were doing.

George Washington willed that, on the death of his wife, all his slaves be freed. And Martha freed them before her death, for fear that they would cause her death, for their freedom. Thomas Jefferson said that the slaves of his nation wouldn't tolerate slavery forever. He said that someday they too would "rise from the dust."

But did you recognize that I misrepresented a biblical fact? According to the Bible, King David wasn't an ancestor of Jesus' but of Jesus' Earth father, the carpenter Joseph, who married Mary, Jesus' mother. But all the Bible says of Mary's ancestry is that she was a cousin to a Levite while David descended from Levi's brother Judah. And it says Jesus descended directly from God.

So questions are why we muddle that, and that question leads to the question of whether you love your mother, or your sister or daughter or wife.

And another biblical fact is that a Samaritan was good. And another is that Samaritans are remnants of the tribes of Israel the tribe Judah calls lost. And another is that God said he'd go before the Israelites and destroy all Canaanites.

But a historic fact is that Israelis treat Samaritans who have survived as they treat Canaanites who have survived. And most of us male Earthlings still strive to keep red or yellow or black or white or Semitic women in our dust, as most of us pale Earthlings still strive to keep our colorful neighbors, African or Semitic and Judaic or Islamic, in our dust. We still call dirt anything we think doesn't fit in our place, and we wallow in that dust.

In the third year, of the third millennium, after the birth of Jesus.

But maybe I'm wrong in my reasoning, and maybe I'm just maudlin.

Maybe, in the deepest shadows of the hearts of men and women, lurks bloodlust. Maybe that's the ultimate Jungian archetype, and so killing Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein may be more important to humans than the happiness of other humans. I, the author of this fiction, lived on Earth through all of the last half of the last century of the last past millennium, and I spent years in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Yet I've never heard the word "kill" as often as I've heard in this millennium. And that mentioning, on the news and in our homes, is for the killing. Are we closing evil or opening it? What's your opinion?

The question is, if I'm wrong about how things seem to me, if I'm wrong in my suspicion that humans are at heart noble and loving, why do people bother to say they prefer peace to war? Are we just hypocritical bigots, nothing better? What's in your heart?

While Billy the Kid worked for *l'amore di Santa Clara*, Charismatic lost the triple-crown by breaking one of his three-year-old legs at the finish-line for the Belmont Stakes, and Belmont means beautiful mountain, and the horse was a lovely chestnut.

So Billy took to work the *Boston Globe's* picture of that horse as an Hispanic groom tried to comfort the horse while the jockey held the horse's broken leg.

And, after September 11, when War Emblem looked like a promise to win the triple-crown, Billy felt a compulsion to see the race and traveled to Belmont Park for the purpose, for all all meant. And commerce, being what it is, left a ticket to a clubhouse seat the cheapest he could buy, and he found himself sitting beside movie stars and a winner of the Silver Star in World War II, whose name is Charlie. And sitting beside Charlie was his nephew who

headed a company in China that electronically stores data for companies outside China.

Sitting in front of Billy was a woman in a straw hat and an elegant suit, like for an Easter parade, or a mint julep.

And, as the sunlight reflected from the grass track inside the dust one for the main race, she leafed through a magazine.

“Excuse me,” said Billy, tapping one of her elegant shoulders. “Was that Freud?”

So she flipped back the page to the picture that had caught Billy’s attention.

“Yes,” she said, from eyes surely more elegant than any analysis of any dreams.

“Why do you just look at the pictures and not read the articles?” Billy asked her as the man sitting beside her showed no sense that any of that was happening there.

“I read the articles,” she said offended, and Billy found himself deeply ashamed.

The movie stars were Bruce Willis and Dennis Quaid and John Goodman. The only woman with the three of them was Goodman’s wife, Annabeth Hartzog. When Billy referred to her as John’s girlfriend, John said she was his wife. He said he didn’t know or care about horses. He said he was there for her, his wife.

Billy drank too much beer and lost attention to the racing. War Emblem stumbled or was bumped at the starting-gate and lost the race, after gaining the lead near the end but running out of wind, and Billy didn’t see the stumble. Not long after, the Arabian prince who owned War Emblem died of questionable causes, and a movie about Sea Biscuit was a hit. Who’d ‘a’ think?

But, as we all know, nothing’s personal. Willis starred in a movie about a dead child who sees dead people wherever he looks and says so to Willis’ character, who’s dead but doesn’t know it. Quaid starred in a movie purportedly about New Orleans that



portrayed swings for children outside Huey Long's Charity Hospital, where no ground's left for grass. And Goodman also played in that movie and played the kingfish on TV.

But, as another story goes, Dennis Quaid put in words when Annabeth rejected John at a party. And, as this story is, she took John to that race, dressed ready to assist in an operating room. You know, those blue clothes, sometimes called scrubs.

"Do you work for a hospital?" Billy asked her.

"No," she said. "I don't work for a hospital."

Goodman, as Billy looked to hear, said to Quaid something about someone's speaking of evil. Billy wondered about his own evil against the evil ranchers and about whether anyone would ever make a movie to tell the story of the movement from Storyville through the projects to the concrete corrosion that Charity hospital has become, whatever the intentions of the assassinated governor. And then, as Billy thought about young Goodman Brown in a story by the author of *The Scarlet Letter*, as he wondered whether the kingfish was an evil corruption or a saintly martyr or only an ordinary person, John took Annabeth into the clubhouse and bought her a sweatshirt to wear in the afternoon, chilling as the evening race approached. One must recall.

My faith is not gone. She lies lightly in the windy sands of the Sahara and in the rainy forests of the Amazon, in the mists of Avalon and in the azure sky. My faith rides with snorting camels and neighing horses, in Rachel's well and thousands of Arabian nights. My faith may dream but never lies at all.

Billy left at the track field-glasses he'd borrowed from a former guest of *l'amore di Santa Clara* whom who then worked there. And, having passe them around at the track, the last person to whom he remembered passing them was Willis, and he didn't realize the loss until he was in a Manhattan bar called the Playwright, while awaiting his buss back to Boston. And aloud, as

the bartender brought him a beer, he exclaimed dismay that Bruce Willis had his field-glasses.

So the bartender told him he'd have to leave after finishing that beer. But Charlie returned the field-glasses by mail, and left Billy a message on his voicemail at Saint Francis House, saying that Billy was a sweetheart, and Willis had been a bartender. And the next triple-crown prospect was a gelding.

How many paths can we find to follow to the mountaintop, and what is a mountaintop? Everest isn't very far up from Katmandu, which is as famous for drugs as is Tangier in the country of Casablanca. Play it again, Satchmo?

The reason Charlie knew his office address and telephone number was that Billy had given him his card. And he also sent notes to all those clubhouse names he knew, asking them to send some money for *l'amore di Santa Clara*, but none of them sent any. Not the movie stars and not the Silver Star winner and not the data-storer. And Billy figured it was because he'd drunk too much beer at the track. He figured he'd failed to impress them.

Or maybe, he thought, he impressed them unfavorably. But maybe, he also thought, they knew better than to donate to the corruption at Saint Francis House, or to a cause of Billy the Kid. Billy was certain that John and Annabeth would give proper consideration, but he was also certain that consideration of charity is full of complexity, in the realm of human reason. He'd learned that all over Earth.

"Charity begins at home," said my mother. "You ain't so muckin' fuch."

Maybe it was an omen, someone named for the mothers of Mary and John the Baptist taking someone named John Goodman to see a horse named War Emblem lose a race. Maybe everything's an omen. Maybe nothing is.

Cher gave! Who's Cher? What's Cher? Cher isn't even a name! All it is is an adjective for what she did. She stayed at the new Ritz-Carlton in Boston, which shares its back wall with Saint Francis House. She walked around the block and saw *l'amore di Santa Clara*, and she kicked up \$5000 to the cause, because.

Rockefeller Center. Was Junior Rockefeller fundamentally good for commissioning Diego Rivera to paint the mural there, or was he fundamentally bad for destroying it because Rivera included in it a portrait of Lenin, or vice versa? Can conventional concepts be correct, that Israelis are better than Palestinians, that white is better than black, or vice versa? Is the glass half full, or is the glass half empty, or is it just the feeling in your heart, or is it just a matter of opinion?

Do reason and knowledge or fairness and justice have nothing to do with it? Do we have free will by our reasoning, or does God just throw us to prejudice he creates for us? Does God want us to cut off the hands of thieves, or to teach them something better to do with their hands? Does sense deserve to be plain, or should we try to obfuscate it? Can sense stand to be common, or must it be elite? Can we deal with truth?

Either or any way, in any of those questions, be it by brain-baking or by soul-searching, it seems to me that humanity in general severely needs a shift of attitude, but that's not my opinion. It also seems to me that, just as partisanship is inherently bigotry, opinions are inherently prejudice. Might not discovering facts you hadn't known change your opinion and your party? If not, how not?

I love the Rockettes. But that's not an opinion. It's a fact of my heart, and my only opinion is that opinions are no better than the facts that support them, and it seems to me that facts in matters of my heart I've presented here bear and despair of attention. Yet, still, that's not my opinion, only a personal offering. But I've tried

to keep it from being empty of facts. It follows some fact-seeking, finding or not.

But, for now, let's try a shift of focus. Above are fiction and facts and myth. Below are facts and closing questions.

For the first Easter after that infamous September 11, I visited the Holy Land. Walking in Bethlehem to the Church of the Nativity beneath Israeli snipers, I saw a Palestinian child playing in a shot-out car, pretending to drive. Also on that visit, amid the wildflowers atop the Mount of Beatitudes, gazing through the mist above the Sea of Galilee, where we're told Peter sank like a rock for lack of faith, I saw no other human. Where were all the Christians? Hiding under a bushel?

On the way there, on a public bus from Tiberius, the Roman city named for the Roman emperor of Jesus' time as is the sea now, I asked the bus-driver to tell me when I'd arrived. But that pistol-packing bus-driver didn't speak English, the language most famous for cowboys and imperialism, but he wasn't all Israelis. A young female Israeli soldier boarding behind me interpreted and sat beside me and made sure I knew where to get out.

And, of the many Israeli soldiers I saw riding buses on that little voyage of mine, she was one of the few not carrying a weapon.

So I, at least, love that young woman as I love Rosa Parks.

Journalists at the church were in flak-vests and helmets. I was in a T-shirt I received for helping with a Project Bread Walk for Hunger. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." But I've given up on going to church, for having to ask there the same question. Where, on Earth, are any Christians?

So I wrote this book, after Rachel wrote this:

“I have been in Palestine for two weeks and one hour now, and I still have very few words to describe what I see. It is most difficult for me to think about what's going on here when I sit down to write back to the United States, something about the virtual portal into luxury. I don't know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons. I think, although I'm not entirely sure, that even the smallest of these children understand that life is not like this everywhere. An eight-year-old was shot and killed by an Israeli tank two days before I got here, and many of the children murmur his name to me, ?Ali?”

I wish to see if I and Rachel Corrie stand alone, in life or death or Canaan or America, in China or Iraq, in Africa. I wish to see whether anyone will trouble to pay attention to the fiction I've presented because I haven't found folks to find facts very entertaining. I wish to see if I can make evident to others any people's hearts.

I wish to see if facts can be as evident to humans as opinions.

I wish to see if myth can prove its truth.

I hope for happiness.

In Jefferson's historical declaration, presumably presuming to speak for all men and women, he said: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Nothing. Nothing on this earth. Nothing on Earth is worse than bigotry, and bigotry cannot exist without hypocrisy. We proclaim against bigotry in our political speeches and weep at it as

we eat popcorn in movie theatres. Then we kick the dust from our feet. We open our checkbooks. We forget.

“And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking . . . . And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew unto the thick darkness where God was.” From that thick smoke came the Commandments! How fear?

You might rightly say it isn't factual that the Ten Commandments came out of that smoke as James Stuart's Oxford scholars said they did, but you cannot honestly deny that three of the six most popular ideologies humans call religion encourage killing neighbors.

When the young man stood in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square, the Chinese driver stopped. When the young woman stood in front of the bulldozer in a Palestinian neighborhood, the Israeli driver crushed her! What, exactly, do we mean by God?

Simple question: Whatever means you think you command, do you think you're as happy as Rosa Parks was with her family in Pine Level? That is, do you think you're on a path to happiness, by way of primroses or anything else?

On September 11, in the first year of this millennium, television broadcasts showed people fleeing what looked like billowing smoke. The pictures looked like they were from a disaster movie.

They were, moving pictures of disaster. But it wasn't smoke, and it wasn't ashes. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

It was dust! Where is the love? *S'il vous plait.*

One More Beginning  
“although I'm not entirely sure”

Books  
by  
Billy Lee Harman

Dust  
a novel  
2005

Ashes  
some memories  
2015

Angels  
summaries of scripture  
2020

Dao De Jing  
a literal translation  
2021

Tai Ji Quan  
(fundamentally)  
2021

Annie  
(how children are)  
2021

Space and Light  
2023