

A Galaxy of No-Stars

© 2010 Jay Edson

First edition 2010

ISBN: 978-0-578-07597-6

Published by Every Farthing Publications

PO Box 603

Orono, Maine 04473

USA

jedson303@gmail.com

Designed and edited by Tau Ceti One

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A Galaxy of No~Stars

Jay Edson

Part One

Dance of the Starlings

God is infinitely careless with his sperm

The Great Plague

During what is now generally known as the 'Year of the Plague', an unknown disease – assumed by most people to have been caused by a virus – nearly exterminated the human race. Now, 35 years later, there is still very little that is known about the nature of that virus. It is not even certain that it was a virus. Professor Peter Javrin, for example, argues that a prion is a more likely candidate.

From the reports of the survivors, of which I was one, we can paint a fairly accurate picture of the course of the disease. It is assumed that the Plague had a fairly long incubation period. This is the most probable explanation as to why no one was able to take effective steps to avoid catching it. Virtually the whole human race was infected before anyone showed signs of the illness. Once a person fell ill the progression of the disease was rapid. It began with a headache and a general feeling of malaise and progressed very quickly to a high fever and labored breathing. After 24 hours it was common for seizures, photophobia, and other signs suggestive of encephalitis to develop. Most people became delirious or even unconscious within 48 hours and by 72 hours they died.

It is estimated that only about one out of 1,200 people survived. Of course there is no way to know with absolute exactness, but this seems to be a reasonable guess. This means that somewhat over 99.9 percent of the human race perished in this disease.

Curiously, those who survived showed no signs of brain damage. Apparently there was a brief window of opportunity for the immune system to identify and prepare an adequate defense against the virus. This had to occur during the first 24 hours, before the brain or its lining became infected. If the brain became infected death was certain. If the defense was successful the infected people continued to run a high fever for two or three days, during which they typically slept most of the time. After the fever broke, they recovered rapidly. It is also worth noting that the health of the survivors has been surprisingly robust. Perhaps this suggests that their survival was do to an unusually effective immune system.

Successful parasites do not as a rule kill their hosts. When they do, they at least do not threaten the very existence of the species upon which they depend. In this case the infecting agent did kill the vast majority of people it infected, and in doing so it appears to have eliminated itself. That leaves us with very little material evidence to examine. Furthermore, very few competent epidemiologists survived the Plague, and those who did no longer have the research tools that were easily accessible before it. Therefore, definitive answers as to what happened are not available. There are, however, some interesting speculations.

There are basically four theories regarding the origin of the organism that caused the Plague. The first is that the normal random and accidental sharing of genetic materials between viruses simply happened to lead to a mix that was lethal to humanity. A second possibility is that as human beings moved into and disrupted previous jungle or wilderness ecologies, conditions were created for an increase of opportunity for novel interactions between humans and other animals. An organism that proved to be highly lethal to human beings may have jumped from another species to human beings. If this is true then the organism may still exist within some species where it lives in a harmless or even symbiotic manner. The third theory is that the disease-causing agent was deliberately created by human beings – perhaps as a possible weapon – and released either accidentally, or by some individual for perverse reasons of their own. The fourth is that the earth was experiencing the human race as a pathogen that was no longer able or willing to live in symbiotic harmony with the rest of the living creatures, and that the Great Plague was a function of its immune system. Before the Plague, this fourth theory would not have been given serious consideration by most scientists. However, the Plague seems to have demonstrated that something was profoundly wrong with how we were thinking and acting with regard to the rest of creation, and there is now a greater willingness to consider perspectives that would have been rejected out of hand before.

Perhaps it is possible to draw at least one tentative conclusion about the origin of the Great Plague. All except the first of the four plausible explanations of its root causes have one thing in common – they pre-suppose that the human race evolved much more rapidly in its technological development than in its moral and spiritual development. It would seem that is a potentially fatal state of affairs for an intelligent species.

... from 'Re-inventing the World', by Alan Kleinschmidt, pp i & ii [from the preface].

Chapter One

Kali

It was the flies that woke him up.

At least that was the first thing he remembered.

He wondered whether he might be dead. Were there flies in heaven?

His body ached, but he propped himself up on his elbow. It was the same room he had slept in for 14 years. It didn't appear that he was in either heaven or hell. What then, was happening? He looked over to his brother's bed. His brother was naked. He wasn't moving and his color was an odd sort of gray. He recalled that William had taken off all his clothes in an effort to be cooler when he started to run the fever. That was at about the same time that Alex began to get feverish. He had tried to comfort William as best he could. He brought him water and told him it would be all right. He lied about Mom and Dad. When William asked for them, he said they had gone out and would not be back until later. Actually Mom and Dad were in their bedroom. They were already unconscious. At any rate, they didn't answer the door when he knocked on it.

Alex had always loved his brother – maybe too much. Sometimes he had had feelings for his brother that the devil must have put into him. At fourteen, one was not always able to control his feelings. His brother was nine, and with his curly hair and his soft brown eyes, he was very beautiful. Everyone said so, but perhaps they only saw a spiritual beauty.

Alex remembered that they had not been able to cool the room down because the air conditioner in the room had stopped working. Either that, or William had been confused about how to make it work. William was already a little crazy from the fever at the time. So when he couldn't get it to work right off he simply shoved it out of their second story window before Alex could stop him.

After a while his own fever had been too great for him to continue. He had flopped down on his own bed – just to rest a moment, he had told himself. But he must have passed out. Had the rapture occurred? That's what his parents had thought was going to happen.

Alex sat up in bed and tried to grasp the reality of his situation. His brother was dead. The air conditioner was lying smashed in the yard below. It seemed to be dusk. He did not seem to be in either heaven nor hell. These were facts. He needed some help. That was also clear.

Without dressing – he was wearing just his undershorts – he left the room and went downstairs to the living room. He was usually very modest. Everybody in his family had been trained to be so. But he was pretty sure he would not come across any of his other family members. He picked up the phone and dialed 911. What can they do, he wondered. William is already dead. Still, maybe they could send a hearse or something, and maybe they could check on his parents and his sister.

The phone rang a long time before he admitted to himself that there was nobody there. Then he tried calling his grandmother and a couple of his friends. Everywhere the phone would ring and ring until the answering service kicked in. Maybe it is the rapture, he thought. This is how they said it would be when the rapture came. So he was left behind. He knew why. It was because of what he would do under the covers at night. That was a sin. Sometimes the dreams by which he gave himself pleasure were of girls. That at least was as it should be. But sometimes he thought about his brother taking off his swim trunks to change, or coming into the bedroom they shared from the shower with just a towel around him – only to throw that off after shutting the door. William was not modest with him. Perhaps it was unthinkable to William that Alex could ever have the kind of thoughts he did. That was truly evil. Or a sickness. Or both. And there were even times when he thought about Mr Williams, his gym teacher.

And there had been his science teacher too, Mr Sanford. Alex had loved biology. It was fascinating to see what was inside animals – what made them tick. Mr Sanford had seemed to take a special liking to Alex, and had sometimes had him come by after school to help get the room prepared for the next day. When he talked with him about the miracle of evolution, Alex just listened. He knew that what Mr Sanford told him didn't fit very well with what he was learning in his church, and he thought that some day he would have to sort it all out. In the meantime there were two Alexs – the one in biology class who believed in evolution and the one who went to church who believed the Genesis story. He recalled how one day when he was dissecting a pig embryo Mr Sanford had guided his hand to the cut he needed to make in order to uncover a major nerve. He wondered about the peculiar little thrill he felt at being touched and guided in this manner. Was this thrill – like the ideas about evolution – one of the influences of the world, of the Devil really, that needed to be resisted?

There was no end to the disgusting thoughts the Devil would put into his head. Anyhow, that had to be why he was left behind. Maybe his family would pray for him and he would still be taken up into Heaven.

Alex wandered into the kitchen and took a Coke out of the refrigerator. Maybe there will be some news on the TV, he thought. He went into the living room and sat down in the big easy chair with his Coke. He picked up the remote and clicked the TV on. Nothing happened. Then he thought about how silent the house was. Even the refrigerator was not working and his Coke was warm.

His father had shown him how to fix the fuses in the basement. After replacing the main fuse he heard the hum of electrical things running again, and he went back upstairs. The house was old, and they had been running too many air conditioners at once. Returning to the living room he tried the TV again. This time the screen lit up but no picture presented itself. He ran through all the stations they had access to and the story was the same. No news, no soaps, no give-away shows, no adventure flicks, no religious shows, no nothing. He clicked the remote to turn off the TV, and then went over to the window and turned the air conditioner off so that he would not blow another fuse.

So why was he not feeling anything? It was all like a dream. Maybe he was dreaming. But if so he couldn't wake up. And dreams never lasted this long anyhow. He sipped his warm Coke and thought about William. Why was William there if the rapture had just happened? Well, he could have been left behind, and then just died from something. Or maybe this was not the rapture. Maybe everybody was just dying from the huge plague he had been hearing about during the last couple of days. It was because of that news that Pastor Maury had called the special service. He had received a vision that the end-times were coming, and that they were being lied to about the Killer Virus. People were being raptured, he said, and the godless people in charge of the news didn't want to let anyone know what was really happening. It was quite a sermon. Went on for more than two hours. That was when William began to complain about the fever.

Alex stared over the top of the air conditioner out into the yard. He looked up into the sky. He could see nothing remarkable. A few stars were beginning to appear. Well, he could go to his parents' room and see whether his mom and dad and Sara – who slept in the room with them – had been raptured. Yes. That would tell him whether Pastor Maury had been right. So he climbed the stairs and stood in the landing at the top – staring at the three doors. On the right was the bedroom he and William shared. Straight ahead was the bathroom. To the left was his parents' room. He entered his bedroom and tried not to look at William as he pulled on a pair of blue-jeans and a t-shirt, and put on his socks and sneakers. Then he went back out to the landing, shutting the door behind him.

He stood for a long time staring at the door to his parents' room. They had always told him to never, ever, come into the room without first knocking. This was an almost sacred injunction. Thou shalt not enter thy parents room without knocking. It was in the same category as getting into his mother's purse. He had done that once, and found a white gauzy pad which he had asked her about. She was horrified. Not only did she not answer his question, but she gave him a long and ponderous lecture on never going into her purse. If he wanted something that might be in the purse he should bring it to her.

"Why?" he had asked. "I would never steal from you."

"Just do as I say," she had told him. He could tell from that sharp edge in her voice that this was one of those heavy things – like the Bible and touching yourself in the wrong places – that couldn't be questioned. "Thou shalt not get into thy mother's purse".

Finally he knocked on his parents' bedroom door. After waiting for a while, he knocked again, harder this time. Still no answer. Maybe they went to get help while William and I were asleep, he thought, and he turned and went back downstairs.

Out in the driveway he found both the the blue Ford station wagon and his father's old pick-up. So either they were raptured or they were in their bedroom. He returned to the house and found his mother's purse in the kitchen He emptied it out on the kitchen table and took her car keys. His father

had given him a couple of driving lessons on back roads during the last year, so he knew the basics. He would go find some help.

Alex Madison had lived up to the present with his family in an old farmhouse about 25 miles from the center of Indianapolis, Indiana. The house was no longer the center of activities for an operating farm. The big corporations had years ago – before he was born – bought up the surrounding land and incorporated it into their system of mass producing crops. His grandfather had seen this coming, and had encouraged Alex's father to learn a trade in high school – which he did. He learned to be a competent car mechanic. The house was now surrounded by fields of corn as far as one could see, and the Madisons had no near neighbors.

Alex backed the car out of the driveway and turned toward Indianapolis. He knew where the hospital was where they took his mother when she gave birth to William and then to Sara. There were no other cars on the road. He turned on the radio, thinking maybe there would be some news but was unable to get a station. As he entered the city and got nearer to the hospital he saw only one other car using the roads. This has to be a dream, he kept telling himself. Otherwise why wouldn't he be having more feelings – like being afraid or sad or something. He pulled into the lot near the emergency room and parked. As he approached the door he saw a woman standing just inside. She was young – maybe in her twenties. She looked bewildered.

Alex opened the door and looked at her. "I need some help," he said.

She just stared at him.

"My family is all dead or sick or something," he explained.

The woman shook her head. "There ain't no help here," she said.

"Where is everybody?" Alex asked.

"Dead. Everybody is dead. At least mostly they are. You and me is still alive, I guess. And maybe a few others. But mostly everybody is dead."

"What am I going to do?"

The woman took a pack of cigarettes out of her purse. "Just try to go on living I guess," she said.

"But I mean about my family."

She shrugged. "Ain't nothing to do about them."

"Are you a nurse or anything?"

"Me? I ain't nothing." She lit her cigarette and offered the pack to him. "Smoke?"

"No."

"I come here for help just like you," she said. "But everybody in here is dead."

On the way out of town Alex saw a small girl sitting on the steps of a row house. She was crying. He pulled over to see what was the matter, but when he got out of the car and started toward her, she jumped up and ran into her house, slamming the door behind her. He didn't see anybody else on his way back to his house. As soon as he arrived at the house he went up the stairs and stood on the landing again, staring at the three doors. He knocked on his parents door and again there was no answer He knocked again and called to them.

“Mom! Dad! Are you there?”

His own voice startled him. It was as though he heard someone else shouting. He reached down and took hold of the doorknob. Very slowly he opened the door. He was hoping that he would see piles of clothes scattered around the bedroom, just like Pastor Maurey had described it when he preached about the rapture. But instead he saw the forms of his father and mother sprawled across the bed. Both were in their nightclothes. There were no flies, because the room had been shut up tight. But he could tell that they were dead. He entered the room and went over to the crib where his sister slept. She was wearing her Wonder Woman nightie. At four years of age she was getting a bit big for the crib, but somehow they had never gotten around to getting her a bed of her own. She was tangled in her sheet and blanket and was clinging to her pillow as a capsized boater might cling to a flotation cushion. He put his hand on her shoulder and shook her. She was cold and he knew she would never wake up – not in this world at least. Her eyes were open and somehow she didn't look like herself. She didn't seem at all peaceful. Without going over for a closer look at his parents he backed out of the room and closed the door behind him.

He was tired but did not want to go back to his bedroom where he would find William covered with flies. So he went back downstairs and lay down on the couch. He couldn't tell how long he slept, but it was beginning to get light when he awoke. For a moment he hoped that everything he experienced the day before was a dream. Even now everything had a dream-like quality about it. But it didn't end or suddenly change into a different scene like dreams do. He went into the kitchen and fixed himself a bowl of cereal. What was he to do? He needed help. Then it occurred to him that he had one last hope of finding both some help and an explanation as to what was happening. He checked his pocket for the car keys. They were still there. He went to the car and this time headed away from town after backing out of the driveway. The church was only a half a mile away.

It was a small wooden church that had been the center of his life ever since he could remember. The congregation was his extended family. The door was open so he walked in and went up to the front of the church, where he sat down on the first pew. An image of Bible Camp came into his head. He was with a group sitting around a campfire. They were singing 'Kumbaya Here My Lord'. He was sitting next to Margie. He was in love with her. He could tell that her breasts were just beginning to grow because she wore t-shirts that were a bit too small for her. She was able to do this because people were still pretending that she didn't have any breasts at all. It was a magical moment in which God and love and budding breasts and hopes for the future all mingled together. He was sure he would marry Margie one day. He put his hand on hers, and she pulled away. But then she patted his hand and smiled at him very briefly. That was a bit of heaven.

Other memories began flooding in – memories of long sermons, of church picnics, of Sunday School, of Bible stories, of Christmas pageants and Easter

plays and revivals. Most of the memories were warm and bright, but there was a dark side too. Images of hell haunted him at night, and since he began playing with himself 'down there' some years ago, he knew he was in danger of being cast into the fire – images of which Pastor Maurey painted with vivid words. Perhaps because of his lustful habits and thoughts he had indeed been left behind. He went up closer to the altar and knelt down.

"God," he prayed, "I know that I have been doing those bad things for years now. I tried to stop. I really did. But the devil kept sending me those pictures when I would go to bed at night. Please forgive me. You promised that if we ask forgiveness in the name of Jesus, it will be granted. I am doing that now. I don't want to be separated for all eternity from my family and from You. I don't want to burn in hell."

He felt nothing in response to his prayer – neither forgiveness nor condemnation. Just nothing. It was odd. It was like the nothing he felt when he saw his family members dead.

Even images of hell failed to move him.

"In Jesus' name," he added, in order to be sure he was not omitting anything crucial, but still there was nothing. Maybe the other people had to be around for the magic to happen, he thought. He rose and left the church. But rather than go straight to his car he walked across the church yard to the parsonage that was next door. It was a modest, but well kept white ranch-style house. He knocked on the door, and when he received no answer, he opened it and walked in. He could hear the hum of the refrigerator, so the electricity was on here too. He called out.

"Pastor Maury, are you here? Sister Maury, it's me, Alex." When he received no answer he began checking out the house. In the master bedroom he found the entire family – the pastor, his wife, and their two daughters, sprawled out on the bed. They were all dead. The pastor was clutching a Bible in a way that reminded him of how Sara was clutching her pillow when he found her in her crib. He backed out of the room and quickly left the house.

Maybe it's not the rapture, he thought, as he drove back home. Or maybe this was how the rapture really did happen. Maybe that bit about the piles of cloths left behind was a misunderstanding. Maybe Jesus just took the souls of the saved into Heaven and left their bodies for their loved ones to cope with – the ones who were left behind. It was hard to be sure. Maybe everybody he was close to was already in Heaven except himself. Or maybe it was just a disease. This was not like the rapture that Pastor Maury had preached about. Maybe there was no rapture, and never would be.

Again he was surprised at how little he responded to the sight of something that should have been soul shattering – this time the four dead members of the Maury family sprawled out on the big double bed. It was as though something in himself had died. Maybe my soul died, he thought. Maybe I am a zombie now. Maybe that is the price I will have to pay for my sins. The thought was oddly satisfying to him – not because he especially liked the idea of being a zombie – but because it was a way of explaining things. If he were a living

body within which a dead soul resided, a zombie, that would bring a certain clarity to things.

But one thing was clear. Somehow he had to cope with those bodies.

In some movie he had seen, they had talked about the need to bathe a body before it was buried. So he supposed that was the proper thing to do. He would begin with William.

He found some fly spray in the closet off the kitchen where his family had stored miscellaneous supplies, and he re-entered the bedroom he and William had shared. There were more flies swarming over him now than there had been before. Alex spent some time spraying them. He wasn't worried about getting the spray all over William. He couldn't feel it, and besides he was going to wash him. When most of the flies were either dead or buzzing around in that insane sort of way they did before they died, Alex reached down and picked up William. He was a little startled at how cold his brother felt. His mouth gaped in an awful sort of way. His eyes were dull. He didn't even look like his brother. Alex carried him into the bathroom and arranged him in the bathtub. He remembered that when they were little he and his brother took baths together. They had especially liked playing in the bubbles created by the bubble-bath their mother poured into the tub as it filled. How old had he been when his mother had said that they must take baths separately? Six? Seven? Eight? He couldn't remember exactly, but it must have been around then.

He knew that he was going to get wet bathing his brother so he stripped down to his underwear in preparation. Then he began running hot water into the tub. He wanted to warm him up. William kept slumping over, and no matter how hard he tried he could get him to sit in a way that looked natural. As the tub filled Alex took a washcloth, soaped it up, and began washing William's face. Alex knew that it didn't make any difference if he got soap in his eyes now. It was not until the tub threatened to overflow that Alex thought to turn the water off.

Only gradually did Alex become aware that he was crying. At first it was almost like someone else was doing it. He heard sobs and knew that tears were coming out of his eyes. Then the feelings began to come back. He was no longer a zombie. He felt an unbearable sadness and loneliness and then rage. He couldn't go on with the washing. There was a smell. He wanted to wash the smell away, but he wasn't able to. That was when he sat down on the bathroom floor in the water that had sloshed over the edge of the tub and began screaming. He was screaming at the germs that had killed William, at the world that had not protected him, and at God. Why had He let this happen?

The screaming began to subside after a while, and he was just crying. William had slid down into the water so that it covered his face. Alex pulled him up again and washed him as best he could. Then he carried him back to the bedroom where he laid him down on his own bed because there were no flies there. He closed the window so that more flies would not get in and went back to the bathroom. His mother stored sheets, towels and blankets in a closet in the bathroom. He grabbed a large towel and returned to the bedroom with it. Slowly and gently, with great care, he dried his brother off and then went to

his dresser. He pulled out socks, underwear, a t-shirt and blue-jeans. Finally he selected William's favorite shirt – a striped green and blue one. He was going to dress William as he knew he would have wished – not in a suit and tie which he would have hated. But all his efforts made no difference. It still didn't look like William.

Once he finished dressing him, Alex took the blanket from William's bed, shook the dead flies off onto the floor, and carried him and the blanket out into the yard. After looking around, he decided to bury him behind the old barn that was about thirty yards behind the house – almost at the end of their property and close to where the corporation fields began. Alex thought he might want to visit William's grave sometimes. He knew that people did that. You were supposed to take flowers there from time to time. But he didn't want to be able to see the grave from the house.

He was surprised at how long it took to dig a hole that he thought might be deep enough. It wasn't nearly the six feet he had heard about, but it seemed to him that if he could just get him covered with a couple of feet of dirt, that would be all right. He wrapped him in the blanket and lowered him into the hole he dug. After covering him with dirt he thought that he should say a prayer. They always did that at funerals. He didn't really want to, but knew it would be expected.

"God, I don't know why you did this," he said. "But if you still love William, please take him home with you. He wasn't bad like me."

That was the best he could do. He returned to the house, and repeated the same process with Sara. She was smaller and easier to handle. And he didn't cry quite so much as he bathed her.

By the time he had his sister buried, it was already late in the day. Alex knew that he would not be able to do anything with his parents until the next day, so he went to the bathroom where he ran a fresh tub of water and tried to wash off the grime and dirt of his day's work.

Then he went downstairs to sleep on the sofa. He didn't want to go back into the room where William had died and where now there were only dead flies on his brother's bed. He didn't know how much he actually slept. He could recall dreams of ghosts and earthquakes and other terrifying things. In one dream William was alive. He was sitting on his bed looking out the window. It was night. "There's a big asteroid coming," William said. Alex went to the window and looked out. He saw a huge terrifying ball of fire approaching the earth. Then he saw that dinosaurs were roaming in the yard – giant fierce ones. It's good they will be killed, he thought. He turned to his brother to tell him about the dinosaurs, but now the only one in the bed was a very small child – almost a baby – curled up and shivering.

When Alex was awake it was almost like he was still asleep. That feeling of unreality had returned. He could still feel some things. So he was not totally a zombie anymore. But mostly what he felt was fear. He thought he heard ghosts all through the house. It seemed as though there were sounds coming from his parents' room. He had heard that the dead sometimes come back to say goodbye. He didn't want that to happen.

When the sky began to lighten Alex got up and turned the TV on again – just to see whether someone might have put a program up. He thought maybe he could find some news – some information about what was happening. All the channels produced just the same blank flickering screen. He fixed himself a bowl of cereal and found he wasn't hungry enough to finish it.

He was thinking about how he could wash his parents' bodies. He knew that you were supposed to wash the whole body and then put some clean clothes on it – something special. He knew that he simply could not undress his parents. Not either of them, really, but especially not his mother. He took a bucket from the kitchen closet and carried it up to the bathroom. He half-filled it, picked up a wash-cloth, and went to his parents' room. He began with his mother. She was wearing pajamas. He washed her hands and face and feet with the washcloth, rinsing it out from time to time in the water in the bucket. That would have to do. He struggled to get a bath robe on her and picked her up. He was barely able to carry her, and realized that he didn't dare to try to go down the stairs with her. So he laid her on a large quilt at the head of the stairs, and gathering up the end of it, dragged her down the stairs head-first. Then he dragged her across the yard and out to the back of the barn. The graves of his brother and sister looked ok. He had heard that animals came and dug up bodies that were not buried deep enough. He had done the best he could, but still worried about it. He laid his mother down beside his sister's grave and returned to the house.

Alex was tired and wasn't feeling well, so he lay back down on the sofa and fell asleep. The sun was high in the sky when he woke. It was hot. He went to the kitchen and fixed himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and poured himself a glass of milk. He didn't want to go and take care of his father, but neither did he want to spend another night in the house with somebody dead in one of the rooms.

Like his mother, Alex's father was wearing his pajamas, but he also had his bathrobe on. Alex washed his father's face and hands and feet, and began crying again as he did so. Then the feeling went away again. It was as though a zombie self and a feeling self kept coming and going in his soul. His father was a big man. He weighed well over 200 pounds. As Alex dragged his father off the bed, the mattress itself had slid half-way onto the floor. When he stood up to rest, and to plan his next step, Alex noticed a couple of books on the springs. They had been hidden by the mattress. That's just like I did with my Playboy magazine, Alex thought, and went around the bed to see what the books might be. The smaller one was a book called 'Man's Religions' and was by a man named Huston Smith. The second book was bigger and was full of pictures. It was called 'The World's Religions'. It was not exactly a coffee table book, but it was full of pictures. Why, Alex wondered, did his father have these books hidden it away under the mattress?

These must be my father's forbidden books, he thought. He sat down on the floor and began thumbing through the bigger one. It was also on the subject of the different religions of the world. It wasn't much like the Playboy magazine

he kept hidden away. There weren't any photographs of naked people. Then Alex came across the picture of a goddess called Kali. He was shocked. How could this be a goddess? She had four arms. On one side of her body, one hand held a sword and the other the severed head of a man, with an absurd little smile on his face. Around her neck she wore a whole necklace of severed heads – which were smaller than the one she held in her hand. Finally Alex noticed that she wore a kind of belt around her waist that appeared to be made of severed hands. Surrounding her were the bones of someone else who had been killed. Dogs were gnawing on some of these bones, and birds – vultures he supposed – were tearing the remaining bits of flesh off some of the others. But, in Alex's mind, even more shocking than all this carnage, was the fact that she stood on a smiling naked man. The man lay flat on his back. He was abnormally white – like an albino – and Kali was dark. The smiling man underneath her feet had a boner. There was no way to get around it. It was a very large boner that stuck straight up in the air.

How could anyone worship something like that, Alex wondered. But the text said she was a goddess. And there was a small group of people not far away, dressed in colorful clothes, and wearing crowns, who seemed to be worshipping. Why had his father had such a book as this?

Alex closed the book, stood up, and stared at his father. He rolled him over onto a blanket and dragged him down the stairs. By pushing the rug aside, Alex was able to drag the blanket with his father on it across the smooth floor to the front door. When he got him out into the yard, however, it was more difficult. His father was too heavy, and he was already too tired to drag his father over the rough ground. After struggling with it for a while, he ended up getting some rope. He tied the ends of the rope to two corners of the blanket. This gave him a loop several yards long which he draped over the trailer hitch on the family car. Finally he tied the blanket securely around his father. With all these preparations made, he was able to drag his father out behind the barn with the car.

Flies were already swarming over his mother. Alex untied his father and rolled him over close to her. He felt that his parents would want to be near each other. The flies began landing on his father's face, and some of them began landing on him. Alex had the thought that they were checking him out. They wanted to know whether he was dead yet. He was already feeling sick and the sun beating down on his head made him nauseous. Kneeling in the grass he vomited up the little bit of lunch he had eaten. He felt weak and dizzy, so he drove the car back to the driveway, and returned to the house.

He flopped down on the sofa and felt himself falling asleep. He could tell that he was feverish. Maybe I will die after all, he thought. His memory was hazy, but Alex could recall that he had wakened and fallen back asleep a number of times. When he was awake he would drink a little water, and wander around the house aimlessly. Once he went outside and started for the barn. He felt that his parents hadn't been buried properly and he intended to finish the job. But he felt too weak and dizzy. Also he couldn't bring himself to go and look at them. When I feel better, I'll go take care of them, he thought to himself.

His dreams were vivid, chaotic and nightmarish. He remembered dreaming of Kali. All the severed heads around her neck turned into flowers, and then into something like dandelion fluff. A wind, whipped up from a thunderhead that was approaching, swirled around her and blew all the fluff away. "I want to go with them," he had said. Kali smiled as if in agreement and started toward him. When she opened her mouth he could see that her teeth were bloody. He was terrified and began to run. He could not make his feet move fast, and she was gaining. He dragged himself out of sleep with her chasing him.

Soon after he woke from the Kali dream his fever broke. It had done so before when he woke and found his brother dead. Alex wondered whether the sickness would keep coming back. But at least physically he was feeling better for the moment.

He went into the kitchen and fixed himself a bowl of cereal. The milk was beginning to taste a little sour, even though it was still in the refrigerator, but there was some powdered milk in the cupboard that his mother had used for baking. He used this. He then fixed himself a cup of coffee. His parents had begun letting him drink coffee with his breakfast. He put a lot of powdered milk and sugar in it, and sat at the chair his mother had always used. It had been her habit to sit in the chair at the end of the table every morning after breakfast and swivel it around so that she was facing the window. It was, as she had described it, her 'private time'. She didn't like to be bothered at this time.

As he sipped his coffee Alex remembered his dream about Kali. Maybe she's the same as the devil, he thought. Then he swiveled his chair so that he could stare out the window. He could see the roof of the barn from there. There were ravens perched on it and more of them flying around. He had never seen so many ravens around his house before. All at once he realized why they were there. He got up from the table and took his coffee to the front porch. No cars at all were using the road. It was unnatural. But at least he could not see the barn. For a long time he sat holding his coffee, without drinking any. Finally he said, out loud, "There is nothing I can do about it now". He was apologizing to the spirits of his parents, wherever they were.

The Wrecking Ball

Throughout the planet, the Plague, like a huge wrecking ball, shattered the cultural overlay that in large part determines how people relate to one another. In subsequent chapters we will examine this phenomenon with regard to the emergence of new social patterns in a number of areas.

Although this shattering is easiest to observe on a social level, it would be a mistake to see it as an event external to individuals – as something that happened only in the world around them. The initial shattering occurred within. I can speak from my own experience here, for I was already an adult when the Plague struck. When we woke up after the Plague we found ourselves in a world in which few of our previous ideas about how we should act, what was necessary to survive, or how reality is put together had relevance. We did not know who we were, who our neighbors were, or the nature of the world we inhabited. All the old authorities and precepts that had heretofore guided us, successfully it had seemed at the time, were profoundly discredited. They had failed us. We were both deeply bewildered and consumed with grief and shock. Gradually we realized that within the rubble of our psyche, we had to re-invent ourselves, and between ourselves and others, we had to re-invent the world. Anything, except a return to who we previously were, was possible.

... from 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p12

Chapter Two

The Smell of Death

The smell of death was overwhelming. Marcie felt that a person could probably get sick just from breathing the air. She had found the girl wandering aimlessly in the street as she was leaving the city. The girl had told Marcie that her name was Janice Whitfield and that she was eight years old. Janice wanted to go back to her parents but Marcie had been able to persuade her that they were dead.

"I'll be your Mama from now on," Marcie had said.

"You can't be my Mama," Janice had said.

"Well, honey, I'm the nearest thing to a Mama as you are likely to find anytime soon," she had replied.

Eventually Marcie had succeeded in getting the child to come with her. Since then, she had almost regretted it at times. Janice was obstinate. This, in combination with the fact that she had no judgment at all, made her a difficult companion. Still, she would have died on her own. Marcie felt responsible to help the few people she could, and was grateful to have someone to be with, whatever practical problems the person created.

They were parked in front of an old farm house. It was about noon.

"I don't want to go into that house," Janice said.

"Why?" Marcie asked. "We need a house to live in."

"There will be dead people," Janice said.

Without thinking she reached over to pat Janice as a way of saying that she understood that she didn't want to see any more dead people. Janice pulled back.

"Why do you always pull away when I try to touch you?" Marcie asked.

"I don't know."

"Is it because I'm black?"

Janice shook her head. "You're not black. You're brown."

"Whatever. If it's not that, what is it?"

"I don't know."

"Anyhow, we need a place to live and we need more people. We have to get a little group or family going so we can help each other to survive. Just us two isn't enough."

"There will be more dead people," Janice insisted.

Marcie sighed. "The last place we checked out did have dead people in it ..."

"There was a girl about my age. She had flies all over her."

"Yes, I know. I am sorry about that. But this one won't."

"You don't know."

Marcie could see a large barn behind the house, and saw ravens sitting on it and flying around. "I think any dead people were taken out of the house," she said.

"You don't know."

"I am pretty sure. Remember yesterday when we were driving around. We saw a car pull into this driveway, and what looked like a teenage kid got out and went into the house. I think he lives there."

"So?"

"So he wouldn't want to live in a house with a lot of dead people. He would have taken them somewhere." Janice shrugged. But for her that was a fairly positive response. Marcie could see she was weakening. "Maybe the kid who lives there will let us use his stove and we can heat up the hot dogs we found."

Janice nodded in a tentative way. "You go first," she said.

"Ok. I'll check it out. If he is nice and there are no dead people around, I'll come and get you."

Janice thought about this for a minute, and then nodded. "Don't take too long," she said.

"Ok. I'll see what that kid we saw is like." Then she smiled at Janice. "Who knows, maybe he will even be cute."

"I don't like boys."

"Right. Well, I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Marcie knocked several times at the door but could not rouse anyone. Yet the car was in the driveway, and she had seen someone come into the house. She turned the handle slowly and opened the door.

"Anybody here?" she called.

"Go away!" someone shouted from inside. It was almost a shriek. Marcie responded to the fear in the voice.

"I'm harmless," she said. "I just want to talk with you."

"I don't want to talk. I have a knife."

Marcie moved further inside the house very slowly until she could see into the living room. The boy sitting on the couch was wearing a dirty t-shirt and blue-jeans. He held a table knife in his hand, which he pointed at her in a manner that was meant to be threatening. Marcie was an athletic 23-year-old. She was pretty sure she would be able to handle the boy if it came to a physical scuffle. She repressed an impulse to smile at the absurdity of the boy thinking that he could scare anyone off with a table knife.

"I really won't hurt you," she said.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Marcie. Marcie Bohm. Who are you?"

"Alex."

"Why were you so afraid?"

"I thought you were Kali."

"Who is Kali?"

"Sort of like the Devil, but she's a woman."

"I see. Well, whatever she is, I'm not her." Marcie looked around the room. It was cluttered with dirty dishes, empty food cartons, and clothes.

"Is this the rapture?" the boy asked.

"It's not the rapture," Marcie said. "It was the Plague. Some sort of disease."

"Were we left behind?"

"Well, sort of, I guess. At least we survived."

Both Marcie and Alex jumped when they heard a scream from the front doorway. "Marcie, are you there?"

"Go away," Alex shouted back. "In the name of Jesus."

"Janice, honey. Of course I'm here." Then she turned to Alex. "It's all right. She's not a devil either. Just an eight-year-old girl." Janice peeked around the corner. "I thought you were going to wait until I came for you," Marcie said.

"I was alone," Janice explained.

"I see. Well, anyhow, this here is Alex. He is sort of scared – like you – but I don't think he wants to hurt anyone."

Janice eyed him suspiciously.

"He's alone here. At least I assume he is. You are alone here, aren't you, Alex?" Marcie asked.

Alex nodded. "Yes," he said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the back of the house. "Everybody is dead."

"None of the people who died are still in the house, are they?" Marcie asked.

"Just their ghosts," Alex said.

"I'm not going to sleep in a house with ghosts," Janice said.

Marcie knew there was little point in arguing with either of the others. Ghosts to them were real – as real as the chairs and lamps in the room. More real probably. She could leave with Janice and they could sleep in the car as they had done the last few nights. But she felt the need for something more settled – more like it was before the Plague. And she was sure if she could get Janice settled into a more stable situation, it would help her to begin to deal with the huge losses she had experienced.

"Right," she said. "Ghosts. What to do about the ghosts? What ghosts are you most afraid of, Alex?"

"Kali," he said. "Only she's not a ghost, she's a goddess or a devil or something. I hear her slinking around the house at night. I dream about her."

"What about you, Janice?"

"Me?" Janice answered.

"What ghosts are you most afraid of?"

"Whoever lived here."

"Ok," Marcie said. "What you both need to understand is that I am trained in the art of exorcism."

"What's exorcism?" Janice asked.

"Getting rid of ghosts and devils."

"Who trained you?" Alex asked.

"I am forbidden to tell, but you must trust me on this."

The extent of her actual training was reading a few books on ghosts while she was still in high school, and seeing a fair many horror movies that dealt with the subject. But she felt she had to convince the two people that she possessed profound and mysterious powers. Alex and Janice just stared at her, without saying anything.

"You must trust me if I am going to be able to help," she said, looking at Alex. He looked at the floor.

"Do you trust me?" she asked him.

"If I trust you, you can get rid of Kali?" he asked.

"For sure."

"Ok," he said, tentatively.

"What about you, Janice? Do you trust me?" Janice shrugged her shoulders.

"Good, then maybe I can do something." She sat down and began asking Alex about his family. For each of them she said she had to know what they liked, what they didn't like, and how close he felt to them. Then she asked about Kali. Alex went upstairs and returned with the book on the world's religions. He sat down beside her on the couch and thumbed through the book until he found the picture. Janice stood off to one side.

"Ah yes, that one," Marcie said. "No wonder you were afraid."

"You know who she is?" Alex asked.

"She goes by many names, but of course I recognize her. No one knows her real name. In my training we just called her the Great She-Devil."

Janice slipped over to the side of the couch. "I want to to see the She-Devil," she said.

"She shouldn't see it," Alex said.

"Why?" Marcie asked.

"Because it's ... well, it's nasty."

But it was too late. Janice had already positioned herself behind the couch to get a better view. Alex put his hand in front of the book.

"Don't," said Janice. "I want to see."

"She has a right to see," Marcie said.

"It's not right," Alex said. But he pulled his hand away.

"Why does she have that man's head like that?" Janice asked.

"Because she is the Goddess of Death," Marcie said.

"I don't like her. What is that on the man there?" she asked, leaning over the back of the couch and pointing to his erect penis.

"That's his penis," Marcie said.

"It looks funny."

"Alex thinks she is haunting this house."

Janice Looked at Alex. "Is she?" she asked.

"It seems like it."

"I think we can get her out of here," Marcie said.

"Ok," said Alex "So do it."

"We can't yet," Marcie said. "The house first has to be purified."

"How do we do that?"

"Well, we could begin with picking up all this trash lying around, and then maybe do the dishes."

"What's that got to do with it?" Alex asked.

"We must begin on the physical level, and work up from there. Spirits and devils of all kinds love filth and chaos."

They spent a good deal of the afternoon getting the house cleaned. Janice always insisted on helping Marcie – and would not let her out of her sight. But, Marcie noticed, neither would she let herself be touched. Not too far away – not too close. There seemed to be a magic distance that had to be maintained. If Marcie washed dishes, Janice dried them. If she vacuumed, Janice had to dust in the same room. By late afternoon the house was clean and Marcie directed the creation of a tolerable supper – with hot dogs, some vegetable soup, and even some cookies for desert. After doing the dishes it was almost dusk.

With Alex's help, Marcie gathered the few things she said she needed for the exorcism – a Bible, a cross and some candles.

"First for Kali," she said.

She picked up the cross. It was a small one the family had kept in their bookshelves near the place where they kept their religious materials. She handed the cross to Alex. She picked up a Bible and gave it to Janice. It was a very big, ornate and old Bible that Alex's mother had bought in an antique shop. She had felt that its age and size gave it a weight that modern Bibles did not have. Janice had to use both hands to lift it. "You have to hold these things in front of you as we go into each room," Marcie explained. Then she led Janice and Alex from room to room in the house. In each she stopped, and after waiting a few minutes, said in a dramatic voice, "Kali, She-Devil that you are, be gone from this house. In the name of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit I command you to depart."

When they all returned to the kitchen Alex said he thought maybe she was gone. He couldn't feel her evil presence anymore. But Janice wanted to know about the other ghosts.

"They're my family," Alex protested. "We can't just command them to be gone like they were devils or something."

"No, you're right," Marcie said. "But they may need help moving on. They may think they have to stay for you."

"There is nothing they can do for me now," Alex said.

"No, there isn't."

So Marcie had them each light a candle and they went first to the main bedroom. When they sat down in the doorway Marcie explained to the ghosts of Alex's parents and his sister that they were dead in this world and that they needed to move on.

"Alex will join you when it's time," she said. "Can they go, Alex? They need your permission."

Alex was quiet for a few moments. This whole business about the exorcising demons and talking to spirits was weird. He didn't know what he thought about it. But he did know that he didn't want his parents' ghosts in the house.

"Yes," he said finally. "You can go."

It was more difficult in the room Alex had shared with William. They had cleaned up the flies earlier. But Alex still didn't want to go into this room to preform the ritual that would make William leave.

"You have to," said Janice.

"I don't have to do anything."

"But we have to make William go," Janice insisted.

"He wasn't your brother. You didn't love him. Maybe he doesn't want to go. Maybe he wants to stay with me."

"But he's a ghost now. He shouldn't be here." Janice turned to Marcie. "I can't sleep here if there's a ghost."

"Nobody asked you to sleep here," Alex mumbled.

"You're not ready to say goodbye to your brother yet," Marcie said.

Alex shook his head. "No, I just want to keep the door shut."

"That will be ok for now. We can all sleep in the big bedroom."

Alex stared at her. "You're going to sleep in my parents room?"

"I understand that might seem strange to you. But They're gone, now. They don't need it. We need a place to sleep and you need some other people to be with. You're going to go bonkers if you keep on trying to live here alone."

"I can't sleep in there."

"I think we would all feel safer if we slept in the same room," Marcie said.

"That wouldn't be right. "You're a woman."

"So?"

"So it's not right."

"Alex, the whole world that we knew is gone now. Maybe that's good. Maybe it's bad. I don't know. But it's gone. If we sleep in the same room there is nobody else to say it's good or bad. Nobody cares what we do."

"God didn't die," Alex said. "The rules are still here."

Marcie sighed and shook her head. "Do as you please. Janice and I are going to sleep in the big bedroom."

"I'm going to sleep on the couch – like I did before you came."

"Ok. I want to get some sleep. Come on, Janice." She reached out to put her arm around Janice's shoulder. Janice pulled away, but she did follow Marcie into the bedroom. Janice decided that she wanted to sleep in the crib. Marcie pointed out the obvious fact: it was really too small for her. But Janice insisted. She said she liked to sleep curled up and she did fit into the crib that way. Janice dodged the goodnight kiss that Marcie tried to give her.

"You smell," Janice said.

"You're not exactly a flower yourself," Marcie returned.

"I can't help it."

"No," agreed Marcie. "But we'll try to do something about it tomorrow. We're in a house now, with a bathtub."

Janice turned her back to Marcie, and put her thumb in her mouth.

It wasn't that hot after the sun went down, so Marcie pulled the air conditioner out of the window and replaced it with a screen. As she settled into the large double bed, she thought about what she had told Alex about how the world, as they had known it, was gone for good. To her, the world had always seemed like a violent and ugly place. She could even feel a little hope about the idea that maybe there might be a different kind of world in the future.

Marcie had been working on a degree in business at a local community college when the Plague hit. She wasn't that interested in business, but wanted to become self sufficient, and that seemed to be the way to accomplish that. When she woke up and found that everybody in her family was dead, and her classmates as well, she wasn't sure she wanted to go on living. But after a few days she decided that maybe it would be interesting to live in a world that had not yet been created. So she had packed up a few of her clothes and left the city. The smell of death was everywhere, and most of the people who did not just let themselves die, left.

She heard Janice's breathing get deeper, and knew she was asleep. It was odd that she ended up being with two children who wouldn't allow themselves to be touched. With Alex it seemed to have to do with his ideas about what is right and what is wrong. Why Janice was that way, she didn't understand. It irritated her.

Then she noticed the smell. The breeze had shifted and was coming from the direction of the barn. She wondered whether Alex had simply dumped all of his family members out there without burying them. Even out here in the country she could not escape the smell of death. She thought about how she and Janice and Alex all smelled from sweating and not bathing. But it was better than the smell that was coming in the window. She felt a terrible loneliness, and wished that someone would come and share her bed with her. She let herself begin to cry – softly so as not to awaken Janice.



Marcie was the first to awaken. For a few minutes she lay in the bed and thought about what needed to be done. In the short run, food was not a problem. But they would need to go to a supermarket before the shelves were stripped and gather an assortment to things to live on. The most urgent problems, however, had to do with smells. Something had to be done about the bodies she was pretty sure were behind the barn, unburied, or perhaps only buried in shallow graves and dug up by animals. And somehow she had to get everybody bathed and in clean clothes. She slipped out of bed quietly and tiptoed down the stairs.

She had not been in the kitchen five minutes when Janice joined her.

"You weren't there when I woke up," she said.

"I wanted to let you sleep."

"I was alone."

"I see."

Marcie placed a carton of eggs on the sideboard of the sink, and closed the refrigerator door. She stared at the dirty and disheveled child in the kitchen doorway for a minute. "Well, now that you're up why don't you help me fix breakfast? I found some eggs in the fridge. Bacon too."

"Ok. I know how to fry eggs."

“Great. I’ll get some bacon going and make some coffee.”

“Is that boy up?”

“I’m not sure. I think I heard him rummaging around in the living room.”

“I’ll go see.”

Marcie watched the girl run into the living room and then heard a screech from there.

“Get out of here you little twerp. I’m dressing.”

Janice returned to the kitchen. “He’s up,” she said.

“So I heard.”

“I’ll make scrambled eggs.” Janice said. “I break too many yolks when I try to fry them sunny-side up.”

“Scrambled is good.”

The three of them ate breakfast without much conversation. Marcie sat so she could see out the window.

Alex was still hungry after eating the bacon and eggs so he fixed himself a bowl of cereal. Marcie poured herself a cup of coffee and Alex nodded when she offered him some.

“Can I have some too?” Janice asked.

“Sure. A little bit can’t hurt you. Try it with lots of milk. That’s called ‘cafe con leche’. You’ll like it.”

“Mama wouldn’t ever let me have any,” Janice said.

“The old rules are gone,” Marcie said. “Why shouldn’t you have what you like?”

Alex looked up at her from his cereal and frowned. But he didn’t say anything. For a while they sat in silence. Marcie watched Alex eating his cereal and Janice drinking her first cup of coffee. From time to time she glanced out of the window at the ravens.

“Alex,” she said finally. “What did you do with your family members?” Alex stopped eating and glared at her, and then stared at his remaining cereal.

“I think maybe you took them out behind the barn. Is that right?”

He nodded.

“And were you able to bury them?”

He nodded. “William and Sara.”

“And your parents?”

“They were too big. And I got sick.” He paused. “And then it was too late.”

He was on the point of tears. Marcie couldn’t tell whether it was from rage or sadness. Probably both, she thought.

“It’s ok, Alex,” she said. You did what you could. “But I am thinking maybe it would be good if I went and buried them now.”

“There are bodies around,” Janice said. “I don’t want to stay here. It’s creepy.”

“I’ll take care of it, honey,” she said, suppressing an impulse to pat her reassuringly on her hand. Then she turned to Alex. “I think it would be hard for you,” she said. “I mean ... to see them.”

Alex stared at her without saying anything for a few moments. Then he said, “Yes. But I should help.”

Marcie shrugged. "As you wish," she said.

They all fell silent. Marcie watched the ravens circling around in back of the barn. Then she looked at the dirty, frightened children sitting at the table with her.

"Ok" she said. "I think I saw an equipment rental place about an hour up the road toward the city. Is that right?"

"Yeah," Alex said. "They sell and rent both, mostly farm and building kinds of things."

"All right. You will need to drive me there"

"I want to come with you" Janice said.

"When we go get the backhoe, sure," Marcie said. "But I don't think you want to come out when we bury the the bodies."

"But I want to be able to see you."

"Ok"

The three of them drove to the rental place together in Alex's car, and Marcie asked Alex to drive Janice back to the house. She found some instructions meant for people who would be renting a backhoe. She tried one out in a nearby lot, and then drove it back to the house. It took her the better part of two hours.

Janice watched from the edge of the barn, where she could see Marcie and Alex, but not the bodies. At least she could not see them very clearly. The bodies had very little flesh left on them. The areas the ravens were not able to easily access were filled with maggots. A lot of flies still swarmed around. As soon as Alex saw what was left of his parents he returned to where Janice waited at the edge of the barn, and watched Marcie dig a hole. He began to feel nauseous and sat down with his back to the area where Marcie was working. Janice came and sat down beside him.

"They don't look too good," she said.

Alex glared at her, but said nothing.

"It must make you feel bad."

Alex leaned over and threw up.

"You're sick."

"Leave me alone."

Janice stood up and wandered around to the side of the barn where she couldn't see anything.

Marcie finished digging the hole and pushed the remains into it. She got off the backhoe, and stood at the edge of the grave. Hesitantly, Alex joined her. He touched her shoulder.

"I think we should say a prayer," he said.

"You probably know more prayers than I do."

Alex stared at the dirt at his feet. "I'm sorry I didn't bury you better," he muttered. He began to say something else, but choked up.

"It's ok," Marcie said. "You did what you could."

"It wasn't ... wasn't a prayer," he said.

"Do you know a good prayer to say?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You do it."

"I'm not too good at prayers."

"Please."

She thought a moment. "Well ... ok." Marcie bowed her head. "Dear God, please take these good people, the parents of Alex, into your heart. Take care of them. And help Alex and them to say goodbye. Amen." She looked at Alex.

"Thanks."

"I guess we are ready to cover them up now," Marcie said.

Alex looked uncertain.

"Aren't we supposed to throw something that was important to them into the grave?" he asked. It seemed like he had seen this done in a movie once.

"Yes, sometimes people do that."

"What could it be?"

"What do you think?" she asked.

"A Bible?"

"Good idea. What about the one we used in the exorcism?"

"Yes."

Janice had edged toward them after the remains were in the hole and not so visible. She had been listening to their conversation. "I'll get it," she said, and ran off to the house. Alex backed away from the grave. Janice was back very shortly, hugging the large Bible in her arms. She handed it to Alex and he carried it back to the grave. He wondered whether it would be respectful to just throw the Bible into the hole. Probably, he thought, it should be lowered carefully with some sort of ceremony. He got down on his knees and leaned over the grave. He reached as far down as he could, and dropped the Bible on top of his parents' remains. The bones and the Bible were all jumbled together, and again Alex wondered whether the whole procedure was being done in a respectful manner. But he didn't know any ceremony that would make it ok.

"That's good," Marcie said. She got onto the backhoe and started to push the dirt into the hole. When she had filled in the grave, she joined Alex.

"It's done now," Marcie said.

Alex nodded. "Yes. It's the past now." He joined Janice at the side of the barn and walked with her back to the house.

Marcie lingered at the graveside and reflected on how she had reacted to seeing the bodies. Oddly, she had not felt especially repulsed. It was really no more horrifying than a fallen tree rotting in the forest. They were becoming soil. She thought about her family and about the friends she had known at the Community College. She would miss them terribly. But death itself did not appear so horrible to her.



The next day, after breakfast, Marcie announced that she was going to take a bath. It was her first hot bath since the Plague. She was barely settled in when she heard a knock at the door."

"Yes?"

"It's me, Janice. I've got to pee."

"That's ok. Come in and do it."

"I won't look," Janice opened the door. She pulled her pants down and sat on the stool, looking in the opposite direction from Marcie.

"Maybe you would like to take a bath later," Marcie suggested.

"Yes. I would," Janice said.

"You don't have much that's clean to put on. Suppose we go to the mall today and get some clothes for everybody."

"Yes. I'd like that," Janice said. As she spoke she turned to look at Marcie. "Oh, I forgot not to look," she said. She looked away again.

"It's ok," Marcie said. "Look all you want." Janice turned her head back and stared at Marcie. She had finished peeing but made no move to get up and leave. "Your breasts are pretty," she said finally.

"You will have breasts too, one day. But you are pretty now just the way you are."

"I don't think so."

"Well I do."

"Can you feed babies with them? I saw a picture once of a baby drinking milk from its mother."

"Women's breasts only make milk when they have babies," Marcie said.

"Well, I've got to go," Janice said. She stood up, pulling her pants up as she did so, and left the bathroom.

After a lunch of hot dogs and canned soup they drove to the mall. The mall, which occupied two floors, was large and rambling. The stores had been looted to some extent. But there were so many stores and so few people that no one seemed driven by a sense of scarcity. They simply came to whatever store they wanted to, broke in if someone else had not already done so, and took whatever they wanted. It was interesting to Marcie to see which items seemed most popular. Food, guns, TV sets, and cars seemed to be the most popular items as far as she could tell. She had herself taken a hand gun and some ammunition for it. She had images of gangs of roaming thugs rampaging through the countryside, stealing and raping as they went. In fact she had not seen a single gang, or even a particularly dangerous looking man. But she still felt safer with the gun. She kept it in the school backpack she still used to carry the things she needed.

It was eerie walking through the deserted mall with most of its store windows broken out. The only other person they saw was a man carrying a huge monitor for watching dvds. He ignored them.

"I want to check out the videos," Alex said.

"We may be looking for different things," Marcie said. "Why don't we just go our separate ways for an hour or so, and meet back right here."

"I want to stay with you," Janice said.

"I'll meet you all right here in one hour," Alex said.

"Sounds good," Marcie said.

"I want to go to Penny's," Janice said.

When they arrived at Penny's, Janice said she wanted to go to the boys' clothes section. "I think their things are nicer," she said.

"Whatever you like," Marcie said. "But let's just get a few things that we need today – so that we can have clean clothes to put on. We can come back in a couple of days with a shopping cart and get everything we might want." Janice picked out a pair of sneakers that blinked when she walked, a pair of bluejeans, some boys' briefs, and an assortment of super-hero t-shirts. She seemed satisfied that this would meet her needs for the moment and they went to find Alex. He was already waiting for them at the designated place with a bag full of video games.

That evening, Alex seemed to be in better spirits and even helped them fix supper and clean up afterwards. At Marcie's suggestion, Janice took a bath after supper. She emerged from the bathroom wearing a pair of baggy basketball shorts, a Hulk t-shirt, and her blinking sneakers. She looked clean, refreshed and satisfied with herself. At close to sunset Marcie and Janice went for a walk while Alex stayed at the house and tried out some of his new video games.

As they walked, Marcie and Janice did not talk much. They were content to enjoy the sunset and the cool evening breeze. Then Janice patted Marcie on the arm to get her attention. "Look." She pointed to the sky to their left. A large swarm of birds was undulating like a single organism – constantly changing its amoeba-like shape.

Marcie smiled. "Yes. Those are starlings. They gather like that every night and then fly off as a group to where they sleep." They stopped to watch the starlings for a few minutes and then continued walking.

As they started back Marcie was surprised to feel Janice's small hand slip into hers. It was the first physical human contact she had known since the Plague. She felt energy and happiness and a desire to live flowing back into her. She was grateful to whatever it was that had brought about this sudden change, but felt that it would be a mistake to comment on it. They walked down the road hand in hand casually, as though it were something they had done a thousand times before, and they talked about what they might do the next day.

Janice went to bed that evening in her crib, wearing only her boys' briefs. Marcie had just drifted off to sleep when she felt someone slipping into bed with her. It was Janice. Marcie put her arms around her. Janice turned her back to her, but did not pull away.



The next morning Janice arrived at breakfast wearing a large Spider Man t-shirt.

Marcie was frying eggs, and Alex was already at the table bent over a bowl of cereal. He looked up when she came in.

“Why don’t you get dressed?” Alex said. “You shouldn’t be running around the house like that. You’re practically naked”

“I’m not naked,” Janice said. She pulled her t-shirt up to reveal her briefs.

“That’s boy’s underwear,” Alex said. “Are you a boy?”

“I can pretend if I want,” she said. She let the t-shirt drop and sat down at the table.

“Girls aren’t supposed to wear boy things,” Alex said. “It’s against the Bible. Suppose I started running around the house in a dress?”

“It wouldn’t hurt me.”

Alex threw his fork down on his plate. “Marcie, are you going to let her do this?”

“What? Wear boy things?”

“Yeah.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s wrong.”

“Why is it wrong?”

“It’s in the Bible. It’s a sin for women to wear men’s clothes.”

“Lots of things are in the Bible. That was all ok for people who lived in Bible times, but these are different days.”

“So you know better than the Bible?” Alex looked at her with an air of triumph. He knew what he said was true. He had heard Pastor Maury preach on it. He couldn’t see any way for her to wiggle out of this.

Marcie speared another bite of pancake, sloshed it around in the excess syrup on her plate, and popped it into her mouth. She stared at Alex while she chewed. It was evident she was thinking about what he had said.

“Well, yes,” she said. “I guess I do think I know better than the Bible about some things.”

Alex was dumbfounded. He had listened to lots of arguments, and even engaged in a few. In all these discussions the final proof had been what the Bible said. Even in science class no one had ever said the Bible was not true. In that world the Bible did not even exist, but if someone had talked about the Bible he doubted that his teacher would have said, “I don’t care what the Bible says. Maybe the Bible is wrong”. It was as though someone in the middle of a baseball game all at once started running around the bases without first hitting the ball, and claimed he could simply run anytime he wanted. There would be no more game. No rules, no game.

“You’re crazy,” he said. He stood up and stomped out of the back door, slamming it behind him.

“I think he’s kind of mad,” Janice said.

“He’ll get over it.”

“Marcie?”

“Yes?”

“Will I go to hell if I wear boy’s underwear?”

“Of course not, Honey.”

“Alex says it’s against the Bible.”

“Look, Janice. You wear whatever goddamn underwear you want to. Whatever God is or isn’t or what He or She wants or doesn’t want, or even whether there is a God, I am sure I don’t know. But He isn’t some bigoted, brutal narrowminded redneck in the sky who punishes for eternity girls who wear boys’ underwear.”

“So will I go to hell?”

Marcie laughed. “I talked too fast for you to follow what I was saying, didn’t I.” Janice nodded. “How can I put it? God is not a like a mean father who punished His children in horrible ways for every bad thing they do. There isn’t any God with a big torture chamber, like you see in horror movies. There is no torture chamber. Really. You can wear what you like. Wearing boys things isn’t even bad.”

“You sure?”

Marcie reached over and patted her hand. Janice did not pull away. “I’m sure,” she said.



The next day was spent collecting various things they wanted. First they selected a pick-up truck that they liked – a big red one with plenty of room in the cab for the three of them to sit in comfortably. Then they went to a grocery store and helped themselves to lots of canned goods, noodles, potatoes, eggs and various other staples. They threw the two shopping carts they used into the back of the pick-up and returned to the mall for more clothes. Finally they went to a Boarders that was near the mall and picked out whatever books and CDs that appealed to them. Occasionally they ran into another ‘shopper’ or two, but there was no mad rush to loot everything.

That evening, everybody pitched in to clean up after supper. Even Alex seemed to be in better spirits. When Janice came back down to the kitchen after taking her bath, dressed in a t-shirt and a pair of boys’ briefs, Alex said, “I wish you would wear pajamas,” but he didn’t scream at her. She, in turn, did not say something snotty to him, but simply ignored the comment.

Alex still did not want to return to his old room, and insisted in sleeping in the living room with the light on. As they were all sitting in the living room after watching one of the DVDs that they had picked up at Boarders, Alex commented that he still had nightmares most nights and it was too scary to wake up in a dark room.

“I have nightmares too,” Janice said.

“What are yours about?” Alex asked.

“Monsters and things.”

“Are you scared when you wake up?”

“Yes. But I have Marcie close to me.”

Alex frowned. He wasn’t sure adults and children – at least big children – should sleep in the same bed together. But he said nothing.

That night Janice and Marcie were awakened in the middle of the night by screams. "Go away ... Leave me alone ... I'm sorry ... No!"

Marcie's first thought was that someone had broken into the house and had attacked Alex. The screaming awakened Janice who also screamed.

"What is it? What's happening?"

Their disorientation was made complete by the fact that the lights had gone out. The sky was overcast, so there was no light from the moon to help them out. It was almost pitch black. Shit, Marcie thought. I knew there was something I forgot. Candles and flashlights. I knew the lights wouldn't go on burning forever. She reached out and found Janice. She pulled her to herself and said, "It's ok, Honey. It's just that the lights went out".

Alex continued to scream. He was completely out of control. "In the name of Jesus, Go away. I call on the name of Jesus. Please don't get me."

"Who's after Alex?"

"Nobody. I don't think it's anybody."

"Why is he screaming."

"I'll go see."

"No. Don't go. They will get you too." She clung to her with a strength Marcie never suspected she had.

"We have to try to help him."

Janice clung more tightly. "Don't leave."

Marcie tried to make herself be calm. How could she get to Alex without leaving Janice? Maybe she could do it if she could move quickly, but she couldn't see a thing. And she knew that Janice would be beside herself with terror if she were left alone in the total darkness.

For a few moments it was quiet downstairs. Had he died of fright, Marcie wondered. She had heard of that happening. But then the screaming started again. If I can't go to him, he will have to come to me, she thought.

"Alex!" she shouted. "Listen to me."

"Who are you?"

"Marcie. Who is after you?"

"It's Kali. She has come for my soul. Oh my God, Oh my God, it's too late."

"Alex, listen to me. This is Marcie. I am in this same world with you. It isn't hell. It's just here."

"She has come for me, Marcie."

"Alex, can you find your way to me? You know the house. Go by feel. Find your way to me."

"Go away, Kali, go away! I don't want to go with you!"

"I am not Kali, Alex. Its just me. Try to find your way to me."

It was quiet for a moment. Then Marcie and Janice could hear someone stumbling around down in the living room.

"That's good, Alex. Just find the stairs, and you will almost be here."

As they listened to the footsteps on the steps, Janice clung more tightly to Marcie.

"Maybe it's not Alex," she said.

"Who else would it be?"

"Maybe it's Kali. Maybe she killed him," she whispered.

"Kali isn't real," Marcie said.

"You don't know that."

"I do. Trust me. Kali doesn't exist – at least not in this world."

There was a long pause. The footsteps had stopped.

"We're here, Alex. Don't be afraid," Marcie said.

The footsteps resumed.

"Maybe that's not Alex. Maybe someone broke into the house and killed him," Janice whispered. "Don't tell him where we are."

"Are you ok, Alex?" Marcie said. "Speak to me."

"I'm ok, I think." The voice clearly belonged to Alex. "I woke up from a dream and there were no lights."

They heard Alex bump into the door, and then a chair on the way to the bed. But he was soon with them. Marcie found him with her hands and pulled him down to the bed, and put her arms around him. "It's ok, Alex," she said. "Of course you were scared. But it's ok."

Janice relaxed some now that she could tell it really was Alex, but she still clung to Marcie's back. Marcie could feel Alex trembling.

"I was scared," he said. "She was coming for my soul. I thought I was going to burn forever and ever and ever. It was the Devil and Kali. They were the same. I would never see light again. The fire that would burn me was a dark fire. And devils would eat me alive, over and over. I don't want to go there, Marcie. Not ever."

"There isn't any such place," Marcie said. "I was brought up with the same teachings. I know how you feel. But there isn't any such place."

"You don't think so?" Alex asked.

"I'm sure of it. No such place."

Marcie rubbed his back and caressed his hair, and as she did so she could feel the tension begin to dissipate. For a long time they lay in the bed together without anyone speaking. After a while Janice fell asleep. Marcie scooted her to one side and kissed her. Then she turned to Alex. "Take off your shirt," she said.

He did so without arguing and Marcie had him lie on his stomach. She gave him a long gentle back rub. After a while the sky began to lighten just a little, but enough that they could see. Alex lifted his head and looked at Marcie and then at Janice. He seemed reassured. He let his head fall back on the bed and fell asleep.

Later that day the three of them went out in the truck and found a gasoline generator in a Home Depot. They loaded this onto the back of the truck with a number of big gas cans. Then they supplied themselves with an assortment of flashlights and lamps that used batteries and candles. "This will take care of us for the moment," Marcie said, as they were driving home.

Alex didn't talk much about what had happened the night before. Marcie thought he was probably embarrassed at how afraid he had been.

What a strange idea it is that real men should not feel fear in terrifying situations, she thought. But she didn't say anything about it. That night, with a camping lamp that worked off a big battery and a smaller flashlight within his reach, Alex resumed his place on the couch in the living room.

The next day, Marcie figured out how to hook the generator up to the house so that all the electrical lights and appliances worked. They agreed they would only use it for part of the time each day because of the noise it made and the need to keep feeding it gasoline.

A couple of nights later, Marcie brought out a bottle of wine for supper and offered some to both Janice and Alex.

"Isn't she too young to drink wine?" Alex asked.

"Too young to make your own decisions always seemed like a strange idea to me," Marcie said. "Maybe she can decide for herself."

"I want some," Janice said. Marcie poured both her and Alex some wine and put it in front of their plates. Alex frowned, but didn't reject it. Janice tried her wine immediately. "Yuk," she said, wrinkling her nose. "This needs some sugar."

Alex sipped his wine carefully and then emptied the glass. "It's pretty good," he said. Marcie poured him some more.

"Course it's good," she said.

As they ate, Alex kept filling his glass from time to time and pretty soon he was more talkative than Marcie and Janice had ever seen him. He began telling Janice moron jokes, which she loved. He had never before shown her any attention. Then he started telling her one about a man who spoke in a squeaky voice and was told by his doctor that it was because "his balls were too big".

Janice giggled. "You're talking dirty," she said.

"I'm just telling what happened," Alex said, laughing.

"So what happened then?" Marcie said.

"Well, he said, 'I guess I'll just have to live with it, then, 'cause I can't let you cut them off.'" When he quoted the man Alex spoke in a high squeaky voice that both he and Janice found funny. "Well then, one day he was taking a boat trip and he fell overboard. Someone saw him so they stopped the ship and sent a lifeboat back to get him. As they got close they heard him shout, 'Help, help, there are sharks in these waters!'" Alex delivered the "Help, help" in a high squeaky voice and then suddenly dropped his voice as deep as he could for the "sharks in these waters". He was hysterical with laughter. Janice laughed in a tentative sort of way and then turned to Marcie.

"I don't get it," she admitted.

Marcie was laughing too, not because the joke was so funny to her but because of seeing Alex acting like this. She made herself stop laughing to answer Janice.

"Why did the man talk in that squeaky voice," Marcie asked her.

"Because his ... his ... things ... were so big."

"Right. And what would the shark do that might make him not talk that way?"

Janice thought a minute. Then she frowned. "Oh, I get it." She tried to laugh, but it wasn't real.

"That's gross," she said.

"It's just a joke," Marcie said. "That never happened for real."

"Still, it's gross."

"There's sharks in these waters," Alex repeated in the deepest bass he could muster, and started laughing hysterically again.

Between the two of them Marcie and Alex had finished the bottle. Alex had drunk the larger share and pretty soon he wasn't feeling so well and went to lie down on the couch. Janice and Marcie cleaned up the kitchen together.

"Alex got drunk, didn't he," Janice said as she dried the dishes.

"A little bit," Marcie said. "I don't think he ever drank anything alcoholic before."

"I don't like it when he's drunk."

"Why is that?"

"He's loud and scary."

"You have never seen anyone like that before?"

"In my family people never got drunk."

"Wish I could say the same," Marcie said.

"You thought he was funny."

Marcie nodded. "I guess I did. Mostly I don't like to see people drunk. But with him ... I don't know. I liked it."

"I didn't."

"Right. You told me that."

Janice hung the dish towel up to dry. "I want to take a bath tonight," she said.

"Good idea."

"Will you come up and wash my back?"

"In a minute."

After Janice went upstairs Marcie went into the living room to see how Alex was doing. She found him lying on the couch, looking a bit pale.

"I don't feel too good," he said.

"You drank too much too fast," Marcie said.

"I can't get the room to stop spinning. Whenever I shut my eyes it spins."

Marcie went to the kitchen and returned with some Tums, some Ibuprofen and a glass of water.

"This may help some," she said. "But mostly you just have to sleep it off."

After getting Alex settled as best she could, Marcie went upstairs and found Janice waiting for her in the bathtub.

"You took a long time," Janice complained.

"Sorry."

"The water is getting cold."

Marcie ran some fresh hot water on the wash-cloth and rubbed her back with it. Then she helped her out of the tub and dried her off. Janice put on a fresh pair of boys' briefs, and a Hulk t-shirt and crawled into bed.

Marcie got in with her and they cuddled together. Janice allowed Marcie to caress her hair and rub her back. Then they lay still for a while. Marcie was floating in a state between waking and sleeping when she was brought back into a waking state by the feel of a small hand on her breast. She started slightly, just at the unexpectedness of it, and the hand quickly withdrew. Janice rolled over and pretended to be asleep. Marcie snuggled up close to her and kissed her ear. "It's ok to touch me wherever you like," she whispered.

Marcie had just dozed off when she was wakened by hearing Alex retching in the downstairs bathroom. She went down to see whether she could help. She found him kneeling in front of the commode with bits of spittle and vomit on his chin. She took a washcloth, rinsed it out in the sink, and then washed his face.

"Do you think you got rid of all of it?" she said.

He nodded. "I think I feel a little better."

Marcie led him back to the couch. He was still feeling a bit queasy and was quite hot. They weren't using the air conditioners because they seemed to put too much stress on the generator that Marcie had hooked up to the house. Marcie unbuttoned his shirt and helped him pull it off. Then she pulled off the t-shirt he wore. She went to the kitchen and returned with a pail of cool water and a washcloth.

"That feels good," he said as she washed his face and chest. Then she unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants. He looked at her a little anxiously, but did not protest. She pulled his pants down, and then his underpants, and washed his legs. After drying him off she told him to turn over. She washed his back and butt and legs with the cool washcloth. After she dried off his back she told him to turn over again.

"I shouldn't," he said.

"Why not?" she asked.

"You'll see ... me.

"That's ok," she said.

When he turned over she could see that he had an erection. There was a small crescent of pubic hair around base of his penis. She rubbed down his chest and legs and then very gently caressed his testicles. "This is where you can most easily be hurt," she said. "It's also where you can feel the greatest pleasure. I think that's interesting."

"Hmmm" he said. He felt that what was happening was wrong, but he could not seem to resist. It felt good.

She took hold of his penis and began massaging it until he groaned and ejaculated.

"What's wrong with Alex?" Janice was at the head of the stairs, and could not see into the living room.

Alex covered himself with a blanket. "There's nothing wrong with me," he said.

"I heard someone groaning."

"Alex was sick from the wine," Marcie said. "Go back to bed. I'll be up in a minute."

"Is he well now?"

"I gave him some medicine. He's better. Don't come down right now."

"Why?"

"Because I need to say something private to Alex."

Janice was silent for a moment. Then she said "Alex shouldn't drink so much wine."

"No shit," Alex said.

More silence. Then Janice said, "I woke up and you weren't there."

"I'll be up in a moment. Trust me," Marcie said.

"I miss you when I wake up and you're not there."

Marcie leaned over Alex and kissed him on his forehead.

"I've got to go," she said. "We'll talk about what happened when we get a chance."

Janice was still standing at the head of the stairs when Marcie got there. Marcie led her back into the bedroom and cuddled her in her arms until she went to sleep again.

The next morning Alex was the first to rise. By the time the others got up he had prepared them a complete breakfast – eggs, bacon, toast, oatmeal, dry cereal and fresh orange juice.

"I didn't know you could cook," Janice said, as she came into the kitchen.

Marcie was right behind her.

"Wow," she said. Look at that."

"Don't expect it every morning," Alex said.

Marcie smiled.

"It's almost like we're having a celebration," she said.

Alex blushed. "Maybe we are," he said.

After breakfast Alex and Marcie sat around the table drinking coffee. Janice had taken her 'cafe con leche' out into the living room where she wanted to read the most recent super-hero comic books she had found.

"When I was afraid the Devil, or Kali, was going to take me to hell, you told me there isn't any such place," Alex said.

"That's right."

"How do you know that?"

Marcie thought a minute.

"Well," she said. I can't prove it doesn't. You can't really prove that anything doesn't exist. But you can show that there is no particular reason to think it does."

"But if you're wrong, and you break the commandments ..."

"Like letting sexual things happen?"

Alex looked away. He mumbled a barely audible "uh huh."

"One thing I can show is that everything you and I were taught in those churches we went to is wrong," Marcie said. "It's all based on the Bible. Right?"

"Yes. That's God's Word."

"And we are supposed to take it all as the literal truth, right?"

"Yeah."

“Ok. Go get me your Bible and some paper.”

While Alex was hunting up some paper and pens, Marcie cleared the table and washed off a place for them to work. When he returned she had him sit down beside her.

“Now,” she said. “Let’s begin at the beginning. What we are going to do is study the order of creation.”

“We’re going to have a Bible study?”

“Right. Only this is something I learned from a friend of mine at college. He was the one who opened my eyes.”

“What was his name?”

“Gerald.”

“Was he a pastor?”

“No. He was a rebel.”

“Was he bad?”

Marcie shook her head.

“No. He was ... he was ... exceptional.”

“Was he your boyfriend?”

She nodded again. “He was maybe the only one I ever loved.”

“The only one?”

“Well, until I met you and Janice,” she said. She smiled, but Alex could see that her eyes were sad. He had never noticed before that sometimes a person’s eyes and mouth could say different things. “But let that go for now,” she said. “I’ll tell you about him some day. Not now.”

“Ok,” he said.

“Now we are going to figure out in just what order God created things. What came first, what second, etc. Simple, huh?”

They opened the Book of Genesis at the very first pages and began. As they read the first chapter they wrote down the things that were created each day. They ended up with a list like this:

First he created light and darkness so that there could be days.

Then each day he created certain things.

1st day. The sky and water.

2nd day. Land and sea.

3rd day. Sun and Moon.

4th day. Sea creatures and birds.

5th day. Land animals.

6th day. Human beings [both male and female].

“Ok,” she said. “That’s cool. But look what happens when we get half way through Genesis 2:4. We come up against a second story of creation.”

Alex nodded, doubtfully.

“It’s true,” Marcie said. You’ll see as we go along. Let’s just keep reading and write down the order in which things were created according to this story.

“Ok,” Alex agreed. “You read. I’ll write.”

“Good. It doesn’t list them according to different days. So just write down the sequence.”

After some time Alex had the following list in front of him:

- 1 Earth – with no plants or water.
- 2 A man – Adam.
- 3 Plants (in a garden).
- 4 Animals and birds.
- 5 A woman – Eve.

“Ok,” said Marcie. “In the first story men and women were both created on the 6th day – as the last act of creation. In the second story a man was created before either plants or animals. And even before a woman. It’s a totally different sequence.”

Alex studied the lists for some time, and then glanced back through the Bible passages to see whether he might have made some mistake in jotting things down.

“Yes,” he said finally, “it is.”

“So if you are going to take it all literally, you can’t get through the first three pages of the Bible before it contradicts itself.” As if to punctuate her remarks with an air of finality, Marcie got up and grabbed the coffee pot. “Another cup?”

“Uh-huh.” Alex nodded. Marcie poured them each another cup. There was an air of quiet triumph – almost smugness in her manner that irritated Alex a bit. At the same time he was excited by the ramifications of what he was being told. “So what does this mean?” he asked.

“It means that the kind of religion we were taught was a lot of hokum,” Marcie said. “It doesn’t mean that God exists or that God doesn’t exist. It doesn’t mean that there is nothing in the Bible that might have some value. It just means that the Bible is no longer a cage around our heads. We are free to think. To consult our own experience. To think things through for ourselves.”

“You seem happy about that,” Alex said.

“It was the happiest moment in my life when Gerald made this clear to me. I was free.”

“But it also means you can’t be sure of anything anymore.”

Marcie nodded. “I guess that’s the downside. We’d like to know some things for certain.”

“What about what the Bible says about Hell? Maybe that’s true.”

“I wish Gerald were here. He studied all that stuff. He was a bookworm. Always reading and thinking about things. He said that the Bible didn’t really say what most people think it did about heaven and hell. There were contradictions there too. But I can’t prove that to you.”

“Then why did you decide there wasn’t any Hell?”

“Just my own thinking about it. I’m smart but not super-smart like Gerald was. So my thoughts are just simple.”

“Like, what are they? I want to hear what you think.”

“Well, in the New Testament Jesus says God is Love. He compares Him to a loving father. Well, a loving father isn’t going to create a torture chamber in the basement for his kids, and keep them locked in it forever. So if Jesus was

right, there isn't any hell like that. Maybe hell on earth or something human beings create. But no eternal torture chamber. Or maybe there isn't even a God. I don't know. But if there isn't, then we just die. And that's better than worrying about hell."

"Do you think that's true? That maybe there isn't any God?"

"I don't know, Alex. Like I said, I'm not super-smart. Just ordinary smart. It's too big for me to decide. But as for cosmic torture chambers and all that crazy stuff we were taught in our churches – I'm done with that. Take this plague. There wasn't any 'rapture'. I mean how many little piles of clothes did you see lying around? I just saw dead bodies. And it wasn't something God did. It was crazy people acting in crazy ways that messed everything up here on earth."

Alex nodded. They sat in silence drinking their coffees for a while. The early morning sun was shining in the kitchen window. It reflected off some of the dishes on the table and made quivering designs on the wall. Alex stared at these designs.

"I liked what you did last night," he said after a bit. He kept his voice low so that Janice in the next room could not hear.



Though she had pretended to be asleep, Janice had heard Marcie say it was ok to touch her wherever she wanted, and this emboldened her. After that, when they went to bed together she began testing the limits. When she found the Marcie did not pull away when she touched her breasts, Janice began feeling them in an open exploratory manner. Marcie started sleeping without a t-shirt in order to facilitate the process.

Finally one night Janice said, "Pretend I'm a baby."

"I can do that," Marcie said.

For a while they snuggled quietly as Marcie rubbed her back gently.

"You're the mother" Janice said.

"I'm the mother and you're my baby," Marcie said.

"It's just pretend," Janice said.

"I know."

They lay quietly together for a while longer before Janice spoke again. "The baby wants some milk," she said.

"From her mama's breast?" Janice nodded. "That would be fine."

"I'm not really a baby," Janice said.

"I know that," Marcie said.

"Is this where the milk comes from?" Janice asked, touching a nipple.

"Yes, but there won't be any milk there now."

"I can pretend," Janice said, as she nestled her head down to the breast and took the nipple into her mouth. The sensation of Janice sucking at her breast was one of the happiest that Marcie ever remembered having. And it was obviously an intense pleasure and happiness for Janice as well.

Over the next two months Marcie would often slip downstairs to see Alex after Janice fell asleep. She gave him full body rub-downs and let him explore her body as he wished. She explained about her clitoris and had him stimulate it. She told him about other things that made her feel good and asked what he liked. Then, before going back upstairs, she would masturbate him. He was a willing student. But during all this time she never let him put his penis into her.

"Men think that's all there is to sex," she told him. "I want you to see and touch and feel everything first. You shouldn't try to rush things or feel you have to prove yourself." He didn't argue with her. She was the teacher. She never belittled him or put demands on him. He loved it. Then one night after they had played and explored for some time, she positioned his body on top and guided his penis into her vagina. He made more noise than usual as he reached his climax.

"Did you ... feel good ... too?" he asked, when he became relaxed again.

"It was good for me too," she said. "But I have to get upstairs now."

When she got back to the bedroom she and Janice shared, she discovered that, as she had feared, the noise had wakened Janice.

"I don't like it when you go away at night," she said.

"It's just when you are asleep," Marcie said.

"No. Sometimes I hear you. I pretend I'm asleep when you come back."

"Oh."

"What do you do with Alex?"

"Just talk and things."

"I hear him making noises."

"Oh."

"Do you let him drink milk too?"

"Drinking milk is our thing. I do other things with Alex."

"What things?"

"Just things."

Janice rolled over and turned her back to Marcie. When Marcie reached out to pat her and comfort her, she pulled away.

"I'm not a baby," she said.

"I understand."

They were silent for some time. Marcie could think of nothing to say. Finally, even though Marcie had made no effort to touch her again, Janice said, "I don't want any milk either".

"Ok."

"Maybe I'm too big for that."

"I'm sorry, Janice."

But Janice didn't answer. Much later Marcie heard the even breathing and faint snoring that told her Janice was asleep.

Spirituality Before the Plague

With regard to that aspect of life which is usually designated as 'spirituality', the most conspicuous change to have occurred since the Great Plague has to do with the disappearance of organized religion. A few small groups that consider themselves to be 'churches' do exist. Also one still finds individuals with a charismatic appeal for a few followers. But no large scale organizations with a purely religious agenda exist - whether Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist. Nor do any seem to be emerging. Professor Joseph Lee in his book 'Religion and Spirituality Since the Plague' argues that organized religion met three primary needs:

- 1 The repression of individual erotic experience, on behalf of the rulers of society, who feared anarchistic thinking, feeling and behaving on the part of the people they needed to control;
- 2 The reduction of the anxiety associated with individuals assuming responsibility for their own beliefs; and
- 3 Camaraderie in a socially coherent social group.

Under the anarchistic conditions that emerged during the first decades after the Great Plague there have been no groups that are big enough or powerful enough to attempt to impose their will on the rest. The need for social camaraderie has in large part been met by various 'families' who have gathered together out of mutual attraction and practical necessity. People are left, he argues, with some anxiety about not being able to relegate the responsibility for their beliefs to an ecclesiastic authority, but in the balance, most people are happier without organized religion.

The loss of authoritarian religious organizations has not lessened the interest people have in spiritual matters. Quite the contrary. If anything, interest in such matters seems to be more prevalent. However, people tend to pursue their interests in more idiosyncratic ways, and are not concerned with labeling themselves as 'Christians' or 'Buddhists', or whatever.

From 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, pg. 281

Chapter Three *The Library*

Richard Wallace woke while it was still dark. He lit a candle and sat on the edge of his cot for a few minutes while he stared out of the second-story window of the Indiana University Library. He poured himself a glass of distilled water from a large bottle he kept by his cot and drank it in one motion. He then took his candle to the men's room, where he relieved himself and then splashed some water on his face. He didn't know why the water still worked. Perhaps a loyal employee from the waterworks kept the machinery cranking along. Or perhaps it just worked by itself. He had never looked into the matter. He thought it would probably not continue indefinitely, but as long as it did it was certainly convenient. But he didn't trust drinking it.

He glanced at himself in the mirror. In the candlelight he looked ghostly. He was getting thinner – was almost gaunt, in fact. Eating did not have much interest for him since the Plague. His beard was beginning to look a bit shaggy, but this was a matter of indifference to him. He had nobody to look good for.

Returning to the space he had cleared beside his cot in front of the window, he performed a few sun-salutes to get the morning stiffness out of his bones. Then he went through a number of asanas and a breathing exercise. Finally he assumed a half lotus position and sat for about a half hour without moving while the sky began to lighten.

His goal in doing yoga was clear in his mind. The pain of finding Sandra and Joshua dead in their beds when he woke up that morning was unbearable. They were a perfect family as far as he was concerned. He worked in the library and studied chess, and she taught Literature at the university. Their son Joshua was a beautiful and vivacious nine-year-old who was successful and happy at school, with his family, and with his friends.

He and Sandra both liked poetry – with a particular fondness for poets of the Romantic period. Sandra had written her doctoral dissertation on some obscure nature poets of this period. They had loved reading poems together. But Richard now read no literature at all. He had no desire to read well-constructed lines about the transience of things. The reality of his loss could not be expressed with any words, nor did he have any inclination to find words for it. To whom would he speak about it? He had no significant relationships at this point, nor did he want any. That, in fact, was the point of his yoga. He wanted to live without attachments to anyone or anything. All attachments, he had concluded, were simply set-ups for suffering. In the realm of duality suffering always had the final word. He wanted no more of it. If it was within his power, when he left this life he did not want to be reborn anywhere. Perhaps he would return to the unmoving Satchitdananda – being/consciousness/bliss – to the One. Perhaps death was only oblivion. It was all the same to him, so long as he was not reborn.

He had thought about suicide, but was fearful that perhaps the Hindus were right. Maybe if you died with attachments to things or people, you would be reborn. There were, undoubtedly, many worlds in the universe, and he was confident that, wherever he might be re-incarnated, the invariants of any embodied experience had to be attachment, loss and suffering.

After his meditation he jogged about four miles around the campus. His endorphins were kicking in at full force at about the same time the sun appeared above the horizon.

He could not help but notice the exquisite greenness of the leaves and in the brilliant sunlight. Running ignited his senses. He considered this kind of happiness as simply an organic event. It could not be helped. If he ran, it happened. It made him nervous. It was as though the earth were enticing him to trust this realm of tears once again. Yet he supposed that if he did not allow himself to be attached to these organic states, no harm could come from them. The goal of his yoga was not so much the avoidance of pleasure as it was indifference to both pain and pleasure.

Back at his space in the library, he ate a bowl of cereal for breakfast, and then sat down in his easy chair to think. Always his thinking revolved around two questions: What was he still attached to? What could he do to loosen the grip of those attachments?

He felt he had come to a point of real indifference as to many of the attachments that had been important to him before the Great Plague – whether he was intelligent or not, whether he was moral or immoral, whether he was good-looking, or interesting, or ‘good in bed’, whether he was profound or superficial. These he categorized in his mind as identity attachments. They all boiled down to images of who he was – images that he had hoped others shared. He knew that such images as a rule bore very little relationship with anything real or significant, and to the extent that they might contain some degree of correspondence with reality, reality itself was a fleeting thing. He wanted to be nothing at all.

The other big category of attachments had to do with other people. He had never had many attachments that had much force in his life, but the few he did have were intense. He could not think them away. They were more recalcitrant than the identity attachments. Whatever he thought, whatever arguments he presented to himself about the unreality of his connectedness to others, he continued to long for Joshua and for Sandra. He wanted to be with them again, hear their voices, see them laugh, tease them, touch them. He dreamed about them.

The previous morning Richard had seen a spearmint gum wrapper on the ground while he was out jogging. Spearmint had been Joshua’s favorite, and it brought back to him the way his jaw had worked as he chewed gum, and the sweet smell of his breath. Empty images, he told himself, yet these images clung to him. No. He clung to them, like the monkey who could not free his hand from a narrow necked bottle from which he tried to pull out a nut. He could not make himself let loose.

He looked out the window and saw a boy coming toward the library. Particularly at this early hour, that was rare. Finding a good book was not a high priority for most people these days, and the few who did want to read something could for the most part find what they desired in a book store or library near where they lived. On two occasions he had encountered people who came to the library looking for something that could not be found in more popular book places. One was a middle-aged woman who was a biology professor. She wanted to get material that would help her figure out what organism had caused the Great Plague. Richard didn't think it mattered much. There was nothing to be done about it now. The other was an older man – a French teacher – who wanted some obscure French novels. Richard had pretended that he did not speak French. They had both tried to strike up a conversation with him, but he had been cold and standoffish.

He had trouble believing that a boy who appeared to be barely into his teens could have an appetite for anything that he could not satisfy in a local book store. He hoped he would go away.

He heard the door one floor down, open and close. Then nothing for a while. Probably he's wearing sneakers, Richard thought. Maybe he won't come up to the second floor. But his thought and his routine was as thoroughly interrupted as if the boy had been right there with him. He knew the boy was in the library somewhere, and that he might intrude into his space at any time. After a while he heard footsteps on the stairs. He heard the door to the second floor open and after a few more seconds saw an adolescent boy come around the corner. The boy seemed startled to find anyone.

"Oh," the boy said. "I didn't know anyone else was in the building."

"Now you know," Richard said.

"I'm Alex," the boy said.

"I'm Richard."

"Do you work here?"

"Yes. Do you have some books you want to check out? You'll have to show me your library card."

Alex knew he was being made fun of, but was not sure just how to respond. Finally he smiled.

"That was a silly question," he admitted. "What I meant to ask is, do you know how to find things here?"

"What kinds of things are you looking for?"

"Science and religion."

"That covers a lot of ground," Richard pointed out. "Maybe you could narrow it down a bit."

"I want to know what is known about those two things. Which is right?"

Richard smiled. It was a smile that made Alex feel uneasy. He did not feel that he was being mocked, exactly. But he sensed that he wasn't being taken entirely seriously.

"Probably half the library here is on one of those two topics," Richard said. "Brilliant men and women, profound men and women, have spent their whole

life-times pondering these issues. And they have done their best to convey to us what they learned." He made a wide sweep with his arms as if to take in the whole of the library. "And you want me to tell you what is known about it all." He glanced at his watch. "I'm not sure we have the time. I usually try to get something to eat at about 12 or so, and then take a nap."

Alex did not miss the sarcasm, but it was not enough to stop him. "But there must be books on science and religion," he said. "Books I could understand."

Richard nodded. "Yes, there are such books."

"I don't have to understand everything about science and religion. Just the basic things they say. Know what I mean?"

"I think what you are after would be called philosophy. Epistemology, to be exact. You want to know how we can be sure of anything. How we can know anything?"

As irritating and rude as this man was, Alex felt he did seem to grasp what he was trying to say. That fact motivated him to try to explain himself more fully. "Yes. How we can know anything. See, before the Plague, I was religious. I was very happy with my religion." He paused and looked down at the floor. "Well, the thoughts of hell did bother me. But mostly I was happy."

"Nothing is 100 percent," Richard said.

Alex nodded. "After the Plague I saw that certain things just did not add up. So I wanted to know how a person can know anything for sure."

"A person can't."

"Can't know anything for sure?"

Richard nodded. He stood up and went to the window and stared out. He liked this absurd adolescent. More than he wanted to. The boy thought, and asked questions that were really quite advanced for his age. He glanced over his shoulder at him, and noted the worry in Alex's face. The boy was transparent. Without guile. He seemed incapable of presenting himself as something other than what he was. Richard found this very appealing. But he was not moved to be more gentle in his speech. "I have overstated the case," he said. "There are some things you can know. But you already know them."

"What things? I don't know anything."

Richard nodded. "Knowing you are ignorant is an excellent place from which to begin, I should think. At least it would be, if there were any place to go. But you already know what can be known for sure. You know it as well as I know it." He turned and looked at Alex. "We are born. We get attached to a lot of people and ideas and things. They are taken away. And we die. That's about it. The Plague already taught you that. Everything else is just sentimental stories we tell ourselves."

"Stories?"

"Yes. Stories. Or pictures if you prefer. We are taken up into heaven when we die. Dying is oblivion. The world is the result of blind chance. It is the outcome of a divine plan. It thinks itself up as it goes along. We have an eternal soul. We have no real self even from one minute to the next. Blah, blah, blah. Some of the stories are very beautiful. Some ugly. Some may even be to some extent

true, but there is no way of knowing that. So you can take your pick. Whatever story or picture floats your boat. But none of these pictures change the basics. We are born. We get attached to a lot of people, and ideas and things. They are taken away. And we die.”

Alex shook his head. “There has got to be more to it than that.”

Richard shrugged. “Who knows?”

“I at least have to try to find out for myself.”

“Help yourself,” Richard said, nodding toward the stacks behind Alex. “There is no dearth of people wanting to tell you.”

Alex glanced around at the stacks behind him. “There is no card catalog,” he said. “Now that there is no electricity, the computers don’t work. So I can’t find anything.” He stood up as if getting ready to go.

“We are surrounded by literally mountains of information,” Richard said. He seemed to be musing to himself as much as he was talking to Alex. “More than we could digest in a thousand lifetimes. And somewhere in that mountain there is the answer to our question – the answer that would put our souls at rest. Yet we don’t have a clue where to find it. There is no card catalog.” He smiled. “What a curious state of affairs.”

“It is,” Alex said.

“So it’s the old needle in a haystack problem,” Richard said. “I’d just give it up if I were you.”

Alex shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’ve got to know.”

Richard shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

Alex looked at the floor. “Somebody’s got to know,” he said. He looked at Richard – actually studied his face for a moment as if he might find an answer to something there. Then he said, “Well, bye,” and he turned to leave.

This strange bumbling boy was oddly attractive to Richard. He wasn’t sure why. Perhaps he reminded him of himself at that age. He too had received a religious upbringing that he had begun to question in his teens. Alex had no sooner turned the corner than Richard called after him. “Wait a minute.”

Alex returned.

“I think I can help you,” Richard said. “But first we must talk. We should find a more comfortable place.” He motioned for Alex to follow him. Alex nodded. Without making any effort to converse Richard led him through a labyrinth of stacks and corridors until they came to some stairs. Why am I doing this, Richard asked himself as they started down. The boy was leaving. What is the matter with me? Am I that lonely? He continued asking himself questions along these lines as they descended two flights of stairs. They emerged into a room with a big picture window. Comfortable chairs were positioned around some low coffee tables. Richard led him to one of the tables. “Sit down. I’ll be right back.”

Richard was gone about five minutes and returned with two Cokes in ice and a bag of corn chips. He put one glass down in front of Alex, and sat down in the second chair at the table. He tore open the bag of chips and placed it between them. For a few moments Richard stared through the window without speaking.

"Where did you get the ice?" Alex asked.

"I have a refrigerator in the next room, and it is hooked up to a generator out on the lawn. I run it enough to make ice and keep a few things cold."

"Cool," said Alex.

"Did you ever play chess?" Richard asked.

"Yes. I'm pretty good too. Do you have a set?"

"No," Richard said. "It wouldn't be fun to play."

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't be fun for you because I would always beat you. Nobody likes to lose all the time. And it wouldn't be fun for me," Richard added, "because you would be no competition."

Alex felt annoyed. How did Richard know he would always win? Maybe I'm better than Richard thinks, he thought.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Before the Plague I studied and practiced chess during all my free time. I think I was wanting to prove how smart I was, which was very stupid. But I did become good at chess. Very good. I was competitive with the best players in the world. When I won I was elated. When I lost I would fall into a fit of depression that would last for days." He paused. Whether he was lost in his memories or giving careful thought to what he wanted to say next, Alex couldn't tell.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"You'll see. Or at least I hope you will. Just listen."

Alex nodded. He couldn't think when he had ever run into anyone quite this rude. But at the same time he was filled with curiosity about where Richard was going with all this.

"I played against a computer quite a bit. At first this was just for practice and discipline, but gradually I became fascinated with the whole concept of a human being playing against a machine. As they made the machines bigger and better – put more memory into the machines and so on, it gradually became impossible for anyone to beat them. It was like the race they had between a horse drawn carriage and a steam engine, not long after the invention of steam engines. Flesh and blood feels pain and gets tired. Machines tromp them every time."

"So the machine was smarter than you were," Alex said.

"No," said Richard. "That's the peculiar thing about it. Intelligence is a matter of seeing and comprehending relationships. The machine saw and comprehended nothing. It was no more intelligent than the steam engine. It just went through a number of very simple mechanical motions with incredible speed. It could be programmed to run through all the possibilities on the board for several moves into the future. The programmers of these machines were very intelligent. But the machines did not understand even the simplest relationship. They did not comprehend the nature of the relationships on the chessboard any more than a cash register understands the meaning of adding and subtracting, or of the transactions of buying and selling."

"I think I understand," Alex said.

"It's like billiard balls." Richard continued. "Suppose you could set up a billiard ball configuration so that whenever you hit it a certain way, nine-tenths of them would fall into pockets. Suppose you could do this with a lot of billiard balls. You could count the remaining balls and tell what the original number of balls had been."

"But that doesn't mean that the billiard balls would know what division was," Alex said. "That's what you are getting at."

Richard was impressed. The boy was bright. "Exactly," he said. "And that's what computers are. We have made very tiny and complex billiard ball configurations that repeat certain patterns over and over with incredible speed – so it looks like intelligence. But there is nothing in that machine that comprehends anything. Nor does the machine as a whole comprehend anything."

Alex nodded. That seemed right to him, but he still couldn't see why Richard was working so hard to explain this to him.

"You look puzzled," Richard said.

"I think I understand you," Alex said. "But I don't see where all this is going."

"I learned something from playing computerized chess games."

"To play chess better?"

"Well, yes. I suppose so. But something more important than that."

"Which was ...?" Alex took a sip of his Coke and reached for some more corn chips.

"It was that mechanics always overpowers intelligence."

"Always?"

"I think so. Locomotives and computers always come out on top. Eventually," Richard helped himself to some corn chips and finished off his Coke. "You are following this?" he asked.

"Mostly," said Alex.

"Ok. Then you can understand the main point I want to make. Suppose you spent all your time and energy playing chess with a computer that you could never beat. It would always outrun you just like the locomotive would always outrun the flesh and blood horse. Then suppose someone offered a huge award to anyone who could beat that computer game. You kept thinking that if you got just a little bit better – if you concentrated just a little harder – if you studied tricky combinations just a bit more carefully – you would be able to win. But this machine was unbeatable. Eventually you would realize that."

"It would make you want to give up," said Alex.

"Yes. In fact you would realize that would be the only intelligent thing to do."

"I guess so."

Richard stood up and stretched. He walked to the window and looked out at the empty campus. Then he turned and looked at Alex. "Earlier you asked me what the solution was," he said.

"About science and religion?" Alex asked.

Richard nodded. "Yes. And this is my answer. You must realize that you are in a game that can't be won, so you should walk away."



On the way back to his house Alex drove his motorcycle rather recklessly. He knew he should be more careful. He had only been riding a motorcycle for a few months and was hardly an expert. But he needed some way of expressing his excitement. As he swung onto the bypass around the south of Indianapolis he sped up. He had the highway to himself, or practically so. What was this excitement he was feeling? He knew it was a kind of happiness. He had assumed, after his losses in the Great Plague, that he would never know happiness again. He didn't think he should feel happiness. In spite of everything that Marcie had told him, his sense of shame about his hidden thoughts and feelings would not go away. Of course his 'hidden' thoughts and feelings were not so hidden any more. He had told Marcie all about them – about his feelings for both boys and girls, and men and women and even about his lusting for his own brother. And she had just shrugged and said "a person feels what he feels". That was it. Life seemed simple to her. Now all that he kept secret was the shame he felt. He knew that would only irritate her.

In addition to his feeling that he did not deserve to be happy, Alex felt that any real enjoyment of life was an act of disloyalty to the dead – at least to those he had known and loved. Now they are gone, he mused. They have no more opportunity for happiness. Well, too bad about that. Is that my attitude? To let his grief lighten up a bit was to abandon them. It was the ultimate act of disloyalty. It had been just a little over a year since the Great Plague had struck, and already the intensity of the feelings he had felt for those he loved was beginning to fade. Perhaps, except for William, he really hadn't loved them all that much anyhow. He felt shame at what he considered to be his superficiality.

Alex had felt a lot of shame about the pleasures that Marcie had shown him also, but at least that did not seem like real happiness. It was just pleasure, he told himself. Not love. It was a sin, perhaps, but it was not the final act of casting his parents aside, any more than masturbating when he still lived with them was a rejection of them. This pleasure was not something that competed with his attachments to his parents and siblings, and the friends he had know before the Plague. But now what he felt was unmistakable. It was pure happiness that filled him from his toes to the top of his head. He couldn't help it. It just happened. What could he do? He started weaving down the road in a kind of dangerous road dance. Yes. Life was still good.

He knew the exact moment this astonishing new happiness had taken possession of his being. He had asked Richard if he could come to see him again. After hesitating a bit, and questioning the use of it, Richard had finally said yes. It didn't even bother Alex that Richard had been reluctant – that he had hesitated. He had said yes, and that was all that mattered. That 'yes' was like the first peek of the morning sun. He had even given Alex detailed instructions about how to get to his house.

It seemed that Richard lived in two places. Some of the time he stayed in the library where Alex had found him, and some of the time in a house in the woods in Brown County.

His exit was coming up more quickly than Alex had expected, and he found himself entering the off ramp at a speed that was clearly excessive. "Shit," he thought. "I'm not going to make it." He hugged the outside of the curve briefly while he slowed down as much as he could without losing control. Then the curve sharpened and he went off the pavement and found himself bouncing wildly down a grassy slope. He maintained a tenuous control until he hit an unusually big bump and went flying off the cycle. He found himself lying on his back. He didn't seem to hurt anywhere. He sat up and tested all his limbs. He thought he had a few bruises, but nothing was broken. He lay back down into the grass and laughed. He was invincible.



"Look," he said to Marcie. "These are the books he gave me." Alex picked up his backpack and pulled three library books out of it. They were 'A History of Western Philosophy' by Bertrand Russel, 'Autobiography of a Yogi' by Yogananda, and 'Guide For the Perplexed' by E F Schumacher. He threw them on the table, almost knocking over the cup of coffee Marcie was drinking – her first of the day.

Alex was seldom up this early. He had arrived at the house late the previous evening, and looked a mess from having driven off the road. But other than a couple of scrapes and bruises he did not seem to be hurt. He had rambled on a bit about this awesome guy he had met and then gone to get a bath. Shortly after that he went to bed. Marcie wasn't quite clear what was so wonderful about this person Alex had met, but figured that she would find out in good time.

While Alex fixed himself some coffee, Marcie examined the books on the table. She opened each one to the table of contents, and then glanced through it, reading a random statement here and there. Then she pushed them away as though they had a smell she didn't much like. "They look like religion," she said. "And philosophy."

"They are. Richard said they would 'speak to my concerns'. That's just how he put it – 'These books will speak to your concerns'."

Alex seemed to take pleasure in quoting Richard word for word. There was Eros there. Marcie could smell it. ok, she thought. So he can love men as well as women. That's cool. But what kind of drivel was this newfound friend putting into his head? She glanced at the books again.

"Maybe the philosophy is ok. But why do you want to get back into religion? It's all just a lot of hokum. It's been used as an excuse to torture people, to start wars and to persecute anyone who was a bit different – especially regarding his or her sexual tastes. What's the use of it?"

"It's not all that way, Marcie. There must be some kind of good religion."

She patted his hand. "I think I understand. There was something in all that religion you knew that you did like."

Alex nodded. "There was. There was something good about it. We should be able to find what was good in it and reject what wasn't."

Marcie shrugged. "It's your business, Alex. I got no right to belittle it. Its just hard for me to understand, that's all. When I saw that the Bible couldn't be true – at least not the way it was taught to me – it was like someone opened a huge prison door and said, 'ok, honey. You are free to leave'. So I left, and don't suppose I'll ever go back."

"But maybe you could help me with the philosophy," he said.

"Sure," she said. "I mean, I have only had a couple of general courses in it, so I'm no expert. But we could read that book by Russel together and both learn something. That would be fun."



It was as though this were the first time Richard had ever sat down and tried to make himself quiet. He kept fidgeting and thinking about his conversation with Alex the day before. Why in God's name did I tell him about my house in Brown County, he asked himself. And even more than that, what prompted me to give him permission to come any time he wanted? What was I thinking of? I have no responsibility to teach this fifteen-year-old airhead anything. Maybe he does show some signs of intelligence, but has no education to speak of. He was brought up in some ignorant form of primitive Christianity. It's not up to me to show him that there are more plausible forms of spirituality. Am I the Bodhisattva? All I want is a way out of this pain factory. The idea of returning to aid all sentient beings to escape is appalling. Alex, along with every bird and snake and every tiny organism in all the microbe-infested swamps on the earth can suffer in their ignorance for another billion years and it's all the same to me.

Alex had clearly believed that he had caught himself a real live guru, and Richard had let him think it – had even acted the part to an extent. His very coldness and rudeness had been interpreted by the boy as the severity of a teacher testing a prospective disciple. As sure as he knew he was sitting in the library looking out over what was once the University of Indiana campus, Richard knew that this was the fantasy that consumed the boy. He had invited Alex to his house in Brown County, and the thought of Alex actually making such a visit pleased him. That was the worst part of it.

The Gaea Hypothesis

In the pre-plague years, many health professionals were aware that there was a relationship between psycho-spiritual balance and physical health. In some cases, 'faith healing' did in fact access the deeper regenerative capacities of the implicate dimensions of the self. In examining the literature, one also finds carefully documented cases of the spontaneous remission not just of cancer, but of a number of other serious illnesses as well. The field of psychosomatic medicine – despite its incompatibility with some of the reductionist assumptions of the age – received a degree of begrudging recognition within the mainstream of medicine.

At the same time, it must be noted that the successful application of non-mechanist forms of healing was quite limited. People continued to die from cancer, AIDS and other serious illnesses even after the prayers, the laying on of hands, the meditative practices or whatever other psycho/spiritual techniques were applied to the patient. Spontaneous remissions were just that: spontaneous. The dynamics that underlay such remissions were never clearly apprehended and no systematic use of these healing possibilities was ever established.

Although there were a few healers who seemed able to access a true healing power, there were many more 'faith-healers' who were blissfully deluded as to the limits of their powers and not a few out-and-out frauds. Given this state of affairs it is not surprising that many investigators assumed that spontaneous remissions, faith healings and the like were not-yet-understood curiosities that would one day be explained by the same mechanistic procedures that were producing such dramatic outcomes in many situations.

It now appears that the limited success of psycho-spiritual interventions can best be explained by a number of factors. First, in a culture dominated by intellectuals who were enamored by the mechanistic-reductionist model of reality, only a limited amount of resources was dedicated to exploring alternatives. Second, the extremely primitive forms of popular spirituality that appeared to most people to be the only alternative to the mechanistic-reductionist model discredited psycho-spiritual approaches in the the minds of most thinking people. Third, many of the imbalances that were disease-producing were collective in nature, and therefore not amenable to adequate treatment within the context of models of health and illness that assumed the primary locus of pathogenic processes was in the individual organism. Fourth, it was little understood that some illnesses in fact served larger psycho-spiritual functions and were thus not amenable to correction by psycho-spiritual means.

-
-
-
-
-
-

All the aforementioned causes for the inefficacy of pscho-spiritual health interventions could conceivably have been overcome. But there was a fifth obstacle that proved to be insurmountable. For real progress to be made it would have been necessary to transcend that entire cultural paradigm of the pre-plague years. As is now clear, a paradigm contains emotional, cognitive and mythical dimensions that are largely unconscious and not easily amenable to change. This was, of course, understood by a limited number of individuals long before the Great Plague, but this understanding did not inform cultural life as a whole to any great extent.

Prior to the Great Plague, when creative individuals stepped out of the dominant paradigm of their culture, they were presumed by the larger group to be insane – a judgment the creative person often shared. For this reason the person’s work was often discredited in its entirety and not carefully sifted for its nuggets of truth. In addition, the person was frequently persecuted in a variety of ways, or even destroyed. Minimally, such a person was excluded from positions of responsibility and often from social life in general. It is difficult for those born and raised in the post-Plague years to grasp the extent of the difficulties and suffering forced on any creative person who had the temerity to attempt to live outside the harsh constraints imposed by pre-Plague paradigms.

From 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p 281.

Chapter Four

What The Trees Said

All through the winter and spring Alex spent most of his time with Richard. He would return to stay with Marcie and Janice for a few days at a time every couple of weeks. He was glad to see them, and they welcomed him. He helped out with practical matters and played board games with Janice. But he would not sleep with either of them, and seemed careful in the giving and receiving of even ordinary physical affection.

When he was there, Marcie had him stay with Janice while she went different places with different men. Twice she even brought one of her men to the house, but Janice was jealous and wouldn't talk with him. It didn't make a lot of difference because Marcie never seemed to like them very much in the long run, and she split up with them. "They still got the old habits of mind," she said when Alex asked why she seemed to reject them all. But she never explained just what she meant by that.

While he was very fond of Marcie, and was even beginning to warm up a bit to Janice, Alex was always excited about getting back to Bloomington. He and Richard lived most of the time at a house in Brown County that Richard had taken over shortly after the Plague. The house was on a hill overlooking a stream that wound through a state forest. Its most prominent feature was a large deck that extended out over the hillside, and provided a perfect view of the stream down below. The deck was separated from the rest of the house with sliding glass doors. When the weather permitted, Richard and Alex practiced their asanas and did their meditation on the deck. When it was too cold they performed their spiritual exercises just inside the glass doors.

At times they would abandon the house and live for a while in the library. Oddly, Richard did not read much. He simply seemed to take some comfort in being close to the books. But he did find things that he insisted that Alex should read. These books – novels, social commentaries, and books of philosophy – always seemed to be perfectly geared to tear down any belief system that Alex began to feel comfortable with. He read voraciously, always hoping to find exactly what the books prevented him from finding – something he could believe in.

Their life together fell into a routine. They would rise before the sun, and do stretching exercises and asanas that built them up physically. They greeted the sun every morning with a series of sun-salutes, and went jogging. When they returned to the house they showered. Only then did they eat breakfast. Up until then they took only water. After that they took care of whatever tasks needed to be taken care of to keep the house supplied and in order. Then for the rest of the morning they meditated. This meant sitting in a half-lotus position and learning to be still. After lunch they would run errands or go on

an afternoon trip. After supper they meditated for a spell again, and then they would watch a video, play a board game, or just talk until time for bed. They slept in separate bedrooms, and though they did their asanas and meditations wearing only their briefs, Richard proved to be rather modest.

The shift that occurred in their relationship one morning was noticed by Alex, but he had no way of appreciating its magnitude. It was like a tsunami passing under a ship far out at sea. The powerful swell is at that point hardly noticeable to the people on the ship, though soon, upon reaching land, it wreaks havoc. They had finished doing their yoga together. The deck faced north, so when the sun came up they saw it ignite the tips of the trees across the valley through which the stream flowed to their left. This was a magical moment for Alex, and for some reason it had struck him as especially beautiful that morning. When they stood up to do the sun-salute, Richard noticed that Alex had a bit of difficulty with his leg. When they finished, he asked him about it.

"I think I sprained my ankle a bit when we were running yesterday," Alex said.

Richard had him sit down and he examined the ankle carefully. "It's a bit puffy," he said.

"It's not serious," Alex said.

"No. I don't think it is. Still, you shouldn't run this morning."

"I don't think it would hurt too much."

"No. It needs rest. I'll run alone this morning."

There was no arguing with him, and Alex wasn't too keen on the idea of running on his sore ankle anyhow. Still, this development put a bit of a glitch in a plan he had been formulating for some time. He knew that Richard found him attractive, and this was very exciting for him. Yet Richard always seemed to hold him at an arm's distance. He thought that perhaps he could more or less casually strip down and invite himself into the shower with Richard. Being as they were both always hot and sweaty after jogging, this would seem like a reasonable thing to do. Why wait to take their showers separately?

After Richard left, Alex felt at a loose end for a few minutes. Then he decided that he wanted to explore the area down below the house. Richard had never taken him down into the valley to see the stream. It felt exciting to be naked, so Alex took his shorts off, put on his tennis shoes, and ventured down into the back yard. Richard kept the yard mowed because he said that would mean fewer bugs on the deck. Lately Alex had begun mowing it for him. He had noticed that a path descended from the low point in the yard, but he had never explored it. This morning he started down the path, and found himself almost immediately wending his way along a narrow track beneath a canopy of leaves formed by the overhanging branches of tall trees – maples and oaks for the most part. As he descended, the sound of the stream – which was only a faint murmur on the deck – became louder. He limped and found it necessary to walk slowly, but the path was easily negotiated.

It was not a big stream. He made note of the fact that there were a few pools deep enough to paddle around in, but none big enough for real swimming. He waded across and climbed out on the the other side. Climbing up onto an

outcropping that he discovered a few yards above the stream, he sat down and removed his wet tennis shoes so as to be totally naked, and he surrendered himself to the peacefulness of the place.

He was sitting on bare rock, but saw that a part of the outcropping was covered with a fine dust. This dusty area, he noticed with mild curiosity, was punctuated with a number of conical indentations, which were perhaps about three quarters of an inch deep. As he stared at them, he saw a bit of dust pop up in one of them. Some sort of miniature event was taking place there. He crawled over on his hands and knees to get a better look. An ant had fallen into the cone and was trying to crawl out. Just as she almost made it to the top, another little bunch of dirt was flipped up from below, causing the ground to give way under the ant. The ant slid back almost to the bottom of the cone, and then started up again. Again the dust flipped up, causing him to slide back down. This action was repeated several times, until the ant ended up at the very bottom of the cone. At this point two pinchers reached out and grabbed the ant, and dragged it under the dust.

Alex was astonished. This was Kali in one of her most minute embodiments. He realized that this woods, that seemed so peaceful to him, and so uncomplicated, was in fact composed of millions – billions – of minute events – many of which were quite violent. With a stick he dug up one of the cones, and after careful searching, he found a rather unprepossessing bug with large pinchers. This unlikely creature inspired Alex to take a closer look at his surroundings.

Dragonflies dashed here and there in erratic patterns above the stream, and bugs skated on its surface. Ants searched the ground around him in zig-zag patterns. Spiders set their traps in the limbs above him. Birds skittered through the trees. The trees were themselves alive, as was all the huge variety of plants and flowers he had never paid much attention to. It was as though he had never looked at the woods before.

Mostly, it occurred to him, what all these living creatures were concerned about was eating, and a lot of what they ate was each other. It was indeed a violent and frightening place. He did not find the place particularly terrifying only because his size made him relatively safe from most of the hungry creatures around him – except for a few biting insects who were not going to do him serious harm since he had put on some bug repellent before coming down.

In its essence this woods into which he had ventured was a huge and violent hierarchy of eating, yet it was also exquisitely beautiful – at least if you were not in any immediate danger of being eaten.

He scooted back to his place on the bare rock again and resumed a quiet pose. He wanted to understand these woods. He became aware of himself in the woods as one more creature that was not so different from the others. He too dashed from place to place. He too plotted and connived so that he might be the one doing the eating rather than the one being eaten. He too digested what he ate, and shat out the unusable portions. If he and all the creatures around him were like each other in so many ways that could be seen from the

outside, was it not likely that they were also alike in their inner realities – at least on some basic level? Did the creature he dug up rejoice in the prowess by which he captured the ant as he himself rejoiced in his newly learned ability to ride a motorcycle? Did the spider delight in the taste of a fly, as he might in the taste of a well-done stake? Did the bugs enjoy their skating, as he had once enjoyed roller skating? Did the trees thrill to the first glimpse of the sun as he did while sitting in meditation with Richard?

As he sat and made himself become more quiet, as Richard had taught him to do, the particular creatures around him faded somewhat into the background and Alex became aware of the woods as a whole. Gradually the woods itself seemed like another creature, or a person, and he was a part of this person. This realization was accompanied with an deep feeling of contentment. A happiness that was more intense than anything he could remember infused itself into his body. All the creatures around him, and he himself, were just moments – small events – in a larger life. Just how long he was lost in this ecstatic awareness of his oneness with everything around him, he didn't know, but gradually his more ordinary consciousness returned. He was again just himself, and all the creatures around him were once again separate and distinct. Yet his body still glowed from the experience.

Alex jumped down from the ledge and limped up the path to the house. He could not wait to tell Richard of his experience. As he entered the house he could hear the shower running. Although on warm days he and Richard did their yoga wearing only their briefs, they had never actually seen each other naked. But he did not bother to put anything on before going and knocking on the bathroom door.

"Yes, you can come in," Richard called to him.

He pushed the door open and peeked in. He could see Richard's form, blurred by the frosted glass of the doors to the shower. He went over and opened the shower door just slightly. "Can I come in?" he asked.

There was a slight pause. Then, "Sure."

He opened the door wide enough to let himself in, and shut it behind him. "Did you have a good run?" he asked Richard.

"Yes. It was nice. Missed having you along, though."

"I went down to the stream."

Richard stepped aside to make room for Alex to get under the stream of warm water. "Find anything interesting?"

"Yes." He began explaining to Richard about the bug with the pinchers.

"That's an ant lion," Richard explained. "They are interesting. Do you want me to wash your back."

"Hmmm. That would be good." Alex handed him a washcloth and some soap. It felt good to have his back washed. He was aware that he was getting an erection, and hoped that Richard would not mind. When he turned around to let the shower wash the soap off his back he saw that Richard also had an erection, and that he was looking at his. He hoped that Richard would see that he was beginning to grow a little hair around the base of his penis.

He was growing up. Would soon be a man. He was slower than some boys in maturing, and had been self-conscious about that before the Plague, when he went to school with other boys and girls.

Richard reached out and took Alex's face between his hands. Alex thought that he was going to kiss him, or pull him toward him. He wanted very much to be hugged by Richard. But then Richard dropped his hands and shook his head. "No," he said. He turned, opened the door to the shower, and left.

By the time Alex saw Richard again, they were both dressed. Richard had fixed them both some breakfast, and did not seem upset with Alex. Still, there was a certain distance – even formality – in his manner. A door had closed.

As they ate breakfast Alex wondered if he had done something wrong. Perhaps he had been too forward. Not everybody, after all, thought about things the way Marcie did. "If you love someone," she had said, "it don't make any difference about male or female, or black or white, or young or old. If you love somebody, you love them. That's all. And it's ok to show it."

As he ate the eggs and toast that Richard had prepared, Alex thought about Richard's hands on his face. Why had he suddenly pulled away? Alex wanted to reach over the table that separated them and touch Richard on the face. He wanted to be touched in return. But he knew that this was not possible. Maybe there was some other way of making contact with him.

"I felt something very powerful in the woods this morning," he said.

"Like what?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Give it a try."

While they drank their coffee Alex told of his experience with the woods – beginning with his perception of it as a great hierarchy of eating and ending with his ecstatic sense of being one with the woods as a single entity. "Do you understand what I am saying?" he asked. It didn't seem possible that anyone else could know. "Does it make sense, what I am saying?"

Richard nodded. "Of course it makes sense," he said. He reflected a moment, and then stood up. "Wait here for a minute. I want to get something."

Richard returned shortly with a book. Without any introduction he began reading a poem. The thought and language was too complex to be entirely grasped at one hearing, but when he came to the following passage Alex felt the hair on the back of his arms rise up –

... and I have felt

*A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,*

*And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.*

Yes. It was unmistakable. That was what he felt while he was out there among the ant lions and dragonflies. Someone else had felt this before him. And if one person wrote a poem about it that found its way into a book, then many other people must have felt this at some time or another. He was not alone in this.

“Does that speak to what you experience?” Richard asked.

“Yes. That was it.”

Richard allowed his head to fall backwards. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. It was an idiosyncratic gesture that Alex had seen a number of times before. It usually meant that he was thinking something and did not wish to be interrupted. “Yes,” he said, finally. He opened his eyes and stared at Alex. “It was a kind of religion, actually. It was for many people before ...”

“Before the Plague?” Alex ventured.

“Well, yes. That. But really before technology. Before everything was understood to be under the rule of mechanism. It was hard then for people to believe in that spirit that rolls through all things – and to relate to it almost as one would relate to a lover. What was for Wordsworth, the author of this poem, a living religion, became in time, mere poetry. A fantasy. A harmlessness that could be ignored.”

“Was it a ‘kind of religion’ for you?”

“Yes. For me and for Sandra. It was. We didn’t take Joshua to Sunday School. We took him to streams where he was allowed to play in the water, naked. He was a beautiful child. Actually the stream down below runs through the state park where we took him.”

And don’t you still have feelings like that?” Alex asked.

“Of course. One can’t get away from them entirely.”

“Why would you want to?”

“A couple of reasons, really. If this was the first time you heard this poem I am sure you didn’t follow all of it. You may have noticed the phrase in it where he speaks of his love ...”of all the mighty world/Of eye, and ear – both what they half create,/And what perceive;’ ... there’s the rub, you see. Even as he was in a state of near ecstasy about his experience of his surroundings, he was already aware of the possibility that it had more to do with what his eye and ear – and by implication the mind behind them – ‘half created’. Perhaps

the contribution of the ear and the eye and the mind was even more than half. Perhaps there was no spirit at all. Only projection.”

“You mean like just a sort of fantasy?”

“Like a fantasy, yes.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I don’t know. But suppose that ‘Nature’ in its entirety does constitute a living thing that you can have a real relationship with, there are still problems with Wordsworth.”

“Like what?”

“Well, there is that part where Wordsworth says, ‘ Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her’. Perhaps it worked out that way for him. But that has not been my experience. Not yours either, if you think about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, “Nature” took Sandra and Joshua away from me. And the stream Joshua played in, while Sandra and I sat on the bank reading poetry and admiring our son, burbles as merrily and peacefully as ever. That feels like a betrayal to me. And you? Did nature not take someone you loved away from you with her plague?”

Alex didn’t answer, but he thought about his brother William. Richard did not demand the specifics. He knew, of course, that the answer was ‘yes’. They sat in silence, staring at the residue of the egg yolks on their plates and the crumbs of the corn bread Richard had prepared for them on the table, each alone in his memories. William had been beautiful too. Alex thought about how he probably would have been about the same age as Joshua when both of them died. This ‘Nature’, then, that felt so gentle, had another side. It was also Kali. What would Wordsworth have done with the ant lion dragging the ant beneath the dirt, or the spider sucking the insides out of its still-living prey?

“The thing is,” Richard said, finally breaking the silence, “if one is going to escape, it requires a bit of ruthlessness. The attachment that we have to nature is no different from any of the other attachments that keep us engaged in this game that no one ever wins. That too must be given up.”

“That’s hard,” said Alex.

“Not really. It’s just a mechanical thing. It means nothing. It’s the same with all our subjective experiences, however ‘sacred’ they may feel. Once you see that, it’s not so hard.”



“It seems like he wants me to give up everything,” Alex complained.

Marcie let the water out of the kitchen sink and dried her hands on a dish towel. “Let me pour us some more coffee while you finish up drying the dishes,” she said. Marcie had made some donuts, and put them on the table after pouring the coffee. It was a beautiful sunny morning but Alex was depressed. He could think of nothing he wanted to do that day.

"It really stinks. Did you know that's why I don't let you near me? Physically, I mean. He says sex is a kind of glue that keeps us connected to the things of this world. We have to learn to control it."

"I did wonder why you had got real standoffish with me."

"Well, that's the reason. I really liked those things you showed me. But he says I have to give all that up."

"If he wants you to give everything up, why do you bother with him?"

Alex sat down at the table, dumped two heaping spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee, and took a bite from his doughnut. "I'm not sure. I just like him."

"Seems like more than that."

"I think he knows things. Maybe he can teach me to find God again."

"God again? I had hoped that you were done with that. Don't you remember our conversation about the Bible and all that?"

"The God we learned about in Sunday School isn't the only God that anyone ever thought about. There are other religions, and other Gods, or at least other ways of understanding God."

"Good riddance to them all. You yourself said Kali was just like Satan. It's all the same."

"Maybe not. I want to find out."

"But why?" Marcie threw the doughnut she was eating down on the table in frustration.

"I can't help it if it makes you mad."

"I'm sorry, Honey. It's like you just manage to get a lot of garbage out of your house and then you go looking for more garbage to replace it with – hoping that the new garbage will be better – will smell less. Why do you need any garbage at all in the house?"

For some time Alex thought about this question. Marcie gathered up the pieces of her shattered doughnut and didn't pressure him. "I miss God," he said finally.

"Well, I sure don't," Marcie said. She picked up the piece of donut she had thrown down and stuffed it into her mouth, mechanically.

"I can't help it, Marcie. I want God and I want Richard, but I want you too. I don't want you to push me away."

"I won't, Alex. You got to love whoever you love. Gerald said most people had more than one kind of person that turned them on. Maybe it was women and boys, or men and women, or men and dogs." She laughed. "Whatever. Each person's got his own pattern of love. Not like anybody else's. Gerald called it the person's 'love map'. It's not something we choose. Just something we discover. Seems like you got God on your love map. You love this God of yours who would have sent you straight to hell for not believing the right things. Then you fall in love with this guy who wants you to give up everything that really does give you some happiness in life for the sake of what? Some abstract notion of purity? He don't want you to enjoy things too much. He's got at least that in common with God. Seems like you got a real troublesome love map."

"Fall in love with Richard?" Alex looked up over the coffee he was sipping.

"You think Richard and I are lovers?"

"Seems pretty plain to me."

"But I've never had sex with him. Never did any of the kinds of things you showed me."

"Didn't you ever want to?"

Alex blushed. "I don't know. Never thought much about it."

"Ain't a crime if you did."

Alex crossed both his arms in front of himself, and then raised one hand and began chewing the skin at the edge of his thumb-nail. "Remember I told you about the woods – how I was part of it and all. Well, when I came back up I got into the shower with Richard. We had never done that before – had never seen each other completely naked. Least I had never seen him. He always sort of hid when he changed his clothes. I wasn't so careful. Anyhow, well ... we got sort of ... excited. You know."

"Like you had boners?"

Alex laughed. "Well, yeah. Like we had boners. I wanted to touch him and have him touch me."

"And what happened?"

"Nothing." There was a long pause. Alex finished his coffee. "Well, what are we going to do today?"

"Whoa there. You were just getting to the good part and all at once we're wondering what we're going to do today. I mean you don't have to say. It's not my business, 'less you want it to be."

"Say what?"

"Well, there you are standing in the bath tub with your boners. That's the last you told me. Something happened. If you don't want me to know, just say so. It's your right."

"I don't mind if you know." He looked down. "But it's hard to say. See, he took my face between his hands ..."

"And?"

"And he said 'no' and pushed me away. Then he got out of the shower and got dressed."

"So he just left you standing there naked and feeling like a fool."

"Sort of, I guess." Alex rubbed his face and closed his eyes. He shook his head in a barely perceptible manner and moaned slightly. He was not even aware that he had made an audible sound. "You know," he said finally, "I never wanted anybody to touch me so much in all my life."

"You do love him."

"I do. But I'm not sure he feels the same way about me."

"He does. No question about that."

"Are you just trying to make me feel good?"

"No. I would rather tell you he didn't love you, and then maybe you would give him up."

"You don't like him very much, do you?"

"I don't even know him, Honey. So how can I dislike him?"

"You could dislike the kind of person he seems to be, from what I tell you."

"I suppose so. I guess I'd have to say I don't care for how he treats you."

"He doesn't treat me bad."

"He treats you like a jealous lover."

"How?"

"Well, what did he tell you about sex with other people? Don't do it. And what did he tell you about nature? That you have to give that up too. So he's the only one in your life. But then he doesn't even touch you. Seems to me that kind of leaves you hanging out in nowhere land."

"Maybe he wants us to be like Socrates says lovers should be. Remember that part in the philosophy book you got me? He told me about Socrates too. Maybe he wants us to go toward that light together."

Marcie shook her head. "Maybe," she said. "I don't know."

"But you still don't like him much."

"All I can say is that his way and my way don't seem to be the same. Maybe his way is better. Or maybe there is no better or worse way. I really don't know. It's too deep for me. But the bottom line is you got to choose your own way for yourself. If he's your Socrates, then he's your Socrates."

"Yes. I think that's how it must be. I'm glad we talked about it. I don't know if that thing about Socrates would have popped into my head if we hadn't talked."

He looked out the kitchen window. The sun was bright and cheerful.



Alex decided to drop by the library. Sometimes he found Richard there. In any case he wanted to get a copy of the two Socratic dialogs Richard had told him about – Phadrus and The Symposium. He hoped that by reading these two works he would be able to better understand his relationship with Richard. Richard had talked more than once about the progression from the love and appreciation of a beautiful boy to the contemplation of Pure Beauty in its absolute manifestation. It was a little difficult to understand what the contemplation of Pure Beauty beyond this realm of shadows might be like. But the idea that he might be the beautiful boy that gave Richard his jump start was quite gratifying. The ideal of perfect celibacy was beyond Alex at the moment. He avoided any sexual contact with Marcie, and tried to accept it that Richard could not allow their relationship to become sexual. But he could not break himself of his habit of masturbation. Pastor Maury had told a group of boys at church camp that he believed that masturbation was the 'thorn in the flesh' from which Paul had not been able to free himself. At least that put him in good company.

Richard was not in the library. Alex sat down in the chair that Richard sat in when he read or simply stared out the window at the campus. It felt good to sit where Richard sat. One day he would perhaps have read as much as Richard, and would be as conversant on as many subjects. Yes, he could be Richard's beautiful boy, and one day perhaps he would have a beautiful boy of his own.

He went to the card catalog in the basement and found where the Socratic dialogs were located. He found a volume that contained both of the ones he wanted, along with a number of others. He stuck it in his knapsack and descended the stairs two at a time. Perhaps he needs to see me naked more often to kindle the fire, he thought to himself as he trotted to his motorcycle.

Always Alex felt excited when he was approaching Richard's house. Today he was especially elated. His last visit had been painful to him. Richard had not only minimized the importance of his experience in the woods, but had also made it clear that the touch Alex longed for would not be given. But he now had a way of understanding his situation with Richard – and a challenge he was anxious to respond to. Although it was indeed painful not to be able to satisfy the desire that was ignited in himself as well as in Richard, the hope that one day this fire that burned within him might rise to a new level of intensity, happiness and peace made the privation seem worth it.

He steered his cycle back and forth down the street in a sort of dance, and took the hills at a speed that was really not quite safe. But the tensions within him were crying for some release.

Alex leaned his bike against a tree and ran to the house. He was surprised to notice that the generator was not running. It was still early in the morning and usually Richard started it up in order to have the power he needed for making breakfast and heating the water for a shower. Alex wondered whether something was wrong. He started the generator and ran up to the deck. He saw no sign that Richard had been there recently, and he proceeded with some apprehension into the house. Perhaps Richard was sick. He went into the bedroom but Richard was not there. Something was very wrong. A quick glance around the room told him that Richard's personal things were missing – most of his books and papers and some of his clothes. He had left. Alex wondered how could he have done such a thing without telling him. Perhaps he had simply located a house he liked better and moved in there. Maybe he had left a note somewhere.

A quick search of the bedrooms disclosed nothing so he went to the kitchen. When the weather was not good, and the deck was not an option, he and Richard had spent a lot of time in the kitchen. They ate their meals there, and spent additional time drinking tea and coffee and talking. That would be a logical place to find a note. The coffee pot was set up so that it just had to be turned on to begin brewing the coffee. Some fruit, trail-mix and home-made biscuits – the sort Richard liked to make the that the two of them had shared frequently – were laid out on the counter. Even butter and honey were there. Did this mean that he was expected to get breakfast started and that Richard would show up any minute to share it with him? He flipped the switch to start the coffee and went to the living room. He and Richard would watch videos there. He found the note he was looking for on the coffee table in front of the couch. It was a hand-written message with a video on top of one corner. Alex sat on the couch and picked the note up.

*Dear Alex,
By the time you find this note you will already have suspected
the truth. I have left. I will not be coming back, and there is no
point in your looking for me. You will not be able to find me.
I have no attachments in this world and will leave no trail.
I have thought about how to explain this to you – have
written some long letters, even, which I then destroyed.
The essential issue is really quite simple.
My path is one I have chosen to walk alone.
I am sorry.
I hope that one day you will be able to forgive me.
If you are hungry you will find some breakfast in the kitchen.
I have also left you a video, which you may be able to relate to.
Richard.*

The video was *For a Lost Soldier*. He picked it up. On the back of the DVD case he read that “*For a Lost Soldier* is a sensitive and poignant story of a romantic relationship between a grown-up and a child. A lonely and uncertain 12 year old boy finds friendship and first love with a Canadian soldier. Years later, as an adult frustrated by a lack of creative inspiration, he finds he can turn the painful ending of that relationship into a new beginning.”

At first Alex was too stunned to react. He still could not believe that this was real. He picked the note up and took it to the kitchen where he sat down and poured himself some coffee. Then he read the note again. This time he realized that it was true. Whatever else he might do, Richard would not joke about such a thing. He stood up and threw his coffee cup into the sink. Then he swept all the breakfast things off onto the floor and went out to the deck. He sat down in one of the chairs there and tried to make sense of it. “Damn you, Richard. Damn you. How could you?” he said. He listened to the birds and was reminded of the ledge down by the stream where he had gone and felt the woods as a living presence. But that memory only added to his grief. For a long time he sat there, doing and saying nothing. Finally he got up, went to his motorcycle, and left.

Medicine Before and after the Plague

In the pre-plague years, many health professionals were aware that there was a relationship between psycho-spiritual balance and physical health. In some cases, 'faith healing' did in fact access the deeper regenerative capacities of the implicate dimensions of the self. In examining the literature, one also finds carefully documented cases of the spontaneous remission not just of cancer, but of a number of other serious illnesses as well. The field of psychosomatic medicine – despite its incompatibility with some of the reductionist assumptions of the age – received a degree of begrudging recognition within the mainstream of medicine.

At the same time, it must be noted that the successful application of non-mechanist forms of healing was quite limited. People continued to die from cancer, AIDS and other serious illnesses even after the prayers, the laying on of hands, the meditative practices or whatever other psycho/spiritual techniques were applied to the patient. Spontaneous remissions were just that: spontaneous. The dynamics that underlay such remissions were never clearly apprehended and no systematic use of these healing possibilities was ever established.

Although there were a few healers who seemed able to access a true healing power, there were many more 'faith-healers' who were blissfully deluded as to the limits of their powers and not a few out-and-out frauds. Given this state of affairs it is not surprising that many investigators assumed that spontaneous remissions, faith healings and the like were not-yet-understood curiosities that would one day be explained by the same mechanistic procedures that were producing such dramatic outcomes in many situations.

It now appears that the limited success of psycho-spiritual interventions can best be explained by a number of factors. First, in a culture dominated by intellectuals who were enamored by the mechanistic-reductionist model of reality, only a limited amount of resources was dedicated to exploring alternatives. Second, the extremely primitive forms of popular spirituality that appeared to most people to be the only alternative to the mechanistic-reductionist model discredited psycho-spiritual approaches in the the minds of most thinking people. Third, many of the imbalances that were disease-producing were collective in nature, and therefore not amenable to adequate treatment within the context of models of health and illness that assumed the primary locus of pathogenic processes was in the individual organism. Fourth, it was little understood that some illnesses in fact served larger psycho-spiritual functions and were thus not amenable to correction by psycho-spiritual means.

• All the aforementioned causes for the inefficacy of pscho-spiritual health interventions could conceivably have been overcome. But there was a fifth obstacle that proved to be insurmountable. For real progress to be made it would have been necessary to transcend that entire cultural paradigm of the pre-plague years. As is now clear, a paradigm contains emotional, cognitive and mythical dimensions that are largely unconscious and not easily amenable to change. This was, of course, understood by a limited number of individuals long before the Great Plague, but this understanding did not inform cultural life as a whole to any great extent.

• Prior to the Great Plague, when creative individuals stepped out of the dominant paradigm of their culture, they were presumed by the larger group to be insane – a judgment the creative person often shared. For this reason the person’s work was often discredited in its entirety and not carefully sifted for its nuggets of truth. In addition, the person was frequently persecuted in a variety of ways, or even destroyed. Minimally, such a person was excluded from positions of responsibility and often from social life in general. It is difficult for those born and raised in the post-Plague years to grasp the extent of the difficulties and suffering forced on any creative person who had the temerity to attempt to live outside the harsh constraints imposed by pre-Plague paradigms.

From 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p 281

Chapter Five *End of the Dinosaurs*

He had not expected to wake up. But he did. For the past few weeks he had been reading everything he could get his hands on about the progress of the Plague. It had hit Europe first, then Asia and Africa. Only then did it jump across the ocean and infect the Americas – North America first and then the South. He could see almost immediately that efforts to keep it from infecting the Americas were going to be futile. He was able to glean some important information from the reports and speculations. So far as anyone could discern, it was limited to the human species. There was a lot of discussion about possible ‘vectors’ – transmitters of the disease. In just a matter of days everybody in the world learned what a ‘vector’ was. Birds were suspected. As he was something of an expert on birds, Antonio was even approached by local newspapers for his opinion on the subject, which was, maybe and maybe not. Who could say? It was a reasonable speculation.

“Dr Lamarre states that we have reason to believe that birds may be the vector that scientists are looking for”, the story in the newspaper read the next day. It was on the front page. It was not accurate, but “Dr Lamarre has no idea whether birds are the vector or even if there is one” would not have made good copy. Good copy was important, even in the end times. Such are the habits that drive us. Well, it made no difference.

He had read a few isolated reports that a new and unidentified antibody had shown up in some blood samples of people who were sick with ordinary known diseases. He suspected that everybody was already infected, and that they were now living during an incubation period.

Antonio got up and went to the kitchen sink where he drank a glass of water. Then he turned the TV on just to be sure that what he thought had happened was in fact the case. The screen lit up but no program appeared. He tried all the channels. Yes, he thought. It really is so. Most people are dead. He returned to sit on his bed. He had no plan. He had already learned that a few people did survive. Estimates varied, but all agreed that it was only a very small number. He thought about how odd it was that he should be one of the survivors. It had never occurred to him to wonder what he would do if he woke up.

He glanced around the efficiency in which he had been living the last four months. It consisted of two rooms – one that was a combination bedroom, living room and kitchen, the other a bathroom. It was quite adequate in terms of his physical needs, but lonely. Not that he really liked large numbers of people in his life, but he had grown used to family life. He missed Isabel and Alicia. Well, he missed Alicia. And he missed living in a family. Isabel and he never had actually grown close. He wanted to have a life that appeared normal, and did have a rather strong sex drive. Isabel was attractive and enjoyed sex. So

they got along, after a fashion. Their minds, however, were miles apart. Even so, it came as a surprise to him to learn that she was sleeping with Herman Steiner.

Alicia, on the other hand, he really did miss.

He wondered about his parents. He wanted to go and check on them, but at the moment he felt very drained. He was thirsty, and light-headed. He supposed he was probably dehydrated, and that his electrolytes might be a bit out of balance. He went to the kitchen to get another glass of water. When he returned to his bed this time he flopped back down and drifted off to sleep.

When he awoke the second time he felt stronger, and his head was clear. He knew what he wanted to do, at least for a start. He would go check on his parents, and then on Isabel and Alicia. He put on a pot of coffee, which brewed while he got dressed. Then he fished a slightly stale doughnut out of his bread-box and sat down with a cup of coffee. He wondered that he felt so little. He was not especially glad he had survived. On the other hand, he did not feel that terrible about the six billion or so people who had just died. Was there something wrong with him? What should he feel? It was a fairly easy way to die, actually. They would have felt what he did. At first it was like having a rather severe flu – aches and pains, of course, and a bad headache. With regard to emotional suffering, many people would probably have felt a deep despair as they experienced these symptoms. He was mainly just curious. But then the fever spiked and one was soon delirious and then unconscious. It was rather quick, and while not entirely painless, there were worse ways to go. It was, he supposed, the same for them as it had been for him. Except that he woke up. And now what did he feel? Like he was in a dream. It was hard to gain any sense of reality about what had happened. Well, normal or not, he felt what he felt. There was no longer anyone to pretend for.

He left his apartment and went down the one flight of stairs to the street. His car was where he had left it two days ago. All the things in the environment were, in fact, unchanged. It was just that there were no people around. He drove to his parents' house just inside the northern belt-way. The door was unlocked, so he walked in. He found them in bed. His mother had her arms around his father. He felt a sadness creeping into his dream-like state. They had each other, he thought. They were brave and philosophical. They would not have been hysterical. He must have become unconscious first, and she held him – for his comfort and for her own. He wondered what he should do. There was no precedent for handling the end of the world. Not the complete end, he thought. There was a remnant, and so far as he knew none of the other species were affected. But it was the end of the world as he knew it. He realized that everybody couldn't be buried. There were simply too many dead and too few for the task. He recalled that some Native American groups put their dead up on platforms in trees and let them be devoured. Why not? And why not just leave his parents as he found them? He could see no way to improve the situation in which he found them. He kissed each one, without disturbing their positions, and left the house.

His ex-wife's house was several miles away, near the University complex next to the White River. On the drive there, he saw only two people. One was a young woman with a blank look on her face who was driving up the street he was going down. It was a one-way street, but what did it matter? The other one was a man who was sitting on a curb. He seemed to be crying.

It was a nice house – old but carefully renovated. Everything that Herman Steiner did was tasteful. He was successful. He was the head of his department at the University, and had a good reputation within his field. He had published several articles in prestigious journals. His articles were intelligent and correct. They carefully linked into the work of other scholars and then offered a small insight that added to the 'literature'. Isabel was also successful in her work with her public relations firm. Success was important to her. Antonio had always told himself that what was really most important to her was art as a means of self-expression – as something he would have thought of as 'real' art. She used her artistic talent with the advertising firm only because a person had to adapt to the world. Only after she left him did he come to the belief that he had been taken in – that actually she had no self to express. What she did have was an uncanny knack for being whatever any man she wanted to seduce wanted in a woman. But what she herself wanted was a man who could be as successful as she was. Antonio had not been that man. That was why she had left him.

Antonio had never been in Steiner's house before. It was a large two-storey structure. The downstairs was decorated in a modern style – with abstract paintings that were aesthetically pleasing in a vague sort of way, but which did not pretend to explore any of the issues of human existence. Antonio peered from the entryway into a large living room. A carefully selected collection of audio and visual equipment, dominated by a huge TV screen, was arranged along the far wall and a large couch sat in the middle of the room, facing it all. The TV screen was lit and flickering, but of course there was no picture on it. The room was a bit cluttered, but clean. They had a cleaning woman come by periodically. Alicia had mentioned this during one of her visits with him. But Antonio had no interest in trying to glean from the room information about its regular inhabitants, as he would have previously. None of that made any difference now. He assumed that everybody would be upstairs. He wasn't sure that he was quite prepared for what he might find there, so he went into the living room to think and to try to get his bearings.

As he walked around the couch he was startled when he saw that someone was lying on it. It was Isabel. She was curled up in fetal position, facing toward the back of the couch. A bottle of ginger ale sat on the floor with a half empty glass beside it. He called to her, but knew she wouldn't respond. She seemed very fragile and lonely there. He supposed that Steiner and Alicia had died first and she had come downstairs to get away from them. He turned the TV off and went to the stairs. The first door he came to opened into the master bedroom. Herman Steiner lay on the bed, face down, dressed only in a pair of boxer shorts. The covers were all on the floor and the sheets were in a tangle, lying beneath him.

Antonio could see that Alicia was not in the room, and he had no interest in Steiner, so he backed out of the room.

The next door he opened was a well furnished guest room. The door to the bathroom was open. That left only one more door. It seemed odd to Antonio that they should all be in separate places with the doors shut.

He opened the door the the last bedroom, and saw that it was decorated for a child. Alicia was lying on her side on her bed, with her arms between her legs. Her head was twisted back in an odd position. Antonio's first thought was that her face hardly looked like her. But he recognized the nightie she was wearing – the one with the picture of the fairy child on it. He sighed and went over to the bed and sat down. The dream-like quality of his experience intensified. This could not be real. He looked around the room to try to imagine what her life here might have been like. The posters she had on her walls portrayed scenes from the Harry Potter books and other fantasy stories. She was eight, but was precocious and would have been able to read these books to herself. Then his eyes fell on the bedside stand and he saw one of the Moomintroll books lying on it. It was 'Comet in Moominland'. He remembered then how he would read bedtime stories to her every night. These were some of her favorites. Antonio had himself enjoyed the droll humor and the quirky imagination that went into the stories, and found great pleasure in watching Alicia's delight in them. It had been one of the most pleasurable experiences in his life.

He lay down beside her and gathered her in his arms and cried for a long time. Her body, of course, was neither warm nor supple as it had been when she was alive. After a while he got up and went back downstairs to the kitchen. He found a large bowl and filled it with hot water, which he took back upstairs to the bedroom. He removed her clothes and as he begin washing her off he became aware of the first strong wish that came to him since he awoke. He wished that he had not survived. He dried her off and dressed her in clothes that he knew she liked to wear – her favorite jeans with the flowers on the pockets, and her t-shirt with the gnome family that lived under a giant mushroom. Finally he wrapped her in a blanket and carried her downstairs and out to his car. Whatever happened to the others, she, at least, would be buried.

He laid Alicia in the back seat and drove to the Lafayette Square mall where he found a spade, a pick ax, and a saw. Then he drove west. When he had escaped the city, he left the main highway and followed back roads until he came to a farm that was surrounded by fields. A small brook with a line of trees marked the edge of the property. This seemed to be as good a place as any. Antonio selected a fairly flat piece of land that was just a few yards from the brook, and began digging. He encountered a number of tree roots but he was in no hurry. The bigger ones he cut with his saw. In a few hours he had managed to dig a hole that was over four feet deep. He lowered Alicia's body into the hole and carefully covered her face with the blanket. Then he filled it in with dirt. He found the biggest rock he could carry in the stream, and brought it to the grave where he placed it as a headstone.

Antonio then drove back into Lafayette Square and went to a drug store. He rummaged around the pharmacy section until he found some Tylenol with codeine, and some sleeping pills. Finally he gathered together an odd assortment of supplies: an allergy mask, a bag of garbage bags, the heaviest rubber bands he could find, and a gallon of distilled water. With these supplies he returned to Alicia's grave. The sun was getting low when he arrived.

Antonio did not like violence or pain, but he did not want to live. He had explored ways of killing himself when Isabel left, and found a book put out by the Hemlock Society that described what seemed like a good plan to him at that time. He would take the Tylenol with codeine, and an overdose of the sleeping pills. Then he would put the allergy mask over his face, and a plastic bag over his head, with rubber bands to hold it in place around his neck. He would hold it out so that he could breathe, until the sleeping pills took control. Then, as he went to sleep, he would let loose the rubber bands. His idea was to simply drift into permanent oblivion. Or, if there was some sort of existence that followed the death of the physical body, which he doubted, he was ready to move on to that.

He sat down, put the bag with the rubber bands and other paraphernalia down beside him in the grass, and thought about his reasons for wanting to kill himself earlier.

The most important reason he had wanted to die was the loss of his family. He saw Alicia from time to time, but it was not the same as living with her and Isabel as a family. On top of this was his professional failure. The college where he taught was not planning to renew his contract. He kept bringing unorthodox ideas into the classroom, ideas that the faculty interpreted as 'creationism'. Actually his views had nothing to do with those of the evangelical Christians, who he thought were ignoramuses. But he did believe that there was a real teleology involved in the process of evolution. When he was getting his doctorate he talked his professor into allowing him to do a dissertation that argued, firstly, that the neo-Darwinian view that random mutation and natural selection alone were sufficient to explain evolution was philosophy – not science: it was neither empirically verifiable nor falsifiable; and secondly, that the process philosophy of Whitehead provided a more adequate way of bringing coherence to the facts. His professor argued that whether this was true or not, to do a dissertation like that would hurt him professionally.

"It shouldn't," he had argued.

His professor only shrugged. "But it will," he said.

And it did.

Antonio's rejection by the academic community made it clear that he did not belong with the leaders of modern intellectual life. Some evangelicals heard about what happened, and mistakenly concluded that he could be recruited to their cause, but he pushed them away. He certainly did not fit there. That he should have been born into this world at all seemed to him like a fluke – a painful accident. He didn't like its religion, its science, its way of doing business, or its politics, and he was unenthusiastic about most of its entertainments.

When his effort to find a refuge from a world that seemed hostile and foreign in a cozy family also failed, he lost what appetite still remained for living here.

He had finally decided, however, not to follow through with his suicide plan. It was mainly his conviction that it would create a serious problem for Alicia that prevented him from doing so. Now that reason to continue living in this world was no longer there.

Antonio sat beside his daughter's fresh grave and watched the sun set. He took two of the Tylenols with codeine. At the moment he just wanted to take the edge off the aches and pains he felt throughout his body – probably, he thought, the aftermath of the Plague. He wasn't quite ready to take the overdose of pills that would free him from this world. After a few minutes he began to feel strangely peaceful. He knew that he would miss Alicia, but he had already done a lot of grieving for her when the family broke up. He felt now that she was peaceful. He did not believe in personal immortality. It's just the codeine, he thought. She is neither peaceful nor unpeaceful. Still, is it impossible that on some occasions a mind altered by drugs – or simply freed from its connection to a body full of pain – might not be able to experience reality more fully, more accurately? Perhaps she was peaceful.

As he thought about it, Antonio realized that Alicia was really the only person in the world he would intensely grieve for. He knew other people he liked, but he was not deeply attached to them. They were part of a world that did not, in any fundamental way, include him. Not his core self. There had been a couple of others in college with whom he had felt this deep kinship, but they had all gone their separate ways, perhaps not realizing how rare such camaraderie would prove to be in the future. He felt sorry for the billions who had died, but he did not grieve them. He had never known them.

The moon rose, and Antonio continued to sit. The feeling of peace deepened. It was organic – not something he willed or could have predicted. Perhaps it was just the codeine. Certainly the freedom from pain that the codeine facilitated was a part of it. But it was more than that. He was no longer sure that he wanted to kill himself. It was not that he was afraid. He was not driven by the idea that a punitive god or universe would cause him any torment if he killed himself. But something seemed to draw him back into the world.

The world that excluded you, in which you were a stranger, to which you never really belonged, has ceased to exist: this thought came to him with startling clarity. "And I alone am left to tell the tale." As the words of Ishmael in 'Moby Dick' came to his mind, he smiled. Was it inappropriate to smile on such an occasion? But who was around to know or care or even have an opinion about the matter? Appropriateness and inappropriateness had ceased to exist.

The world that excluded me has died along with most of its inhabitants, his reverie continued. Well, ok. It was not my fault. In truth he had done what he could to warn those who held the reins of power in the world, that their disregard for the biological order of things was quite dangerous.

Few people had heard him. It was hard to get his articles published. But no matter. Once again the earth had cleansed itself with a great catastrophe. This, surely, was as great an extinction as the one that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. It was that extinction that set the scene for the evolution of mammals. Perhaps this extinction would wipe out the new dinosaurs that were preventing the evolution of the earth – namely the human beings who, perhaps because of their loss of a sense of kinship with the rest of life, had in their way grown as huge and cruel and stupid as their extinct predecessors 65 million years ago.

Antonio actually felt a desire for something. He wanted to see what sort of world might emerge out of this chaos. This desire did not take away the pain of having just buried his daughter. It didn't generate a huge desire to live. But curiosity was always a strong motivator for Antonio, and in this case it tipped the scales. Perhaps, even, he thought to himself, a new world might not be one that would leave people like him on the outside.

But now he was tired. He pushed aside the bag containing his rubber bands and the other things he had collected at the mall, and he lay down beside his daughter's grave and slept.

Education Before and After the Plague

Obviously the major impact of the Plague on educational practice derived from the collapse of the huge bureaucratic system that administered a program of compulsory education. This system did produce a high level of literacy. Most people could read and write on at least a simple level. Also, most people understood at least the fundamentals of arithmetic. In our present circumstances it is estimated that perhaps 10 to 15 percent of the population are illiterate. The criteria used for defining literacy upon which these estimates are based is whether an individual could read with understanding the sentences that an average four-year-old child would produce in his or her spoken language. The flip side of this is that 85 to 90 percent of the population are learning to read and write – many with a very high level of competence – without any formal education. Nevertheless, the fact of significant illiteracy in society at this point has led a number of social critics to suggest that we may need to return to the old system of compulsory education at some point. Perhaps so. It is possible that as society recreates some of its previous complexity our current pedagogical practices will prove to be inadequate. But before rushing into the reinstatement of the old system, a closer look at what existed then, and how it compares with what we have now, might be in order. Only a few of the older members of our current population can remember from personal experience what it was like to be in the pre-Plague educational institutions.

Although educational practices have been quite varied since the Great Plague, it is possible to make some generalizations about the differences in pedagogical practice before and after the event. Society is now fundamentally different in many ways. Before the Plague there was a division of the generations into separate spheres of existence. Except for their own children, most adults had very little contact with children, and children were in general ‘protected’ from contact with adults. Where contact did occur, such as in the schools or in extracurricular activities, it was highly structured, visible, and regimented. Now children are generally in daily contact with adults, with whom they share the various activities necessary for survival. They work in the family garden along with the adults, or in the case of the nomadic groups – the so-called ‘gypsies’ – they participate in hunting and gathering activities and in performing the various tasks needed in their travels.

Most communities do provide for some semi-formal arrangements to ensure that the majority of their children grow up with basic reading, writing and math skills. But beyond this, educational pursuits are selected by the children themselves. These pursuits are dictated

● by two factors: 1, what they need for the the tasks they carry out in
● conjunction with the adults around them, and 2, the things that they
● naturally become interested in as they go about their ordinary activities.
● Education in our present society is, in other words, driven by need and
● curiosity. Children want to learn about the things they need to know to
● participate effectively with others, or that they are naturally curious
● about, so they seek out older children or adults who can teach them
● these things. This fact is so simple and obvious that few people today
● give it much thought one way or the other. Yet, as hard as it may be to
● grasp this fact in its full significance, it was generally assumed before
● the Plague that children did not like learning.

● All around us we see that children seek out and gobble up
● information like candy. And they are forever asking why this, and why
● that. The assumption that children did not like learning was based on
● the observation of children who were alienated from the rest of their
● community, highly regimented, and not allowed to pursue their own
● natural interests. Such children frequently did fail to show interest
● in learning what the adults deemed worth knowing. Therefore it was
● necessary to impose a system of extrinsic rewards and punishments
● to motivate children who had lost their intrinsic interest and pleasure
● in learning, and in some cases in life itself.

From 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, pp 392, 393

Chapter Six

An Unwelcome Guest

Janice liked Antonio even less than any of the other men Marcie had brought home to supper. He isn't very handsome, she thought. He isn't tall like some of them. And he is kind of skinny. He doesn't smile a lot. I don't think he is very friendly. Why does Marcie like him?

"Where did you find him?" she asked.

"You mean where did I meet him?"

Janice grabbed the last piece of chicken off the plate in the middle of the table. She didn't want Antonio to have a chance to get it.

"Yeah."

"I met him at a bookstore in the mall."

"Oh." Janice began gnawing the meat off the bone and looked down. She really didn't care where Marcie had met him. What she really meant was, why did she bring him home?

"What kind of books were you looking for?" Alex asked Antonio. In spite of himself, he liked this man. But he shared with Janice the wish that Marcie would not bring any of her men home. She didn't do it that often, actually. There had been only three others over the last year. But Alex was aware that Marcie was wanting something in her life that neither he nor Janice provided. He continued to hold Janice at a distance, but was used to having her around. He had found himself somewhat distant from Marcie since the business with Richard. Even after Richard left, Alex never became physically intimate with her again.

"I was looking for some books on birds to see whether I might be able to be interested in them again."

"Again?"

"Before the Plague I was a biologist. An ornithologist. I specialized in birds."

"Did you have a family?" Janice asked him.

Antonio nodded. "I was married and we had one child. A girl. She was about your age."

"What was her name?"

"Alicia."

"Was she pretty?"

"Very."

"I'm a girl, but I'm more like a boy," Janice said.

"Yes. Marcie told me that."

"You think that's weird?"

"No."

Well, ok, Janice thought. Antonio didn't think it was weird if she wanted to be a boy. Or at least he said he didn't. That was in his favor. But that still didn't

mean she had to like him.

“So did your interest in birds come back?” Alex asked.

“Not really.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. After I buried my daughter I didn’t have much interest in anything. I decided to go on living, but my interest in living has been slow coming back.”

Alex thought about William, and about Richard, and about the trouble he had been having for some time getting close to anyone or caring about anything. “Maybe that happens after you lose somebody you ... love. You know. Like a son or daughter or brother.”

“Or a lover,” Marcie said.

Alex glared at her. He didn’t want her to bring up that business about Richard again. “Or just anybody,” he said.

“I think you’re right,” Antonio said. “In addition to the roots that you can see, most plants have very tiny root-hairs that are responsible for a good deal of what the plant absorbs. The reason transplants sometimes don’t work, is that when you uproot a plant, these very delicate root hairs tend to be destroyed. That’s the way it is when we lose somebody – somebody we are really connected with. All those root hairs are torn away, and it takes time for them to grow back.”

Antonio reminded Alex of Richard. They were both teachers and were both very intelligent. But there was a least one difference he could see – even at this point when he didn’t know Antonio that well. Antonio was gentle and accepting. He showed an interest in what Alex thought, and seemed to respect it. At any rate he didn’t try to tear it down. Still, though, he was guarded. He really didn’t want anybody else to be sharing the house with them – however nice he might be.

“What made you interested in birds?”

Antonio shrugged. “Just was.”

“That’s an interesting question,” Marcie said. “What did make you interested in them?”

“It’s hard to say.”

“Try.”

“Well, my reasons for being interested in things were weird,” he said. “I doubt that anybody would find them interesting.”

“We’re talking about what makes something interesting, interesting,” Marcie said. “That’s got to be interesting.”

“Is it also interesting to try to understand why we find it interesting that we find it interesting that something is interesting?” Alex said. “I mean, this could go on and on.” He sat back and grinned, obviously satisfied with himself.

Antonio laughed. “That’s called an ‘infinite regress’,” he said. “We run into them lots of times when we try to understand the fundamental causes of things.”

“Alex and I are learning philosophy together,” Marcie said. “So maybe you

can help. Give us an example of an infinite regress.”

“Well, once there was this very learned astronomer and philosopher who was giving a lecture, in which he described how the earth was a part of the solar system, and the solar system was a part of the Milky Way Galaxy, and it in turn was part of a larger system of galaxies, which was part of an unimaginable huge expanding universe.

“When he opened the floor for discussion a old lady told him that what he was saying was rubbish. The earth was really a flat plate resting on the back of a tortoise. ‘What then, is the tortoise resting on?’ the philosopher asked. He smiled condescendingly at her. He was sure he had scored a point. But the woman saw where he was heading with this. ‘You’re not so smart as you think you are,’ she said. ‘It’s turtles all the way down’.”

Marcie and Alex both laughed. “Cool,” said Alex. “Turtles all the way down. I like that.”

“Me too,” said Marcie. “But you still didn’t answer the question. Who are you to judge whether the rest of us will think your reasons are weird or not?”

“Well, all right. I’ll try to explain it. When I was in high school, just a little older than Alex, I got interested in things that seemed like lots of separate things at one point and then acted like a single organism at another. Like ants and ant colonies. Each ant seems individual, but the whole anthill acts like a single organism. Or like slime molds, which look and act just like a lot of single-celled organisms most of their lives, but then all at once pull together and form themselves into what looks like a single organism, with differentiated parts. Then one day I watched a flock of birds take off. As I watched their flight pattern I saw that this was the same thing. The flock itself was an organism. I knew that there was a mystery in this that I wanted to understand. And I knew that I wanted to study this mystery in birds.”

“I like to listen to birds sing,” Janice said.

“That too,” said Antonio. He smiled at her.

His smile was hard to resist. And he always listened to what she had to say. But Janice wasn’t that easily taken in. He had sure left her out with all that complicated talk about ants and birds. She still wished he would go away.

“I have asked Antonio to stay with us tonight,” Marcie said. Janice and Alex seemed to be hitting it off fairly well with Antonio right then, and she thought this was as good a time as any to make the announcement.

“I’m done eating,” Janice said. She jumped down and started out of the room.

“We’ve got some desert,” Marcie called after her.

“I’ll eat it while I play my video game,” Janice said.

“Well, whatever. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

Alex stared at his plate and acted like he hadn’t heard.

“Is that ok with you Alex?” Marcie asked.

“Sure. Why not?” But Alex did not look up from his plate.

“It doesn’t seem like my staying overnight is a very popular idea,” Antonio observed.

"It will be all right," Marcie assured him. "It's just that the kids aren't used to it. They like things to stay the same."

"I don't have to stay over. Maybe the kids need more of a chance to get used to me."

"No." Marcie's tone was emphatic. "I want you to stay. It's my bed you will be sleeping in."

"Sometimes Janice likes to sleep with you," Alex pointed out.

"She sleeps just as often in her crib. She likes it there."

"Whatever. You have a right to have guests if you want them."

Marcie looked at Alex, and then at Antonio. She heard the video program come on in the living room. "Well, why don't I get us some desert? Ice cream with strawberries."

"We got strawberries?" Alex asked.

"Antonio brought them."

"I found them growing wild," he said. "They're really quite good."

Marcie called out to Janice, her voice loud enough to be heard over the video. "Janice, honey, Antonio brought us some strawberries."

There was a long pause. "Janice, did you hear?" she called again.

"I heard. I don't like strawberries. Just bring me the ice cream."

"I thought you liked them."

"I don't like them today."

Marcie looked at Antonio. "Janice can be a little ... difficult at times," she said. She smiled apologetically.



Antonio had been sleeping at their house for five nights. Janice had noticed that even Alex seemed to like him being there. He didn't at first, but they liked talking about that stuff they called philosophy. And Marcie really seemed to like him. But Janice continued to avoid him as much as she could.

A couple of times she had heard them doing things at night. She thought he might be drinking milk like she did. Well, if Marcie liked him doing that more than she liked her doing it, there was nothing she could do. But she didn't have to be friends with Antonio. This night it was very hot and they had thrown the covers off themselves. Janice had always insisted that they keep a night light in the bedroom. In addition, the moon was full and the bedroom window was large, so there was a fair bit of light in the room. They thought that she was asleep and they started hugging and kissing. Both of them were naked. Marcie opened her eyes enough to see what they were doing. Marcie was playing with his penis which had got real big. Then she even kissed it. Finally he rolled over on top of her and put his penis right in her, down between her legs. Marcie seemed to like it and for a while they wrestled around and made some groaning noises. Then they were quiet. He was big and hairy and had that penis which got big. Well, he wasn't that big, really. But he was a full grown man, and Janice felt that

she didn't stand a chance against him. She supposed that she would never get Marcie back. Even so, it was interesting to see what they did.

"I hope we didn't wake her up."

They had, but Janice pretended to be sleeping.

"Don't worry, Tony. She sleeps like a log."

They seemed to take a long time settling down, but eventually Janice heard that familiar deep steady breathing that told her Marcie was asleep. Not long after, she heard an unfamiliar snoring. So she knew that Antonio was asleep too. She slipped out of her crib very quietly and looked over at their bed. They had made some effort to cover up with the sheet, but Janice could see that they were snuggled up pretty close to each other.

Janice went to the bathroom where she sat on the toilet and peed. She didn't need to very badly, but she didn't want to stay in the bedroom where Antonio was staying with Marcie. Here at least she could sit and think. But where could she sleep? There was a nightlight in the bathroom, and it was a familiar place, even at night. The rest of the house was darker and seemed scary. She thought about how Marcie really did seem to like sleeping with men, and doing those things with them. Well, she had only seen her do it with Antonio, but she did go places where there might be men, and from time to time would strike up a conversation with one of them. Janice thought men were lumpy and hairy, and she didn't think she would ever want to sleep in a bed with one. Women were softer and you could suck on their breasts, if they let you, and they were gentle and pretty. It felt good to have their arms around you. She wished that Marcie could be satisfied with sleeping with just her. Or if Marcie really felt like she wanted to do things with men, she could sleep with Alex from time to time. He was almost a man. But they didn't need anybody extra in the house. Maybe I'll just sit here all night, she thought. But it was not long before Janice found herself getting sleepy. She wanted to find a bed to sleep in, but was determined not to go back into the bedroom with Antonio and Janice.

She got off the toilet and went out into the hall. It was darker there, but she left the bathroom door open so some light reached the area. Except on the day of the exorcism, Janice had never set foot in Alex's room. So far as she knew the door had never been opened since that time. William's ghost was not supposed to be in there. Marcie had assured her of that on more than one occasion. Still, it was a very scary room. She put her hand on the handle and turned the knob. She opened the door a crack and peered in. The room seemed empty. She couldn't see a ghost. Suppose she just went in and slept in Alex's old bed. He wasn't using it. She took a step into the room. Then she thought about how mad Alex would be if he woke first and found her there. She hated it when he was mad at her. So she backed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Downstairs they left a little light on in the kitchen. It was like a Christmas tree bulb, and it screwed into a very small lamp on the sideboard. It didn't give off a lot of light but when your eyes got used to the dim lighting, you could see well enough not to bump into things. Still, it was very creepy downstairs. She never went down there at night. But she had to do something.

As she neared the bottom of the stairs, she could hear Alex breathing real steady and deeply. He almost snored but not quite. It was more like a purring. She thought she would feel safer if she slept in a room with someone who sounded like that when he slept.

As she neared the couch she could see that he was sleeping on his side. She whispered his name. She wanted him to wake up but but didn't want him to be afraid. The possibility of things like Kali and ghosts never went away really, whatever Marcie said – not at night anyhow. She didn't want Alex to think Kali had come back.

"Alex ... Alex. Wake up."

His rhythmic breathing didn't change at all.

"Alex. It's me. Janice. Don't be afraid. But wake up."

Still he didn't respond. She reached out and shook him gently. He twisted around and sat upright. "What? Who?" He was startled, but then saw it was just Janice.

"Jesus, Janice. You jumped me. What's the matter?"

"I don't have a place to sleep."

"What's wrong with your crib?"

"I don't want to sleep in that bedroom."

"Why not, for Christ's sake?"

"I saw Marcie and Antonio doing things with each other."

"Like what?"

"Well, kissing and feeling each other and stuff like that."

"So?"

"I didn't like it."

"Men and women do that."

"Well, I don't like to see it."

"That's no problem. They're done."

"I don't think they like me in the room with them."

"Did they say that?"

"No, but I can tell."

"How can you tell?"

She sat down on the couch beside Alex and stared at the floor. "I don't know. Since Antonio came Marcie doesn't seem to want to be with me much any more. She never ... hugs me."

"If I hug you will you go back upstairs?"

"Can I sleep in your room, Alex?"

"What do you mean, 'my room'?"

"The other bedroom upstairs."

"No way."

"Why?"

"You know why. It's where William and I slept."

"Marcie says there are no ghosts in there."

"That isn't the point."

"What is?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I would if you explained it to me. I'm not stupid."

"I don't think you're stupid. I just don't want you in that room. That's all."

"Can I sleep with you?"

Alex shook his head. "No. No, you can't." Janice could hear the irritation in his voice. He was losing his patience.

But she persisted. "Why?"

"I don't want to sleep with anyone, Janice. I just want to be left alone. This is my space down here at night."

"You don't even want me on the floor?"

"Not really. Like I said, it's my space and you're in it. Go back up and sleep in your crib. You like it there. Antonio and Marcie won't do that thing again tonight."

"You don't like me either."

"I like you fine, Janice," he said, but his voice was full of irritation. "It's just that I want to sleep and to be left alone."

Janice stood up. "Ok. I'll go."

"That's a good girl, Janice. You'll be fine."

"Don't tell them that I saw them."

"Ok."

Janice made her way back to the staircase and up to the landing. To her right was the room that Alex had shared with William. She didn't dare go against what Alex said, and besides she thought it would be pretty scary to sleep there by herself. On her left was the master bedroom where Marcie was sleeping with Antonio. She was more determined than ever not to go back in there. In the bathroom closet they kept some extra blankets and towels. She found a pillow in there as well. She arranged all this in the bathtub and found that it was not all that uncomfortable. She wondered what people would think when they found her there, but she was very sleepy. She knew nothing more until morning.

She was wakened by Marcie calling her name. "Janice. Janice."

"Huh?"

"What are you doing there?"

"Sleeping."

"But why here? What's wrong with your crib."

She thought a minute. She didn't want to say the real reason. "Because I'm not a baby anymore. I need a bigger bed."

"The bathtub doesn't seem like a big improvement. We can get you a bigger bed any time you want it. But you always said you liked the crib."

Janice sat up in the tub. "I don't think you and Antonio like me sleeping in the room."

"It's fine, Janice. It's not a problem."

Antonio had heard them talking and he came into the bathroom wearing a bathrobe.

"What's happening?" he asked.

“Janice doesn’t want to sleep in the bedroom with us. Says she doesn’t think we want her in the room with us.”

Antonio went to the sink and splashed some water on his face. Then he looked at Janice.

“That’s not true,” he said. But then he looked at Marcie and shook his head. “I thought my being here might create a problem. Maybe I should go.”

“I like you here,” Marcie said.

“So do I like being here,” he said. “But I really don’t want to disrupt everything.”

“We’ll work it out.”

“Isn’t there another bedroom – one that no one is using?” Antonio asked.

Marcie raised her hands with the palms toward him, and gestured that he should back away from that line of questioning. “That’s not an option right now.”

“Alex won’t let anyone use his old room,” Janice said.

“I see,” said Antonio. “Well, there should be a way to work it out so that everybody’s happy.”

Janice crawled out of the tub. “I’m going for a walk,” she said. She hurried down the stairs and trotted to the front door.

“I think she heard us making love last night,” Marcie said. “It makes her jealous to think I have anything to do with someone else.”

Antonio shook his head. “It just doesn’t seem to be working out with my being here,” he said.

“No. It’s fine. We can’t let Janice control everything. We just have to be more careful.”

“Maybe.” He looked uncertain and shrugged. “If you say so. Where do you think she’s going?”

“She has a little place down by a creek that’s not far from here. She calls it her ‘thinking place’. That’s probably where she went.”

“Should we go get her?”

“Let’s give her a little time. Then I’ll go. She never goes any further than her thinking place.”

About an hour later, just as Marcie was going to go get her, Janice returned of her own accord. She didn’t want to talk about what had happened but agreed that she no longer liked her crib. So that afternoon they found a bed that Janice liked, and brought it back to the house.

“I’m not really a baby anymore,” she explained, as they removed her crib from the room.



“I’m going to sleep in my old room again,” Alex announced at supper time. He helped himself to another serving of fried potatoes which he smothered in ketchup. It had been about a week since Janice got her new bed.

Janice, Marcie, and Antonio stopped eating and stared at him.

“Really?” asked Janice.

"Of course, 'really'. Why not 'really'?"

"I thought William ..." Janice began, but she couldn't think of where to take this sentence. She didn't want to get Alex mad at her.

"William is gone," Alex said.

"Even his ghost is gone?" Janice said.

"The thing is, I need my old bedroom back." Alex's manner was casual, almost flippant.

"That's good," said Marcie. She nodded in a somewhat tentative manner. Then she resumed eating, and nodded again, this time with more conviction. "Yes. Yes, I think that's a good idea."

After they cleaned up the dishes, Alex asked Janice if she wanted to play Monopoly with him. This was a first. While he was seldom actually unpleasant to her, he had always been aloof, superior. She was just a child. She had learned not to make overtures to him, but had ceased doing so only because being rebuffed was so painful to her. She wanted to be his sister. Well, his brother, really. She had her hair cut short and wore clothes that made her look like a boy. People who saw her when they went out did, in fact, take her for a boy.

Marcie made popcorn for the two of them, set the card table up, and fixed them both big glasses of Coke with ice. Janice didn't even mind it when he got all the yellow properties plus Boardwalk and Park Place, and he trounced her. He was older and was supposed to win most of the time.

When they finished the game Alex gathered up the things of his that he kept in the living room and took them to his bedroom. Though he had never set foot in this room since the day of the 'exorcism' and had never, in fact, even mentioned the room until that evening at supper, he entered the room in a unceremonious way. After putting his things away he took fresh sheets out of the bathroom closet and put them on his bed.



It was dark. Alex looked over at his brother's bed. William was there, sitting next to the open window. He was naked but he was no longer beautiful. He was pale and looked like a zombie. He came over to Alex. Alex told him to go away, but he took Alex by the hand and led him to the window. The moon was bright but its light disclosed no yard or neighborhood. All around there were only broken buildings and ghostly trees. The sky was dark except for the globe of the moon. Alex knew that if he was drawn out of that window he would be sucked up into the dark void of the sky and he would never return. He begged William to let loose of him.

"You aren't really William," he said. "Leave me be." He was screaming.

"Wake up, Alex. Wake up." Slowly he dragged himself out of his dream. Janice was shaking him. "You were making noises," she said.

Alex nodded. "It was a dream," he said.

"A bad one?" Janice asked. She was standing beside his bed in her Spiderman t-shirt and her boy's briefs, but somehow her outfit no longer irritated him.

"It was William," he said. "No. Not really. I don't know."

"William misses you," Janice said.

"Yes," said Alex. "I guess he must." He began to cry. He had never cried about William or any of his losses since the day he buried them. He knew it was because he had returned to the room. But he did not want to leave. He turned his back to Janice and buried his face in his pillow, but he could not muffle the sound.

Janice put her arms around him. She was afraid that he would push her away, but he didn't. Then she lifted the covers and crawled into bed with him. "I'll stay with you," she said. Alex did not say that she could, or that he would like it. He didn't move over to make more room for her. But neither did he push her out. She was clinging to him as much to keep from falling out of the bed as to comfort him. "You won't be so afraid with me here," she said.

Janice clung to him while he cried for some time. Then he turned around and scooted over to make room for her. He put his arms around her and they snuggled together, each giving comfort to the other.

The next morning Alex rose early and fixed breakfast for everybody. Just before it was ready he went up to the hallway between the bedrooms and banged on a pot with a spoon.

"Breakfast in ten minutes," he announced. "If you're late, you're out of luck." Most often everybody got up whenever they chose to, and each person fended for themselves as far as breakfast was concerned. At times Marcie fixed breakfast for everybody, with Alex or Janice helping her if they happened to be up. But Alex rarely chose to fix it by himself. He opened the door to his room and saw that Janice was still in bed. He judged by her sleepy look that she had not been awake before his calling to her. "Get up," he said. "I need some help getting everything together."

She jumped out of bed and, after using the bathroom, followed him downstairs. She found Alex frying pancakes. Already there was a stack of them on the table, along with a bowl of scrambled eggs. "You set the table," he told her. "I can't do everything at once."

"Ok," she said. "you never fixed breakfast before."

"I know. But this morning I just wanted to."

"We need some orange juice" Janice said.

"Right. And plates and silverware," he told her.

After he finished what he thought would be enough pancakes, Alex went to the foot of the stairs and banged on the pan again. "Breakfast is getting cold," he shouted up the stairs. Marcie came down almost immediately.

"Wow, this is amazing," Marcie said as she sat down at the table. "What prompted you to do this?"

"I don't know," Alex said. "Sometimes families eat together."

Antonio entered the kitchen, sat down beside Alex, and began buttering a pancake for himself.

“So we’re a family now?” Antonio said.

“Well ... sort of,” Alex said.

“Then what does that make me?”

“I guess you got to be the dad,” Alex said. “You’re the oldest.”

“And you’re my brother,” Janice said, looking at Alex.

“Works for me,” he said.

“So if we’re brothers, we can share the same room,” Janice suggested.

Alex stopped chewing his food for a moment, and thought about this idea. He then resumed chewing and swallowed. “I guess that will be ok. You can use the other bed.”

“What about the dresser? Can I use that?”

“It’s full of William’s things.”

“I know.”

“Well ...”

“What should I do with William’s things?”

Marcie was uncomfortable with where the conversation was going.

“Why don’t you let me take care of William’s things?” she suggested. “Alex might have some feelings about that.”

Everybody was silent for a moment.

“I think I’ll finish off those eggs if nobody else wants them,” Antonio said.

“Help yourself,” Alex said.

Antonio dumped the remaining eggs from the bowl on the table onto his plate. “You made a super breakfast, Alex.”

“Thanks.”

They finished breakfast in silence.

“Why don’t you help me with the dishes?” Alex said to Janice.

“Ok.”

He washed and she dried. They didn’t talk much, but Janice was happy. She and Alex were brothers. He was no longer pushing her away. She would do almost anything to please him.

“I suppose you can wear them, if you want,” Alex said, handing her the last plate to dry.

“Wear what?”

“William’s clothes”

“Really?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t need them. Wherever he is, he doesn’t need them.”

Her happiness was complete.



During the next weeks everybody found the new arrangements to their liking. Antonio and Marcie were glad to have their bedroom to themselves, and Janice was happy to be rooming with Alex. Like William, she was not very modest. When she took a bath she wouldn’t bother to put anything on before

coming into the room. Alex, on the other hand, held on to the old habits, and was careful to not allow her to see him naked. But secretly he did like seeing her naked, just as he had enjoyed seeing William naked. William had been more exciting to look at. He was slender and graceful, and Alex had liked looking at his penis as it waggled back and forth as he walked. That was one of the things about which he had been terribly ashamed. But Janice was pretty too in her way. She was a little more plump than William had been, but her buns were round and pretty, and he found the empty place between her legs rather fascinating to look at.

One evening, Alex came into the room from his bath with only a towel wrapped around himself. He was getting more casual about clothes, but he still pulled his underwear or pants on under the towel so as to not be seen. Janice was lying on what was now her bed, reading a super hero comic book. She looked over at Alex.

"Show me what you look like," she said.

"You mean naked?"

"Yeah. I want to see what your thing looks like. You see me all the time."

"You have nothing to see."

Janice ignored this slight. "Show me," she said.

Alex shrugged. "Well, ok, he said." He let the towel drop. Almost immediately he began to get an erection. He had not anticipated this.

"It sticks up all by itself!" Janice was astonished.

"Only sometimes."

"Make it go down."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It does as it pleases."

"Can I touch it?"

"Of course not."

"Wow, I wish I had one." She pulled her boy's briefs down. "Do you want to see what I look like?"

"I already know."

"You never looked real close."

"I need to get my shorts on, Janice." He found his underpants and pulled them on, pushing his erection somewhat painfully into them. "That's enough for now."

"Ok. But let's do this again."

Alex and Janice crawled into their own beds, and both turned their lights out. Alex was too aroused to sleep. When he heard her breathing in a steady manner, he reached down and relieved the tension in his groin as quietly as he could. A nagging guilt prevented him from slipping fully into the peacefulness that usually came to him after he masturbated. With Janice he had ventured out into a territory that was forbidden. His early training still weighed heavily on him. He had been tempted to say yes when Janice asked to touch him. He wasn't sure that even Marcie would find his doing sexual things with Janice

acceptable. Sometimes at night he still believed in the old wrathful god of his upbringing. But there was another dimension to his guilt. He wondered whether he was betraying William.



Often Antonio and Alex would spend a whole day together. During these times Marcie would spend the day with Janice so that she would not complain or feel left out. Alex and Antonio spent most of their time in the swamps and woods, hunting for birds or for samples of water to examine under a microscope at the university. They had brought a couple of the microscopes home, but generally preferred using the ones at the university. There they were not bothered by Janice interrupting them, and they had access to the library where they could look things up. Antonio seemed to know everything about the natural world. His specialty was birds, but he also knew a great deal about microscopic creatures – especially one-celled organisms that he called ‘protists’.

Antonio was like Richard in at least one respect. He was a teacher. He used every opportunity to teach whatever his student was ready to learn. But Antonio was gentle and patient. He never belittled Alex. He would just provide him with facts and ways of thinking about things that were new. Alex wanted to know everything, so it was a good match.

“How come I like learning from you and was so bored at school?”

“You didn’t do well in school?”

“They said I was lazy. ‘You have such potential’, the guidance counselor told me. ‘You could accomplish so much if you just put your mind to it.’”

“Maybe you do better with me because I only teach you what you are interested in – what you are curious about. Remember, you asked to come with me on these trips.”

“You mean you really don’t like me with you?” Alex blurted this out before he had a chance to think about it. The idea was horrifying.

“Not at all. I love having you along. I love to teach and I can’t imagine anyone who would be better company. But I wouldn’t want you to be with me unless it was really what you wanted. And I wouldn’t want to try to teach you anything you weren’t curious about. You’re a perfect student.”

“Really?” Alex wasn’t just fishing for compliments. He really had been shaken by Antonio’s comment.

Antonio looked over at Alex and smiled. He paused, contemplating how much he wanted to say. “Yes, really. Teaching seems to bring me to life. So I like having a good student with me.” He paused again. “See, it’s like this. My daughter, Alicia, was younger than you are, but the two of you shared at least one trait. She was curious. Wanted to know everything. School for some reason had not destroyed that in her.”

“So being with me is sort of like ... being with her again.”

“In a way.”

It was an interesting idea, but Alex felt they were getting too personal, and wanted to turn the conversation to something more abstract. "You think school destroyed curiosity?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

"Wouldn't that have made it harder to teach children anything?"

"Of course. That's why they needed such a diabolical assortment of rewards and punishments to get kids to do any work."

"Didn't they know what they were doing?"

"The school personnel?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I doubt that many of them consciously thought, 'well now, how shall we go about destroying this child's curiosity?' But on some level I think they knew what they were doing. At least the ones in charge of the schools did."

"Why would they want to destroy curiosity?"

"Because if kids had been allowed to keep their curiosity they might have learned something about reality."

"Wasn't that the purpose of school?"

"Not at all. The purpose of school was to indoctrinate. The curriculum was mostly propaganda. At least most of what was taught beyond the simple skills of reading, writing and math is propaganda. The aim was to make you see things the way the dominant members of society wanted you to see things. In many cases this had little or nothing to do with how reality really is."

Alex shook his head. "That doesn't sound right. Give me an example."

Antonio nodded. They were headed to the remains of an old fish hatchery that was still 20 miles further down the road, so they had time to talk without interruption. "Ok. I'll give you two examples. The first one is history. What kind of picture did your American history class give of the United States?"

"Well, that it was a pretty good country. Not perfect, but pretty good. It was a democracy and it stood up for freedom, peace, and democracy around the world."

"Ok. That's about 10 percent truth and 90 percent lies. Fact. The whole 'winning of the West' was a genocidal act against the population that lived here before Columbus arrived. Fact. The economy of the country was dependent on slavery until the Civil War. Lincoln did not free the slaves because he did not believe in slavery – he freed them as a political act. It was in his political interest and in the economic interest of the north to free them. Fact. The US invaded dozens of countries on trumped-up charges to protect the interests of US-based big businesses that were exploiting other populations for their cheap labor. Also, the CIA was constantly engaged in illegal activities, including the overthrow of democratically elected regimes that it did not like. I could go on. If you are interested I could turn you on to some books that tell a much different story about US history than the one you learned in school – stories that are much closer to the truth. Briefly stated, American history courses exist to keep you from learning too much about real American history. They exist to teach you a fictionalized account that deliberately distorts the reality of the case."

“How could they tell you what you could teach and what you couldn’t? America was a free country where you could say what you thought?”

Antonio looked at him and smiled. “That was one of the things they taught you wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was. You said two examples. What’s the other one?”

“Sex. They never wanted you to know about sex. At the same time that was what most kids were more curious about than anything.”

“But they had to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Keep kids from knowing about sex.”

“Why?”

“If kids knew a little about sex, they would try to find out more. They would start messing with each other. All that kind of thing.”

“So?”

“I’m talking about little kids. Ones who aren’t even teenagers yet.”

“Yes. Curiosity about sex begins at a very early age.”

“And you think it’s ok?”

“Of course.”

“Even if a kid is just seven or eight?”

“Why not?”

“At any age? Just let them do as they please?”

“As long as one person isn’t making the other do things he doesn’t want I think kids should be free to explore any way they like.”

“Even if one is a lot older?”

“If they both like what they are doing.”

They drove in silence for some time while Alex absorbed this new thought. Finally he said,

“Did you ever wonder what it would be like for two boys ... or men ... or a boy and a man ...”

But they were arriving at the fish hatchery. If Antonio had heard him, he pretended that he hadn’t.



The sun had just risen. Janice and Alex were both awake, but neither had gotten out of bed. Alex had an erection – as he did every morning when he woke up. The boys at church camp had called it a ‘piss-hard’. Mostly he felt good about Janice sharing the room with him, but every morning he had to figure out how to get out of bed and make it to the bathroom without her noticing his piss-hard. This morning he was planning his strategy for achieving this when he recalled his discussion with Antonio the day before. “Curiosity is ok. Curiosity about anything is ok.” Antonio had been adamant. Not only was curiosity itself ok, but it was ok to satisfy it so long as nobody was hurt.

“I’ve decided that curiosity is ok,” Alex said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I mean about anything. It’s ok to be curious about anything.”

“That’s good.”

“Antonio and I talked about it.”

“You and him learn about bugs and birds and tiny animals. I wish you would take me with you.” Janice turned toward the wall as though she were going to go back to sleep.

“What I’m saying is that it’s even ok if we learn about what we look like and what our sexual parts are like and how they work. Things like that.”

Janice rolled back over and looked at Alex. He pushed the covers down, sat up, and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Janice jumped out of her bed and ran over to his. “Take your underpants off, and let me see,” she said. “Here. Let me show you what I look like.” She pulled off her boy’s briefs and removed her Spiderman t-shirt. “You can touch me or anything,” she said.

Alex realized that she didn’t need the re-assurance about curiosity being ok nearly as much as he had. He did as she asked.

“It’s sticking up again,” she said.

“It’s always like that when I first get up.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know exactly. But it goes away after I pee.”

“Let me watch,” she said.

“Ok.”

They went into the bathroom together and she watched him pee. “It isn’t going down,” she said.

“I know.”

“Why.”

“Cause you’re looking and we are talking sex stuff.”

“That makes it stick out?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll close my eyes.” She did so. “I’ll even turn around.” She turned her back and faced the corner of the bathroom. “I can’t possibly see now.”

“I guess not.”

“One ... two ...” Janice counted to ten. Then she suddenly whirled around and looked. “It’s still sticking up.”

Alex laughed. “Of course it is.”

“I wanted to see what it looked like when it’s down. How long does it take to do that?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“Different things, I guess. I don’t know. It just does.”

“What makes it go up?”

“Thinking about naked people mostly. Or sometimes it just gets hard for no reason.”

“Can’t you make it go down?”

“No. It does what it does. I can’t make it come up or go down just by wishing.”

"Hmm. I didn't know that." She tapped it gently. "It bobbles like a fishing cork."

Alex laughed. They went back to the bedroom and sat on Alex's bed.

"You can look at me," Janice said.

"I can see you."

"I mean close. You never look at me close."

"Ok. I guess so."

Janice turned toward him and spread her legs apart so that he could examine her pubic area.

"You've got a little bump there," Alex observed.

"That's what I rub to make the good feeling."

"Marcie told me about that. It's called a clitoris."

"A clitoris?"

"Yeah. It's like a little penis."

"So I do have a penis – sort of."

"Look, you can make babies. I can't. I have a penis – a real one. You don't. Some have one thing and some another. It comes out even."

"I guess so."

"Sometimes I think it would be better to be a girl. It would be awesome to have a baby – to feel it growing inside you."

"That's what Marcie told me. She says I have a special place for growing one. It doesn't just get mixed up with the food."

"Right."

"But I still like to pretend I'm a boy."

"That's ok. A person can pretend whatever."

"Maybe it would be best to have both parts – girl parts and boy parts."

"Maybe. But I think the different parts would get in the way of each other."

"Can you do that thing to me that Antonio does to Marcie?"

"No. You're not big enough. And there's something in the way. I saw it when I looked at you."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. A flap of skin. It's in the way of the place where the penis would go. Why don't you ask Marcie about it?"

"I will."

"Anyhow, even if it wasn't there, my penis would be too big for you."

"Maybe not."

"I think so."

"Maybe you could touch me, then."

"Down there?"

"Yeah."

Very gingerly Alex explored her vaginal region with his fingers.

"That feels good," Janice said.



Late one sunny afternoon Alex and Antonio had returned from a collecting trip and were examining some of their plunder in the University biology lab. Antonio sat at a table and was thumbing through a bird manual, trying to learn more about a bird he felt should not have been in the area. He was interested in the possibility that the reduced level of human activity might have altered the migratory habits of birds. He was sure this would be the case, but did not think it should have happened so quickly. Alex was looking at some swamp water under one of the University microscope.

“Wow! There is a weird looking creature!” he suddenly exclaimed.

“What’s it look like?”

“It’s like a bell attached to a cork-screw.”

“Good description. That’s a vorticella.”

“Awesome.”

“They are curious creatures.”

“Good grief. Look at that. That corkscrew acts just like a spring.”

“Did he suddenly coil it up and spring back against whatever he is attached to?”

“Yeah. Why did he do that?”

“Hmm. Good question. Watch him carefully. Gradually he will stretch himself out again – the stalk or ‘myoneme’ – will uncoil.”

“Yes. It’s already doing that.”

“Ok. Wait until it’s completely out.”

After staring into the microscope without saying anything for a few seconds, Alex announced that the ‘myoneme’ was uncurled. He liked to use the words that Antonio taught him.

“All right. Now tap the slide with this pen.”

Alex did so. “Wow. Didn’t he pull back in a hurry.”

“Yes. So back to your question. Why does he do that? Is it because the myoneme suddenly contracts? Or is it because he is startled?”

“Both reasons.”

“Of course. It is able to make its myoneme act like a spring in order to escape danger.”

“Seems that way.”

“Yeah. And pretty soon he will venture out again. When you ask why something happens, it is useful to understand what kind of question that is.”

“I just mean why does he do that?”

“Seems simple doesn’t it”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe so, but Aristotle, a Greek philosopher who lived about 500 years before Christ, said that there are four kinds of answers to why anything happens. One of them he called the ‘formal cause’. That’s the shape of the thing. Like the ‘formal cause’ in this case is the corkscrew shape of the myoneme. Without that, the vorticella couldn’t suddenly spring back. The second cause he called the ‘material’ cause. That refers to the stuff out of which the thing is made – in this case protoplasm.”

Alex thought about this a minute. "Ok. I can see that. It's made of something, and it has a shape."

"Right. Then, Aristotle said, we have to consider the different mechanical things that make it possible for something to happen. In the case of the myoneme we would be talking about the chemical changes that facilitate the contracting of the myoneme."

"I get it. So if we add the mechanisms that make it work, we've got all we need. We can explain why anything happens."

"So a lot of people would have us believe."

"You mean it's not true?"

"What was your question?"

"The one that started all this?"

"Yeah."

"Why did that creature ... that ..."

"Vorticella."

"Yeah. Vorticella. Why did that vorticella spring back like that?"

"In other words, what was his 'purpose' in doing that. What was his aim."

"Right."

"Aristotle referred to the purpose behind any event as the 'final cause'. That is the end that is facilitated by the action. Another word for this is 'teleological' causality. 'Telos' is the end toward which an action aims. In the case of the vorticella, the purpose of the behavior is to get the hell out of there as it seems like a dangerous place."

"Cool. But does every 'why' have to have such a complicated answer?"

"I think so."

"Why?"

"I'll give you another example. See my hand?" He held out his right hand and opened and closed it several times. "Let's look at this event."

"Opening and closing your hand?"

"Right. What are the four causes?"

"You want me to tell you?"

"Sure."

"Well, the material cause is just that you have a piece of meat and bone there."

"Good so far."

"The formal cause is the five fingers and all that. Its shape."

"Right."

"What was the next one?"

"The mechanical cause," Antonio said.

"Oh, yeah. What makes it work. Well ... That's got to be all the nerves that send the messages from your brain to move the fingers."

"Good. It's all those nerves, and what makes them work. Plus the muscles and the processes that make them work. And the final cause?"

"That's the purpose, right?"

"Right. The telos. The end result that is aimed at. What am I wanting to do?"

He opened and closed his hand again.

"You're wanting to show me something."

"Exactly. The final cause is my purpose – in this case, my desire to make my hand into an illustration of something I am wanting to explain."

"I see."

"Good. The important thing is to realize that if you take away any of those causes, the event won't happen. That is why I was always arguing that in order to have a complete science of life we needed to return to Aristotle's four causes."

"So did people buy that?"

"No. Not only did they not buy it, but when they discovered I was serious, it cost me my job. I wasn't supposed to talk about teleology or final causes."

"That stinks. You shouldn't have lost your job."

"Well, it beats being tortured. At least I wasn't a heretic during the time of the Inquisition. But I did lose my university position. Later I was able to get a job teaching high school, on the condition that I kept my radical views to myself."

"Did they prove your 'radical views' were wrong?"

"It wasn't open for discussion. They did some name-calling. Said I was a 'Creationist' or a 'Lamarkian'. Or, worse than either of those, a 'mystic'."

"Are those bad things?"

Antonio laughed. "I don't know. But I wasn't either a 'Creationist' or a 'Lamarkian'. Maybe I am a bit of a mystic. I'm not sure about that."

"What's a mystic? Someone who believes in magic?"

"No. A mystic is someone who feels that on some level we are all 'one' – like a single organism, or consciousness, or 'being'."

Alex remembered the feelings he had when he was in the woods, and the poem that Richard had shown him. "That poet, Wordsworth. Do you know about him?"

"A little."

"Was he a mystic?"

"I think a lot of people would call him a nature mystic."

"Maybe that's what I am. A nature mystic."

"It's no crime if you are."

Antonio and Richard really were very different. Antonio accepted you for what you were. He didn't try to destroy what you thought or felt. He just tried to show you other ways you might also feel and think. He was much easier to be with, but somehow the electricity that Alex felt between himself and Richard was missing. Alex got up from his microscope and pulled a chair up beside Antonio. He looked at the page Antonio was studying. As he positioned himself to see it better, he rubbed up against Antonio, trying to make it seem like it was not intended. He felt Antonio pull away just slightly, as if trying to make more room for him. They were different. Whether or not Richard had pulled away, a spark would have leaped between them.

"Did you find the bird you were looking for?"

"Yep. Here he is."

“Does he belong in this area?”

“Well, it says that sometimes he does wander into this area, but not often. So it’s really not that strange seeing it here. It’s no puzzle – just a bit unusual.”

So there was nothing to figure out about this bird. They sat staring at the picture of the bird in the book for a few moments. Alex wished that Antonio would touch him. He tried to think of some excuse for initiating some physical contact, but nothing came to him that would not be obvious.

“Why was that business about Aristotle’s four causes so important to you?” he asked finally.

“So important?”

“Yeah. It meant so much to you that you talked and wrote about it even when it cost you your job.”

“You’re right. I guess it was important.”

“Why?”

Antonio closed the bird book and stood up. “It’s hard to answer that.”

“Try.”

“OK. See, it’s like this. I have a huge respect for science. I like its insistence on grounding things in facts. Before the Plague I dedicated my life to it. But I came to believe that human beings made two mistakes when they established the ground rules for science.”

“What were they?”

“Well, the first one we already touched on. Science established a rule that said you must not use any teleological explanation for anything. No final causes. We will explain reality only in terms of three kinds of causality – mainly concentrating on mechanical causality. And should we run up against anything that obviously was driven by purposes or aims, we will always show how something that looks, feels, smells and acts like a purpose or aim is really something else – something mechanical.”

“I think I understand. I’ll probably need more examples to be sure. But what’s the second mistake?”

“Ok. Any event can be known in two very different ways. First we can know them as events we see from the outside. Like you observing my hand. Or we can know them from the inside, like me moving my own hand.”

“I can see that.”

“The second big mistake was that scientists decided that only those aspects of reality that we see from the outside are real. Or at least only what we learn from the outside is real knowledge.”

“Like what you know about your own hand isn’t real knowledge?”

“Basically, yes. That was what was agreed to.”

“Why would they make a rule like that?”

“Sometimes basic shifts happen in how humanity sees things. It’s hard to know why. In general, thinking people had an interest in escaping from the Church – from the way the Church prevented free inquiry. They wanted a truth based on things everybody could see rather than on ‘faith’. They were right, of course, to try to escape from that. They established a new set of rules about

what kinds of things could be said and what could not – but in their own way those rules were as constricting as those of the Church. But that’s a whole other topic.”

“So something was wrong with science too.”

Antonio nodded.

“Yes. Many beautiful and remarkable things were discovered. But life became fragmented. The human species became very brilliant technicians but were barely developed beyond chimpanzees in their souls. They did not understand the purposes or the aims of anything. How could they? They didn’t even believe that such things as purposes or aims were real. And they were prohibited from consulting their own inner experience – which is the one place they would have found something to restrain, balance and shape their technical expertise so that it would contribute to life.”

“You wrote about all these things in journals? Marcie said you wrote lots of articles that got published.”

“I wasn’t exactly famous, but yes, I did write articles. I tried to tell people where I thought all this was heading. I thought it had to end in a huge catastrophe of some sort.”

“Like the Plague?”

“Exactly.”

“You knew the Plague was coming?”

“the Plague was only one a number of possible catastrophes that could have happened. I mentioned it along with some of the others. But my main point was that just more scientific technology wasn’t going to bail us out. We had to somehow regain a vision of the whole fabric of life – as it is known both from within and from without, both as One and as Many.”

Alex got up and went over to his microscope. “I’m the Plague,” he said. He wiped the slide off. “So much for the vorticella that lived in that world.”

“Are you the Plague, or God?”

“Its hard to say.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference.”

Alex laughed. “But you just told me that it was the stupidity of human beings that created the Plague. We can’t blame God.”

“I agree. It was humanity. Something went wrong with our collective nature.”

Alex nodded. “Yes. That’s makes sense to me.”

“Well, we got that worked out.”

“A little late though.”

“Late?”

“Yeah.” Alex washed off the slides he had been using. “The plague already came and went.”

Antonio nodded. “But maybe it won’t be too late for next time.”

“Do you think we will do it all over again, Antonio? Is our chimpanzee nature just too strong?”

Antonio thought about his daughter, and his wife and friends, and then about all the billions of people who had suffered and died. It was more pain and

loss than he could comprehend. It was on a scale of galaxies. You could name a number of stars for a galaxy that was perhaps correct to the nearest million or so. But how could you grasp what it meant for there to be that many stars – or that much suffering?

He shook his head.

"I hope not," he said. "Maybe we have a capacity for learning as a group – as a species – just as we can learn as individuals."



Antonio and Marcie had gone off together as they sometimes did. They were expected back before supper. In their absence, Alex and Janice had spent the afternoon in their shared bedroom, looking at things under a microscope that Alex had brought home from the University. They looked at salt, sugar, strands of hair, and the head of a dead fly.

"What next?" Janice asked.

They looked around the room and then at their own bodies. Most of the obvious things had already been examined.

"I know what," Alex said.

"What?"

"My sperm."

"Your what?"

"Sperm. The seeds that my body makes so that I can plant them in a woman and make a baby grow."

"Ok." Janice was intrigued. This sounded like it might be the most interesting thing of all, but she had only a vague idea with regard to what Alex was talking about.

"Yeah," Alex said. "That would be cool."

"How would you get it?"

Alex looked down and paused to think. Did he really want to answer that question? Then he thought again about what Antonio had told him. Curiosity was ok. Curiosity about anything. The only thing was that you shouldn't hurt the thing you were curious about – like doing vivisection or things like that. Janice was curious. He was curious. Why not?

"I'll show you," he said. Alex went to the bathroom and returned with a jar of Vaseline. While Janice watched he pulled his pants down and worked himself up to an erection. He put the Vaseline on his penis and began to rub it. "Get me a slide," he said. "It's on the table with the microscope."

Janice did so, and returned to watch. She was enthralled. "Is that how you do yourself?"

"Yeah. It's just like you rubbing yourself."

"Awesome."

She watched in silence for about half a minute. Then she heard him groan. "Oh my god," she breathed. "Something came out."

“Right. That’s what we’re after. Hand me that slide.”

She handed him the slide and he smeared a quantity of his semen on it.

“Be careful with that,” he said to her, and he hurried into the bathroom where he cleaned himself up with some toilet paper. He returned quickly with his pants up and his hands washed. “We have to look before it all dries up,” he said.

He arranged a slip over the sperm, and positioned it under the microscope for viewing. It didn’t take long for him to bring it into focus. “Jesum. They really are like tadpoles,” he said. “That’s what I heard. They really are like that. Look at them thrash around. They’re all different sizes.”

“Let me see.”

“Ok. But you got to let me look again too.”

Janice peered into the microscope, and then adjusted the focus slightly as Alex had taught her to do. “Gross! What are those things?”

“It’s not gross. And they are my sperm.”

“Your sperm?”

“Seeds. It’s what I make babies with.”

“You make babies?”

“Of course not. But it’s what would make babies if I put them in a woman.”

“That’s not right.”

“Yes it is.”

“Isn’t. Marcie told me that babies grow from an egg that the mother has in her.”

“It does, but it needs a sperm too.”

“What’s the sperm do?”

“It joins with the egg. Together they make the baby.”

“I see a bunch of sperms here.”

“Only one joins with the egg. The others die.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s how it is. Lots of things have to die for just one or two to live. That’s how it always is with seeds and things like that.”

“Lots of eggs too?”

“Not so many. You just make one egg a month. It dies if no sperm come along. But it’s only one at a time.”

“My eggs die?”

“Well, not yet. When you get bigger. Look, just ask Marcie about that. That’s girl stuff.”

“Ok.”

“Let me look again.”

Janice stood aside so that Alex could look at his sperm again. They were both quiet. “They are beginning to die,” Alex said after a while. “So many that die just for a very few that live. It doesn’t seem right.”

“Let me see again.”

Alex let her look into the microscope again. “Some are still alive,” she said. “But it’s drying up. Then they die. They can’t live outside that slimy stuff.”

"No. They can't. They're very fragile."

"They're all gone now." Janice moved the slide around trying to find others. "Wait. Here's some more that are still alive ... but that area is drying up too ... now they're gone." She moved the slide around some more but found no more living sperm. "I think they're all gone now."

"That was awesome," Alex said.

After washing off the slide Alex said he was tired and he went to lie down on his bed. Janice went to hers and read comic books while Alex dozed.

After a while Janice heard a car coming into the driveway. "They're back," she said.

On her way to the bathroom, Marcie looked in on the two in the bedroom.

"Hi. Had a good afternoon?" she asked.

Alex nodded.

"It was great," Janice said.

"What did you do?"

"Alex showed me his sperm."

Alex gave Janice a look that told her he was displeased. "You talk too much," he said under his breath.

Marcie looked first at Janice and then at Alex, and then smiled. "That's cool," she said.

Alex looked down, blushed and shook his head.

"It's ok," Marcie said. "So long as nobody gets hurt, whatever you do is fine."



Antonio and Alex swam back to the shore where they had left their towels. As they stood drying off Alex felt how good it was to be naked. He and Antonio had found a reservoir with a nice little beach and they had fallen into the habit of coming to this beach for a swim on those days when they went out looking for biological specimens. Usually they would arrive there toward evening to get clean and refreshed before returning home. Alex watched Antonio as he dried off and began to get dressed. It was especially nice being naked together. The sun was just beginning to set. He felt very happy. He decided he didn't want to get dressed yet.

They heard the starlings before seeing them. The squawking and chirping that came from the island was loud and cacophonous. Alex peered out at the island out of curiosity but without any expectation of witnessing anything of great interest.

"Starlings," Antonio said.

Alex nodded.

Suddenly the birds rose like undulating globules of oil rising through water – each globule made up of hundreds of birds. One globule was perhaps the size of a house and the other was a little smaller. They were not 'flocks' of birds in the sense of being a collection of birds who were all separate entities.

Each globule moved as a single unit without any obvious leader or center of control. They soared, shifted from side to side, and dived back down toward the earth again, only to swerve to one side and rise again, all the while shifting in shape but never losing their clearly defined boundaries. Then the two groups began swirling around each other like dancers. At one point Alex thought they would collide or merge into a single unit. They did in fact touch and they seemed to interpenetrate, but then they pulled back again into the previously existing two globules. For several minutes Alex and Antonio stood on the beach watching this display, not saying anything. Then Alex said "That's awesome." Antonio only nodded. Finally they moved off and disappeared behind some trees.

"They are heading for their sleeping quarters," Antonio said. "They are always anxious to get there before it's completely dark."

"Those two globs looked like giant, fast moving amoebas," Alex said. "Like their boundaries were so tight they could have had a membrane around them – one of those bi-whatever membranes you told me about."

"Lipid bilayer – lipid, as in fat," Antonio said. "Yes, it does seem like that. You're a good observer."

"It's hard to see how they could follow each other's moves so fast."

"Indeed it is. The idea of birds as individual organisms communicating with one another only by sense impression and motivated only by their individual drives cannot explain those starlings," Antonio said. "In some sense, each swirling cluster of those birds is a single organism."

"It looked like they were dancing," Alex said.

"And they were," Antonio agreed. "And dancing is always about love. It is love that holds them together."

"Same as people love?"

Antonio nodded. "Love makes us One, just like the birds. Don't you think?"

Alex looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes, that would be nice," he said.

But Antonio didn't seem to hear him. He started talking about how animals not only had their forms of language, and their use of tools, but they also had art. "Bower birds create masterpieces of visual art – each one being quite original – to attract mates. Birds compose songs made up out of bits and pieces of sound they encounter in their environments. Lyre birds are geniuses at it. Its not just a built-in mechanical reflex. They compose. And now you see that they dance." Alex stood up and walked to the shore. He was between Antonio and the sun. He hoped that Antonio would find both him and the sunset beautiful. He stooped down to examine some of the stones on the shore, and then stood back up and stretched.

"Maybe that's just poetry," Alex said. "Maybe when animals do things like that its just instinct."

"Instinct." Antonio frowned and looked down. "Hmmm. Instinct." He nodded his head affirmatively but with little conviction.

"I see." But he looked doubtful. Alex picked up a flat rock and threw it out across the water, trying to make it skip.

"Well, don't you think it's an instinct?"

"I guess. If you say so."

"If I say so? You're the biologist."

"Yeah, I guess. But I never was very good at biology. Seems like I had trouble understanding even the most basic ideas. Like instinct. I would look at a piece of behavior and say to myself, suppose I call a particular piece of behavior an 'instinct'. What do I know that I didn't know before I called it an instinct?"

"Well, just that it's there – you know, in the genes. I mean it's like built in. Something you are born with."

"I see. So these birds soar around like that just because it's built in. It's a more or less mechanical thing that is programmed into them by their genes, and they just carry out the program. Sort of like a computer will carry out a series of commands."

"Yeah. I guess so."

"I see. Only it sure did look like those birds were having a hell of a good time."

"Yeah, it did."

"But that wasn't why they were dancing. They weren't dancing because it gave them joy. They weren't really dancing at all. They were just doing what they were programmed to do."

"I guess so."

"I think I get it."

"You know about instinct, Antonio. You're just trying to get me to think about this." Antonio smiled.

"Ah, you're on to me. Still, though, I am genuinely confused. Let me try a different approach."

"Ok."

"You seem attracted to chocolate, right. Every time we go to a store you grab some."

"Yeah."

"Why do you do that?"

"Cause I like it."

"Because it makes you happy to eat it?"

"Yeah."

"Not because it's an instinct?"

"I don't think so. I don't think we are born with any instinct to eat chocolate. I tasted it and liked it. I learned that I like it from eating it."

"So you eat chocolate because you learned it gave you a kind of happiness."

"Right. A lot of human behavior is learned. Animal behavior is mostly instinct. That's what the biology teacher said."

"So instinct and things we learn are two different things."

"I think so."

"You eat chocolate because you learned that it gave you happiness."

"Antonio! Where are you going with all this?"

"Be patient with me. It's hard for me to understand simple things. Do you like salted peanuts?"

"You know I do."

"Is that an instinct?"

"No. I like them because they taste good."

"But everybody likes salt. It's built in. Doesn't that make it an instinct?"

"I guess."

"But you don't eat salted peanuts because it is an instinct. You do it because they taste good. For the very same reason you eat chocolate. And really for the same reason you do anything. Because it gives you a kind of happiness."

"Well, yeah. I guess so. I mean sometimes I do things that aren't much fun, but then it's because I think there will be a pay-off later."

"Like some kind of happiness."

"Sure. I suppose so."

"So whether you were born with the inclination, and call it an instinct, or whether you were taught about it by someone else, or whether you chanced upon it yourself – all that doesn't have much to do with why you actually do things. You do them because it gives you some sort of happiness to do them."

"Yes. Naturally I only do things that make me happy – or at least that I hope will make me happy."

"Sometimes you're not sure?"

"Not until I've tried it out." Alex turned and smiled at Antony.

"Right. So, in general, your behavior can be understood as trying things out that you think might make you happy, and repeating the things that do and rejecting the things that don't?"

"Yeah. I guess that's pretty selfish."

"No. That's not my point. It's only selfish if you ignore the fact that other people and other living things want to be happy too. We can't help wanting to be happy."

"No. I guess not."

"Absolutely. The only reason any living thing does anything is because it gives it happiness. Each species may have its own general pattern for seeking happiness, but when any particular member of the group does anything it is because it gives it happiness. The osprey dives for the fish because to it the fish is a chocolate bar. It makes it happy to catch it."

"And the reason the starlings dance is for the joy of it?" Antonio nodded. "And the reason the sunflower turns toward the sun in the morning is because seeing the sun again gives it happiness."

"Plants too? You think plant are conscious?"

"I am sure they are."

"And they can be happy or unhappy?"

"Sure. Don't you think that?"

Alex thought about the experience he had in the woods of everything being alive, and him being just a part of it. So, yes this did make sense. Yet Richard had attacked this idea. The whole experience was now linked in Alex's mind with the pain of Richard leaving him that he didn't much like to think about it at all. But here was a man who understood that kind of feeling, and appreciated

it. Had thought a lot about it, even, and could teach him more about it. Maybe something could happen between him and Antonio that had not been possible for some reason with Richard. He looked at Antonio, who was staring at the horizon where the sun had just set.

"Yes," Alex said. "I guess I think like you do. Everything is alive and can be happy or sad."

"That's what it's all about," Antonio said. "The universe is forever experimenting with new ways of being happy. It tries something, and says, 'Wow, that was something else. I'll do that again'. It tries something else and says 'Ugh, I won't do that again'."

"Always trying new things, huh?"

"You got it. Always learning new ways of being separate and being one."

"Yes," said Alex, beginning to put his clothes back on. "That would be nice. A new way of being One." His voice was subdued. A bit sad even. Antonio thought it was probably just his attunement to the sunset.



They stopped in a video store on their way home. Antonio rummaged around until he found Hitchcock's 'The Birds'. "Ever see this before?" he asked.

Alex shook his head. "Mostly, us kids didn't go for movies that were that old."

"It's all about how birds all at once organized an attack on human beings."

"You think that could happen?"

"No. Not as it is portrayed in the movie. That's just fantasy. But it may be that the ecosphere has an immune system just as does any other organism, and that it came to see human beings as 'not-self'."

"Not-self?"

"Yeah. That's what immune systems do. They recognize organisms and proteins that are foreign to the system, and they attack them. Try to eject them from the system."

"So Gaea might have seen us as 'foreign to the system'."

"Well, it would have been returning the compliment. Human beings, after all, were seeing themselves as radically discontinuous with the rest of the natural order."

"Radically discontinuous? Speak English, Antonio."

"As being, well ... as totally different from everything else in creation. As we were talking about earlier. As being the only ones with consciousness, the only ones using tools or language, the only ones motivated by joy, the only creative ones, and so on. Somehow, human beings came to see themselves as this inexplicable accident – as something that the universe produced that was in fundamental ways foreign to the universe. How things could have leaped from the mechanical to the creative, from the 'material' to the 'mental', from the inanimate to living creatures were seen as the big issues."

"In other words, how life began?"

"Right. That was the question."

"So how did it?"

"It didn't."

"What do you mean, it didn't? Everywhere you look there is life."

"But it didn't 'begin'. It always was. In every plant or animal, in every one-celled organism, but also in every molecule, atom, or fundamental particle of the universe – it is all alive. We are kin to all that is – not some sort of accident on the surface of a reality that is foreign to us."

"I think I see what you mean. That's what I was feeling in the woods."

"Exactly. Your kinship with all. Your One-ness with it, really."

"And human beings came to a point that they didn't see this?"

"I think so. And they acted as though we were this special kind of thing set aside from everything else. As though we were 'not-self' with the rest of creation."

Alex laughed. "So Gaea believed us."

"Yes. Gaea took us at our word, and tried to eject us."

Alex stared out of the window at the empty streets as they drove through Indianapolis. He was silent for the duration of several miles. "Then that's what you think caused the Plague," he said.

"It doesn't explain the mechanical cause. But it was the telos. The reason behind it. Yes. That's what I think."



Everybody enjoyed 'The Birds' up to the point where the neighbor was found with his eyes plucked out. At this point Janice pulled her shirt up over her head and refused to watch.

"What's the matter, honey?" Marcie asked when she noticed.

"No more dead people," Janice said. "No more dead people."

Antonio grabbed the remote and turned the DVD player off. "I'm sorry. I should have thought."

"I think Janice has seen enough dead people for a lifetime," Marcie said.

"I guess we all have," Antonio agreed. "I'm really sorry. I didn't think."

"Why did you pick that one?" Marcie asked.

"I thought it would fit in with some things Alex and I have been talking about."

Marcie shook her head and went over to Janice to try to comfort her, but Janice suddenly jumped up and ran upstairs to the bathroom, and locked herself in. The other three followed her.

"Janice, come out. We won't turn it back on," Marcie called to her.

For a long time they could not get Janice to say anything. They begged her to come out, to speak to them, anything. Finally she spoke.

"I want my Mama," she said.

Come on out," Alex said. "You can sleep with me tonight."

There was a lull in the crying. For a moment he thought she might accept this offer. But then she said, "You're not my Mama."

Marcie looked at the other two in the hall. "Why don't you go on downstairs," she said. Then, to Antonio. "Maybe you could sleep in Alex's room"

"I'm really sorry," he said.

"It's ok. Sorry I sort of snapped at you. You had no way of knowing."

In the bathroom they could hear Janice crying. "You two go on downstairs," Marcie repeated. Antonio nodded, and he and Alex went downstairs.

"Janice, honey, let me in. It's Marcie."

"I want my Mama."

"I'll be your Mama."

There was a long silence. The crying stopped. "Ok," she said at last.

"Can I come in now?"

"Can I sleep with you?"

"I want you to."

"Will we do the milk thing?"

"Of course."

After another pause Marcie heard the bathroom door unlock.



For the next several nights Antonio slept in the room with Alex. Most nights they talked a while in the dark. It reminded Alex of the excitement he had experienced when he was younger at church camp when, after the lights out call, he and his buddies whispered about God and girls and salvation. Once a boy had invited him into his bed. The boy's name was Matthew. He was small and wiry. "Come on in," he had said. "We can cuddle together. It feels good."

"I don't think I had better," Alex had said.

"I like to sleep naked," Matthew had said, and he pulled his covers back to prove his point. There was enough light in the cabin that Alex could see that the boy was not lying. "Everybody else is asleep. They won't know."

Alex had been tempted. But he was afraid that maybe some other boy might still be awake, or would wake up and hear them. Even more, he was afraid of God. It was bad enough that God knew how much he desired taking Matthew up on his offer. If he had actually done so he knew that he would be damned forever. "I don't think I'd better," he said and turned his back to Matthew.

He would not have behaved in the same way had Antonio made the same offer, but he didn't. Antonio seemed content just to talk a bit and then go to sleep.



Alex lay on his back, naked on the sand. Antonio had gone down the beach to look for specimens. Now that the sun was setting Antonio would be returning any minute. Alex remembered the starlings that they had watched together the

previous evening. It had, indeed, been like a dance. Each of the configurations had been like a single organism, and the two together threatened repeatedly to merge into a single entity, but each time they would pull apart again.

Alex imagined himself as the smaller configuration and Antonio as the larger one. Could they dance like that? What would it be like to intermingle their identities? Could their bodies interpenetrate each other like the bird groupings seemed to do over and over at their edges? The action is always at the boundaries – at the membranes between self and other – Antonio had told him. Life was always at the edges. It was about that struggle between wishing to merge with the other and fear of losing one's own boundaries. Yet somehow, Alex believed, it could be possible to be both merged with the other and one's self at the same time. The paradox had to be realizable or one was doomed to be forever tantalized by an impossible hope. If the paradox could not be realized we would forever be thrown back and forth between a merging from which we would always wish to escape for the sake of preserving our individual identity, and a separateness that would be too lonely to bear.

But if one found the right one ... what then? Would not reality override all our conceptual confusion about Ones and Manys. It is just a matter of finding the right one, he thought. He felt a growing excitement in his groin as he anticipated Antonio's return.

As he saw Antonio walking down the beach with his collecting bucket he made no effort to get dressed.

"Been skinny dipping, I see," Antonio said.

Alex nodded. "You find what you were looking for?" He stood up to greet him.

"Just got some water samples from different places to see what kinds of micro-organisms are the most common around here."

Antonio put the bucket down and stood looking out at the sunset. Alex edged over to stand beside him. It was more than he could bear. He felt that Antonio must feel some excitement. How could he not? He moved around in front of him, put his arms around him, and hugged him. "I like being with you," he said.

Antonio hesitated just for a second, and then hugged him back. But it was just a friendly fatherly hug. There was none of the electricity in it that Alex had felt between him and Richard when they had been in the shower together.

"I like being with you too," Antonio said. But then he pulled back. "We'd better be getting back or the others will wonder whether we got lost."

It felt almost like a slap, but Alex realized that Antonio couldn't help it. Your love map is your love map. It was just who you were. There was nothing you could do about it. Richard had pushed him away because he was afraid of the electricity between them – afraid because of its power to create attachments. Antonio had pulled away because there was no electricity for him. It all came to the same thing in the end. It left Alex alone.



That night Janice returned to sleep in her bed in Alex's room, and Antonio went back to sleep with Marcie. Janice seemed glad to be back. "I like sleeping in this room with you," she said.

They were both in their own beds.

"That's good," Alex said.

"But sometimes I need someone more like a Mama."

"Sure," said Alex. "I understand. I'm glad you're back."

Reassured that she was wanted, Janice turned over and was soon asleep. Alex listened to her rhythmic breathing and thought about Antonio, in the room across the hall, sleeping with Marcie.

All that about the flocks of the birds being organisms, and dancing, almost like they had souls – maybe that was just a fantasy. Maybe it was like he learned in Biology class. It's all just instinct. Perhaps birds weren't even conscious – either as individuals or as groups. The Universe trying to find new ways of being happy? Fat chance. It seemed more likely that all those intuitions and feelings that had promised to bind him and Antonio together were just illusions. He remembered the poem that Richard had read to him, and his comments on it. "both what they half create, And what perceive." Indeed. What they half-create. That was the rub. All that stuff he felt down by the stream was just something his mind created. And love too was just something we create out of our fantasies. Really it was all just mechanics, signifying nothing.

Part Two

Landscapes of the Heart

*A tree dies
... and spring dances
upon the bones*

Childhood – Before and After the Plague

In previous chapters I have touched upon some of the profound changes that occurred with regard to the status of children after the Plague. As already noted, the 'ad hoc' composition of most social groups, and the general lessening of societal controls, led to an ongoing flexibility and hence diversity with regard to the composition of the small collectivities that functioned more or less effectively as 'families'. This now generally accepted diversity of family patterns has certainly had a continuing impact on the status of children. The nature of these changes is so profound, the causes so multifaceted and the implications for the future so consequential that I have deemed it appropriate to dedicate an entire chapter to the subject. In this chapter I will focus on the nature, causes and implications of what I perceived to be the four primary areas of change:

- 1 The shift from an age-segregated society to a social order in which daily intergenerational contact, from infancy to old age, is the norm.
- 2 The shift from a highly centralized and standardized educational model to a diversified pattern of pedagogical practices planned and implemented by cooperating groups of households.
- 3 The shift from a pattern in which childhood, at least in industrialized societies, was a time of almost no meaningful work activity, to a society in which the child's contribution to the economic order is real and valued, and generally performed alongside adults.
- 4 The shift from a society in which childhood sexuality was generally denied and adolescent sexual expression relentlessly repressed, to a social order in which childhood sexuality is taken for granted, and in which few people have the inclination or the time to interfere in the sexual lives of younger people.

In all four areas of change we will observe a common thread: before the Plague society took it upon itself to mold the child into a predetermined pattern based upon a commonly held image of the 'good citizen'. A large array of very aggressive medical, pedagogical and behavioral strategies were employed to accomplish this molding – so much so that the average middle and upper class child was subject to rather intense regulation from the moment they awoke to the moment they went to bed. After the Plague such regulation was

- simply not possible. Consequently the child's development took place
- in a much freer environment and was driven from within by their own
- likes, dislikes, needs, and ambitions. Although it is too early to claim a
- definitive judgment on the matter, preliminary indications are that this
- shift in child rearing practices produces a more creative, self reliant
- and generally happier child. It remains to be seen whether this felicitous
- change in the status of the child will be maintained in the future.

... from 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p384
— the preface to Chapter VII,
'The New Status of Children'

Chapter One

Interstate 70

Undulating fields spread out in all directions, like a vast ocean, broken only by the occasional winding path of trees marking the course of a stream. It was Spring. Like fairies dressed in bright costumes of many colors and styles, the flowers danced and nodded in the wind. Christopher thought about the naked fairies he had seen in a book his mother had shown him, and he felt himself becoming a little aroused. Since he had turned eleven, it seemed, everything aroused him – some things a little, other things a lot. His mother had noticed. She had been washing his back while he was taking a shower one day last winter.

“I see little Willie is woke up,” she said. She nodded in the direction of his groin.

“Seems like he does that all the time, nowadays,” Christopher said.

“It’s the kundalini.”

“What’s kundalini, Mama?”

“It’s love energy.”

“It’s what?” He cocked his head to one side and screwed his face into that expression of suspicion he gave her when he thought she was putting him on.

“It’s like the lava you learned about in science. It’s all hot and burning and flowing around underneath the surface, and then it bursts out here and there like a volcano.”

He turned and let the warm shower wash the soap off his back. “It’s ‘cause I’m older, right?”

“That’s right. Along about your age, that kundalini makes there be earthquakes and volcanoes. The whole landscape of your love is going to be a different place.”

“Hand me a towel, Mama.” He began drying himself off. “I don’t feel no earthquakes or volcanoes going off,” he said.

“You will,” she said.

The landscape of your love. His mama loved phrases like that. When she heard one, or made one up that she especially liked, it would become a regular part of her vocabulary. All the rest of the winter and into the spring Christopher kept hearing about the landscape of your love, and how it was a thing that changed.

Christopher didn’t like it when his mother talked about how the kundalini was going to change everything. He was proud that he was growing, and pleased that she noticed. But he preferred to think of growing older as simply getting bigger, more powerful, able to do more things, but still being the same person. He compared it to a horse growing from a pony. It was still a horse. You would always be the same person. There would just be more of you. “Yes and no,” his mother had said during one of their conversations. “It’s more like a tadpole becoming a frog. You will want new things; you will see life in a new way.”

He was still sitting on the floor where he had been doing math before they began this conversation. He rose and went to the couch where his mother was sitting with the usual book in her hand. He stretched out on his back and lay his head on her lap.

"You keep saying how much I'll change," he said. A little frown wrinkled his brow.

"You will go places you ain't never been before," she said.

It was peculiar to think about becoming a different person. It was exciting of course. But it also made his belly feel empty and a little nauseous, and it made him afraid. Becoming a different person seemed a little like dying.

He looked up into his mother's gentle brown face and felt her fingers push through his bushy hair.

"If I go to the new places, you got to come with me." he said. She smiled.

And then came the letter from his father, the letter that changed everything, the letter that was responsible for his being on this trip with his friend Kyle. His father lived in Indianapolis and they were going to see him.

The two boys had pulled their motor cycles over to the edge of Interstate 70 about 75 miles from Indianapolis. It was hot and they were wearing only blue jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers. Christopher took his helmet off and set it on the pavement beside him. He looked at Kyle. The wind rippled through Kyle's straw-colored hair as it did the grass. Then he studied the winding path of trees. Where it came close to the road he could see water through the grass, but he could not judge how deep it might be.

Christopher pulled a letter out of his hip pocket. "Want to hear my daddy's letter?" he asked.

"I told you I did," Kyle said.

"I wasn't ready, then," Christopher said.

They got off their bikes and sat in the grass at the edge of the road. Christopher unfolded the worn and tattered pages of his letter. "It's kind of personal," he said.

Kyle nodded.

"You know how it is when you get a personal letter with lots of private stuff in it from your dad," Christopher said.

Kyle shaded his eyes, and looked at the letter in Christopher's hands and then at his face. "No," he said.

"Oh," said Christopher. He looked at his letter and then at his friend. "So. I guess not."

"I can sort of imagine," said Kyle.

"It's the sort of thing you'd only share with a blood brother," Christopher said.

"I can see that," said Kyle.

"Well, it goes like this," said Christopher. He held the pages firmly so that the wind wouldn't blow them around. "Dear Christopher ..." He folded the letter back up and gripped it tightly in his hand. "It's kind of hard to read how it starts," he said.

"Why's that?" Kyle asked.

"No reason." Christopher unfolded the letter again. "Dear Christopher, I can't tell you how much I have missed you all these years," he read. He looked away.

"Go on," said Kyle.

"Just a minute."

Kyle waited for what seemed like a minute. "So what's he say next?" he asked.

Christopher turned his head back and looked at Kyle. "I'm getting to it," he said.

"You're crying," said Kyle.

"I'm not."

"How come you got tears in your eyes?"

"The sun makes them water."

Kyle glanced at the sun, then at the letter and then at Christopher. "Missing your father is a reason to cry," he said.

"Will you shut up, Kyle?"

"Sorry."

Christopher reached out and touched Kyle on his arm. "Ain't your fault," he said. "Only I told myself I wasn't going to do this."

"You seen me cry before," Kyle said.

Christopher nodded. "Yeah."

"Want me to read it?" Kyle reached out his hand.

Christopher hesitated. "Well, ok," he said. He handed Kyle the letter. "But don't let the wind get it."

"I'll be careful." Kyle unfolded the letter and began reading in a clear voice, pausing only occasionally to decipher a difficult word:

Dear Christopher,

I can't tell you how much I have missed you all these years. When your mother and I went our separate ways five years ago I agreed that you should stay with her. I felt that's what you wanted and believed she might be better able to care for you. I'm not too good at telling my feelings so I am afraid that you may have felt that I didn't mind our being separated. We were very close those first six years of your life. Your absence has been a painful empty place in my life these last five years.

Your mother and I agreed that you should be able to decide where you want to live. I would like it if you would consider coming to live with me for a while. In the old days, before the Plague, we used to believe that a boy had a special need for his father around the time he was changing from a boy to a man. We believed many stupid things then, but I think this belief may have been true. I don't know. I do know that I could teach you a great deal about math, history and science – more than most other people could. I also know that I wish you were close to me.

*I worry sometimes that something could
happen to me before I ever see you again.
If you didn't like it here you could always go back.
I hope that you will think about this.*

*With love,
Your father*

Kyle folded the letter back up very carefully, following the already established creases and handed it back to Christopher.

"That's a good letter," he said.

"Yes, it is."

"What do you think he means about something could happen to him?"

"For Christ sake, Kyle. How should I know?"

"I was just asking."

"Sometimes you ask too many questions."

Kyle shrugged. "He could mean like getting hit with lightning. Or getting a bad disease. Something like that."

Christopher jumped up. "Look," he said. "Let's go swimming. I'll bet the water's deep enough down under the bridge."

"OK."

"Let's leave our clothes here on our bikes," Christopher said, kicking off his shoes and slipping out of his shirt and pants before Kyle could answer. They had encountered only four cars and a motorcycle on the highway during the whole morning and half the afternoon. It wasn't likely that someone would come along right at that moment. The bridge was about 40 yards down the road.

They draped their clothes over their junior-size motorcycles and started walking toward the bridge.

"Before the Plague there was zillions of cars using a road like this," Christopher said.

"Must of been lots of crashes," Kyle said.

"Yeah, I guess so," Christopher said.

Kyle took Christopher by the hand as they walked. "I think a lot about those days," he said.

"In those day we couldn't walk down the road like this," Christopher said.

Kyle nodded. "The cars would smash us."

"Plus my mama said in those days they was more fussy about being naked."

"Well, I wouldn't be walking down this road naked if there was zillions of cars with everybody looking at me," Kyle said.

"Why they be looking at you?" Christopher asked. "Like you was some handsome dude or something."

"Be better than looking at you," Kyle said.

They both laughed. They liked joking about how ugly the other one was.

"Anyhow, nowadays if somebody came along and did see us, they wouldn't throw us in prison."

"They did that?"

"Mama says they would throw you in prison for most anything."

Kyle glanced over his shoulder to look down the highway behind him and then peered up the road in front. As far as he could see in either direction the road was empty. Grass sprouted from the irregular cracks that ran through the pavement. It was the same pattern that the trees made as they followed the streams through the grasslands.

At the edge of the bridge they found a rough pathway running down to the creek. Christopher ran ahead of his friend who negotiated the slope with greater care.

"Hurry up, Sissy," Christopher called. "There's a dam."

"Don't call me a sissy," Kyle shouted back.

"I didn't mean nothing," Christopher said. "But hurry up."

By the time Kyle arrived at the creek Christopher was already paddling around in a little pool. At the far end of the pool a rough dam of boulders held the water back.

"I'll bet some other kids built that damn," Kyle said.

"Probably," Christopher said. "Come on in."

"I'll bet it was before the Plague."

"Probably."

"I'll bet they're all dead now."

Christopher ignored this comment and dived under the water to explore the bottom. When he came back to the surface Kyle was still crouched down at the edge of the pool, staring at the dam.

"I wonder if we stayed here all night we'd feel their ghosts around us," Kyle said.

"Will you stop all that talk about ghosts, Kyle?"

"I just think about them a lot, that's all."

"You ain't even wet," Christopher said. "And you won't find a swimming hole no nicer than this."

"All right," said Kyle. He stood up and slowly eased himself into the pool.

The two boys splashed each other and wrestled in the water for a while. Then Christopher said, "I'll carry you on my shoulders."

"How you going to do that?"

"Spread your legs apart. I'll swim down behind you and lift you up."

Kyle was skeptical, but did as he was told. Then shortly, much to his delight, he felt Christopher rise up under him with his head between his legs, and Christopher lifted him out of the water.

"You did it!" Kyle shouted.

Christopher looked up at his friend who was now sitting on his shoulders. "Of course I did," he said.

"Aren't I too heavy?" Kyle asked.

"I'm strong."

"You are."

"If there were other kids around we could have a battle."

"If I was a magician I could find the ghosts of the kids that made that dam, and bring them back alive," Kyle said.

"But you ain't no magician," said Christopher, and he flipped him off backwards into the water. Kyle paddled over to the edge of the pool, climbed out, and sat down on a flat stone.

"You ain't done, are you?" Christopher asked.

"I'm just resting."

"Ok."

They were silent for a few minutes, with Christopher paddling around in the water, exploring all its contours, and Kyle sitting on the flat rock, staring at the damn.

"Six billion people," Kyle said.

"Six billion people what?" Christopher asked. He took in a mouthful of water and squirted it out in Kyle's direction to see how close he could get.

"That book your father sent to you. It says six billion people died during the Plague."

"I know that," said Christopher. "It's my book."

"What do you figure God would do with six billion ghosts?"

"How should I know, Kyle? Maybe people don't leave no ghosts."

"You believe that?"

"I don't know." Christopher had stopped swimming and was standing waist deep in the water. "Some say one thing, and some say another."

"Not even a ghost left behind," Kyle said. "That would be even sadder. Six billion people one day and then a week later they are all gone. Poof." His hands and fingers flew into the air like a bubble popping. "Just like that."

"Leave it be, Kyle." Christopher dived again and surfaced a few seconds later with a mouthful of water, which he spewed all over Kyle. "Come on. Let's go see if we can build the dam up some more."

Kyle came with him to the dam and they both worked in silence for a long while, gathering stones from shallower water and piling them into the lower places where the bulk of the water flowed over the damn. As they struggled together with a stone that neither could have carried alone, Kyle looked Christopher directly in the eyes.

"But ghosts or no ghosts, don't it make you sad?"

"You still on them six billion people?" Kyle nodded. "I don't think about it all the time like you do. That was twenty-some years ago. They had their lives to live. We got ours."

"You're going too fast," Kyle said. "I can't get my footing."

When they got the large stone into place Christopher sent Kyle over to the rocky area on the opposite bank where there were some boulders that looked like just the kind of thing they needed. Kyle was tired. Rather than grab the first boulder he saw, he spent some time looking them over, carefully, as a connoisseur of boulders might do, trying to find just the attributes that were required. Suddenly he raised his head and his whole body snapped stiff with attention.

“Chris,” he called in a loud whisper. “Come here. Listen.”

“If you think you are hearing ghosts, forget it,” Christopher said.

“It’s not that.” Kyle motioned him frantically. “Come over here.”

When Christopher arrived at Kyle’s side they both became as still as rabbits hiding from a fox. They heard a dog bark. Then another. “Shit,” Christopher whispered. “Oh shit!”

“It’s dogs for sure,” Kyle said.

“Follow me,” Christopher said. He led the way back through the pool to the path they came down. As they climbed up along the side of the bridge they continued to hear growling, scuffling and an occasional bark. Before looking over the top of the embankment, Christopher pointed to a tree a few yards ahead of them and slightly off to their left. “See that oak there,” he whispered. “It’s got low limbs – easy to grab from the ground. If they smell us, we got to make it to the tree and climb like hell.”

“We should have brought the gun with us,” Kyle said.

“No shit.” Christopher looked over the top of the embankment.

“What do you see?” Kyle asked.

“Wild dogs. A pack of them.”

“How many?”

“Maybe a dozen.”

“How far away?”

“They’re at our bikes.”

At that moment a big black and white dog lifted its head and sniffed the air. He barked several times in succession. This seemed to get the attention of the other dogs who also began sniffing the air.

“I think they know we’re here,” Christopher said. “Let’s go.”

“Why don’t we just hide down there,” Kyle whispered, motioning back to the creek.

“If they find us on the ground they’ll kill us,” Christopher said. “When I say ‘Now’, run for it. No holding back.”

“Shit,” said Kyle.

“Now,” said Christopher. Almost before the word was out of his mouth he was up over the embankment and running toward the tree which was in the same direction as their bikes – and the dogs, though much closer. Kyle was not far behind. The dogs, as Christopher had suspected, had already picked up their scent, and when they saw two small naked man-pups, who were for some reason running right toward them, they lost no time making up their minds. In seconds they became a pack – almost a single creature, like a flock of birds or a school of minnows. Barking wildly, they began running like demons, rapidly closing the distance between themselves and their prey.

Glancing over his shoulder, Christopher saw that Kyle was several yards behind him. “Run!” he shouted. “Run faster.” When he reached the tree he swung himself up onto the first limb, and waited for Kyle to catch up. The big black and white dog was faster than the others and was only a few yards away when Kyle reached the tree.

He grabbed the lowest branch, a big one on which Christopher stood, holding onto another branch above him. Kyle got one leg over the branch but couldn't seem to get the other one up. Christopher reached down and pulled the dangling leg up. "We're too low," he said. "Get up on that next branch there." The black and white dog leaped up and tried to grab Kyle's arm. With a well placed kick Christopher caught the dog squarely on the side of his head with the heel of his foot. The dog fell back to the ground and rolled over. For a couple of seconds it seemed disoriented and that gave Kyle time to clamber up into the branches above him.

The rest of the pack was at the base of the tree now, barking frantically and leaping up at the two boys. Christopher lost no time in pulling himself up out of their reach.

"Jessum," Kyle said, trying to catch his breath. "I though we were goners." He sat down on a branch and hugged the tree.

"I wasn't sure," Christopher said. He stood on a limb opposite from Kyle and peered down at the dogs. The pack milled around at the base of the tree, looking up, growling, and occasionally barking.

"How long you figure they'll hang around?" Kyle asked.

"Don't know," Christopher said. "Maybe I can make 'em go away."

"No way," said Kyle.

"Oh no? Watch this." Taking careful aim Christopher started pissing on the head of the black and white leader of the pack, who had settled down to rest at the base of the tree. The dog picked himself up, shook his head and barked up at Christopher. Christopher laughed. "I got him good. You see that?"

"I don't think that was a good idea," Kyle said, laughing in spite of himself.

"Why not?"

"Might make him stay around longer 'cause he might want to get even."

Christopher sat down on his limb and held onto the trunk. "I thought that big one was going to get you," he said.

"Almost did."

"I got him good with that kick, didn't I?"

"That kick saved my life."

"That's what blood brothers are for," Christopher said..

Kyle smiled at him. Christopher knew that the smile was a way of saying thank you. He felt proud. "Uncle Jim taught me that," he said.

Kyle nodded. "C ... c ... cool," he said. He was shaking.

"Hey, man. You cold?" Christopher asked.

Kyle shook his head. "The dogs," he said.

Christopher looked down at the dogs. Some of them began wandering back to the bikes but the main pack was still just below them, milling around, waiting. "You thinking about them dogs getting you?"

Kyle nodded. "They would have ripped me into pieces."

Christopher believed this to be true. He saw that Kyle was shaking more violently now. It was hard to know what to say. "Anyhow," he said. "They didn't get you."

Kyle nodded.

Christopher rubbed Kyle's arm in an effort to comfort him.

"You got to stop shaking," he said.

"I'm trying."

"You're going to shake yourself right out of this tree."

Kyle looked down at the dogs. "I know." And he began to cry.

"Don't cry," Christopher said. "Look. More of the dogs is going away."

Kyle looked. "They're just going back to our bikes," he said. "They're after our food."

Kyle was right. Four of the dogs were tugging at the food bags. Christopher's bike fell over from the tugging and the dogs backed off from the clattering, but they were right back at it a moment later.

"You got to stop shaking and crying, Kyle."

"I'm sorry."

"You always was jittery," Christopher said.

"I can't help it."

"I know." Christopher reached around the tree and grasped Kyle's upper arms. Holding on tightly he said, "Close your eyes. I'll do you a visualization."

"A what?"

"A visualization. That's what my mama always did to me when something come along and psyched me. She'd hold me and put these nice pictures in my brain. She called it doing a visualization. Then everything would be all right."

"She teach you how to do it?"

"Not exactly, but I'll just do what she did."

"I got to close my eyes?"

"Yeah."

Kyle looked down at the dogs.

There were only two of them below them now. The rest were over at the bikes tearing the bags to pieces and growling at each other about who got each bit of food they dragged out.

"That could have been me," Kyle said, indicating the dogs with a toss of his head.

"Don't think about it. Shut your eyes."

"Don't let me fall."

"I won't."

Kyle shut his eyes.

"See, its like this," Christopher began. "Me and you are back in Baltimore. We're in my room. You come over to spend the night, see. Mama and Uncle Jim and the others are all downstairs talking, and munching on stuff and drinking wine." Christopher could still feel Kyle shaking. It was like he was shivering from cold. "You listening to me?" he asked.

Kyle nodded.

"Ok. So we're in my bed together under the blankets. We already had our snacks with the others downstairs. Right? And we already took our warm showers and washed each other's backs. You following all this?"

Kyle nodded again. Christopher noticed that he had stopped crying and that he was not shaking quite so badly now. "Ok. So we put on clean t-shirts so we're not stinky or anything. And Mama and Uncle Jim are downstairs and they're going to protect us from anything. And you know Uncle Jim could, too. And besides, ain't nothing bad around going to get us anyhow. So it's kind of cold and that makes it super cosy under the covers. And we hold each other tight, you know, like sometimes we do. And we both feel safe and good, like the blood brothers we are."

Kyle seemed almost relaxed now. "Hey. You ain't going to sleep for real are you?" Christopher asked.

"No." Kyle opened his eyes.

"That's good."

"Keep visualizing," Kyle said.

"I don't know what else to say," Christopher said. "I ain't good at this like Mama is. She'd talk all soft and whispery and you could see everything she talked about just like it was pictures right in front of your face."

"You're doing good," Kyle said. "I could see everything you said."

"So what else can I pretend?"

"Do how we are, under the covers, holding each other tight."

"Okay."

Kyle closed his eyes.

Christopher began remembering out loud how they would tell each other jokes under the covers, and how Kyle would tell the weird sorts of stories he would make up about ghosts and monsters and the Plague, and how that would make them both scared and how one of them could fart and they would both giggle about that and Christopher would always blame Kyle even if he did it himself, and they would talk about how time began and whether there was really a devil and why God let there be things like plagues. And when he finished with the things they did and said under the covers he went back to the showers they would take together and the smell of Ivory soap which he liked but Uncle Jim said smelled like shit, and how the windows got all steamy and Mama would holler up the stairs and tell them not to use all the hot water, and they would say they wouldn't even though they already had.

And he talked about how the popcorn tasted that they had for a snack, and he named all the uncles and aunts and grandmothers in the household that weren't really any relation to each other because all their real relations had died 27 years before in the Plague. There was Uncle Jim and little Sam who was two, and really did belong to Uncle Jim and to Christopher's mother, Ella May, and there was Aunt Sophia who had Mary Belle and Matthew the twins who were six and who belonged, Sophia was sure, to one of two men she still knew and there was Aunt Liza who loved Ella Mae like a man and who didn't have any children or want them, and there was Grandma Beulah who ruled everyone except Ella Mae.

As he was growing up, Kyle had spent almost as much time in Christopher's household as in his own. Hearing the names of the people there soothed

him; remembering the smells and the tastes and feel and looks of everything comforted him; most of all remembering himself and Christopher hugging each other under the blankets calmed him.

"Pretend one more time how we're under the covers," he said. He was not shaking any more.

"Ok. But I got to stop then."

"Why?"

"Cause you seem better and I'm all out of memories."

Kyle nodded. "Ok." This time he smiled as he listened.

"Hey, I do that almost as good as my mama," Christopher said when he finished.

"You were on a roll."

"I was."

Only one dog remained under the tree. The others had finished tearing open all the food bags and had made a supper of the boys' provisions.

"Looks like them dogs are getting ready to settle down," Christopher said.

"Yeah. Right by our bikes."

The sun was settling toward the horizon and the clouds in the western sky began to show faint tints of red and purple. "It's going to be night soon," Christopher said. He let loose of Kyle's arms and stood up on the branch to stretch and look around.

"How we going to sleep?" Kyle asked.

"Maybe we'll just have to stay awake tonight."

"Suppose we fall asleep by accident?" Kyle said.

"We won't."

"But suppose we do?" Kyle looked up at Christopher. "We'd fall out of the tree."

"We'll talk and tell jokes," Christopher said. "You can tell one of them long weird stories you make up."

"But maybe those dogs will just stay and stay. Sooner or later we'd fall out of the tree from going to sleep or ... something."

"I don't know," said Christopher. "We've just got to try."

"Maybe that's their plan. Maybe they're just waiting."

Both boys were silent for a while. The reds and purples in the clouds began to deepen.

The dog at the base of the tree had a gold-colored coat of very shaggy fur. He paced back and forth whimpering faintly. He was almost as big as the black and white leader of the pack.

"Look," said Kyle. "His tail is wagging."

"I see," said Christopher.

For the first time since he had settled onto his limb Kyle stopped hugging the tree. Balancing himself in a more relaxed manner he looked down at the dog. "That means he's friendly."

"I wouldn't trust it," said Christopher.

Kyle smiled at the dog. "Hello Goldie. Are you friendly?"

"When he was in that pack a little while ago, he wasn't so friendly."

"I didn't notice him in particular."

"He was going to have you for dinner."

"Well, he's different by himself. It was the pack that made him like that."

The dog raised himself onto his back legs and pawed the trunk. He wagged his tail and whimpered as he looked up at Kyle. "You want to be friends?" Kyle reached down in his direction. The dog's tail wagged more vigorously. "Dogs and people used to be friends," he said to Christopher.

"Maybe, but you can't trust them any more," Christopher said. Kyle eased himself down to the lower branch. "He might reach you from there," Christopher said.

"Maybe dogs remember how we used to be friends," Kyle said. Slowly he lowered himself into a crouching position on his branch.

"Dogs and people aren't friends these days," Christopher said.

"Some places they are," Kyle said. Slowly he extended his hand down and touched Goldie on the top of her head.

Christopher shook his head in disgust. "Don't look for me to do no more visualizations if that dog bites your hand off," he said.

Goldie stretched as high as she could to allow Kyle to stroke her behind the ears. "See. She likes me," Kyle said. He glanced over at the other dogs to make sure they weren't too close, and dropped himself to the ground. The dog licked his face. Kyle hugged her and petted her all over. Christopher came down to the lowest branch to watch more closely. For a minute or so Kyle and the dog occupied themselves with petting and licking.

Then Christopher said, "Look out Kyle. See them dogs coming our way?"

Kyle looked toward the bikes and saw two dogs slinking toward him. Christopher helped him up into the first branch and both boys clambered up into higher branches from there.

"I've got a friend now," Kyle said. He settled back down on his branch and put his arms around the trunk of the tree.

Christopher remained standing. "How's that going to help us?" he asked.

Kyle shrugged. "Maybe it won't."

"What do we do now?" Christopher watched the two dogs that had stalked Kyle return to the group. But both boys knew that these dogs would return with the whole pack should they come down out of the tree and try to escape.

"I guess we just wait," Kyle said.

A rich palette painted the western sky. The sun was almost touching the horizon. The afternoon wind had died down. The boys fell silent.

Christopher was the first to notice the car.

"Look," he said. He pointed down the highway to the east.

"Someone's coming," Kyle said.

Christopher nodded.

The car was coming fast. As it got closer they could see that it was a red station wagon. When it didn't slow down as it passed the bikes Christopher shouted, "Hey! Stop!"

The dogs stood up and began to pace nervously, but did not retreat. Christopher hung onto a limb and stretched out as far as he could toward the road. "Stop! Stop!" he screamed. "We need your help!"

The car flew by without braking. "Come back," Christopher yelled. Then, as though they had heard him, the car slowed and made a u-turn across the median between the two strips of highway, and started back. As it reached the bikes it turned again to cross the median back to the same side with the dogs and the boys. It came to a screeching halt about half way between the tree in which the boys were perched and the bikes. A man jumped out of the back seat with a rifle. He took two shots at the dogs down by the bikes and two of them fell. The big black and white dog barked and ran into the grass beside the road, with the rest of the pack on his heels.

Goldie was still at the base of the tree. He looked up at the boys and whimpered. Then he looked back to where his pack had just disappeared.

"Go with them," Kyle yelled. "Go with your friends."

By this time the driver was standing beside his car. Someone handed him a rifle from inside.

"Run!" Kyle screamed. "Go!" Goldie wagged his tail and barked at him.

The man took aim, using the car to steady himself.

"Not this one. He's my friend," Kyle shouted. The shot rang out almost before Kyle finished his sentence. Goldie did an odd flip in the air and fell on the ground at the base of the tree.

Both boys dropped down out of the tree. Kyle went to Goldie. "I'm sorry they did that," he said to her. "I'm really sorry." Goldie was still alive but didn't seem able to get up.

"Come on," said Kyle. "We got to get our clothes."

"I'll be right back," said Kyle. He was talking to Goldie. "You're going to be ok."

With Christopher in the lead the two boys trotted up toward the car.

"Look," called the driver. "Two kids. Naked as jaybirds."

"We went skinny dipping," Christopher explained. "You saved our lives. Thanks."

Two women emerged from the car, a skinny blonde from the front seat and a dark-haired teenager from the back.

"We'll be back soon as we get dressed," Christopher said, as he trotted past them.

Kyle held back. He walked slowly and as he approached the car he gave it a wide berth, edging close to where the grass began. He watched them warily.

"Don't be scared," the teenager said. "Nobody going to hurt you."

"Look at that," the blonde said. "That dark one got some cute buns."

"Don't talk like that, Mabel," the driver of the car said. "You're drunk."

"Drunk or not, it's true."

The man who got out of the back seat leaned against the car and picked a pimple at the edge of his mouth. "We got three of them, Chad." He smiled.

"I think that one down by the tree's still alive," Chad said.

"I think you're right," the other man said. "I'll go finish him off."

Kyle ran up to him. "No," he said. "He's my dog."

"What? You want to finish him off?" the man asked.

"That's not what he means, Nicky," the teenager said.

"He's my friend," Kyle said.

"I think that one's a little loony," Chad said, pointing at Kyle. He was walking around the car to join his friends. "Maybe they both are."

Christopher ran back to the car. He had his pants on and was carrying the rest of his clothes, and all of Kyle's. "Get you're pants on at least," he said. "These people will think you got no manners."

"They want to kill Goldie," Kyle said.

"He'll probably die anyhow," said the teenager.

"These dog packs are going to kill all our animals," Chad said. "We need to kill them when we get the chance."

The teenager edged over to Nicky, put her arm around his waist and began rubbing his belly through a grubby t-shirt. "That kid never done anything to us," she said. "Why'd we want to kill his dog?"

Nicky looked at Chad. "Ain't no purpose in killing a dog what's going to die anyhow," he said.

Chad shrugged. "Have it your way," he said.

Kyle began getting dressed.

"They got all our food," Christopher said. "And tore up the saddle bags."

Chad reached through the open window of the car and pulled out a large cider jug that was about two thirds full of wine. "Time for refills," he said.

Mabel thrust the cup she was holding in his direction.

Nicky opened the back door and rummaged through some clutter. "You want your cup, Judy?" he called out.

"No. I've had enough," the teenager said.

Chad poured some wine for Mabel and then for himself. He stared at Christopher. "How'd you guys get in that fix with those dogs?" he said.

"We were skinny dipping in the creek there," Christopher said. "Forgot to take our gun."

"That was stupid."

"It was," Christopher agreed.

Mabel sloshed some wine around in her mouth, savoring it, and then swallowed. "Leave the kid alone," she said. "Ain't you never done nothing stupid?"

"I let you drink enough wine to loosen up your mouth," Chad said. "That was stupid."

"Don't you two get started," Judy said. "We been having a good day."

"That's right," said Nicky, who had found his cup. "Let me have a little of that wine."

Kyle touched Christopher's arm to get his attention. "I'm going to see Goldie," he said.

Christopher nodded. He and the others watched Kyle as he walked toward the big oak.

Chad took a gulp of wine, poured some into Nicky's cup, and scowled. "What's it with him and that dog?" he asked.

"Kyle is different," Christopher said.

"I can see that," Chad said.

Kyle knelt beside Goldie who lay on her side, whimpering. "Poor Goldie," he said. "Does it hurt?" He patted her while he studied the injury. The wound where the bullet went in was hardly visible through all the fur, but Kyle could see that she had been hit high and in back of her ribs. Her back legs and tail were lifeless. "I think he got your back bone," Kyle said. Goldie pawed at him in a friendly way with her front feet. "Don't worry," Kyle said. "We'll think of something to do." For some time he sat with Goldie, petting her, reassuring her, and thinking. The sun had set and it was beginning to get dark.

Presently Kyle heard the car doors slam and the engine start. He looked up. The car started down the road toward him. As it passed he saw Judy wave at him and smile. He waved back.

"Guess what?" Christopher shouted. He ran down the road toward Kyle. "Guess what? They gave us sandwiches and wine." When he arrived under the oak tree he looked down at Goldie.

"She's not doing too good," said Kyle.

"I'm sorry," said Christopher. "But ain't nothing you can do."

Kyle shook his head. "Got to be."

"We got to go," said Christopher. "Those dogs may be back."

Kyle looked out and saw the darkness enveloping the fields all around them. Then he looked down at Goldie. "I got to go," he said. "Goodbye."

They salvaged what they could from the food packs. One of the packs was still usable. Christopher re-packed the few things the dogs had not destroyed or eaten, and placed two sandwiches, wrapped in white paper, and a jug half full of wine in with them. He moved quickly and soon they were on the road again.

They had ridden down the highway for about five miles when Kyle pulled up beside Christopher and motioned for him to stop.

"What's wrong?" Christopher asked when they were sitting beside each other on their bikes.

"We have to go back." Kyle said.

"Why?"

"We can't leave Goldie like that."

"Ain't nothing we can do for her."

"We got to ..."

"We got to what?"

Kyle looked away. "Finish her," he said.

"You mean kill her?"

Kyle nodded. "She's suffering."

"For God's sake, Kyle. Them other dogs may be back. It ain't safe."

"We got to," Kyle said.

Christopher had seen Kyle like this before and knew that there was no point in arguing with him.

Goldie had dragged herself a couple of yards toward the grass by the time the boys arrived back at the oak tree. Kyle jumped off his motorcycle and knelt down beside her. She whimpered and tried to lick him when he petted her. "You hurting a lot?" Kyle asked.

Christopher dug the revolver out of the pack and made sure it was loaded. He walked over and stood beside Kyle. "Ain't no need to put it off," he said.

Kyle stood up. "You do it," he said. "You shoot better than I do."

"Ain't my dog," Christopher said.

Kyle shook his head. "Please. You do it."

Christopher put the gun down on the ground beside him. "This was your idea."

Kyle petted the dog a while longer and then picked up the gun. He held it in both hands and aimed at the dog. "Goodbye, Goldie," he said. Then, turning his head away at the last moment, he fired.

The dog yelped. She rose up on her front feet but her back legs lay on the ground, unable to move. His eyes wild with alarm, Kyle gasped. "She won't die."

"The head," Christopher shouted. "You got to get her in the head."

"I tried for the heart," Kyle said.

"Just shoot her in the head," Christopher said. "Above the eyes."

Kyle took aim at the dog's head and fired again. This time she fell without making a sound and lay, unmoving, on the shoulder of the highway.

Without ceremony they dragged Goldie into the grass. "I think she'll be happier here," Christopher said.

"I'm sorry," said Kyle. He patted the dog and then stood up. "I didn't mean to hurt you." He turned to Christopher "I didn't mean to hurt her," he said.

"I know that. Come on. We got to get out of here."

Both Kyle and Christopher hated traveling at night, but for different reasons. Christopher was afraid of dogs, violent storms and crazies, more or less in that order. Kyle was more afraid of ghosts. But they were both anxious to put some miles between themselves and the dogs they had just encountered. Christopher insisted that when the moon was bright they travel without their headlights. He felt that made them less likely to be seen, or at least it would give them a chance to spot a potential enemy before it could see them. A scattering of thin clouds shuffled across the sky, darkening the countryside only slightly as they passed in front of the moon. The road, a glowing ribbon, stretched out in front of them. Wisps of mist rose and mingled with the trees that followed the occasional stream. The grasses and the flowers, having reclaimed the prairies from the now antiquated cornfields, rippled in the night breezes.

Feeling themselves exposed and very small in this vast ocean of grass, the boys decided they would be satisfied with the thirty miles or so they had put between themselves and the dogs, and when they came to an old rest area they took the ramp.

The rest rooms did not smell, not having been used for their original purposes for many years.

"But the floors are hard," Kyle said.

"Yeah, and I don't want to be inside where I can't see something coming," Christopher said.

They looked around and decided that a cement picnic table would serve as one side and a roof for a small fort. They completed the makeshift structure with some boards they found in a shed that had once been used by highway maintenance crews. By the time they put their sleeping bag inside and built a little fire in front, they were satisfied that they had a comfortable place to spend the night.

"Look at this," said Kyle, pointing at the board they were using for the back wall of the fort.

"What about it?"

"It says, 'No Overnight Camping'," Kyle said.

"Christopher laughed. "You think they'll come and haul us off to jail?"

"There used to be cops that would do that," Kyle said.

The sandwiches that the people in the car had given to the boys, at Judy's insistence, consisted of large slices of home-made bread with butter and big slabs of venison. They decided to share one now and save the other one for breakfast. Washing down their food with liberal quantities of wine, they sat by the fire for a while.

"I'm sleepy," Kyle said.

"Me too," said Christopher. "And I feel a little drunk."

They took off all their clothes, and crawled into the one large sleeping bag that they shared. For a long time they lay on their bellies and stared at the crumbling and dying fire.

"Christopher?"

"Yeah?"

"You think dogs have souls?"

"Don't know," said Christopher.

They were silent. The tattered clouds passing in front of the moon created the illusion that the moon itself was sailing across the sky. Yet it remained where it was. They could hear the grass whispering in the fields around them and frogs croaking in a nearby pond.

"I don't even know if people got souls," Christopher said.

He looked at Kyle and only then realized that he was crying. He was quiet, but tears were in his eyes and he sniffed from time to time. "You thinking about Goldie?" Christopher asked.

Kyle nodded, and then slipped down deeper into their sleeping bag. Christopher crawled out and went to pee. Then he checked out their campsite, looked around, and crawled back inside. He followed Kyle deep into the bag, letting the front edge fall shut. In the dark he reached out and touched the gun to make sure it was within easy reach, should dogs or any other enemy find them.

Kyle touched his arm. "Hold me," he said. "Like in that visualization."

Farmers and Nomads: the question of civilization

In this chapter I will trace the development of two rather distinct lifestyles following the Plague – the farmers and the nomads, or as they are popularly referred to, the ‘Gypsies’. The forces leading to this development, and the dynamics that defined the relationship between the two groups, were largely economic. The farmers were the primary producers of food. Although the nomads produced some of their own food through hunting and gathering, a significant portion of their diet was provided by the farmers. Economically, the central function of the nomads was the geographic distribution of goods. They were traders. From early on, both the ‘Horse Gypsies’ and the ‘Bike Gypsies’ transported a wide variety of goods, such as coffee, bananas, sugar and grains. In addition, the Bike Gypsies distributed, from central storage tanks, the gasoline used by vehicles.

The factors that led to the division of the nomads into two distinct groups were both practical and economic. I will touch on both in this chapter. With regard to the practical factors, differing conjectures about the speed at which a capacity for heavy industry would be developed were critical. The most pressing concern in this regard was the tires used by cars, trucks, motorcycles and bicycles. The basic question was whether the current supply, which was ample, would age and become unusable before the capacity for producing new tires was re-established. The Bike Gypsies argued that with careful storage to protect them from the elements, the shelf life of tires could be extended for a long time. The Horse Gypsies felt that there would be a gap between the time that existing tires were no long usable and the time new ones could be manufactured. If people were depending on motorized vehicles, they argued, people would be left in the lurch during this period. But the deeper issue that divided the two groups concerned the desirability of industrializing at all.

... from ‘Re-inventing the World’
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p 198

I have spent some time discussing the different pre-Plague assessments of technology articulated in the ‘green movement’. In particular, I have focused on two subsets of that general movement: green anarchism and anarchic-primitivism. It can be argued that I have dedicated an inordinate amount of time to a cluster of marginalized

Chapter Two

Diego

As his father Vincent had explained to Christopher in his letters, the 'Cluster', as he referred to the small community of which he was a part, consisted of four houses. The adults in the first house were Marcie Bohn and Antonio Lamarre. Marcie and Antonio had been living together since shortly after the Plague hit. At first they had lived with two children Marcie had found and assumed responsibility for. One was Alex Madison who had been a 14-year-old when she found him. He'd thought he might have been left behind in the 'Rapture' and was terrified that he would up in Hell. The other was Janice Whitfield who had been eight years old then, a self-willed but likable child who thought of herself as a boy. Adults now, Alex and Janice had long since moved to their own houses, near the farmhouse that had been their first home with Marcie after the Plague. Since then, Marcie and Antonio had four children of their own, two of whom, Samantha and Mark, were still living with them.

Janice had set up housekeeping in the second of the Cluster houses with a man called Lee Sheehan, and another woman, Isabel Neptune. They had two adolescent offspring living with them, Gaea and Phoebe. Gaea was Janice's daughter and Phoebe was Isabel's.

Alex Madison lived in the third house by himself. Although he was not actually unfriendly, he was a bit of a recluse. When he wasn't occupied with the business of survival, he spent a good deal of time meditating and reading. His tastes were very broad but he had a special interest in works from the world's spiritual traditions. It was not uncommon for him to take trips away from the house for the purpose of interviewing various people who he felt might have some spiritual insight.

The fourth and last house in the Cluster was occupied by Christopher's father, Vincent Lorenzo. He had joined the Cluster about three years after the Plague. At that time he was still living with Christopher's mother. Although he now lived in a house by himself, he was quite gregarious and often had an odd assortment of guests. He was, as he had explained to Christopher, interested in the current unfolding of history. He felt that the time in which they were living was of great interest, and that the patterns of life that were currently emerging would determine the direction of humanity for many years – perhaps centuries – into the future. He was curious about everybody. Since most people loved being asked questions about themselves, his household was generally full of a great deal of animated conversation.

Christopher and Kyle had arrived in the area after dark the previous day, and had felt that it would not be a good idea to come until the next day. For a few moments after they knocked on the door nothing happened.

"Maybe we're too early," Kyle said.

"It's been light for over an hour," Christopher said. "They should be up by now."

Presently a brown-skinned girl with an explosion of black curly hair on her head opened the door. She was wearing a pair of cut-off jeans and a t-shirt with a picture of dolphins. She eyed them, suspiciously, but not with hostility. "Yes?"

"I'm Christopher, and this is Kyle," Christopher explained.

"And?" The girl fished for additional information.

"Christopher Lorenzo. Vincent's son. He lives here doesn't he?"

The girl's face lit up. "Ah, of course. Vincent said you will be coming." She opened the door and motioned them in. "He'll be thrilled that you're here." She went on to say that he was not in the house at the present moment. "He's visiting the gypsies," she explained.

"You must be Samantha," Christopher said, as the girl led them through the large, rambling, and somewhat cluttered house back to the kitchen.

"Wow. That's true. How'd you know?"

"My father described all the people in the little cluster here in his letters to me."

"Hmmm. He must have described us pretty accurately for you to be able to tell right off."

"Yes, he did."

"How did he describe me?"

"He said you were the third child of Marcie and Antonio."

"Yes. But what did he say about me? You know. What I was like."

"He said you were a 'lithe and lovely teenager'."

"Well, that was nice of him."

"Yeah, I remembered the exact words, because it made me want to see you."

Samantha blushed slightly and then laughed. "Well here I am," she said. "So what do you think?"

"I think he was probably right."

"Only 'probably'?"

"Well I don't know about 'lithe' yet," Christopher said. "I had to look that word up. It means you can do things real graceful like. I ain't seen you do nothing so I can't tell about that."

Samantha smiled and reached up into a cupboard above the sink. "You must both be hungry," she said. "I'll fix you some oatmeal."

"That would be great," Kyle said. "I'm starved."

The three of them were quiet for a few minutes while Samantha measured out the oatmeal and water and set the pan on the stove to begin cooking. "Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

They both said they would. Christopher watched her as she poured each of them a cup of coffee, and warmed up a cup that she had been drinking. "My dad was right about the 'lovely' part," he said.

Kyle kicked Christopher under the table. He felt that this was going too far. But Samantha only smiled. "Nice of you to say so," she said.

Kyle had never seen his friend Christopher flirt with anybody before, and he didn't much like it.

"How come you're here at my dad's?" Christopher asked. "You belong to Marcie and Antonio."

"I do," Samantha said. "But your dad has guests who like to sleep late. There's only two here now. Sometimes the house is bursting at the seams with guests. Anyhow, he asked if I could come over, fix them some breakfast when they woke up, and take it to them to where the gypsies are staying."

"Who are the guests?" Christopher asked.

"Anita Sommers and Kenneth McCafferty. Two older people. You know, in their fifties or so. Survivors of the Plague. They're here to learn more about the gypsies I guess."

"What's with the gypsies?" Kyle asked.

"They're parked out at the reservoir. There're about 50 or so in this band. They come by every year, stay for a couple of weeks, and move on. They're nice."

"Bike or Horse Gypsies?" Christopher asked.

"Bike. They call themselves the The Blue Bunch."

"The Blue Bunch?"

"Yeah."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know," Samantha confessed. "One of the old ones there that they call Granddaddy, has a blue guitar that he plays. Maybe that has something to do with it. He seems to be a kind of leader."

As they were talking, a short stocky woman came into the room. She yawned and ran her fingers through her carrot-colored hair. "We've got more guests, I see."

"Hi, Anita. This is Kyle and this is Christopher. Christopher is Vincent's boy."

"Hi. How'd you all get here?"

"Bikes," Christopher said.

Anita was friendly and seemed interested, so Christopher began telling about the trip. While he talked Samantha fixed Anita a coffee and began fixing her some oatmeal. "So we was up in the tree naked," Christopher was saying. "The dogs was all around. Kyle was crying like a baby."

"You cry too,sometimes" Kyle interrupted.

"I wasn't then."

"So what's that make you? Tarzan or something?"

"It don't make me nothing. I was just telling Anita here about what happened to us."

"But you were doing it in a way that made me look like a baby."

Christopher frowned and looked at his plate. He thought about Kyle's comment for a moment. "I guess maybe you're right Kyle. I got no reason to do that. Sorry."

"It's okay. You didn't mean anything."

But Christopher could see that his friend was still hurt.

"You was braver than I was when you made friends with that one dog – the one that got shot."

"Wasn't brave. I knew he wasn't going to bite me."

"How could you be sure?"

"I can tell what someone's going to do if I look at them real careful like. It's just something I feel."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of another person in the kitchen. "Good morning, Kenneth," Samantha said. "What'll you have for breakfast?"

Kenneth put in his order for a couple of eggs over light and sat down at the breakfast table. Samantha introduced him to the two boys and said, "Christopher was just telling us about how he and Kyle got trapped up in a tree with a bunch of wild dogs around them."

"Wild dogs can be pretty dangerous," observed Kenneth.

"They can," agreed Samantha. "Go on with your story, Christopher."

Christopher made an effort to continue telling about the adventure he and Kyle shared with the wild dogs, but he could see that he had lost his audience. Kenneth wasn't really paying attention to him, and Anita seemed preoccupied. So he finished describing the incident as quickly as he could and fell silent. Samantha made an effort to spark up a bit of conversation about the Bike Gypsies who were camping nearby, but nobody responded.

Finally Anita looked over at Kenneth. "Still not speaking?" she asked.

"What's the point of speaking?" he said. "When I do, you just a belittle my ideas."

"I'm not making fun of you," Anita said. "I'm just disagreeing with some of your ideas."

"I don't mind that, but the way in which you disagree suggests that you think I'm a simple-minded fool."

"I'm not saying you are simple-minded. It's your ideas that seem simple-minded to me." Anita warmed up her coffee from the pot that was on the table, and frowned. "Though it's difficult to understand how an educated person would advocate for such a ridiculous idea."

"You're referring to the idea of reincarnation?"

"What else?"

"Why is reincarnation a ridiculous idea?" Kenneth asked.

"It's childish. When we grow up it's important that we face the fact of death. Reincarnation is just one more way of trying to be dishonest about our real situation."

"Even supposing what you say is true, why are you so ... so ... passionate in pushing your ideas about it?"

"Because I think we have only a very limited amount of time to live whatever life is really available to us. If we kid ourselves about having an infinite amount of time, we're not so likely to make good use of the time that we really do have. Also the poignancy of all of life will never be experienced outside our knowledge of death. I might also point out that religious superstitions about living forever

have frequently been used to persuade people to tolerate intolerable situations rather than rise up and fight against them. In short, living fully and making use of all our resources requires that we not lie about this most fundamental fact of our existence.”

Kenneth stood up and began pacing back and forth in the kitchen. “It could just as easily be argued that belief in our own absolute and final cessation at death is a recipe for despair, and that it leads only to depression and paralysis. But the possible consequences of believing in reincarnation or denying it are irrelevant to our debate. The question is what is the evidence, and what is it possible to extrapolate from the ordinary experiences that all of us have.”

“What evidence?” Anita said with a wave of her hand.

“Well, for one thing there are the memories, which despite what you say, cannot be easily dismissed. In addition ...”

“We’ve been through all this, Kenneth,” Anita said. “I’ve heard all of your so-called evidence. We’re just spinning our wheels.” She picked up her now-empty cereal bowl and took it to the sink where she washed out the residue of the oatmeal she had eaten from breakfast. “This conversation is pointless,” she said, shaking her head. Kenneth continued pacing for a few seconds, and then sat back down in his chair, looking despondent. For some time nobody said anything.

“What’s reincarnation?” Kyle asked.

It was not clear exactly to whom he was addressing his question, but Anita did not hesitate to provide him with an answer. “It’s a silly superstition,” she said.

“That’s hardly a fair answer to the boy’s question,” Kenneth said. He turned to Kyle. “It’s the belief that when we die something in us that some people have called a ‘soul’ comes to life again in another person, or according to some accounts in an animal or even in an angel.”

“Like we are born again, and then maybe again and again?” Kyle said.

Kenneth nodded. “Basically, yes.”

Kyle looked at Anita. “And you don’t believe this?” He asked.

“No,” she said simply.

“What do you think happens when we die?” Kyle asked.

“Nothing. We just cease to exist.”

“And not even dreams are left?”

“No dreams, no memories, not anything.”

Kyle put his spoon down on his plate and stared at Anita with his head slightly to one side. He looked upset. She saw that he was, but simply shrugged her shoulders as if to say there’s nothing I can do about it. So live with it.

“And all those billions of people who died in the Plague, what happened to them?” Kyle asked.

“Nothing. They’re gone. It’s like they never were. All we can do now is live as best we’re able and try to make things better for real people on this earth.”

“You’re old,” Kyle said. “You knew those billions of people.”

Anita laughed. “No, I didn’t know billions of them. I only knew a few of them. Though sometimes it may have seemed like billions.”

“But what does that feel like?” Kyle asked

“What does what feel like?”

Kyle leaned back in his chair and his eyes rolled back to stare at the ceiling. “I mean the sadness,” he said. Then he looked directly at Anita. “What do you do with all that sadness?”



It was not long before three more young people arrived on dirt bikes. Gaea, the 15-year-old daughter of Janice Whitfield and Lee Sheehan, came into the house and helped Samantha finish cleaning up after breakfast. The other two waited outside. Gaea was blond and wore her hair in braids that went down to her waist. She was very friendly to Samantha but did not show a great deal of interest in any of the guests that she was introduced to – neither the younger ones or the older ones.

When they went outside Samantha introduced Kyle and Christopher to the two people who were waiting in the yard. One was a coffee-colored rather bookish and delicate looking 12-year-old boy named Mark. He was Samantha’s brother. The other one was Phoebe, the 11-year-old half sister of Gaea. In contrast to Gaea, who was big-boned and athletic, Phoebe was a small girl with curly brown hair and eyes that never seemed to actually focus on anyone or anything around her.

After introductions were made the group started off toward the camp of the Bike Gypsies, with Samantha and Gaea in the lead. Mark, Phoebe, Christopher and Kyle followed in a loose clump of dirt bikes and motor cycles, and Kenneth and Anita brought up the rear in a Buick convertible driven by Anita.

After about two miles, Mark pulled over and got off his bike.

Samantha pulled up beside him. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing” Mark said.

“Why did you stop?”

“Mushrooms,” Mark said. “Chantels, and a bunch of others. They look great. The rain brought them out.”

“You’re holding everybody up.”

“Go on ahead. I’ll catch up later.”

“Can’t let you do that.”

“Why not?”

“Wolves could get you.”

There had been stories about wolves moving into the area. Most of the wild dog packs had been chased from the cities and the more populated areas. One was not in too much danger from them except in the open countryside. It seemed that the dogs and the wolves were competing with each other to gain control of different territories, and they both fed off the deer that were plentiful in the area. It was known that the wild dogs would on occasion attack children who were separated from any larger group of people, and there was fear that the wolves might do the same.

“But I can’t pass up all these mushrooms,” Mark pleaded.

“Okay,” Samantha said. “I guess we could all use the mushrooms to spice up some of our food.”

Most of the group joined in to help collect the mushrooms. If they had a question about whether one was edible they came to Mark, who seemed to be quite knowledgeable about the subject.



The reservoir was surrounded by a woods that varied in width from about 100 yards to a half a mile. This created a habitat that supported a variety of plants and animals rather different from those found in the surrounding grasslands. Within these woods there were two cleared grassy areas that bordered on the reservoir. In one of them, the bike Gypsies had set up their camp. The other one was used as a playing field.

Most of the children and teenagers from the Gypsy camp were in the playing field area when Kyle, Christopher, and the group that they traveled with arrived in the camp. Kyle didn’t much like the game that they were playing, but tried to join in for a while. Altogether there were 18 children between the ages of eight and fourteen in the game. It consisted of a no-holds-barred kind of keep-away played with a soccer ball. Short of hitting, kicking or biting the people on the opposite team, almost any kind of action that got the ball was permissible. Any one who had the ball could be tackled or held and the ball could be forcibly removed from them if they were not able to throw it to a teammate before being captured.

Most of the players were boys, but some girls joined in. The people in the Gypsy community were even more casual about wearing clothes than were the people with whom Kyle grew up. Although both boys and girls were present, the two teams were designated by those who wore shirts and those who did not.

Gaea, Mark, Christopher and Kyle all joined in. Phoebe sat on the sidelines and watched. Kyle was not very successful in the game, and he disliked the roughness. So after a bit he joined Phoebe on the sidelines.

While they watched, someone threw the ball to Mark. He didn’t go very far before three of the opposing team members grabbed him and threw him to the ground. His head hit a rock and he was temporarily stunned. The others helped him to his feet and made sure that he was not seriously injured. His head was bleeding slightly. Mark came to the sidelines and sat down with Phoebe and Kyle and the others resumed the game.

“Let’s go look around,” Kyle suggested to Mark.

Mark felt his head to see if it still bleeding. The cut was minor and it had already stopped. He would have a bruise to show for his efforts, but it wasn’t anything to worry about. He shook his head. “No. In a minute or two I’m going back into the game.”

Kyle studied the game more closely, trying to understand why Mark would want to rejoin it. He saw Christopher grab Gaea and wrestle her to the ground. They laughed as Gaea made an energetic but unsuccessful attempt to throw the ball to one of her team-mates. They both seemed to enjoy this, Kyle noticed. He also noticed that Christopher seemed to take a special interest in guarding Gaea, and trying to get the ball from her at every opportunity.

After a bit he turned back to Mark. "Do you really like that game?"

"It's okay. It's what everybody is doing."

Kyle could see that Mark was not well built for such a game. But it came to him that Mark's real attraction to the game was that he wanted to be with everybody else.

Kyle shrugged. "Well, okay. I guess I'll go off and look around by myself a bit then."

"Okay," Mark said. "See you later."

Phoebe looked up and smiled faintly at Kyle as he left.

Kyle followed a path along the reservoir in the direction of the main Gypsy camp. Pretty soon he came to a small beach. He noticed a boy about his own age sitting at the edge of the water digging into the bank. The boy, who was naked, had a small hand shovel with which he dug clay out of the embankment. Kyle noticed that further up on the bank there was a clay cup and a figurine of a beaver drying in the sun. Kyle was usually slow to reach out to people he didn't know, but he was intrigued by this boy. He sat down on the embankment and said nothing. The boy glanced up but also said nothing.

For several minutes Kyle watched as the boy went about his business of digging clay out of the bank. Then Kyle smiled at him and said, "Hey."

"Hi," returned the boy.

For a while longer they remained silent, with Kyle just sitting and the boy working with his clay. "What you doing?" Kyle asked finally.

"Making stuff."

Kyle looked up at the cup and figurine on the bank. "Looks cool."

"Hmmm," the boy said. Kyle noticed the very faint hint of a smile pass over his face.

"Sure wish I knew how to do that," Kyle said.

For about 30 seconds the boy did not respond at all. Then he said "I could show you."

"Cool."

"Best to take off your clothes before starting," the boy said. "Clay gets all over everything."

Kyle undressed, came down to the water, and kneeled down beside the boy. "I'm Kyle."

"I'm Marcello. Here. Take this bucket and fill it with some of this clay. Don't let any dirt or sand get mixed in. I'm going to rinse off." Marcello handed Kyle a small bucket and the hand shovel he had been using.

He went out into the water and began rinsing off. After he had most of the clay off of his face and body, he dived into the water and swam around a bit

before coming back to shore. Then he went on up to the bank where he had left the cup and the figurine of the beaver. He sat down in the grass, picked up an ice pick, and began etching a design into the cup.

When Kyle had his bucket full of clay he brought it up to the bank where Marcello was sitting.

"Go rinse off before the clay dries," Marcello said. "If you don't, it will itch." Kyle did as Marcello suggested.

For a couple of hours Marcello taught Kyle about making things out of clay. He had him roll long strands of clay and wrap them around and around to make the basic shape of a cup. He then taught him how to mold the cups so that it took on an attractive shape and showed him how to put on a handle so that it would not come off easily. Marcello was a patient teacher and worked slowly and methodically himself. He was very careful to get the exact effects that he wanted on his figurine and on his cup.

"How long will you be staying here?" Kyle asked.

"Probably a couple of weeks."

"Are you on the road all the time?"

"Pretty much. We have regular places that we stop, and usually stay in each one for three or four weeks. We swing south for the winter months and back around toward the north during the summer."

"Sounds like a good life," Kyle said. "What if someone wanted to join you?"

"You've got to get permission from the tribe to join us."

"Is that hard?"

"It depends. The tribe wants somebody who can make a contribution to the life of the tribe, and who won't be causing a lot of trouble."

"I'm pretty easy to get along with, and I could learn how to make cups and pottery. At least I could if you taught me."

Marcello stood up and stretched. Kyle could not help staring at him. He was about medium build, but rather delicate looking. There was a gentleness about Marcello that Kyle found very attractive. He seemed somehow different from anybody Kyle had ever met before, and he wanted very much to become friends with him.

"I could teach you," Marcello said, and he smiled at Kyle. "But don't you have family here?"

"My mom's the only family I got, and she lives in Baltimore. So I'm pretty much free to come and go as I want." Kyle was surprised at himself. He had hardly known Marcello for a couple of hours, and knew very little about the Gypsy group that he belonged to, and yet he was already talking about joining them.

"Well, I don't know," Marcello said. "If you're serious, let's go talk with Diego."

"Diego?"

"He's one of the main leaders in the tribe here."

"I don't know whether I am serious or not," Kyle said. "Maybe it's just an idea in my head."

"Sure. You'd want to spend more time with us before making a decision like that."

"I would."

"At least a week or so with us so that we can get to know each other, and you could get to know our ways."

"Right."

"Still, there would be no harm in your meeting Diego."

"I guess not."

"He's out on a hunting trip right now. I'll introduce you when I get a chance."

"OK."

"But for now you can meet my family. Put your cup over here in the sun, and let's go rinse off again. I could show you around. And teach you more about pottery."

"I'd like that," Kyle said.

After a short swim, Marcello led Kyle along the edge of the reservoir until they came to the large clearing where most of the bike Gypsies had put up their tents.

The tent that served as Marcello's home at the edge of the clearing. Kyle surveyed the scene. In front of the tent there was a fire pit circled with rocks. Next to this was a wooden box with a variety of cooking utensils and supplies. A picnic table and several comfortable plastic chairs completed the homesite. A tarp was strung up over the picnic table to provide protection from both rain and the sun.

Two women in their mid-40s were sitting at a picnic table drinking tea as Marcello and Kyle arrived at the homesite.

Marcello made introductions in a cursory manner.

"This is Pam, and this is my mom," he said, nodding first at one and then the other to indicate which was which. "This is Kyle. He's new here. He's staying with Phoebe's people."

"What your mom's name?" Kyle asked. "I can't just call her 'mom'."

The darker and more gentle looking of the two women laughed and said, "My name is Anna Morales. I'm Marcello's mother." She nodded at the other woman sitting at the picnic table. "This is Pamela Kotredes. She's my friend."

"Kyle thinks maybe he wants to join us," Marcello said.

Pamela stared at Kyle, as though taking his measure. "Really?"

Kyle nodded, uncertainly. "It's just something I am thinking about." This woman did not seem as friendly as Anna, though there was nothing really hostile in her manner.

"What made you think of doing that?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. The traveling, I think. Seeing new places ..."

"I'm going to introduce him to Diego," Marcello said.

Pamela turned to Marcello. "Diego likes people who can hunt," she said. She turned back to Kyle. "Do you like to hunt?"

"Not very much."

"That could be a problem."

"Well, I could learn. I'm pretty good at learning most anything I put my mind to."

"I'm sure you can," Anna said reassuringly. Then to Pamela she said "He looks like a pretty clever boy to me, and Marcello seems to have taken a liking to him. I think the main thing that Diego will be looking for is that he gives it his best effort."

Pamela took a gulp of tea, sloshed it around in her mouth a bit, and swallowed it. "Maybe," she said.

"He'll do okay," Marcello said. "He's got a good hand for pottery, and he learns fast."

"Pottery and hunting are not the same," Pamela said.

They were silent for a few moments. "I don't know," Kyle said. "Its just that you seem to have a nice way of life."

Anna smiled at Kyle. "Well, in any case, I'm glad to meet you. Maybe Marcello could show you around our place a bit. Be looking for both of you at supper time."

Marcello took Kyle by the elbow. "Come on."

He led Kyle around to the back of the tent and down a small path that came to the outhouse. This consisted of a toilet seat on three legs placed over a pit. He removed the seat and peed into the pit, as if to demonstrate how it worked. Kyle followed suit. "Usually I just pee in the woods somewhere, but it's against the rules to poop just anywhere. I mean people might step in it, so it's not a good idea. If you got to poop you put the toilet seat over the pit, and if you just got pee you set it to one side. That way you don't get pee all over the toilet seat." He shrugged. "Or you can just pee behind a tree or something."

Kyle nodded. "Makes sense."

"Okay. Let me show you where I stay." They followed the path back to the central area of the homesite, and then followed a second path about 15 yards back into the woods. There they came to a little clearing with a smaller tent in it. Marcello pulled the front flap of the tent back. "Take a look."

Kyle peered and saw a sleeping bag, some clothes, a few books, a flashlight, and some other paraphernalia, all neatly laid out. "Cool." He was thinking about how pleasant it would be to travel with this group of people from place to place. He could get his own small tent, and have a place to retreat to when he'd had enough of dealing with people. But when he felt lonely, there would always be lots of friends around. He visualized himself sleeping in a tent not too far from Marcello's. He would want a tent of his own, but thought that perhaps sometimes it would be nice if they could sleep together. He wondered whether Christopher would want to join them. He thought probably not, because Christopher would want to stay with his father a while, and then maybe return to his mother. He kept these thoughts to himself.

"Still one more place to show you," Marcello said. "The guesthouse."

"You got a guesthouse?"

Marcello smiled. "Sort of."

The guesthouse was connected by short paths both to Marcello's tent area and to the central homesite. It consisted of a large tarp supported in the middle by a pole tied between two trees, and securely fastened down on

both sides with ropes and stakes. An area of about 20 by 30 feet that was protected from the weather was created by this arrangement. In that area four smaller tarps were arranged that people could sleep on, with blankets or sleeping bags. One of them was occupied by a girl sitting on a large sleeping bag reading a book. She looked up when she heard the boys coming into the clearing.

Kyle recognized her. It was Phoebe.

"Hi," she said.

"You're Phoebe, aren't you?" Kyle said. He was glad he had remembered her name.

"Yes. And you're Kyle."

He nodded. "What are you reading?"

"Fairy tales."

"Cool. Can I see?"

"Ok."

Kyle sat down beside her, and Marcello arranged himself on the other side. "Those are awesome pictures. What's the name of the book?"

"Norwegian Fairy Tales."

"Wow. That is a great book. I love fairy tales."

"You do?"

"I love them. I know a bunch of them." He paused, and thought a moment. "Some people say I'm too old for fairy tales. But I don't think so."

"Me neither."

They looked at each other, and she smiled, shyly.

"Do you stay here?"

"Sometimes I do when Marcello's people come through."

"Pam and my mom have taken a liking to her. Me too, of course. She's just like one of the family when we are here."

"That's cool," said Kyle. He was more enthralled by the minute with the idea of joining this group.

"If you wanted, you could come by after dark and tell one of your stories," Phoebe said.

"I would if you would read me one of yours from that book."

"Sure."

"We got to go for now," Marcello said. "I got to finish showing Kyle around."

"Okay," Phoebe said. "I'll start a fire around nightfall."

Kyle glanced around and saw that in front of the guesthouse there was a ring of rocks for a fireplace.

"Phoebe really cottoned on to you," said Marcello, as he led Kyle back to the main house site. "She doesn't do that with many. Usually she's pretty shy with people."

"Maybe it's because we both like fairy tales."

After Marcello finished showing Kyle around the camp of the motorcycle Gypsies, they returned to the homesite for supper. Phoebe was there. They ate a meal that Pamela and Anna had prepared without much conversation,

but the atmosphere was relaxed and pleasant. After supper Marcello and Kyle went back to the beach where Kyle first found him, and they went swimming. A few other people of different ages were at the beach. Some were swimming but most were simply sitting on the shore. A few were talking quietly, and others sat silently and watched the sun settle beneath the horizon in the West. Marcello and Kyle were soon in the water.

They swam in a leisurely manner. They saw geese flying overhead, and could hear the frogs that were beginning their nightly chorus. Kyle felt a deep harmony with this place.

It was already dark when Marcello and Kyle arrived at the guesthouse. Two kerosene lamps on poles were burning a few yards in front of the two trees at either edge of the parking area. A small but cheerful fire was burning in the fireplace.

"We're back," said Kyle

"Good," said Phoebe. "You got your story with you?"

"It's in here." Kyle pointed to his head. "Got lots of them in there."

"Where they come from?"

"My mama used to read to me a lot."

The three of them sat silently for a while staring at the fire.

"Why don't you tell one of those stories now?" Phoebe suggested.

"Ok. This one is called Wababanal. That's what a tribe way up in Maine called the Northern Lights. That was way before the Plague. It was even before the Europeans came and took over the land here in what used to be the United States."

"You know a lot of history, too," Phoebe said.

"My mama told me all these things."

"Where is your Mama now?"

"In Baltimore."

"We go near there in the fall. We go over to the coast up around Boston, and then down the coast. By winter we end up in Georgia or Florida."

"If I traveled with you I could go see her when we got close."

"Your mama read to you a lot and was nice to you?"

"Sure."

"So why didn't you stay with her?"

"Christopher wanted me to come with him when he came up here to find his dad."

Phoebe nodded. "But it doesn't seem like you plan to go back and live with her. Why not?"

"It's hard to say. I love her. But I like to wander. I always like to see new places. And she just wants to live in one place and do the same things each day."

"Well, ok. So what about the Wababanal?"

"It's about this boy that was different from the other boys in the tribe," Kyle began.

His dad's name was Morning Star. He was the chief of the tribe. He worried about his only son. He wasn't unfriendly, but he didn't show much interest in playing with the other children. They called him Wanders Off because it seemed as though every chance he got, he would go off by himself. Sometimes he would be gone for days at a time. When his parents asked him about this, he would just say, "I am happy where I go. You don't need to worry." And he wouldn't tell them anything more no matter how they questioned him.

Finally Chief Morning Star told his wife, "I've got to do something about this." So the next time his son wandered off, the old chief followed him. He followed him a long ways, way beyond the hunting lands of his people. Always they would be traveling north. Then, all at once, a funny feeling came over the chief. His eyes closed against his will and he couldn't hear. Then he had this crazy feeling of not knowing anything at all. When his eyes opened and his hearing came back, he found himself in a different land. It was a real strange place. There was no sun or moon, and no stars. The country was illumined by a peculiar many-colored light.

People came and greeted him. None of them knew his language, but they were friendly and treated him well. But none could show him where to find his son.

After some days, an old man came up to chief Morning Star and said to him in his own language, "Do you know where you are?"

"No," admitted the chief.

"You are in Wababanal, the land of the Northern Lights. I came here from the same land as you many years ago. We call that the 'lower country'."

"How did you get here?" asked the chief.

"By the path of light," said the old man. "Is that how you came?"

"I don't know," answered the chief. "Did you have the odd feeling that you had lost all knowledge as you traveled?"

"Yes" said the old man. "And I could not see or hear."

"Then that's the same path by which I came. Is there any way to return to our land?"

"Yes, but the chief of Wababanal would have to be the one to tell you that."

"I see. Can you tell me whether anyone else from our country is here in Wababanal?"

"For a long time I was the only one here from the lower country. But now there is a boy who comes to visit us, but he never stays."

The old chief's heart leaped within his chest. "Yes, that must be my son. He is the one I have come to find. I want to take him home."

"I can show you where he is, but both he and the chief of Wababanal must agree if he is to return home with you."

"I won't try to force him," agreed Chief Morning Star. "Only please show him to me."

The old man led Chief Morning Star to a playground of many colors. Boys and girls of all the colors of the rainbow, and of new colors that the chief had never seen back in the lower country, played many games in the playground.

They showed him a wonderful game that he had never seen before. The participants played with a ball of multi-colored light. You had to be lively and quick to play this game well, but it wasn't a rough game. They didn't knock each other down and things like that. They had lights surrounding their heads, and the only things they wore were these peculiar many colored belts around their waists. They called them 'rainbow belts'.

"Do you see your boy here?" asked the old man.

"Yes," said the chief. "That one, with the very brightest light around his head, is my son." Tears came to the chief's eyes. These tears were because of the relief he felt at seeing his son again. But also he cried because of all the beauty – the beauty of the children, and especially of his own son.

"You will need to ask him about returning with you when the game is over," said the old man.

When the game was over the chief went up to his son, who seemed surprised at first, but then very happy to see him.

"Your mother misses you, and we both worry about you," said the Chief. "You must come home."

"I am happy here, father. I wouldn't be happy living in the lower country, and the traveling back and forth is very tiresome. I have only returned as often as I have for you and mother."

"Can you not continue to do that?"

"Many parents lose a child to some sickness or to a wild animal. They carry on, and in time regain an interest in life. If I did not return, you would miss me for a while, but then you would have other sons and daughters and forget me."

"But the tribe needs you," argued his father.

"What for? I am skinny, and a poor hunter, and am not clever in the ways of the world."

The old chief thought hard for a few moments. Then he said, "Our tribe needs you to teach it about Wababanal."

"They can get along without that knowledge," his son said.

"Maybe and maybe not. I don't know," his father answered. "But the life of our tribe will be poor without the knowledge of Wababanal."

The boy thought a few moments on what his father told him and said, "Yes, what you say is true. I'll return to live with our people and tell them about Wababanal. But from time to time I must return here to see this country again."

"Agreed," said his father. "Lets go now to the chief of Wababanal and tell him about our decision."

When he heard about their decision, the chief of Wababanal was quite ready to help them return home. He arranged for two great birds of light to carry them there. On the way, Chief Morning Star had the same sense of losing all knowledge as he had when he went to Wababanal.

When his wife welcomed them back, Chief Morning Star was overjoyed that his family was re-united once again.

When Kyle finished his story Marcello got up and put some more sticks on the fire. The children watched the fire in silence as the new sticks began to burn and the fire brightened. Then Kyle turned to Phoebe. "So what about your story?"

"I have to read my story. It's not all in my head – at least not word for word."

"I don't have stories in my head word for word, either. I just tell them with whatever words come to my head as I think about it."

"You told it good."

"Thanks."

Phoebe rummaged through a pile of papers, crayons, books and other paraphernalia that sat beside her sleeping bag and pulled out a large book. "My story's about three trolls."

"I'll hold the flashlight for you," Kyle offered.

"Okay."

The two boys arranged themselves on either side of Phoebe so that they could see the pictures, and Kyle aimed his flashlight at the page. The story was about three trolls who had to share one eye between them. They tended to bicker quite a bit about whose turn it was to use the eye. Without it, of course, they were blind. The boy who was the hero of the story was threatened by these three trolls, but was able to evade them by taking advantage of the fact that they were always fighting about who was to have the eye.

"That was a cool story," Kyle said when Phoebe finished.

"I like the pictures in the book," Marcello said. "Someday I hope to be able to draw like that."

Marcello had brought sleeping bags for himself and Kyle. It was beginning to get chilly so the three campers spread out their bags on separate tarps and crawled into them. They talked a bit about the stories and about what they had done during the day, but Kyle was very tired, and soon fell asleep. He didn't know what time it was when he woke up, but he had pee. A bright moon was high in the sky so he had no trouble finding his way to a nearby tree where he relieved himself. Back in his sleeping bag he felt warm and happy.

He listened to the frogs. His mother had told him that at one point the frogs were dying off because of all of the pollution that human beings had created. Kyle was glad that they were coming back. He thought of himself traveling across the countryside with the Bike Gypsies. He thought maybe Marcello's mother would adopt him as a sort of foster child. He wanted to be a part of their family. He also hoped that maybe Phoebe would join them.

Kyle wondered who Diego was. All he knew about him was that he was a hunter and was very influential in the tribe. It seemed that he would have to approve of Kyle joining the Gypsies. He worried a little about the things that Pam had said. She seemed to think that if Kyle wasn't a good hunter, he might not be accepted. But Kyle reassured himself with the thought that he could be brave when he had to be, and that he could learn new things. With all these mixed thoughts and images swirling in his brain, he drifted off to sleep again.

Kyle was up with the sun. He was surprised that both the other children had already risen and were gone. He pulled on his pants and shoes and followed the path back to the main homesite. There he found that Anna and Pam were also up, and that they were cooking breakfast. She lent him one of her flannel shirts to wear because she saw that he was chilly and had not brought enough warm clothes. Actually he had not planned on staying overnight. He was grateful for the use of the shirt.

When breakfast was done Marcello took Kyle with him and spent the morning teaching him how to collect the various plants and substances he needed to make the dyes he would use for his pottery and paintings. Toward the end of the morning they went to the beach to wash off before returning to the homesite for lunch.

As the two boys were drying off in the sun after finishing their swim, Kyle caught sight of a man a little way down the beach who was also wading into shore. Kyle could not take his eyes off of him. He was tall and lean, but very muscular. His body was tanned, and he wore his black hair in a ponytail. Kyle thought that he was probably the most handsome man he'd ever seen.

Kyle had seen a picture of this man somewhere before. He was sure of it. He racked his brain trying to remember. Then it came to him. He'd seen a picture that looked just like this man in a mythology book that he spent a lot of time looking at when he was younger. Christopher's mother seemed to know where to find such books, and Kyle's own mother liked reading to him even after Kyle was able to read for himself. The picture that reminded Kyle of this man was Apollo. It had been in a book on Greek mythology. As he studied the man carefully he realized that there were some differences. The living Apollo that was before his eyes was a shade darker than the picture of Apollo in the book, but both had the same lithe, muscular bodies, and both had strong, reflective faces. There was no question about it. The man was a god.

Sitting there naked in the sun, Kyle felt his penis become erect. This happened from time to time, of course, but not usually when he was with other people. Sometimes it happened when he cuddled with Christopher. At other times it happened for no apparent reason. But this was the first time he had ever been aware of this happening in direct response to his looking at a man.

Kyle looked over at Marcello.

"Who is that?" he whispered.

"That's Diego."

"He's beautiful."

Marcello nodded. "Yeah, and he knows it too."

Kyle frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Never mind," Marcello said. "Let me introduce you to him."

"Me ... to him?"

"Of course. Who else? If you're wanting to join us you have to let people see you"

Kyle sneaked a look down at his erect penis.

It was not unknown for boys to get erections when they were swimming, wrestling, or just running around having a good time. Sometimes boys teased each other about it a bit, but it was never thought to be a matter of any particular importance. Yet all at once Kyle felt quite embarrassed.

"Maybe I don't want him to see me right now," he said.

"Why not?" Marcello asked.

"No particular reason."

"Then come on. They have to get to know you."

"Maybe now's not a good time," Kyle said.

"Why not?" Marcello asked again.

"Maybe he's busy or something."

"You can see he's just swimming."

Holding his hands casually in front of him to hide his erection, Kyle allowed himself to be led over to the edge of the water just as Diego was coming out.

"Diego!" Marcello called.

Diego turned around and faced the boys. "Oh, hi, Marcello," he said.

"I've got somebody to introduce you to," the boy said.

Diego smiled at Kyle.

"Diego, this is Kyle. Kyle, this is Diego," Marcello said.

"Good to meet you," Diego said and held out his hand.

Kyle gave up trying to hide his erection and extended his right hand, dropping the other hand to his side. He took Diego's hand lightly, and Diego squeezed his hand firmly.

"Kyle thinks he might want to live with us," Marcello said.

"Would he now?" Diego said.

"Yeah. He likes to travel and thinks our way of life is pretty neat."

"It is a good life. But it can be a pretty hard life too at times."

"Kyle's good at dealing with hard times. You should have heard some of the hard times he's told me about. What do you think? Is it possible?"

Diego studied Kyle. Kyle wished that he had bigger muscles, and that he didn't have a boner right then. He couldn't tell what Diego might be thinking. He didn't frown. But then he didn't smile either. Finally he said, "I'd have to get to know him."

"That's easy," Marcello said. "Kyle wants to go hunting with you."

"I do?" Kyle said.

"Sure, don't you remember telling me about how you wanted to learn more about hunting?"

"Oh that. Yeah." Kyle turned to Diego. "I don't know too much about hunting but I'd really like to learn."

Diego nodded. "Okay. Meet me here tomorrow morning at sunrise. A group of us will be going out to get a deer, and to see if we can tell what the wolves are doing."

"Do I need to bring anything special?"

"Do you have a gun?"

"I could borrow Christopher's pistol."

"I mean a rifle. Never mind. I'll bring everything that you'll need. Just be here at sunrise."

That was the end of the interview. With a mixture of feelings, Kyle watched Diego as he walked on up the beach. He was as beautiful from behind as he was from the front. But Kyle also found him to be a somewhat frightening person.



Kyle, Phoebe, and Marcello decided to sleep together again at night in the guesthouse. They told or read stories and talked about how their lives had been before they met each other. Kyle liked being with his new friends very much, but he was preoccupied. It was hard for him to concentrate on what was being said. He knew that early the next morning he would get up and go hunting with Diego. Conflicting feelings and thoughts consumed his heart and mind, but he was reluctant to share them with his friends.

As the conversation began to grow more listless, and the fire began to die down, the children prepared to go to bed. When Kyle was worried or afraid, he found it comforting to sleep with other people. He turned to Phoebe who was already snuggled into her sleeping bag. Marcello had gone off to pee before settling into his bag.

"Can I sleep with you in your sleeping bag?"

"Why?"

"It would be warmer."

"I'm warm enough."

"It would be cosy."

"Well, I don't know."

"What I mean is, sometimes I get afraid at night. And I'd feel safer if I was with somebody."

"Why are you whispering?"

"So Marcello won't hear. He's just over there. He'll think I'm a sissy."

"No he won't."

Kyle thought about this for a moment. Perhaps she was right. Marcello was different from a lot of boys. But right then he didn't want to take the chance. "Well can I?"

"I suppose so ... if you're afraid."

"I am. And I'm worried about tomorrow. How it will go."

"Okay. But no sex things."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sometimes boys want to do sex things if you let them too close. I don't want to – especially not with someone I don't hardly know."

It took Kyle a minute to understand what she was talking about. Then he realized that she meant the kinds of things he and Christopher sometimes did when they slept together.

“Oh, that,” he said. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I think maybe I’m ... uh ... well ... the other way.” As he said this, Kyle was sitting beside her, taking off his shoes and pants.

Phoebe looked up at him. “The other way?”

“Yeah ... you know ...”

“Hmm, I guess.” She didn’t. But he seemed to be saying that he wouldn’t pester her a lot, and she did like him. So she said that he could sleep with her.



It was already beginning to get light when Kyle woke up. He pulled himself out of the sleeping bag as carefully as he could so as not to bother Phoebe, and hurriedly pulled on his pants and shoes. When he reached the main homesite he saw that Anna was already up. She was sitting at a picnic table drinking a cup of coffee. She knew about his appointment with Diego.

“You want some breakfast?” she asked.

“No time. I got to get to the beach before the sun comes up.”

“Well drink a glass of milk, and you can take some bread with you.”

Kyle gulped down the milk, mumbled a thank you, grabbed the bread that Anna offered, and hurried down the path toward the beach.

When he arrived at the beach he found four people waiting for him. They did not seem impatient, and he had the feeling that they had themselves only very recently arrived. In addition to Diego there was another man who was introduced as Alfredo. Alfredo was a little older than Diego. He was shorter and more heavysset. Kyle saw a gentleness in the man’s eyes that contrasted with the sternness of Diego.

In addition to Alfredo and Diego there were two boys in the group waiting on the beach. One was introduced as Sam and the other as Joshua. Joshua was about 11 years old, with a medium build and a quiet manner. Sam was bigger. Kyle judged that he was about fourteen. He was muscular and athletic.

After introductions were made, they had chatted for five or six minutes about events and issues in their community. Sam contributed a fair bit to the conversation, and when he did talk it was with great conviction. He seemed to be very confident of his own opinions.

The fact that he knew none of the people being talked about made Kyle aware of how much of a stranger he was here. Always, it seemed to Kyle, he was a stranger. He did not feel like a stranger with his mother, who he felt truly loved him. Also Christopher and his family accepted him completely. But these were the only exceptions. He thought about how some months from now he might know the people who were being talked about and be familiar with the events that were transpiring in this community. Then he could join in the inconsequential chatter. There was a kind of intimacy about it.

“I guess we better get going,” Diego announced.

The first item of business was to try to get a deer or two. They used the game that they killed both for food in their own community, and as something to trade with the local people for fresh bread and vegetables. Diego gave Kyle the rifle he brought along for him and then explained the strategy that they would be using. Although he was older, Alfredo seemed to defer to Diego in most matters. The two men had searched out the area and had a pretty good idea about where the deer drank in the reservoir and what paths they used in their movement through the woods. He and Alfredo would take two of the boys, and would spread out with the boys between them. Each boy was to keep within sight of the adult closest to him. The remaining boy was taken to a location just outside the boundary between the woods that surrounded the reservoir and the grassy fields that extended beyond these woods. This boy was to hide in the grass and be prepared to shoot the deer that the other four hoped to flush out into the field, as they moved rather noisily through the woods. Much to his surprise, Kyle was given the honored position of waiting in the field to actually make the kill.

He is doing this not because it's the most strategic thing to do, but because he's testing me, Kyle thought. He hoped that he would not fail the test.

As Kyle waited in his little nest in the grass near the edge of the woods, he tried to remember everything that Christopher had ever taught him about using a rifle or about hunting. It'd never been one of his central interests, but largely at Christopher's insistence he learned to shoot with a reasonable degree of accuracy. He knew that he was not to move or make any noises. Yet the insects – especially the mosquitoes – were beginning to plague him. Because he wanted to avoid making much noise, he tried to slap the mosquitoes softly, but for that reason generally missed getting them at all. For a long time he heard and saw nothing. He began to wonder whether the rest of the group had forgotten about him.

Then he heard something crashing through the woods in his direction. Lifting himself into a crouching position he stared at the edge of the woods. Suddenly a large deer with big antlers leaped out of the woods and started across the field. It was quite close to Kyle, and had not yet seen him. The deer was very beautiful so Kyle stood up to get a better look and at that point the deer noticed Kyle. As their eyes met Kyle realized he was supposed to shoot this deer. He raised his gun and aimed at the deer's chest where he thought the bullet would go through its heart and kill it quickly. He could have succeeded, but in that brief window of opportunity he realized that he really didn't want to kill the deer. He raised his gun slightly and shot over the deer's back. The deer was soon at a safe distance.

Kyle stood in the newly risen sun in a state of complete confusion. He had found it very exciting to see the deer and thought the creature's movements were quite beautiful. He was glad that the animal had escaped. But he was also aware that he had failed his test.

It wasn't long before the other four emerged from the woods and came to where Kyle stood. For a moment they stared at him without speaking.

Then Sam said, "You missed him." His voice was filled with both accusation and contempt.

"Didn't you have a good shot at him?" asked Diego.

"Yes ... I mean no ... not really ... I don't know. I guess it all happened too fast." Kyle shrugged and averted his eyes from all the group members who were staring at him. "I'm sorry."

"Well, he's not the only deer in the woods," Joshua said.

"I could have got him," Sam said.

"Hush," Joshua said. "He's doing the best he can. He'll learn."

Diego took the group back into the woods to see what other game they might find. There were a lot of squirrels around, and before long they had shot three of them. Then Diego shot a fourth one that became lodged, as it fell, in a limb of the tree. "Shit, how am I going to get that out of the tree?" Diego muttered.

"Why don't we just leave it?" Sam said. "There's a lot of other squirrels around."

"No, I don't feel good about leaving anything I kill lying around to rot." Diego peered up into the large oak tree with a look of irritation.

"I'm good at climbing," Kyle said. "I think I could get it."

"It's pretty far out on that limb," Alfredo observed, dubiously.

"No, I could do it. Really."

Diego looked at the boy, and then at the squirrel in the tree. "Well, all right, let's see what you can do."

Climbing trees was, indeed, one of the few athletic activities that Kyle excelled in. With one hand around one of his ankles, and his other hand under his buttocks, Diego raised him above his head so that he could reach the first limb in the oak tree. Kyle scrambled onto the limb, and then made his way with considerable dexterity to the limb upon which the squirrel was resting. He was pleased that Diego could see him doing something that he did well. However the squirrel was, as Alfredo had observed, pretty far out on the limb. There was a real question as to whether the limb would hold his weight. Kyle judged that he was probably about 30 feet off the ground. It was not a height from which he wished to fall. Normally he would not have ventured far enough out onto the limb to get the squirrel. But this was his chance to redeem himself. Slowly he edged out the limb towards a squirrel. The other four watched from the ground in silence.

He was only inches from the squirrel when he heard the cracking of the limb. In a panic he tried to scoot back, but it was too late. The limb gave way and he fell with the limb and the squirrel to the ground. He landed on his feet but felt a sharp pain in his ankle as he tried to cushion his fall by dropping and rolling on the ground.

He landed close to Joshua who stared at him wide-eyed. He kneeled down and stared into Kyle's face. Kyle was moaning. "He ain't dead," Joshua reported.

Alfredo was the next to reach Kyle. He sat down beside him and asked him where he hurt.

"My leg. I mean my ankle. It hurts ... a lot."

Very carefully, so as not to disturb it, Alfredo pulled Kyle's pants leg up little ways.

"Don't touch it," Kyle pleaded.

"Don't worry. I'm just looking at it." Alfredo looked up at Diego who was standing nearby. "I think it's broken," he said.

"Shit," Sam said. "I guess that's the end of the hunting trip."

"He won't be able to walk," Alfredo said.

"I'll carry him," Diego said.

Diego lifted him gently and effortlessly, and they started back. His leg hurt, but despite that, Kyle felt an excitement at being carried by Diego. He put his arm around Diego's neck and snuggled his head into his shoulder. If only I didn't hurt so much, this would be heaven, he thought.

Diego took Kyle to Pamela and Anna's homesite. He knew that's where Kyle had been staying. They lay him down on some blankets and Anna gave him some medicine with codeine in it.

"How did he do?" Anna asked. She looked down at his ankle. "Except for that, I mean."

"Well, except for that, he didn't do too well," Diego said. "He missed the deer that ran by him. He doesn't seem overly strong. I don't think he's really cut out to be much of a hunter."

Kyle's heart sank. He had failed miserably in his first test, and he made things even worse in his effort to redeem himself. He could not argue with Diego's assessment. He was indeed not well cut out to be a hunter.

"So he didn't do so well," Anna said.

"No, he wasn't very skilled." Diego thought a moment. "Well, he was a pretty good tree climber," he conceded. "And he was brave." Diego looked at Kyle and smiled.

"I was?"

"You were," Diego said.

Diego left and shortly thereafter the pain in Kyle's leg began to subside. He felt even a certain euphoria. He supposed that it was at least in part because of the pain medicine. He thinks I'm brave, he thought. There's still hope.

It happened that Antonio Lemaire, Mark and Samantha's father, was visiting the gypsies. He was sent for and arrived shortly after Diego left. He examined Kyle's leg, and asked him how he was feeling.

"Not too bad," Kyle said.

"That's because of the medicine. Your ankle is in pretty bad shape. We're going to have to get you to a doctor who will set it and put it in a cast. I know of one not too far from here who will help us out. We'll go after you have a little more time to rest and we have lunch."

Phoebe and Marcello returned for lunch and found Kyle lying on his blankets. When they learned what had happened, Marcello told him he was sorry it happened. "They'll fix you up, though. And you can come back and I can teach you more about making cups and things."

"I'll come and visit you," Phoebe told him as they were slipping him into the back seat of Antonio's car.

"He'll be staying with us for a while," Antonio said. "It will be good if you do visit him."



Dr Shapiro had his 'office' in a small hospital. He shared this office with one other doctor. Except for the rooms and facilities these two doctors used, the rest of the hospital was abandoned. Dr Shapiro had an x-ray machine rigged up to a generator and was able to take some pictures of the fracture.

After the pictures were developed, he told Antonio and Kyle that his ankle was broken in two places. Eventually it would heal but it would never be completely normal. He said that there would be a degree of swelling and that until that went down Kyle would have to make do with a splint. For the next few days it would be necessary for Kyle to stay in bed with his leg raised, and that they should periodically treat his ankle with cold packs. He gave him enough medication to take care of the pain and told them to come back in four or five days, and he would see whether he could then put on a cast. He told Kyle that he should take as much of the medicine as he needed to keep the pain down, but that he should not take any extra, as that could be somewhat dangerous. He specified a maximum amount that could be taken each day. After the swelling was under control and he had a cast on, Kyle would be able to use crutches and could begin to get around again a bit.

"Thanks," said Antonio. "Could we send you a couple of bushels of potatoes?"

"That would be great."

"Yams or little red potatoes?"

"How about a bushel of each?"

"We'll bring them when we come to get the cast put on."

At Mark's request, when they returned to Antonio and Marcie's house, they put Kyle in his bedroom. Mark said he could look after Kyle and tend to whatever needs he had. Mark's room was full of scientific paraphernalia, and his walls were covered with scientific charts of one sort or another. He was an attentive roommate who was able to show Kyle all sorts of interesting things in books. He said that when Kyle got a little better he could set up a microscope and see a lot of cool creatures. Also he promised that he would set up the telescope and they could go out and look at the skies.

Kyle's first visitor from outside the household was Christopher. Christopher stayed with him for the better part of the second day Kyle was in the house. He found the break 'awesome'. He asked for a detailed description of the hunting trip. Kyle told him what had happened, without really admitting that he missed the deer on purpose. He told him about how he wanted to join this group, and learn to do pottery. And he went into some detail about how gentle Diego was when he carried him back.

Christopher nodded. "You really like this Diego don't you?"

"He's beautiful."

Christopher sat down on the floor near the head of Kyle's bed. "I don't know. Do you really think it's a good idea to just go off with those people? I mean, you hardly know them."

"I know it seems like a fast decision," Kyle said. "But I haven't thought about anything else the last couple of days. It's what I want."

"I'd miss you."

Kyle reached his hand out and touched Christopher on his shoulder. "I'll miss you too."

"Did Diego say that you could come with them?"

"Not exactly."

"What did he say?"

Kyle squirmed in the bed, and turned slightly to one side away from Christopher. "He said I was brave. I think that's worth something."

"Right. But you missed the deer. Also you fell out of the tree."

Kyle did not answer immediately. Finally he said, "That's true. But he knows that I'm brave and he knows that I can learn things. Those are the things that count."



The next day, Mark rose before the sunrise and left with his father, Antonio, on a collecting trip. Their plans were to try to find interesting bugs and butterflies to add to the collection of insects that was their joint project. Mark had made arrangements for Christopher to come by to keep an eye on Kyle in his absence. Christopher arrived on schedule, prepared them both a breakfast of ham and eggs and toast, and brought it to Kyle's room on a tray. When everything was laid out and they began to eat, Christopher said "I've been looking for a chance to get you alone. It's something I've been dying to tell you."

"What's that?"

"Well, Gaea and I have been hanging out together a bit."

"Yeah. I could see that you sort of like each other."

"She's a little older than I am. But she says she likes boys about my age. And she likes it when I'm athletic and can do things."

"That's cool."

"Yeah, but I haven't told you the best part yet."

"What's that?"

Christopher carefully spread his toast with marmalade, and paused to savor the prospect of telling his friend his exciting news.

"Yesterday afternoon she asked me to come by her house. She said we could take a shower together. We'd been playing Keep Away with some of the other kids, and were pretty hot and sweaty. So we did just that. We took a shower

together. And we washed each other off, like all over. I got a boner and she didn't seem to mind. She just washed it with everything else. I was liking it a lot.

"Yeah, it does feel nice when somebody washes you off in the shower."

"Nice? That was just for starters, Kyle. I gotta tell you. After we got out of the shower and dried off she took me into her bedroom, and we got on her bed. So we were rubbing each other and feeling each other and both of us got even more excited. Then she showed me how to put my dick into her pussy. She just guided it right in for me."

"Wow, I've never done that before."

"Yeah, well ... me neither, Kyle. Nice? It was wonderful. It felt better than anything I ever knew."

Kyle put his fork down on his plate. "Than anything?"

"Anything."

"I guess it must've been more exciting than the things we sometimes do. I mean she's full-grown, with breasts and hair down there and all that."

"It was just different, that's all. I mean you and me are close friends in a way I'm not with her. So there's that. And I like the things that we sometimes do. But this was ... different."

"Well, like I said, that's cool."

"Maybe she'd show you how to do it if you asked her, Kyle. Or maybe Samantha would."

"I don't think so, Christopher. I'm not athletic like you. And I'm not as big as you are. I mean my dick isn't. You already have a little bit of hair down there. I don't."

"That doesn't make any difference. You get a boner the same as I do."

"Yeah. But it's different."

"How different?"

"Just different." He looked at his friend and smiled. "We're just different, Christopher. That's all. I'm happy you got to do those things with Gaea."



Three days later Kyle was scheduled to have the cast put on his foot and leg in the afternoon. That morning shortly after breakfast, Phoebe showed up in his bedroom for a visit.

"How's your ankle?" she asked.

"Better every day. They'll put a cast on it today, I think."

"Good. You'll be able to be up and around then."

"I'm surprised to see you."

"Why? I told you I'd come visit you."

"Yeah, but I thought you'd want to stay up there with the Gypsies as long as you could."

Phoebe stared at him for a moment with a look of muted alarm on her face.

"Didn't anybody tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"They've left."

"Left?"

"Yeah. They packed up yesterday, and pulled out at sunrise this morning."

For a long time Kyle said nothing.

"So I guess that's my answer," he said finally.

Phoebe closed her eyes and let her head fall on her chest. She shook her head. When she finally opened her eyes and looked at Kyle she saw the tears were streaming down his face. "I'm sorry. I thought somebody would've told you."

Kyle shook his head. "I hoped ...". He wasn't able to finish his sentence.

Phoebe opened a package that Kyle had not noticed and took an object out of it. She handed it to Kyle. "Marcello told me to give this to you. He said he knew you'd be sad. He said he hoped maybe this would make you just a little bit happy." It was the cup that Marcello was working on when he was teaching Kyle how to make things. But now it was finished and beautifully decorated with pictures of humming birds. "He said he'd keep the one that you made that day, to remember you until next year when they come through here."

The next day, with his new cast in place, Kyle got on his bike and returned to the reservoir. He went to the campsite and sought out the now empty places where the tents and the guesthouse had been. He recalled how he and Marcello and Phoebe had sat around the fire telling stories. Then he went to the playing field where he had watched the game of keep-away. Finally he went to the beach where Marcello had taught him how to make a clay cup, and where he'd first seen Diego. He sat down and looked out over the water. He watched a kingfisher dive into the water to catch a fish. I guess being athletic is pretty important, he thought. And he began to cry.



One evening about a week after the gypsies had left, Mark showed Kyle what some of the sky looked like with his telescope. Kyle found it awesome to realize that the blurred oval shape he was seeing was a huge cluster of stars. He reviewed in his mind what Mark had told him. The sun was just one star in a galaxy – a cluster of stars – maybe billions of them. That was hard to get his mind around. But, according to Mark, this was just one of a huge number of galaxies. Mark had said billions of them, but he was sure this must have been an exaggeration. Hundreds or maybe even thousands. But billions was inconceivable.

"Come on to my room, and I'll show you what really big telescopes are able to see," Mark said.

When they arrived in his room, Mark went to his bookshelf and pulled out a very big book. While the two boys sat side by side on the bed, Mark shuffled through the book until he came to the page he wanted. It was a picture – an

actual photograph Mark explained – of a small segment of the sky. In it there were numerous clusters of stars of varying shapes and sizes. Many were disks that were tipped at a variety of angles. There were some spirals similar to the shape of the Milky Way. Others looked like balls and some were just blobs.

“Wherever they look in the sky, it’s like this,” Mark said. “They just go on and on in all directions.”

Kyle was horrified. “Where does all this end?”

“I don’t know. I suppose it just goes on forever.”

“It can’t. Nothing goes on forever. Everything has to have a size, no matter how big it is.”

“Well maybe it stops somewhere, then.”

“It can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, what would be beyond the place where it stops?”

“Nothing.”

“Right. Empty space going on forever. See, you can’t get away from it.”

Mark stared at this peculiar boy sitting next to him on his bed. All this stuff about astronomy had never seemed like a problem to him before. He liked Kyle – strange as he was – and wanted to make him feel better. “Look,” he said finally. “I don’t know what to tell you. I know it’s hard to get used to how big it is. It makes you feel so small, like an ant.”

Kyle stared at his toes sticking out from the cast on his foot, and said nothing.

Mark didn’t know just where to take it from there.

“I thought maybe learning about the stars might cheer you up,” he said.

Kyle patted Mark on his knee. “It’s ok,” he said. “It was interesting. I’m glad you showed me those things. Maybe I’m just a gloomy kind of person. Christopher is always saying so.”

“I don’t know about that. Mostly you are fun to have around. So maybe you just have to try to not worry about how big the universe is. By and by, you get used to the idea.”

“It’s not how big it is.”

“What then?”

“That it doesn’t end. It must end, yet it can’t.”

“Some things we just can’t understand.”

“That’s like death.”

Things were going from bad to worse, as Mark saw it. Drastic action was called for. “Tell you what,” he said. “Let’s sleep out on the lawn tonight. There’s a full moon out. It will be awesome.”

“Okay.”

They took their sleeping bags, and two foam rubber mats that Mark had, and went to the yard. Mark’s family kept their front lawn neatly trimmed and cut so they would all have a place for games. As Kyle worked his way across the lawn with the aid of his crutches, the grass felt cool and friendly on the foot that was not in a cast. The two boys spread out their mats and sleeping

bags and crawled in. The night was cool, but they were warm in their bags. The moon was very bright, and Kyle imagined that it was a friendly presence looking down at him and Mark, and that it loved them. Maybe the sky and the stars wouldn't be so scary if you could just stop asking things that had no answers. But that was difficult to do.

Violence After the Plague

- Of course people continue to act in violent ways when threatened,
- but virtually all socially sanctioned forms of violence – war, organized
- crime, capital punishment, and draconian laws and punishments for
- infractions against the social order – have disappeared. This has led to
- a radical reduction in the totality of violence in the human community.
- This reduction is not surprising if we remember that, historically
- speaking, the great atrocities committed by humanity have generally
- been collective in nature – they were forms of violence sanctioned and
- carried out by whole societies – not by individual citizens acting on their
- own.

... from 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p 67

Chapter Three

Bag Of Bones

She stood so still at the foot of the bed that only her breathing – faint and regular – gave evidence that she was alive. The girl stared for a long time at the bones. The skeleton was complete, and appeared to be the remains of a person who had been only a little bigger than the girl herself. It was laid out neatly on its back, with its arms across its chest. It looked comfortable. Of course there was no way to know whether the person had died in that position or was arranged like that afterwards.

“Hello, Grammy,” she said. She walked around to the side of the bed and slowly reached out her hand. Tenderly she caressed the skull. “I’m Melissa.” She leaned over and kissed the skull lightly on the forehead. “I’m your granddaughter.” Melissa looked around the room, selected a straight chair, and dragged it up beside the bed. She sat down and addressed the bones in a conversational tone.

“I know you don’t have ears but maybe your spirit can hear me.” She glanced around the room. On a dresser she saw some family pictures. Even from across the room she recognized one as being her own mother when she was a child. She looked back to the bones on the bed. “Mama talks about you a lot. Says she misses you.” She fell silent and began chewing on her fingernail. She studied the nail carefully, as an artist might study a half-finished painting before adding a bit more pigment. She nibbled carefully, first one edge and then the other, assessing her progress at regular intervals. Then she smiled.

“So, how you been doing?” She stared at the bones as if actually expecting an answer. “Looks like you haven’t been eating too well.” Melissa laughed, then frowned. “Sorry. Guess that wasn’t really very funny, huh?” She thought about saying that she was all skin and bones except for the skin, but stopped herself. This wasn’t, after all, a time for jokes.

“I’ve come to take you home.” Although this was a statement, her voice lifted on the last word of the sentence, causing it to become almost a question. She paused, as though waiting for permission.

“Things are not so great at home right now. Mama is sick. She says it’s just a passing bug – that she’ll be better real soon. That I shouldn’t worry. I suppose so. She’s got ... well ... I don’t know what she’s got. She ... messes ... you know, shits. How can I say this? She poops a lot. There is a word for what she’s got but I don’t remember it. Also I don’t remember the nice word for shitting. Bowel movements is one way to say it. Mama sometimes calls it that. But there is a better word for it. A long word. But I’ll just have to say it in ordinary words. She shits a lot, and it’s really runny. Almost like brown water. We’re trying to make it stop. She tries not to drink so much water. So I guess that will stop it and she’ll be ok.”

Melissa sighed and looked down at the floor. It upset her to talk about her mother's illness, and she felt uneasy using the word 'shit' when talking to an adult – even if the adult was just a skeleton lying on a bed. Then she raised her eyes and looked at the skull. "Anyhow, I brought this bag here to put you in." Melissa held up a gunny sack. "It's for potatoes, really, but it was the only thing I could find big enough. May not seem very dignified, I guess. Hope it's all right."

She set the bag on the bed beside the bones. She wasn't quite ready to disturb them yet. "I come over here by myself. On my four-wheeler. I wasn't afraid. Mama says its dangerous for a young girl to be running around by herself. I never heard of no trouble, nor saw any. But just in case, I brought this along." She raised the t-shirt she was wearing and pulled a large revolver from her pants. "Mama taught me to use it. I'm a pretty good shot. So I don't think anybody's going to bother us." She pushed the barrel of the gun back into her pants, under her belt. "It's a single action revolver so you don't have to worry. I won't shoot myself. Mama says single action revolvers are safer and they shoot more accurately." She patted the handle of the gun and pulled her t-shirt over it.

"I don't know that I could really shoot anybody, Granny. That's a pretty terrible thing to do. Well, I guess if a really bad man was trying to get me I would shoot him. I guess I would. But I've seen lots of men and women and girls and boys, and none of them ever seemed like they wanted to bother me. Still, you never know. Mama told me about these movies she saw before the Plague – when she was still little and lived with you. Some of them showed the end of the world – or at least how it was after some big and awful thing like the Plague came by and killed most people. Always, she said, it showed that when their wasn't no police and prisons and such to keep people in line, they would start stealing and killing and raping and that kind of thing. That's where she got her ideas. I saw one movie that was sort of like that. It was Lord of the Flies. It wasn't about a big Plague or something like that, but just about these boys that was stranded all by themselves on an island. No adults around. No law. That's the main thing. No police or anything like that was around. And those boys did act pretty bad. So maybe Mama is right."

She thought about this for a moment and patted the skeleton's rib bones in a comforting manner. "Still, though, I never seen anybody acting like those boys in the movie." She took another nibble from the edge of her fingernail and studied it. "We don't have much to do with other people. Mama says you can't trust them. It gets a little lonely but I guess it's safe."

Melissa stood up, walked over to the window, and stared out. "It's a nice day. Sunny and warm. It will be a good day to take you home. Our home that is. I mean, you're part of the family. We live in a real big nice place. It's way more than people like us could afford before the Plague, but now houses like that are all over the place. I always try to imagine what it was like before the Plague. So many people! Everywhere you go there was people, Mama says. I asked Mama whether she liked it better with lots of people around. 'There is good and bad in everything', she told me."

She turned and looked at the bones on the bed again.

"Well, I guess it's time to go." But instead of going over and gathering up the bones she went and sat down beside the bed again.

"I never did get to know you. That's the bad part. You was dead before I was born. Mama says you was real nice ... that I would've liked you. I mean it's nice being able to live in a big house and just go around and have whatever things I like. That part is good. Course I feel sorry for all those people who died, but I never knew them. So I can't feel too bad about them. Does give me sort of a sad feeling, though, when I think about them.

"Of course I see their skeletons everywhere. Mostly they are in the houses they lived in, and are in their beds. Like you. Guess they was all sick, so naturally they went to bed. We had to clear out the skeletons at the house we live in now before we could move in. That was sort of creepy. There were two big ones and three little ones and they was all on the big double bed in the big bedroom. There was lots of medicines on the table beside the bed. Guess they thought maybe they could make themselves well. Couldn't though. If the Plague was going to kill you, it did, Mama said. And I guess most people it did kill. But it didn't kill Mama.

"One of those skeletons on the bed was real tiny. It must have been a baby. We just piled all the bones on a sheet and dragged them out to the back yard, and then into a neighbor's yard where we left them. Left them just lying there in a pile. It seemed sort of ... I don't know the word for it exactly ... sort of ... cold, you know. Like there should of been a ceremony or we should of buried them or something. But there are so many bones. No way to bury them all."

Melissa looked at the gunny sack and then at her grandmother's bones.

"We won't do that to you, though. I mean, just leave you lying out on the ground somewhere." She patted the hand bones, which until then had formed a quite recognizable hand. In the process she knocked them into disarray. She made some efforts to put them back together, but that only made it worse. "Sorry. I guess we do need to go, though."

For quite some time Melissa sat in silence beside the bed. After a while tears began to flow down her cheeks.

"I feel lonely for people I never knew," she said. "Funny how you can miss people you never even knew."

She stared at the gunny sack for another minute or so. Finally she picked it up and opened it. One by one she picked up the bigger bones and placed them in the bag. Then she scooped up the small bones that had formed the hands and feet and dropped them in. Only the skull remained.

"It will be a nice day for the trip," she told it. She picked it up and dropped it into the bag. Then she wiped her nose on her t-shirt and picked the bag up. "We got to go," she said, and lugged the bag down the stairs to her four-wheeler.



With the gunny sack containing her grandmother's bones tied to the rack in front of the handle bars, Melissa began her trip home, where, she was sure, her mother was anxiously waiting for her. Her mother had discouraged her from making this trip.

"It's too dangerous," she had said. "You don't know what you will run into out there."

"I'll be fine, Mom," she had said.

Now she wasn't so sure. She had encountered nothing as of yet that seemed especially dangerous, but dealing with her grandmother's bones had unnerved her. Suppose her grandmother's spirit did not want the bones to be disturbed. Having the bones tied onto the front rack cut down just a bit on her range of vision, but she had not wanted to put them on the back rack. Her grandmother might feel that it was undignified to be hauled through town on a four-wheeler in a gunny sack. Melissa at least wanted her to be up in the front where she could keep a protective eye on her. She wasn't very clear on what her grandmother needed protecting from, and wasn't much more clear on what the dangers were that her mother warned her about whenever she thought about venturing too far from the house. But she was on guard.

Seeming as if it came from nowhere, a cat dashed across her path. As her foot reached for the brake, a second one, in hot pursuit of the first one, was in front of her. It was too close to avoid. She heard the fearful thump of the cat as it made contact with some part of her four-wheeler. She jerked around to see the animal she had just hit, and her sudden movement threw the four wheeler, which was already unstable from her sudden braking, out of control. She landed on the curb, with her legs in the street and the rest of her on the sidewalk. The four-wheeler came to rest several yards down the road, on its side.

The impact knocked her unconscious briefly. As she came to, she realized that she had crashed. She remembered hitting the cat, but the accident itself was vague in her mind. She looked up the street and saw the four-wheeler. The bag of bones had broken loose and was lying in the road. I'll bet Granny is really mad at me now, she thought. Then her attention turned to her own body. Her knee was beginning to hurt. She looked at her hands and saw that they were badly scraped. Also her forehead hurt. When she felt the hurt place and then looked at her hand she could see that she was bleeding. Quite a bit, it seemed.

Then she peered down the road in the other direction and saw the cat. It was lying on its side, but she could see that it was still moving. It seemed to be trying to get up. Then, a little beyond the cat, she saw the two boys on motorcycles. One was dark and the other lighter. They were staring at her, as if contemplating what to do next. She was afraid they would do something dreadful. She didn't know exactly what. Maybe they would steal her grandmother's bones. Maybe they would kill her. She pulled her gun out and shot in their direction. One of the boys reached into a pouch behind his seat and pulled out a gun of his own. He will kill me for sure, she thought. She was aware that she was too weak, shaky and confused from the accident to shoot straight or defend herself.

But the lighter-skinned boy had jumped off his motorcycle and was starting toward her. He held his hands open in front of himself – to show her he had no gun or weapon. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “We won’t hurt you.”

He must be crazy, she thought. He knows I have a gun. I could kill him.

“Get out of the way, Kyle,” the boy with the gun shouted. He was still next to his motorcycle. “She will kill you.”

“She’s just afraid,” the one called Kyle said.

Melissa knew it was true. She was afraid. And somehow she knew she had nothing to fear from this crazy boy who was walking toward her with no weapon at all, telling her not to be afraid.

“She already shot at us once,” the boy with the gun shouted. “Get out of my line of fire.”

“It’s ok.” Melissa said. “I won’t shoot you.”

“Put your gun away so that Christopher won’t be afraid,” Kyle suggested.

“Ok.” Melissa put the gun back into her belt.

“Put your gun away,” Kyle shouted to Christopher. “She won’t shoot us.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Rather than put his gun back into his pack, Christopher stuck it into his belt. He wanted it handy in case Christopher was wrong.

“How bad hurt are you?” Kyle asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Your head is bleeding.”

“I know.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Not too much.”

“Did you break anything?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Try to move your arms and legs.”

She did as he suggested and everything seemed to work.

“My leg hurts,” she said.

“Its scraped up pretty bad, and you knee is bleeding. But you moved it and it looks straight.”

While they were talking Christopher approached with some caution. “Does your friend want to kill me?” Melissa asked.

“He won’t hurt you. He was afraid you’d kill us. That’s why he pulled out his gun.” Kyle looked at her – not accusingly, but rather intensely, to make sure he had her attention. “You did shoot at us after all.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Well, you missed. That’s the main thing.”

“I was scared.”

“I know that.” Kyle glanced over his shoulder at Christopher. “Got anything we can use for rags? We need a bandage.”

Christopher took off his t-shirt and came over and kneeled down beside Melissa. “Her head is bleeding kind of bad.”

"Yeah. It is," Kyle agreed. "Look, you try to stop that bleeding and I'll run into that house and see if I can find some supplies."

"Ok." Christopher turned to Melissa. "Can you sit up?"

"I think I could stand up."

"No," said Kyle. "Don't move too fast. Just sit up and let Christopher take care of you 'til I get back."

They were in a residential neighborhood of what had been middle and upper middle class houses. Christopher helped Melissa sit up while Kyle started across the nearest lawn at a run.

"I'm going to see if I can stop the bleeding with my t-shirt." Christopher held up his t-shirt for Melissa to see, and smiled at her.

"Ok."

"Why were you so scared of us?" Christopher asked, as he cradled her head in his arm and held the t-shirt over her head wound.

"There's people out here that will kill you or rape you."

"Nobody ever tried to hurt Kyle or me. And we been all over the place. Dogs almost killed us once, but not people."

"You're boys."

"What difference does that make?"

"Nobody would want to rape you."

"You really mean 'rape', like force ..."

"Yeah. Rape. Like make you have sex."

"Why would they want to do that?"

"I don't know."

"I don't see why they would."

"Men just do that."

"I never knew any man who raped anyone. If they want to do sex things they just ask. Or they get a girlfriend they do things with. Whatever. But there's no point in making love to a person who don't want to. I mean what kind of love is that?"

"Just because you don't know any men that rape people doesn't mean that there aren't any."

Christopher shrugged.

"I don't know. My Mom told me about rape. But she said it was mainly something that happened back before the Plague."

"That's not what my Mom says."

Christopher gave up. "Well, who knows?" He shrugged. "But Kyle and I ain't that type."

"I believe you."

"Good."

"I feel kind of sick. And my knee is starting to hurt."

"You got banged up kind of bad. You just need to rest a bit. Here, lean back against me."

Christopher positioned himself behind her so that he could still hold the t-shirt on her head, and she let herself relax against him.

They sat in silence for a little while and then saw Kyle come out of the front door. He had a sack of things in his hand. He held it up for them to see as he ran across the lawn, leaping over the tall grass and weeds. "Look. I found everything we need."

"We'll fix you up proper, now," Christopher said.

"How's her head look?" Kyle asked as he arrived at their side, panting from his run across the lawn.

Christopher lifted his t-shirt from the wound. The bleeding had almost stopped, but a gash about two inches long clearly needed attention. Kyle dug into the sack he carried and pulled out some tape. "I'll make some butterfly stitches. Good thing your mum showed us how to do this kind of thing."

"My Mum was a nurse before the Plague," Christopher explained to Melissa. "She knew all kinds of things about fixing people up. She was always showing us things. Said you never knew when you might need them."

"Guess she was right," Melissa said.

Christopher nodded. "Yeah. Guess so."

Kyle put the sack down and pulled out a brown bottle and some cotton. "We got to clean it first he said."

"That going to hurt?" Melissa asked.

"It's hydrogen peroxide. It will kill the germs but it won't hurt," Kyle said.

Melissa let them clean the cut. Then, after drying it off, Kyle cut little strips of tape that Christopher put in place to hold the edges of the cut together. The task was completed with two longer strips of tape to secure the little strips. Then Kyle examined Melissa's knee. However badly bruised Melissa's knee was, it was neither gashed nor broken. "So I guess we got to think about how to get you home, now," he said.

"We need a car," Christopher said. He glanced at a late model blue Buick parked in the driveway. Two of its tires were flat. He knew that its gas tank would be dry and its battery dead. "One that works."

"The Co-op isn't far from here," Kyle said. He was referring to a place where people from the Cluster traded some of their produce from time to time. "Maybe someone there would let us use their car."

"Good Idea," Christopher said. "That way we can take her stuff too. He glanced over at the gunny sack lying on the ground a few feet away. "What's in the bag?"

"My grandmother."

Christopher glanced at Kyle with a questioning look on his face.

Melissa noticed the glance and rightly interpreted it to mean 'Do we have some sort of nut-case on our hands?'. "I mean it's my grandmother's bones," she said. She hoped that this explanation would make the whole thing seem less strange.

"I see," Christopher said. But he still looked skeptical.

"You probably wonder why I'm driving around town with my grandmother's bones in a gunny sack."

"Um. No. Not really."

"Probably seems weird."

"Not exactly," Christopher said.

"So why do you got your grandmother's bones?" Kyle asked.

"They never been buried. I think they ought to be buried. And my mother thinks it too."

"That makes sense," Kyle said, and gave Christopher a mildly reproofing look.

"Well, yes. It does," Christopher agreed. "Ok, so, you stay here with Melissa while I go see if I can find a car." Kyle nodded.

Christopher ran to his bike, and started off toward the Co-op. Kyle went to the car in the driveway and opened it. He found a pillow in the back seat and brought it to Melissa. "Here. This will make your head more comfortable. Hold on a minute. I'll check out the cat."

It was a tabby cat. It did not appear to have a broken back or any obviously fatal injuries, but it was stunned and in a state of shock. After examining it, Kyle picked it up and brought it to Melissa.

"I didn't mean to hit you," Melissa said to the cat.

"I think he knows that," Kyle said. He gently lay it on the ground next to Melissa.

Melissa closed her eyes. "My knee is beginning to ache," she said.

"I'm not surprised. You got any pain-killer at your house? You could probably use some."

Melissa wasn't very talkative, so the three of them – Melissa, Kyle and the cat – remained there in silence while waiting for Christopher to return. About fifteen minutes later they saw a blue Impala turn the corner and start up the street toward them. They could just barely make out Christopher's head peering over the steering wheel.

"That was quick," Kyle said, when Christopher got out of the car a few feet from them.

"I lucked out. A woman there gave this to me."

"Gave it to you?"

"Yeah. She said she was fixing up a car she liked better, and had no use for this one."

"I guess you did luck out."

Christopher glanced down at the cat. "What are we going to do with that?"

"I don't know. But just put it in the back seat for now."

Christopher shrugged. "Ok. We sure are going to have a full car."

The two boys helped Melissa into the back seat of the Impala. Then Christopher picked up the gunny sack with bones and carried it around to the back of the car.

"Where you going with those?" Melissa asked.

"To put them in the trunk."

"No way. I want them with me."

"Well, all right." Christopher went around to the side of the car opposite where Melissa was sitting, opened the door, and pushed the bones in. The cat turned its head and sniffed at the bag.

"I guess that's everybody," Kyle said.

Christopher pulled the two bikes and the four-wheeler off the road, and climbed into the driver's seat. By sitting on a pillow, he was able to see over the steering wheel well enough to drive.

Kyle got in the passenger's side and glanced over the back of his seat to see that everything was ok in the back seat. "Lets get going," he said.

Except for Melissa occasionally giving directions to her house, they drove in silence for a while. Finally Christopher said, "What's your mother like?"

"She's a mother. You know."

"There's mothers and there's mothers. Not all them are the same."

"Mine's a nice one."

"She got a gun?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe we ought to drop you off a block away, or so."

Melissa didn't answer immediately. Then she said "Yeah, maybe you better. She might shoot you."

"That we don't want," said Christopher.

"Right. Let me think." She was silent for a minute. Then she said, "Ok. Suppose I go in first and talk to her. You just stay out of sight. Then after I tell her who you are, I'll come and get you."

"Sounds like a plan," Christopher said.

"It should only take me about two minutes. I just need to tell her you helped me and you're not dangerous."

"Ok," said Kyle. "Then we could come along with the ... with your grandmother and the cat."

"Ok."

They drove in silence then, except for Melissa's instructions, until they came into an upper class neighborhood, with huge houses and large lawns. The lawns were overrun with weeds and small trees and the houses themselves were beginning to fall into ill repair. "Let me out here," Melissa said. "You can see my house from here. Least you can see the roof. It's that red one there." She pointed to a red shingled roof about a half a block away.

"You going to be able to walk?" Kyle asked.

"Yeah. I think I'm ok. My knee hurts but I think I can walk on it." She got out of the car and started up the street, limping. Then she stopped and turned to face the car. "It'll only take me about two minutes. Then I'll come and get you."

"Two minutes it is," Christopher called to her.



At her house, weeds and small trees were claiming what had once been a manicured lawn. Melissa followed a path through this emerging forest and entered her house through the front door. The contrast between the well kept interior of the house and the unkempt grounds upon which it sat could not

have been greater. The polished hardwood floors and the well-vacuumed rugs spoke of many hours of diligent housework. Only an assortment of crayons and other art supplies, and a few dirty dishes scattered about the living room suggested that the usually high housekeeping standards had been a bit lax in the last few days.

After shutting the front door behind her, Melissa called out before proceeding further into the house. "Mama! I'm home!"

When she received no answer she trotted up the stairs to the second floor, and hurried down the carpeted hallway to the master bedroom. Her mother was lying on the bed, fully dressed in slacks and a colorful blouse. She looked at her daughter through bleary eyes. "Where you been, Melissa?"

"To get Grammy."

"Who?"

"Grammy. Your mother."

"She's dead." Her mother paused and frowned, trying to think. "Isn't she?"

"Of course."

"I see." She fell asleep.

"Mama. What's wrong? Wake up. It's me."

Her mother opened her eyes and looked at Melissa. "You're hurt. Where have you been?"

"To get Grammy. I fell off my four-wheeler."

"You should wash."

"Ok, Mama." Melissa went down to the bathroom, and washed her face and arms. Then noticing that her clothes had blood on them, she took off her shirt and pants and threw them in the hamper. She went down to her own bedroom at the other end of the carpeted hallway and pulled on some long pants and a shirt from her dresser. After brushing her hair and checking herself in the mirror once again, she started back down the hall to her mother's room. The pants covered her skinned knees, but there was nothing to do about the bandage on her head.

Her mother had fallen asleep again. "Mama. Wake up. I want to talk to you."

Her mother opened her eyes again and stared at her dreamily. "Why is your head bandaged?" she asked.

"I told you that. I fell off my four-wheeler."

"Oh, yeah." Her head fell back and she began to doze again.

"Mama! Stop going to sleep. I'm talking to you. What's the matter with you?"

Her mother opened her eyes and stared at her blankly. Melissa felt her head. It was not as hot as it had been, but something was still dreadfully wrong – something that was more frightening to Melissa than the sickness with all its vomiting and fever and diarrhea had been.

Melissa went into the bathroom and sat down on the commode to urinate. Then she remained there, thinking. What was wrong with her mother? Should she get some help? Who did she know who might help? Was her mother dying? Was the Plague back? She sat there for a long time with these questions rolling around in her head. No answers were forthcoming.

Then she suddenly became aware she was not alone. Someone was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, which she had neglected to shut. She looked up and saw a boy standing there with a bag in his hand. He was staring at her. She was so disoriented from thinking about her mother that it took a couple of seconds to realize who he was.

"Oh, it's you. What's your name? Oh, yes. Kyle."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Melissa stood up and pulled her pants up. "You surprised me."

"It's been way more than two minutes."

Melissa shook her head and frowned. "My mama might have shot you if she wasn't so sick – I mean with you sneaking in like that."

"I didn't sneak. I just opened the door and came in."

"Still."

"Sorry about catching you on the potty."

"No matter."

"How's your mama doing?"

"Worse. At least I think so. She sleeps too much and doesn't think right."

They stood facing each other without talking for some seconds – trying to understand what they should do next. Finally Kyle held up the gunny sack.

"I brought you these," he said.

Melissa stared at him, and then at the gunny sack he was carrying.

"You brought my grandmother?"

"Yeah. What should I do with her?"

"I don't know." She thought about Kyle's question. This probably wasn't the time to bring them to her mother. It might upset her and who could know what that might cause to happen? She felt it would not be respectful to just plop her down on the floor. "Here. Put her in the clothes hamper," she said, indicating a wicker basket with a few of her dirty clothes in it. Kyle tried to comply. The bag was too big to slip neatly down into the hamper, so he left it resting on top. That seemed all right to Melissa. At least for the moment it would do.

"Where's Christopher?" she asked.

"He thought we shouldn't come in until we were invited. "

"Oh."

"Can I see your mama now?"

"I guess. Come on."

Kyle followed her down the hall to the mother's bedroom. The woman lying on the bed was breathing in a shallow rapid manner. She opened her eyes and glanced at Kyle and Melissa, and then drifted off to sleep again.

"She's all wrinkly and funny looking," Melissa said. "It not like she usually looks."

Both the evidence of his eyes and the feeling in his heart led Kyle to the same conclusion: the woman was very close to death. "What kind of sickness did she have?" he asked.

"It was ... you know ... the shits. I forget the right word."

"Diarrhea," Kyle said. "For how long?"

"Days. I don't know exactly."

"Did she drink lots of water?"

"No. She said it made her shit more."

"She's got to drink water," Kyle said.

"That's not what she said."

"Well, she does. Whatever she said."

"How do you know that?"

"Like I told you, Christopher's mama was a nurse. She knows about all this stuff. When Christopher and I had diarrhea she told us all about it and what we had to do to take care of it. She said people could die because all the water would go out of their system. She told us the main thing was to get lots of water even if it seemed to make you shit more."

"Is my momma going to die?"

Her mother's eyes opened briefly and she stared at him, and smiled vaguely. Then she closed her eyes again.

"She might," Christopher said.

"We got to do something," Melissa said.

"We do. Get me a glass and some water." Melissa ran into the bathroom and returned quickly with a glass of water. "Now go downstairs and out into the yard and find Christopher. Tell him to go home and tell Marcie to come quick. That's Marcie. Remember that name. Marcie. She's got to come quick."

"Marcie," Melissa said, then she left to go find Christopher.

Kyle woke Melissa's mother, and managed to prop her up on some pillows.

"I'm Kyle," he said. "I'm your friend. You got to drink some water." He put one hand behind her head and held the glass to her mouth with the other. Her eyes closed. "Wake up," he said. She opened her eyes again, and he pushed the glass against her lips and poured a little water into her mouth. Some of it dribbled down her chin, but she swallowed a small amount rather than choke on it. Then he poured in just a tiny bit more.

Melissa returned to the room and announced that she had given Christopher the message.

"Good," Kyle said. "While we're waiting we just got to feed your mama as much water as she can hold down."

Working together, Kyle and Melissa kept feeding water to Melissa's mother. One time her mother threw up the water, and Kyle simply said that they tried to get in too much too fast, but that they had to keep on giving her water little by little.

After a little more than an hour, Marcie arrived with Antonio. After they assessed the situation they decided that it would be best to take her to their house. "We can treat her better there," Marcie said. "As long as we keep feeding her water, she'll probably be okay."

Melissa's mother asked where they were going, and made some faint efforts to resist.

"What's your mama's name?" Marcie asked.

"Cindy."

“Okay. Listen Cindy. I’m going to pick you up and carry you down to a car and we’re going to take you to our place. We can take care of you better there. When you’re well you can decide whatever you like. But for now, you’re coming with us.”

Cindy shook her head, but did not resist. Marcie picked her up as though she weighed nothing, and carried her out to the car. “I’ll drive,” Antonio said.

Marcie arranged herself and Cindy in the back seat so that she was able to continue to give Cindy water as they drove to their house.

At the house, Marcie was soon able to supplement the water with a concoction of watery oatmeal. They fed her small amounts of water and the oatmeal concoction continuously. Gradually a bit of color began to come to Cindy’s face, her skin began to look less wrinkly, and it was clear that the immediate danger to her life had passed.

In a couple of days she was over the intestinal infection that had caused the problem in the first place.

During the days that Cindy was recovering, the members of the little Cluster community fixed up a small house in their vicinity that nobody was using. They moved Cindy and Melissa into this house, and supplied it with the food and other things they needed for living. Throughout the entire process Cindy had the same conversation with Marcie several times. Basically, it went like this:

“Melissa and I are going to go back to our house as soon as I’m strong enough,” Cindy would say.

“Whatever. I’m not your boss.”

“You don’t need to be going to all this trouble for us.”

“I know we don’t.”

But Marcie and Antonio and the other members of the community continued ‘going to all this trouble’. While they did so Melissa began to make friends with Mark, Samantha, Phoebe, and Gaea, as well as with Christopher and Kyle. She liked being with other kids. It was a new experience for her.

One day after they had been living in the Cluster for about a week, Melissa and her mother were alone eating breakfast. “What do you want to do about going home?” Cindy asked.

“I’d like this to be our home.”

“Are you sure?”

Melissa nodded. “Yes. I have friends here now.”

She thought she would have to argue the point. But to her surprise her mother just said, “Ok,” and it was decided.

They buried the bones that Melissa had brought home in their new backyard, and Melissa built a little fence around the burial site. She wasn’t sure just what dangerous things this fence would keep out, but she felt that her grandmother would probably feel safer with it there.

Polymorphous Sexuality

The ideological and the behavioral aspects of historical development mutually determine each other. As might be expected, the behavioral shifts with regard to sexuality were accompanied by a change in how sexuality was understood. With regard to concepts of sexual identity, the changes were profound and far reaching. The central change involved a shift from the practice of categorizing people in terms of more or less fixed identity templates to an understanding of the polymorphous nature of sexual desire in most, if not all, people. This idea seems to have had its origin with Sigmund Freud, but he considered it to be a 'normal' state of affairs only for very young children. Norman O Brown, and others, argued that it was a normal, and indeed a desirable state of affairs for people of all ages.

Those advocating for the idea of polymorphism argued that both in terms of the erogenous zones and the choice of the objects(s) of desire, it was desirable to move away from imposing any preconceived sexual template on people. The assumption is that in the absence of repressive templates a unique and natural pattern of sexual desire would emerge in each person. This pattern was called a 'love map' (Money) or a 'bonding profile' (Horowitz) before the Plague, and we find these terms still in use. Rather than placing people in four or five orientation profiles, it was assumed that each person had his or her own unique and natural pattern, or bonding profile. There would be, in other words, as many bonding profiles as there were people.

While polymorphism is now accepted by a large number of people – perhaps even a majority of the population – as normal, resistance to the idea persists. People continue to be belittled because their desires do not conform to the heterosexual norm, and the experience of shame in the face of the polymorphous nature of a person's own desires is not uncommon – especially in adolescents.

Margaret Fuller in 'Eros and Ideology' claims that this shift from rigid templates to polymorphism as the increasingly accepted norm for society represents the single most important cultural shift since the Great Plague. While some would argue that this overstates the case, clearly it is a shift of pervasive importance. We will therefore find ourselves returning to a consideration of some of the many ramifications of this shift in various places in this book.

... from 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p 79

Chapter Four

The Tree House

The three friends were in very high spirits as they pedaled their bikes down the blacktop toward the reservoir. Thunderstorms the previous night had cleared the air, and the temperature was perfect for bike riding. The sun was still low, but already they felt its warmth on their bodies. By afternoon it would be hot but not excessively humid. It promised to be a perfect day for their picnic and for swimming. All three careened down the road somewhat carelessly as an expression of the happiness that they felt. Christopher did wheelies, partly for the sheer joy of mastery, and partly to show off for Melissa. Kyle trailed slightly behind the other two, humming a tune that Phoebe had taught him. He carried the picnic basket firmly attached to the carrier above the back wheel of his bike. Melissa carried a box behind her with some blankets in it for them to spread out. Christopher had two light folding chairs tied to his back. These two pieces of furniture would complete the decor of their newly finished tree house. It was hard to imagine how the day could be anything but perfect.

"We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here," Christopher sang raucously as they peddled into the cleared camping area beside the reservoir. It was a pre-Plague song that he'd picked up from his father. It was not especially melodious, but his enthusiasm was contagious and his two companions laughed and tried to join in.

Most of the summer had been spent building the tree house. They had selected a large oak tree near the reservoir a couple of hundred yards down from the main beach. It was an ideal location. They even had their own little beach – which was not visible from the central one. They were very proud of the tree house. Perched on a large limb about 20 feet from the ground, it consisted of an enclosed room that was about 12 feet square and a narrow porch about four feet wide, that faced the lake. The two chairs that Christopher brought were intended for the porch. One was already there.

It was still a bit chilly as they bounced down the path to their tree house. "Let's go check out the playing field to see if there are any deer there," Kyle suggested. His friends were agreeable. They walked down the path that skirted the reservoir, and followed it through to the main beach area. As they neared their destination about 200 yards further on, they became quiet and walked stealthily so as not to alarm any deer that might be in the area. They crouched at the edge of the clearing. They could see about a dozen deer grazing in the field.

"Wait here and let me see how close I can get," Kyle said. "Then if I am successful, you try it."

While Christopher and Melissa watched from their hiding places, Kyle stood up and walked very slowly and gracefully out into the field.

His motions were gentle and quiet like water, but he made no effort to conceal himself. The deer saw him, and two or three of them flicked their tails and appeared tense. For a moment it appeared that they would all flee. Kyle stopped moving until they seemed calm again, and then proceeded very slowly to the center of the field. There he sat down and was very still. One of the smaller deer approached him, moving very cautiously. When he was close enough that Kyle could have reached out and touched him, the deer sniffed at him curiously, and then backed away and began eating grass again.

"They're tame," Melissa whispered.

"Only for Kyle," Christopher said.

"I'll bet we could do the same as he did," Melissa said.

"Try," Christopher whispered.

Melissa stood up and, trying to imitate Kyle, she walked slowly and carefully out into the field. The deer stopped eating, their tails flicked, and they looked toward Melissa. She could almost feel their alarm, so she stopped. It was too late. The largest buck flicked his tail again, stamped the ground, and bounded toward the edge of the clearing. The others followed and soon not a deer was to be seen.

Christopher stood up and laughed.

"What's so funny?" Melissa demanded. "You didn't even try."

"They do the same for me," Christopher said. "I tried it several times."

"How come they don't run from you?" Melissa called out to Kyle.

Kyle stood up and started back toward his friends. "You have to be very quiet," he said.

"I was."

Kyle closed the distance between them, and then looked at her. "I mean in your heart," he said, putting his hand on his chest. "You have to walk quietly, but also you have to be quiet in your heart."

"How do you know that?"

Kyle thought for a minute and then shook his head. "I don't know. I just do. It seems like something I've always known."

"Somebody must have taught you," Christopher said.

"Maybe." Kyle shrugged. "But I don't remember it."

"You mean like the deer can hear your heart beating?" Melissa asked.

"No. It's not like that. It's that they can feel what's in my heart. If my heart's quiet they know I don't mean them no harm."

"He's always been like that," Christopher said. "It seems weird, but you get used to it. It really is like he says. He just knows things."

"It's nothing magic," Kyle explained. "It's just like seeing or hearing anything. Only it's a feeling. If you look with your feeling it's just there like anything else. It's just that lots of people don't seem to look, I guess."

"So can you tell what I'm thinking?" Melissa asked.

"No. I don't have any idea what you're thinking unless you tell me. But sometimes I can tell what's in your heart. I mean if you're afraid, or happy, or mad. Just stuff like that. You can do it too. You just have to look."

"Maybe," Melissa said.

"You could." Kyle looked back in the direction where the deer had run. "I'm surprised they aren't afraid of me. I almost killed one of them during that test."

"Don't get to thinking about that test and all that stuff," Christopher said. "You'll get into one of your moods again."

"Why's it a big deal if I do?" Kyle asked.

"Cause it drags us all down when you do."

"See, it's like that. You feel it too. When I'm in a mood you feel what I feel."

"Only 'cause you grumble and carry on," Christopher said.

Kyle smiled. "Maybe. Anyhow, I'll try not to grumble or carry on."

The three children walked on down the path along the reservoir. Kyle was quiet, but he kept his word. He did not grumble or carry on. By the time they arrived at the little beach beside their tree house, the sun had warmed the air and they were ready for a swim.

Christopher was the first to divest himself of his t-shirt and blue jeans. "Last one in is a three-toed sloth," he hollered as he bounded into the water. Kyle was not far behind, but he entered the chilly water with more caution. Melissa was still a bit shy about being naked, and held back until the boys were already paddling around in the water before she slipped out of her t-shirt and blue jeans. When she was naked she entered the water quickly. Soon the three friends were chasing and splashing each other and whatever inhibitions Melissa had felt were quickly dispelled. Christopher dived under the water, grabbed Melissa behind her knees, and stood up to flip her over backwards. She squealed with delight. When Christopher dived a second time, Kyle edged over so that he was between him and Melissa. He expected that he would be the next one to be flipped. However Christopher bypassed him and once again captured Melissa and flipped her over backwards. Kyle splashed the other two and they splashed him back. However, he was unable to ignore the fact that they seemed to derive more pleasure from splashing each other than from splashing him.

After a while Kyle tired of the game.

"I'm going down to the other beach to get some clay," he said. "I want to make some cups for the tree house."

The others did not object, so Kyle emerged from the water and walked on down to the larger beach. He found a bucket there which he filled with clay and returned to the beach in front of the tree house. He sat down in the grass a few feet from the sandy beach and began to form cups as Marcello had taught him to do. By the time he had formed three graceful cups, Melissa and Christopher had tired of their swim. Melissa spread out a blanket and they lay down to dry off in the sun. Kyle went down into the water to wash the clay off his body, and joined them on the blanket. For a while they talked about the different things they saw in the fair weather clouds that floated overhead. Then Christopher sat up.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"Me too," Melissa agreed.

They got dressed and dug into the picnic basket which was well supplied with sandwiches, fruit, and nuts. Sharing the lunch brought them back together, and Kyle felt included again. They took a bit of a nap after lunch, then spent the afternoon hunting for berries and mushrooms. Later they took another dip at the larger beach and returned to their tree house.

"We could spend the night here," Kyle suggested. "We've got enough food left over for supper, and we could eat the berries for breakfast."

"Good idea," Melissa said.

"It would be fun," Christopher said. "But I told my dad I'd go someplace with him first thing in the morning. So I got to get back."

"It wouldn't be fun without you," Melissa said.

Kyle shrugged. "Well, I wouldn't stay out here alone for anything."

While there was still sunlight they started back to the settlement.

After they dropped Kyle off, Christopher followed Melissa to her house. When they stopped in front of Melissa's house, she expected him to say goodbye and pedal on. Instead he said, "Let's go back to the tree house."

"I thought you were going someplace with your father in the morning."

"I just made that up."

"You lied to Kyle?"

"Yeah. It's the first time I ever did that. It feels sort of bad."

"Why'd you do it?"

"I just wanted you and me to be together a little bit."

Melissa looked down at the ground shifted her weight to her other leg.

"I don't know. It just doesn't feel right."

"Look. I know Kyle. If he spent the night out there in the tree house he'd get to thinking again about Marcello and Diego and how they left him. Then he'd probably get to thinking about all the billions of people that died in the Plague and he'd start talking in a real depressed way. Kyle's nice. I guess he's my best friend. But when he gets all sad and gloomy, he's hard to take."

"But you lied to him."

Christopher looked off to one side and sighed. "You're right." He sighed again and rolled his eyes. "That wasn't a good thing. But what's done is done." He glanced at her and could tell she was not quite satisfied with his explanations. "We can make it up to him by showing him a good time the next time we all three do something together."

"It will be getting dark pretty quick."

"We can take the motorbikes. They got good headlights."

The idea of going out to the tree house after dark and spending the night there with Christopher was both scary and exciting to Melissa. And, as Christopher had said, he couldn't undo the lie that he had already told. Maybe he did need to be away from Kyle from time to time. Even the best of friends had to spend some time apart. She could understand this. She was closer to her mother than anyone else in the world – yet sometimes she felt the need to be away from her. After a long, and for Christopher painful, silence she finally answered. "Okay. Wait here. I'll go tell my mom I'm going to spend the night at Gaea's house."



Kyle was alone in the bedroom, and he couldn't sleep. He had been feeling a bit down and had gone to bed shortly after returning from his outing with Melissa and Christopher. It was hot. That was a part of the problem. But also he was lonely. He was disappointed that Christopher had rejected his idea for the three of them to spend the night at the tree house. Kyle seldom went to the tree house alone. There were too many ghosts there for him to feel entirely comfortable. Christopher had told him that he and his father were going to go explore some historical sites in the morning. He must have made a point of not inviting Kyle along. Kyle had as much interest in historical sites as Christopher did – perhaps more. But, as Christopher had told him on another occasion, sometimes a boy and his father liked to spend time together alone. Kyle supposed that this must be one of those times.

No one was sharing the room with him now because Mark also had gone off with his father, to collect some sort of fungi or whatever, and they were going to sleep away from the community. Kyle had to admit that Mark knew a lot more about biology than he did, but he had always taken a lot of interest in anything Mark had taught him. He guessed that this was another case of a boy liking to spend time with his father. He had not been invited along with them either. It must be nice having a father to spend time alone with, he thought.

As he lay there, Kyle was again having those thoughts about how space went on forever. More recently he had added the equally disturbing thought that time was also a problem. Not only did it go on for ever, but it could have no beginning. It appeared that the endlessness went on forever in two directions. It was all absolutely impossible. Yet he could see no way around it. The thoughts left him with an upset stomach and made it hard for him to relax. These thoughts generally came to him in the middle of the night when he was alone, and were associated in his mind with darkness, and with the fearful immensity of things. They stayed in his head like an annoying familiar tune that you get to humming, and then can't stop.

I might as well get up, he thought. I could go out to the tree house and take a swim, and maybe by then I would be tired enough to stop thinking all these stupid thoughts and go to sleep.

He crawled out of bed put on a pair of pants and a flannel shirt and quietly slipped out of the house. In the dark silence of the yard, he looked at his two new bikes, one a 10-speed that he'd got himself because he figured all that pedaling might make him more athletic, the other a new motorcycle that he'd chosen because it was much quieter than the one he'd used before. He liked traveling as quietly as possible so as not to disturb all of the animals in the woods around him. But right now his body was tired even if his brain was working overtime.

He walked a ways, pushing the motorbike, before starting it so as not to wake Marcie or Samantha, who were still in the house, and would be sleeping.

They wouldn't try to prevent him from going to the tree house, but he didn't want to have to explain himself.

The moon was so bright it was not necessary to turn on his headlight to see his way down the road toward the reservoir. He decided to come into the reservoir on a back road that he had learned about that brought him directly to the playing field. After parking the bike, Kyle lay down in the grassy field and stared at the moon. It seemed friendly now – and though he knew that the stars he was seeing were huge distances away, they seemed almost like friends. Kyle had noted many times previously that the world around him – and especially the sky – had this strange double character. Sometimes it was huge and strange and terrifying. At other times it was warm and safe, and it invited him into the most intimate kind of friendship – a friendship in which he was just one more frog, or star, or leaf. At these times Kyle believed in fairies, and expected to see one pop out from behind a bush or a mushroom without warning.

It never happened, but he imagined that the vague rustling and scurrings that he heard around him were fairies – always close by but never allowing themselves to be seen.

Kyle had seen in a book with plays in it a picture of two masks – one very friendly and happy, and the other in agony. Christopher's mother had told him that these represented two different kinds of drama – comedy and tragedy. The world around him was like these two masks on a stick, placed back to back, so that when you turned the stick you faced first one and then the other. It seemed as though his experience of the world could change that suddenly, and for no apparent reason. For now, he was with the friendly face, and saw no reason to worry about when the other would return.

After a while he rose, took a flashlight from the saddlebag in case the moon set or went under clouds before he returned, and he wandered down the path towards the beach. He was startled by a loud screech and a series of hoots. His first thought was that it might be a mountain lion. There were rumors that panthers and mountain lions were beginning to populate this area again. However, he had never actually seen one. Then when he calmed down a bit he realized that mountain lions would not make a hooting noise, and he remembered that he had heard this sound before – though at a greater distance. He'd been with Mark at the time, and Mark explained that it was a great horned owl. It would screech like that to startle any mice or other possible prey in the area. When they jumped from being startled they gave themselves away, and were likely to be the owl's next meal.

By the time he reached the beach, the woods seemed safe and friendly again, so he took off his clothes and went for a swim. He felt a little nervous about the dark water beneath him, but the moon smiled at him and he delighted in the coolness of the water on his skin. When he came out of the water he was slightly chilled, so he put his clothes back on and started toward the tree house. It was another hundred yards or so down the shoreline, at the edge of the smaller beach that the children had selected as an ideal location.

There was a glow of light coming from the tree house window. At first he thought he was seeing things, but as he got nearer he realized that it was quite real. Apparently somebody was using the place. He slowed down and listened but could hear nothing. There'd been no one on the beach and no one was visible on the ground here. So he continued slowly toward the tree house. At the base of the tree he could hear an occasional rustling above, and some quiet murmuring. He could not make out what was being said.

He wanted to know who was using the tree house that he and Christopher and Melissa had built. He bolstered his courage, and very slowly started climbing up the sticks that were nailed to the tree to form a ladder to the doorway. When he reached the top he kept his head low for a while and listened. He could occasionally hear something moving around, but nothing more.

Very cautiously he raised his head and peeked over the edge and into the tree house. He saw two people. They were Christopher and Melissa. He was amazed. Christopher had told him that he had to go on a trip with his father, and here he was. He had assumed that Melissa was with her mother, but here she was also. Kyle almost said something and then held his tongue. Both were naked. Melissa was lying on her stomach on one of the pads that they used for mattresses, and Kyle was kneeling beside her. He was giving her a head to toe massage.

"Hmmm. That feels good," Melissa murmured.

"You've got to do me when I'm done with you," Christopher said.

Why didn't they tell me they were coming here, Kyle asked himself. Again he almost said something, and again he held his tongue. Because they didn't want me, he thought, answering his own question. He wondered why. But 'why' didn't really make much difference. The fact was that Christopher had lied to him so that he and Melissa could spend time together without him. He wondered whether Melissa understood this.

Kyle lowered his head so that it would be out of sight, and slowly and silently descended the ladder to the ground. He knew that things could never be the same between Christopher and him again. He followed the path along the reservoir back to the larger beach, and then back to the playing field. He got on his motorbike, started it up, and returned to the cluster of houses that was his new home. But he didn't go to his bed in the room that he shared with Mark. He didn't want to be alone. After Christopher and Melissa, Phoebe was probably his next best friend. She was quiet and not so adventurous as Christopher or Melissa, so he didn't do as many things with her. But she was like him in a lot of ways, and he always liked talking with her.

Of course the entire family was still in bed. Kyle had no very clear idea what time it might be, so he curled up on the lawn beside the front steps, and waited for someone to wake up. He was soon asleep.

The sun had already risen by the time Janice Whitfield stepped out onto the porch. She was surprised to see Kyle lying in the grass, asleep. She went down the steps to him, and shook him.

“Kyle, wake up.”

Kyle looked up at her with sleepy eyes and sat up. “Hi. Is Phoebe awake?”

“Don’t know. Sometimes she sleeps late. Go on up, though, and wake her up. She would be happy to see you.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Do. For sure. But why are you sleeping here?”

“Don’t know ... well ... it’s hard to say.”

“Never mind. You can tell Phoebe about it.”

Kyle climbed the stairs to Phoebe’s bedroom, walked in, and sat on the edge of her bed. He patted her gently. She opened her eyes and, when she recognized who it was she smiled.

“Hi Kyle. What you doing here so early?”

Kyle yawned. “Couldn’t sleep last night. Wanted to talk, I guess. Hope it’s not a problem.”

Phoebe stared at him for a moment. “No. It’s not. What about?”

“Don’t know, exactly. How Christopher lied to me, I guess. That’s the main thing.”

Phoebe sat up in bed, and leaned her back against the backboard. “What’d he lie about?”

Kyle explained everything that had happened the previous night in some detail, and Phoebe listened attentively, asking a question from time to time.

“The thing is, I think that Christopher likes Melissa a lot.”

Phoebe nodded. “Seems that way.”

“I mean like a boy and a girl sometimes like each other a lot.”

“Yeah. Sounds like that.”

“And maybe they don’t really have room for me. You know. Like three’s a crowd. I mean I think they both like me all right. Christopher is my best friend. I guess I’m his too. Or was, at least. But now maybe Melissa is. So they like me, yes. They got no reason not to. So when you get older you want to ride a bicycle, not a tricycle. You got no room for the third wheel. You see what I mean?”

“I think so.”

Both of them remained quiet for some time, thinking.

Finally Phoebe said, “Remember what you told me a couple months ago when we just got to know each other? You said maybe you were the ‘other way’. That’s how you put it. The other way. Well I went and asked Marcie what you might mean by that. She’s a good person to ask about things.”

Kyle looked at her and frowned slightly. “So what did she say?”

“She thought you probably meant that you were the kind that liked boys and men more than girls and women.”

Kyle looked down. “Maybe,” he said. “Yeah. Maybe.” He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on what he wanted to say. He shook his head. “But that’s not exactly true. I can be friends as much with girls as boys. More, sometimes.”

“Yeah, but it’s boys or men that you fall in love with, that make you feel excited – you know – like make you think about sex.”

Kyle avoided her eyes. "Well, yeah. I guess that's sort of true. That's how I am. And you're right. That's what I meant when I said I was the other way."

"Well, I think maybe I'm ... sort of ... the other way myself."

Kyle looked up. "Really?"

"Really."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's this. The one I'm really in love with is Samantha. I think she's more beautiful than anyone."

"She is pretty."

"Don't tell anybody I told you this. You're the only one who knows."

"I won't," Kyle yawned.

"How much sleep you get last night?" Phoebe asked.

"I don't know. Not very much."

"Get into bed with me, and you can sleep some more."

"You don't mind?"

"Not if you take your pants and shirt and shoes off first. I don't want you getting a lot of sand in my bed."

Kyle was too sleepy to resist the invitation. He undressed and crawled into bed with Phoebe. She lay down beside him and put her arms around him. "If we're both the other way, maybe we can't be lovers," Phoebe said. "But we could still be friends."

"Maybe even best friends," Kyle agreed. He yawned again.

"Like a brother and sister," Phoebe suggested.

"Hmm. That would be good." Kyle relaxed in her arms and began to doze.

"Marcie told me that mostly people aren't just one way. Like you may be the other way. But it's likely that you're not only the other way. Maybe just mostly."

"Hmm."

Phoebe wasn't sure whether he had heard her. She ran her fingers over his hair and kissed him gently on his cheek. She was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, "that must've hurt a lot ... that feeling that neither of them wanted you. I mean that must've hurt, really a lot."

Kyle didn't answer. He was already asleep.



Christopher sat the doorway of the tree house looking down at Melissa who was gathering flowers. He liked it that she was naked. Because of all the things her mother had told her about how dangerous the world was, for a long time she'd been afraid to be naked with him, or even with the other kids when they went swimming. She had gotten over that, largely because of his gentle encouragement. He liked watching her. And he liked it that she now seemed to trust him. He thought that perhaps someday soon he might try to teach her what Gaea had taught him. She was not as developed as Gaea. Her breasts were just beginning to grow, and she didn't have much hair down below.

But he found her to be every bit as beautiful as Gaea – even more so in some ways. He knew, however, that it would be a mistake to push things too quickly. Just like she had to have time to get used to being naked, she needed time to get used to being touched by him and touching him in return.

It bothered Christopher that he had lied to Kyle. It was the first time he could recall ever having done that. At the same time it made it possible for him to spend the night alone with Melissa, and he wasn't quite sure that he wouldn't do the same thing again if the occasion arose. For some time now he had sensed the competition between Kyle and Melissa, and a few weeks ago had written to his mother about his concerns. He had it sent by the cooperative email station in town. It was anticipated that pretty soon almost any computer could hook up again to the Internet, but the technology had not been repaired to that extent yet. They told him to come back in a few days and they would print out any answer that was sent to them. Before he left with Kyle on their journey to Indianapolis, his mother had told him that she would be checking every other day at the Internet Co-op near their house. It was a way for them to keep in touch. The answer came back to him in less than a week.

Christopher crawled back into the tree house, grabbed his blue jeans that were in the heap of his clothes that lay in one corner, and dragged them back to the tree house doorway. There he rummaged through the pockets until he found the letter his mother had written him. He pulled this out of his back pocket and carefully unfolded it. Then he glanced down at Melissa. She had gathered a pile of flowers and was sitting down beside them, and weaving them into a long chain.

The letter was somewhat worn from several readings at this point. He went directly to the place where she had answered his question, and read, half out loud:

Everyone's got a different landscape. And that's a good way for it to be. Their ain't no gay nor straight nor pedo nor bi, and certainly no normal or abnormal, no more than you can say about an ocean or a continent, this one here is normal, and that one is abnormal. Each person is just his or her own landscape – which like any landscape is a mixture of things. We just find ourselves among all these hills and forests with all the living things within them, and sometimes we find joy in their beauty and other times we tremble at the dangers that might pop out at us at any moment. To always see the beauty while at the same time never forgetting about the possible dangers – that is the way I think we should live. Beautiful and dangerous are useful words. They define real things that happen to us and around us – things we can know and see. But 'normal' and 'abnormal' – what use are those terms? When I look around me I don't see no normal or abnormal. I see beautiful and ugly and loving and hateful and helpful and dangerous – but not normal or abnormal. Those are life-killing words. Those are words narrow people use to try to put life in a little box because it's too big and unruly for them to accept on its own terms. Normal and abnormal? Pah! Show me an abnormal mountain.

All the things that go into making up a landscape – the hills and plains and forests and rivers – have a history. They come to be through volcanoes or continents colliding, or wind and rain or glaciers or whatever. Mostly the history of our landscapes is pretty much hidden.

How come one person is one way and another another way? Don't seem like anybody knows that. That's like the history of landscapes. Mostly it is hidden. And suppose one day we are able to answer all these questions of how come one person is one way and another some other way? What then? Knowing the history of a beautiful mountain can't make it ugly. It can only make it more beautiful.

I got this friend who is hell bent on figuring this out. Like if your mama had square nipples, you going to turn out this way, and if your daddy tried to breastfeed you with those hairy nipples he got, you going to turn out this other way. Well, more power to my friend. But I don't think he's going to nail anything down very definite.

"How far you got on figuring it out?" I ask him from time to time.

"I'm gaining on it," he says.

"Gaining?" I say. "Tell my something you didn't know last week."

"Well, I'm just beginning," he admits. "Don't have nothing definite yet." Always he is just beginning. "I've just pulled Truth's skirt up a tiny bit and can only see a bit of her ankle," he tells me.

"Well," I tell him, "You got to consider that maybe she don't want to be undressed. Maybe she's quite happy walking around in all her glitter and finery."

So Chris, you just live according to what your heart tells you. You love Kyle and you love Melissa. They're both beautiful things in the landscape of your heart. And that's fine. Now what you're going to do if you got two mountains on your hands that's likely to collide with each other, that I don't know. You just have to work it out as best you can. You just got to try not to hurt anybody, nor get hurt yourself – at least no more than can be helped.

It was a good letter. It told him everything except the one thing that he most needed to know. What was he supposed to do about this situation? It was distressing that even his mother didn't seem to have an answer for that. He folded the letter back up, stuffed it into the back pocket of his blue jeans, and threw his things back into the corner of the tree house.

Down below, Melissa had finished her flower chain and had wrapped it around into a hoop. She placed the hoop on her head and called up to Christopher.

"Look, Christopher, I'm a princess."

She stood up and twirled around and around in a graceful manner showing off how pretty she was in her flower crown.



Three days passed before it dawned on Christopher that Kyle was actually avoiding him. He went by Antonio and Marcie's house looking for him the day after he and Melissa came back from spending the night in the tree house alone. Mark said he didn't know where Kyle was. He hadn't seen him for a couple of days. He had assumed he was with Christopher and Melissa. "Try Phoebe's. Sometimes they hang out together."

Phoebe was in the living room when Christopher arrived. It was early afternoon.

"He's upstairs," she said. "I'll go get him."

It seemed odd that Phoebe didn't just invite them up, but Christopher shrugged it off and waited in the living room. Phoebe returned with the message that Kyle was taking a nap. He'd been having trouble sleeping at night. "Been having those night fears he sometimes gets."

"Ok. Tell him to meet Melissa and me at her place in the morning – about eight or so. We'll eat breakfast there and go to the tree house."

It was when Kyle didn't show up for breakfast at Melissa's that Christopher realized something was wrong. It wasn't like Kyle to not respond to an invitation, and not even send a message as to why.

"Maybe found out about us ditching him the other night," Melissa suggested.

"How could he?"

"I don't know. But something's up."

"I think he's staying at Phoebe's. I'm going over there to ask him what's happening."

"I'll come along."

Christopher thought about this a minute and then said, "No. I think it's better if I just talk to him myself."

"Okay." As Christopher turned to leave, Melissa called after him. "Christopher?"

"Yes?"

"I'm ..." She couldn't seem to think of what she wanted to say. "Well ... what I mean is ... I guess I don't feel too good about what we did."

"Me neither. But I don't see any way he would know."

Christopher found Phoebe and Kyle eating breakfast. Gaea was in her room reading. All of the adults had already left for the day. "Sit down," Phoebe said. "I'll get you some cereal."

Christopher shook his head. "Thanks, but I already ate at Melissa's."

"Coffee?"

"Yeah. I could use a cup of coffee."

Kyle looked up from his cereal and nodded at his friend. "Hi."

"You get my message?"

Kyle nodded.

"Well, you want to come with us?"

Kyle shook his head. "Don't think so," he said. "I feel sort of tired."

"We don't need to pedal. We could take our dirt bikes."

"Yeah, but I still don't feel like it."

Christopher frowned, and dumped a couple of spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. Then he added some cream to it, and tested it to see that it wasn't too hot. He swallowed a gulp of coffee, and set it down on the table a little too hard so that sloshed over the edge. He took a napkin and cleaned up the coffee that was spilled on the table. He stared at his friend and frowned again.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Something is."

"Why's something got to be the matter?"

"You're acting like you hardly know me. Like you're not glad to see me."

Kyle shrugged. Christopher stood up, picked up his coffee and walked over to the sink. He took another gulp, and then dumped the rest of it down the sink. "Why won't you talk to me?"

Kyle looked away.

"You must know what's the matter, Phoebe? Why won't he talk to me?"

Phoebe looked at Kyle. "You want me to tell him?"

Kyle shook his head. "I don't know. Whatever. It doesn't matter."

"Tell me what?"

Phoebe looked first at Christopher and then at Kyle. "Kyle knows you and Melissa went out to the tree house without him the other night."

"How's he know that?"

"He went out there and saw you. He couldn't sleep so he thought he'd just go out and maybe spend the night there himself."

"Shit." Christopher shook his head. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"You lied to me," Kyle said. "You didn't have any plans with your father."

Christopher went back to the table and sat down opposite his friend. "Listen, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have done that. Can we just be friends again?"

"I guess we're still friends, Christopher. I don't know. But I still don't feel like going out to the tree house today."

"I really am sorry, Kyle."

Kyle shrugged. "Sorry for what? You can't help it if you don't want to be with me. Our hearts just make up our wants as we go along, and there they are, whether we like them or not."

"But it's not true. I do want to be with you. You're my best friend."

"That's not what you showed me."

"I didn't want to tell you, Kyle. I wish I could change what happened."

"You can't change what you want, Christopher. I know. I've tried. Lots of times. I've said I don't want to love this person, or I don't want to be afraid of that, or I want to feel different about something else. I want to be just like everybody else. But my heart just goes on feeling what it feels and wanting what it wants." Kyle looked down at the uneaten and now soggy cereal in his bowl. He stirred it around a little bit with his spoon but did not take another bite. Then he looked up at Christopher. "You can't help what you want, but you didn't have to lie to me."

“What I want is for us to be friends again, Kyle. I’m sorry I lied.”

Kyle smiled at him. “I know you are,” he said. “I’m not perfect either. We’ll be friends again.” He shook his head. “But I’m just not in the mood to go to the tree house today. I think I’d rather just be alone. So why don’t you just go with Melissa?”

“Ok.” Christopher sat for a few moments longer, trying to think of some way to make things better. Finally he stood up. “I made a mistake,” he said. “But I’m still your friend.”

“I know that.” Kyle thought about trying to explain it to Christopher. He knew that in time he could forgive him for telling the lie. What he couldn’t get past was that Christopher wanted more to be with Melissa than with him. He didn’t blame Christopher for this. He knew that your wants were just something that happened, like the weather. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to jump up and hug Christopher and pretend it was just like it always was. Something had shifted, and Kyle had no idea what to do about it. “It’s ok about the lie,” he said. “I can forgive that.”

“I hope so.”

They were silent for a few more moments, hoping that somehow this painful awkwardness would resolve itself. Maybe the confession and the forgiveness would make that heaviness between them go away. It didn’t.

Christopher shrugged. “Well, I’ll be seeing you Kyle.”

Kyle nodded. “Yep. See you around.”

The Question Of Human Nature

From one perspective the Great Plague could be thought of as the ultimate experiment with regard to the nature of human reality. In general, novels, movies, and philosophical treatises prior to the Great Plague assumed that without the restraints imposed by societal inventions human beings would descend quickly into a state of extreme barbarity. 'The Lord of the Flies', which still retains a high reputation, was generally understood to be one of the most vivid artistic expressions of this idea. Yet what must be kept in mind is that this book, and the movie based on it, depicted what might happen to a group of highly repressed boys if they had those repressions removed in a sudden and traumatic manner. In fact, immediately after the Great Plague there were individuals who acted in a rather 'uncivilized' manner. Such people did not, as a rule, rise to the top of the social hierarchy but were either brought under some control by their peers, or were eliminated by others who were also free from the threat of reprisals by society.

In general, though, barbaric behavior was the exception rather than the rule, and those who have been raised since the Plague tend to be non-violent and gentle souls who are accommodating to the needs and reasonable demands of others. The 'experiment' suggests that we are not 'killer apes' as was believed by a great many people before the Plague. Human beings appear to be social beings from the outset. The post-plague data would suggest that they are naturally caring and altruistic creatures, unless they feel threatened.

Perhaps the more anti-social aspects of human behavior that were so much in evidence before the Great Plague were the outcome of harsh and often physical punishments, sexual repression, a general deprivation with regard to holding and touching in the early years, the micromanagement of people of all ages, resentment due to the huge inequities in society, and overcrowding. These are social determinants. The evidence of the Great Plague, viewed as a huge and unintentional experiment is that, in the absence of these social factors, human beings do not, in fact, look much like killer apes.

The question is of some importance. The issue of whether a free society is a real possibility for humanity is at stake here. If the 'killer ape' is hard-wired into our genes, then we will always require the firm and restrictive hand of a parent-like authority to restrain our anti-social essence and keep life from becoming, as Hobbs expressed it, "nasty, brutish and short". The evidence that we can derive from the outcome of the Great Plague, as we have examined it in the preceding pages, suggests a tentative conclusion: human beings thrive – individually and socially – under conditions of relative anarchy. Will this hold true when

- overcrowding, with its concomitant competition for limited resources, is
- again a reality? The answer to that question is beyond my competence.
- Here I can only clarify the nature and importance of the question.
-

... from 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, pp 511, 512

Chapter Five

A New Friend

For several days Kyle moped around. He slept a lot, and didn't show much enthusiasm in most of the things that had previously excited him. Mark tried to interest him in some of his scientific projects. Kyle listened politely and asked an occasional question. But it was clear that his old curiosity in the things that Mark showed him was no longer there. Finally Mark went to talk with Phoebe about it, to see whether she knew what was wrong. She told him what had happened with Kyle and Melissa and Christopher.

"What do you figure we ought to do?" Mark asked.

"Why don't you talk to your mom about it?" Phoebe suggested. "She's good at understanding that kind of thing."

Mark nodded. "She is."

The next morning, after Mark left early with his father on a collecting expedition, Marcie came into the room that the boys shared shortly after, and found Kyle still in bed, reading a comic book.

She sat down at the foot of the bed.

"I hear you've been having kind of a rotten time," she said.

Kyle sat up and leaned against the bed board. "Who told you that?"

"Mark and Phoebe, both."

"So you know about Christopher and Melissa?"

Marcie nodded. "And that was on top of Diego leaving, and your losing your friend Marcello."

"Well. So. Yeah. It has been sort of rotten. Not that I blame Christopher."

"You know, Alex was like you in some respects when he was smaller. I knew him when he was just a couple years older than you are now."

"Alex Madison?"

"Yeah. That Alex. He was sensitive like you. Couldn't shake things off that happened to him. Might be that it would help if you talked with him about what was happening with you."

"But he's kind of ... I don't know ... he's ... he keeps to himself. He read lots of books and doesn't do too much with other people mostly."

"You shouldn't think that he looks down on other people. He just has his own interests. He has friends all over the place that he goes and visits. He's really quite gentle and friendly."

"But I couldn't just go by and see him. He's not the sort you just drop in on."

"He's thinking you might drop by this morning to eat some breakfast with him."

"This morning?"

"Yes. I took it upon myself to ask him if he might want to spend a little time with you. He said that he'd seen some of the pottery that you had made, and

that he had been quite interested in meeting the boy who made such nice things. He told me to ask you if you might drop by this morning for breakfast.”

Kyle eyed her suspiciously. “Did you tell them about my business?”

“No. That’s up to you. You can tell what you like. I just told him that I thought you were feeling sort of down and that you might use a new friend.”

Kyle was uncomfortable with having so many people into his business. Still, it was true that he was feeling down and the idea of a new friend appealed to him. He’d seen Alex coming and going a number of times, and had talked with him briefly one day while Alex was out working in his garden. Alex had always seemed very aloof and unapproachable, but he had been friendly enough that day. Kyle had wondered what he was really like, and now his curiosity got the better of him.

“Ok. I’ll get dressed and go over and see him.”

As he approached Alex’s house, Kyle was having mixed feelings. He was indeed very curious to know more about Alex, and was flattered that Alex had said something nice about the cups and other pottery he had made. On the other hand he didn’t want to be grilled about his personal life. He was afraid that Alex would insist that he tell about everything that was bothering him. Already his personal business had been talked about more than he liked.

The house was a rather small one-story structure. It was well painted and kept up, but not at all elaborate. It was surrounded not by a yard, but by a garden. It seemed that Alex grew a little bit of everything, including a fair many weeds in the mixture. The garden was surrounded by a rather tall wire fence, the purpose of which was to keep animals out of the garden – a function it performed with only partial success. A variety of bird feeders were arranged around a window on one side of the house.

Kyle let himself in through the gate, walked slowly up to the front door, and tapped on it lightly. After a slight delay, the door opened and Alex smiled at him. “Come in.”

Alex was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt with a picture of whales on it, and he was barefoot. He had a beard which he kept fairly well trimmed, but he tended to allow his hair the freedom to do as it liked. Somehow he did not seem as austere or unapproachable as Kyle had remembered him.

Entering the house was like entering another world. A large fireplace, framed by shelves covered with a variety of knick-knacks dominated one wall of the main room of the house, and ceiling-to-floor bookcases lined the other walls. An assortment of small statues and framed pictures were interspersed among the books. A large oriental rug covered the floor. The room was furnished with a couch, a comfortable-looking chair, a lamp and a sound system with a couple of large speakers. Kyle had little time to satisfy his curiosity about the items on the shelves as his host led him though the room and directly into the kitchen.

“How do you like your eggs?”

“Any way.”

“No. Really. How do you like them?”

“Over light?”

“Okay.”

As they ate Alex asked him about the cups and other clay things he made. Kyle explained how Marcello had taught him to mold the clay and prepare the colors from plants and natural things they would find. Alex seemed genuinely interested.

“You’ve got a good eye for color and design,” he said.

“Really? Do you like the design ones or the picture ones better?”

“Both. Where do you get your ideas?”

“Anywhere. Things I see. Out of my head.”

“A lot of the designs you make are mandalas.”

“Mandalas?”

“They are circular designs. Some people think they have a spiritual or magical significance.”

Kyle stared at him blankly.

“Come on into the other room. I’ll show you.”

Alex pulled three books from his bookshelves and sat down beside Kyle on the couch. The first book was a collection of very colorful mandalas. The second was a small book called ‘Sacred Geometry’. It showed how to draw various basic designs with a compass, a ruler and a pencil. The third was a book about crop circles.

“So where do these crop circles come from?” Kyle asked.

“Well, there was a lot of debate about that for some time. Some people thought they were something that aliens – conscious beings from outer space – created, and others that they were just a hoax.”

“What do you think?”

“It turned out they really did seem to be a big hoax. But in a sense that didn’t completely answer the question of where they came from.”

“I don’t get what you mean.”

“It’s hard to explain. It seems at least possible that the Earth, or some spiritual power wanted to say something to everybody on earth through the people who made the crop circles.”

Kyle nodded. “I think I understand,” he said.

“How something spiritual might be speaking to them?”

Kyle nodded again. “Sometimes spirits visit me in my dreams.”

Alex looked at him, and smiled. “Yes. I imagine they do.”

“Sometimes even when I am awake.”

“Yes. That’s the kind of thing I am talking about. Maybe it’s good spirits that put the pictures of the mandalas in your head. Something like that.”

Kyle stared at the picture of a particularly elaborate crop circle in the book. “Probably so,” he said.

The two of them spent about another hour looking through the books and talking about the various designs and about the possibility of communication with non-human beings – either aliens or spirits. Finally Alex said, “I’ve got to get some work done in the garden.”

“Let me help you.”

Kyle did help in the garden for a couple of hours and then went home. He was afraid he might overstay his welcome. Before he left Alex, asked him if he could come the next morning for breakfast.

"You don't mind?"

"Mind? I should think not."

As he walked home Kyle realized that Alex had never asked him a single thing about what his problems were or about how he had been feeling down lately. He looked forward to coming back the next day for breakfast again.

For the next several days Kyle went by every morning and ate breakfast with Alex. After breakfast they would sit on the couch and study the books showing different mandalas and sacred designs. The two of them together worked out how one would draw some of the pictures in the book on sacred geometry, using a ruler, a pencil and a compass.

"It's cool," Kyle said. I could trace some of these pictures onto the cups that I make."

"I think that might turn out really nice," Alex said.

One morning while they were still eating breakfast Kyle looked up at Alex.

"Can a person change what he wants?" he asked.

The question was without any apparent context, and related to nothing that they had been talking about. Alex stared at Kyle for a moment and then asked, "Why do you ask that?"

Kyle continued eating for a while without saying anything, and looking only at his food. He was asking himself whether he wanted to tell Alex about Christopher and Melissa. Finally he washed down a mouthful of toast with a gulp of coffee, and looked up.

"Because I'm mad at my best friend and I don't want to be."

"I see."

"How can you see when I haven't told you about it?"

"Well I can see in a general sort of way what you might be asking."

"But not very exactly."

"No, not very exactly."

"You want me to tell you about it?"

"I'm interested in anything about you that you want to tell me. If I don't ask a lot, its only because I don't want to pry into your business." He shrugged. "It's up to you."

"Well, okay. It's like this. See, Christopher and me, we've been friends ever since we were little," and Kyle found himself launching into a detailed description of his relationship with Christopher. He told of their life together in Baltimore and the adventures they experienced on their trip over to Indiana. Finally he explained how Christopher became more and more interested in girls, and how he finally lied to him so he could be alone with Melissa that night. As Kyle talked, Alex occasionally asked for clarification on this or that point, but, beyond that, said very little. Finally Kyle seemed to finish his story. As though waking up from a dream, he looked around the kitchen and stared for a minute at Alex. "That's more talk than I've done in a long time," he said.

"That's fine," Alex said. "It was all very interesting."

"It was?"

"Very." Alex poured them both another cup of coffee, and then said, "It seems to me that you are really asking three different questions."

"Three questions?"

"Yes. I'm not sure, but let me tell you the questions that I hear in what you're saying. And you can tell me whether that's really it or not."

"Okay. Go."

"Well, the first question that seems to be on your mind is whether you can change what you most want. That is to say, can you change the kinds of things you want from other people, and the kinds of happiness that you most want in life?"

"Yes. That's one thing I want to know."

"The second thing you seem to be asking is whether you can change specific feelings, like being mad at somebody, or afraid of something."

"Isn't that the same?"

"The same?"

"The same as the first thing you said."

"Ah. No. Not exactly. All of us want certain things that we feel very deeply would make us happy. We want to have certain kinds of relationships, or we want to make music, or we want to be friends with trees and things around us ... things like that. These are deep feelings that come from our hearts. That's quite a bit different than just the feelings that come and go as life knocks us around. We are angry at somebody, or are afraid of something, or we are embarrassed at something we did or said. Those feelings may make us want something. Like we might want to get even with somebody we're angry at or prove we aren't as stupid as we looked in some situation, or make ourselves safe from some specific danger. But those are just shallow feelings that crop up in regard to things that happen between us and people and things around us. The deeper wantings that I'm talking about are desires that are there all the time. This kind of wanting is about what we feel will give us happiness in life. Everybody wants to be happy. And we all seem to be hardwired in somewhat different ways with regard to what we most desire and what we feel will give us the happiness that we want."

Kyle frowned. "I see," he said. Then he added. "Well, no. I don't. Not really. What you are saying is too complicated."

"It is complicated."

"I want to understand."

"I think I can give you an example if it won't embarrass you," Alex said.

"Okay," Kyle said.

"Well, from what you said, it sounds like you'd like to change the fact that you like boys more than girls."

"Yes, that's true. At least sometimes it is. I'd like to be more like other people."

"I'm afraid that's the kind of deep wanting that you really can't change."

Kyle looked down and sighed. He picked up a piece of toast from his plate and tried to eat it. It was dry and his mouth did not provide him with much saliva. He took a gulp of his now cold coffee to wash it down.

"I was afraid of that," he said.

"You don't have to believe anything just because I say it," Alex said. "I'm just telling you my experience with things like that."

"It's not just because you say it. It's what I think. I've tried to change what I most want, and I can't. Not even a little bit."

"What you can change is your thoughts about what you most want. You seem to be thinking something like this: 'If I'm too different from other people I won't be happy'."

"Yeah. That's what I think."

"That's not true."

"It's not?"

"No. You don't have to be like other people to be happy."

Kyle nodded.

"Okay. And the important thing is that this is different than being mad at your friend."

"That can change?"

"It can. Not real easy, though. But I think I can teach you something about it."

"That would be good."

"But not today. That's a whole subject in itself."

"Okay. But you said you thought I was asking three questions. You've only told me two."

"Right. The third question seems to be whether you can make things between you and Christopher be like they used to be."

"Probably the answer to that is 'no'" Christopher said.

Alex nodded. "Probably so."

"Bummer."

"It is. But maybe we've covered as much ground as we can in one day."

"Can we talk more about this kind of thing later?"

"I'd love to. You just keep coming by for breakfast and we'll keep talking."

During the next week Kyle did keep coming for breakfast, and they continued to talk. Their time together fell into something of a pattern. They would eat their breakfast together and talk about what can and cannot be changed in life, and then they would look at the mandalas and other pictures together, and work out ways of drawing them. Then sometimes Kyle would help Alex in the garden.

One morning Kyle related again how Christopher and Melissa had 'ditched' him, and how Christopher had lied to him. His face was burning with anger and humiliation, and most of his breakfast sat before him, uneaten.

"Your breakfast is getting cold," Alex observed. "You're so upset that you can't eat."

"Mostly I try not to think about it. But when I do, it all comes back."

"The hurt and the anger?"

Kyle nodded. Tears came to his eyes.

Alex stood up and came over to Kyle's side of the table. He ran his fingers through Kyle's hair and then massaged his temples, cheeks, neck and shoulders. "Try to calm yourself," he said.

In response to the massage Kyle became very quiet. "I like that," he said.

"Good." Alex bent over and kissed him on his cheek and then returned to his own side of the table. "Try to eat now. Those feelings can make you sick." He smiled. "Besides, I worked hard to fix those eggs just the way you wanted them."

Kyle nodded. "I know you did. I'll wash the dishes to pay you back."

"You don't have to pay me back. But we can wash the dishes together if you like."

Kyle finished his breakfast and Alex poured him a fresh cup of coffee. "You are still pretty angry at Christopher," he said.

"Yes."

"And you don't want to be."

"That's right."

"But you can't change it."

"Right again." Kyle frowned. "So three strikes and you are out, right?"

"Not necessarily."

"But if those bad feelings can make me sick, and I can't change them, then ..." He shrugged, indicating that the conclusion was obvious.

"These unhappy feelings can make us sick. They make all of us sick, in fact. All the time. But its not true that we can't change them. It's just that it takes a bit of learning."

"But I've tried, and they don't change. Sometimes I think I have shoved those bad feelings out the door, and gotten rid of them. But then, when I am not looking, they sneak back in and I find them sitting at my breakfast table. And there I am again. It's the same old unhappy me."

"Good. You notice what happens inside you, and you think about it. That's quite remarkable."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's a good beginning. But what you notice when you watch what happens is that our unhappy feelings are like wild elephants."

"I've seen pictures of elephants. They're pretty big."

"They are. And way more powerful than we are. So in order to tame one, people put it between two others that are already tame."

"Where do they do this?"

"In India. At least they did before the Plague. I don't know about now."

"So why are you wanting me to know about taming elephants?"

"It's a metaphor."

"A metaphor?"

"A comparison to something we want to talk about."

"Like what?"

"Like we were comparing wild elephants to feelings we couldn't control."

"I see. So my feelings are like wild elephants. Then what?"

"Well, there are two things in your life you can control – at least to some extent. Your thoughts and how you behave. By controlling those we can begin to control the feelings."

Kyle looked puzzled. "Give me an example."

"Okay. Suppose someone made fun of you in front of your friends. That would make you pretty mad, probably."

"Yeah. It would."

"And you might want to hit him."

"But I wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, I don't like hitting people. And he would probably hit me back. And it probably wouldn't do any good anyhow."

"Those are three thoughts: I don't like hitting. He'd hit me back. It wouldn't do any good. Those thoughts help you control the feeling. You don't hit him even though you feel like it."

"Right. I see. Thoughts can control the feelings."

"So ... that's one of the tame elephants. You can control your thoughts – at least to some extent. And they help control your feelings."

"I get it. What's the other tame elephant?"

"You can decide what you will or won't actually do. You may not be able to change the feeling – at least not right off. But you don't have to do what it makes you want to do."

Kyle thought a minute before answering. "Okay. I see that. But that doesn't really solve it if I go around still having the bad feelings in my heart."

"You want to know how to change those feelings?"

"Of course."

"Well, that's the work of the same two elephants, but it's a little more difficult. The behavior is the easier part. You ask yourself, 'How would I behave if I had the feeling I want to have?', and then you try to act that way. It's important that you don't lie to yourself about whether the feeling is still there or not. And you don't want to gush about a lot of feelings that you don't really have either. But suppose you wanted to stop hating somebody. Well, you could just do something kind to that person even if you didn't feel like it much."

"So it might help if I was mad at somebody to try to do something nice for him?"

"Yes that might help, if you didn't pretend to yourself that all your mad feelings were gone."

"You said the other elephant was my thinking, right?"

"Right."

"So what's that elephant do?"

"That's the hardest part. You've got to try to understand the other person. I mean really understand. The main thing in the way of that is that we want to condemn the other person rather than understand."

"Hmmm. I got to think about that a bit."

They cleaned up the breakfast dishes and went out into the garden. Kyle helped him with some of the weeding, and then gathered together some squash and potatoes to take back to the family where he was staying. Alex walked him to the gate. Kyle paused and looked up at him. "So if I want to stop being mad at Christopher, I got to understand why he did what he did."

"It would seem that way."

"I think I do know. He doesn't love me anymore. He loves Melissa instead."

"I doubt if that's a very good understanding."

"What, then?"

"Well, of course I can't know. But my guess is that he loves both you and Melissa."

"Both of us, huh?" He frowned and stared at Alex's feet for a few moments, and then nodded. "Maybe that could be." He looked up at Alex. "So maybe he had trouble putting the two together ... something like that ... that's what you think."

"That would be my guess."

Kyle opened the gate and walked through it. He looked back at Alex. "But that still didn't make it all right for him to lie to me."

Alex closed the gate. "No, it didn't. But we weren't talking about condemning or justifying. We were just talking about understanding."



The next day when Kyle came by for breakfast he seemed in better spirits. After they washed up he asked Alex if he could borrow the book with the pictures of mandalas.

"Sure. What do you need them for?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, eh?"

"Well, not nothing."

"Something, then."

"Right. Something. But it's a secret."

"Okay."

They went into the living room, and Kyle picked up the mandala book, and glanced through it. Then, slamming it shut, he said, "I've got to go, right away. I can't help you in the garden today."

"That's okay."

"And I won't be back for ... for ..." Kyle was quiet a moment – calculating something in his mind. "For three days."

"Seems like you have a plan."

Kyle nodded.

"But that's part of the secret," Alex added.

Kyle nodded again. "That's not tomorrow morning, or the morning after, but the morning after that," he said.

“Got it.”

“Will you be here?”

“I’ll be here.”

With a quick goodbye Kyle was gone, failing to shut the gate behind him. He went directly to his room and pulled his pottery paints and brushes out from under his bed. He put them in a pack and ran down the stairs to the kitchen where he slapped together a sandwich that he stuffed into the bag with his other gear. Then he ran out into the yard, jumped onto his motorbike and drove at a rapid clip out to the tree house.

The previous evening Mark had told Kyle that Christopher’s father, Vincent, had made arrangements with Antonio to take whoever wanted to go on an expedition to see some Indian mounds. Christopher, Mark, Melissa, Samantha and Gaea were all going. “You’re invited too,” Mark had said. Kyle had told him that he had something he wanted to do that day, but that the next time they went on an expedition he would join them.

When he arrived at the clearing below the tree house, Kyle took off his clothes and ran into the water for a short swim. When he came out he sat in the grass for a while letting the sun dry him. When his hands were sufficiently dry, he began to leaf through one of his books to study the pictures of the various mandalas. As he looked at the pictures, memories of Marcello and his family, and Diego, flitted in the back of his mind, creating a mixture of sadness and a peculiar kind of pleasure which suffused his consciousness. He became very quiet and open to impressions both from within and from his surroundings. The leaves of a nearby clump of aspens quivered in the light breeze. As he studied one of the mandalas that he especially liked, he remembered sitting on the couch beside Alex listening to his new friend explain to him how the mandalas meant that everything was connected to everything else. The happiness that he felt swelling up within him was not due to any single thing, but to an alchemy that incorporated all of the memories, the pictures in the book, and the leaves and birds and sunlight around him. He understood now what Alex had been talking about. Everything was connected to everything else. At least that was how it was supposed to be. He was determined to repair the connections that had broken between himself and Christopher and Melissa.

Within this state of quiet happiness Kyle began to work. On each cup he painted a mandala. Each one was inspired by a picture in the book, but in each case he set the book aside and let his imagination create the specific things that he put on the cup. As he worked he was unaware of time, and was surprised as he put the finishing touches on the fourth cup to realize that it was already well into the afternoon, and that he was hungry.

When he was done eating his sandwich, he worked on the cups a bit more, and then returned to what was now his house – the one he shared with Mark, Samantha, Antonio and Marcie. Only Marcie was there.

“I was just getting ready to eat some supper,” Marcie said. “The others took a picnic supper, so they will eat before they return.”

“When will that be?”

"Probably about dusk. Maybe in an hour or so. I sure would like some company for supper."

Kyle smiled. "I guess you'll have to make do with me," he said.

She dished them out some soup which was already simmering on the stove, and put a loaf of homemade bread on the table.

"Did you have a good day?" she asked after they sat down.

"Yes. Very. I went to the reservoir."

"It's very nice there."

He nodded while he blew on a spoonful of soup.

"Alex tells me he really likes your coming and eating breakfast with him."

"He told you that?"

"He did. Made a point of letting me know that. I think he likes you quite a lot."

Kyle tried not to show how excited this made him feel, but was betrayed by a slight blush. "I like him too. He knows lots of interesting things."

"He does."

After the meal, Kyle went to the front porch where he sat on the steps and waited for the return of the expedition, and it was not long in arriving. Gaea, Mark and Samantha on their dirt bikes were in the lead, followed by Christopher and Melissa. Antonio and Vincent were not far behind. For more than two weeks Christopher and Melissa had barely set eyes on Kyle, and they were uncertain how to handle his unexpected presence. As they stood in the yard straddling their dirt bikes and looking alternately at each other and at the ground, Kyle hopped down off the porch and came over to them.

"Hi," he said, as casually as if there had never been any tension between them.

They both said 'Hi' and smiled.

"I thought it might be fun if the three of us went to our tree house tomorrow," Kyle suggested.

"Sure," Christopher said. And he glanced up at Melissa.

"I would love that," she said.

"It's been a while since we did that," Kyle said.

"It has," Christopher said.

"Okay, then. Come on by here about sunrise. I'll get us some breakfast to eat before we go."

Without giving them time to respond to this suggestion Kyle turned and went back into the house. He went up to his room and sat on his bed. He was shaking. He was unsure about how the other two actually felt about him. That had not been true before. But he also felt happy and relieved that a breakthrough of sorts had been accomplished.

The next morning Kyle fixed a breakfast of ham, fried eggs, and potatoes. He had also prepared them a picnic lunch which they could carry in their backpacks. As soon as they finished eating, they started out for the tree house. It was sunny and promised to be a good day for the trip. They decided to take their pedal bikes rather than their motorbikes so that it would be quiet and they could enjoy the sounds of their surroundings on their journey.

There was just a hint of fall in the air, but they were confident that it would be warm enough for swimming before the day was over.

After resting from their bike trip, they hiked along the path that followed the side of the reservoir, to see what animals they could spot. They noticed that some of the trees were already beginning to change their colors. When they returned to the tree house it was time for lunch. They sat in the grass up from the beach, eating in silence for a while.

Then Christopher turned to Kyle, and said, "I really am sorry about what I did, Kyle."

"Me too," Melissa said. "I went along with him and I shouldn't have."

Kyle looked down, and then smiled at each of them.

"It's okay," he said. "It's past. Forgotten. All that counts is if you want to still be friends with me."

"I want to be friends with you always, Kyle," Christopher said.

Melissa nodded. "Me too."

Without any explanation Kyle stood up and walked to the edge of the clearing.

Melissa and Christopher were both a little nervous, fearing that perhaps they had said too much, or too little, or said it badly. Kyle reached down and picked something up from behind a log, and returned. He had three cups with him. Each one had a different mandala on one side, and a name on the other. Christopher. Melissa. Kyle.

"I made some cups that we can use when we're out here," Kyle said, handing the others their cups.

"They're beautiful," Melissa said.

Christopher nodded in agreement. "They really are."

They were beautiful, and Kyle understood that they appreciated them. Somehow it was difficult to know what to say after that. Then, after an awkward silence, Christopher stood up. "It's warm enough for a swim," he said and began to strip off his clothes. The other two did not need much persuading, and soon they were all in the water chasing each other, splashing, playing tag, and dunking each other. It was like old times ... almost.



The next morning Kyle was at Alex's house for breakfast as he had promised. He had brought something in a paper bag that he placed on the table beside his plate as he ate breakfast, but he refused to tell Alex what it was. "Later," he said. "After we finish breakfast."

"Okay. I guess I can wait. But I sure am curious."

Kyle smiled. "I mean for you to be."

Alex laughed. "Well, you succeeded." He poured himself a second cup of coffee, and warmed up the coffee that Kyle was drinking. "So what have you been doing the last couple of days, or is that a secret too?"

"No secret. I made up with Christopher and Melissa." As they breakfasted together Kyle told Alex about making the cups for Christopher and Melissa, and how he spent the day with them.

"Sounds like a good thing that happened," Alex said when Kyle finished.

Kyle nodded. "And now I've got something for you," he said. He stood up, picked up the package beside the plate, and walked over to the side of the table where Alex was sitting, and he handed him the paper bag.

By this time Alex was pretty sure that it was a cup, but when he removed it from the paper bag he was genuinely astonished.

"It's incredible. Beautiful."

"It's for you," Kyle said. "It's because ... I ... well ... because I like you a lot."

Alex put the cup down on the table and reached out to Kyle, and pulled him in close. He gave him a hug, and kissed him on his cheek.

"I love you, Kyle."

"You do?"

"Yes, I really do."

Kyle touched his cheek and smiled faintly.

"Okay, well. In that case, that's what I meant to say, really. I love you."

Alex hugged him again. They stared at each other and smiled. Neither could think of much to add to what had already been said. So they just did the dishes together, without a lot of conversation. When they were done Alex asked Kyle if he wanted to help him with something he was working on in his shop.

"I've got the whole morning for you," Kyle said. "We can do anything you like."

Alex was working on a basket for a ten-speed bike that he owned. He was also making a platform to fit behind the seat that he could put saddlebags over. They worked for some time with very little conversation outside what was needed to facilitate their mutual task. Then, prompted only by the inner workings of his own mind, Kyle asked, "Can things ever go back to how they used to be?" When he looked up and saw the somewhat puzzled look on Alex's face, he added "I mean if something changes, like between friends, can they ever change back again?"

"Like between you and Christopher?"

"Yeah. Like that."

Alex didn't say anything immediately. He was fastening the platform that would go behind the seat to some supports that would hold it in place.

"Do you know what this is?" He held up the tool that he was using.

"It's a wrench of some kind. I don't know exactly what you call it."

"It's a ratchet. See, this is how it works. I can tighten up the bolt like this. Or, if I shift this lever here like so, I can make the bolt come back out again. It's very handy. A ratchet wrench like this can go either way."

Kyle nodded, but wondered why Alex was not answering his question.

"Well, events in real life don't work like that. It's like they only ratchet in one direction."

Kyle looked at the wrench and thought about this.

"So it can't go back to how it was before, can it?"

"No. It can't. That doesn't mean that it wasn't a good thing that you did. It was important to make up with Christopher and Melissa. Also, lots of new good things might happen – either between you and Christopher and Melissa, or with other people. But that particular thing that you and Christopher had ... well ..." He shrugged.

"Things only ratchet in one direction," Kyle repeated.



That evening Kyle went by Antonio and Marcie's house and invited himself to supper. In the settlement that was not unusual behavior. They all considered themselves to be one family living in several houses. Children were free to come and go as they pleased, and were welcome at any table. After supper Kyle asked Phoebe if he could sleep with her that night.

"Sure. It's fun when you do."

"When I sleep with Christopher he says I'm all elbows and knees."

"Well, maybe so. But you are still nice to cuddle with."

When it was bedtime they stripped down to their underpants and snuggled together under the covers in Phoebe's bed. Phoebe told him about the Indian mounds, and they thought about what it must have been like for people in those days. Kyle told her about the mandalas and the cups. Then after a lull in the conversation he said, "Alex loves me."

"Course he does. Alex loves everybody."

"No. I mean me. Just me. In a special way."

This was a new thought to Phoebe. As long as she had known him Alex had been friendly and helpful to everybody in the settlement, and to anyone else that came along with a need, for that matter. But she had never known him to single any one person out for special attention. "What makes you think that?"

"He told me so."

"He might have said that to anyone."

"Did he ever say it to you?"

"No. But I think he does."

"In a special way?"

"No. Just like he loves everybody else."

"If he says it, I think that means it's something special."

"That's a point. But was there anything else?"

"He kissed me."

"Where."

"On my cheek." Kyle touched the spot lightly to show her where.

"Not on your lips?"

"No. But it was very ... what's the word?"

"Passionate?"

"Not exactly. I wouldn't call it passionate. But ... enthusiastic. Yes. That might be the word. He was very enthusiastic when he did it."

"I guess that counts, then. I mean if it was enthusiastic."

"It's got to count for something."

Phoebe nodded. "That's good." She turned away from Kyle and only responded to anything else Kyle said with grunts, or single words.

After a bit Kyle asked, "Are we done talking?"

"I'm kind of sleepy, I guess."

"Okay."

The next morning when they woke up, Phoebe still did not seem to be in a mood to talk. After several futile attempts to engage her in conversation about various things, Kyle looked at her with a frown. "What's the matter, Phoebe?"

"Nothing."

"Something is. I can tell."

Phoebe shook her head. "There is nothing wrong. I guess I'm just not in a very talkative mood."

"No," Kyle insisted. "It's more than that. It began last night after I told you about how Alex loved me. You went away then."

"I was sleepy."

"It was more than that."

Both had finished dressing, and Phoebe was sitting at her table brushing her hair. She could see Kyle in the mirror on the wall at the back of her table.

"Maybe," she said.

"What was it?"

"I had a thought I didn't want to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because it might make you feel bad."

"Well, you got to tell me now."

"Okay. I could see from what you told me that Alex probably does love you. I mean in a special way, like he doesn't love just everybody. Then of course I can see that you love him. I mean anybody can see that. You love him a lot."

Kyle nodded. "Yes, I do."

Phoebe put her brush down on the table, and turned to face Kyle directly. "It's just that I'm afraid that you will be hurt again when he leaves."

"Leaves? What are you talking about? Where's he going?"

"I guessed you must not know."

"Know what?"

"Mark told me he heard his mama and Alex talking about it one day last week when Alex came by to visit there. They didn't know that Mark was in the next room and could overhear them. Alex hasn't told everybody, I guess, but I didn't think it was a big secret. I thought he'd tell you since you and him are real close. But you acted like you didn't know. Never mentioned it." Phoebe crossed her arms in front of her and shook her head. "I guess I've sort of spilled the beans. I'm not sure if I should say any more."

"Well you can't unspill the beans, that's for sure."

"I guess not." She shrugged. "Well, it's like this. Mark says that Alex will be leaving sometime this fall to go join the Horse Gypsies."

“The Horse Gypsies?”

Phoebe nodded. “Alex feels he has some sort of special connection with the Horse Gypsies. Something to do with their beliefs or something like that. I don’t really know.”



Later that morning when Kyle did not show up for breakfast when he said he would, Alex became nervous. On his motorbike, which he did not often use, it did not take him long to get to Kyle’s house. There, Mark told him that he thought probably Kyle was at Phoebe’s. “Sometimes he stays there overnight.”

Phoebe was at home, and was surprised to see Alex ride up on his bike. She was even more surprised to find out that he was looking for Kyle.

“When he left I thought he was heading over to your place for breakfast,” she said.

“It’s not like him,” Alex said. “He’s always been very careful about keeping appointments, and letting me know any time he wasn’t coming.”

They were standing on the porch as they were talking. Phoebe sighed, and stared out at the road as though hoping that Kyle would come riding up at any minute.

“I’m afraid I might have said something to Kyle that I shouldn’t have,” she said.

“What was that?”

“Well, see, Mark overheard you and his mama talking when you told her you might be going to live with the Horse Gypsies. Mark mentioned it to me, and that was it. We didn’t talk about it to anybody else. We figured it was mainly just your business. Also that you’d be telling the rest of us when you felt like it. But I was afraid Kyle was going to be real upset when you left, and I guess I thought maybe I should sort of prepare him ...”

“So you told him that I might be leaving.”

“Yeah. I guess it wasn’t the right thing to do.”

“It was a pretty natural thing to do. It was my mistake really.” Alex frowned and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he looked at Phoebe. “So what did he say when you told them that?”

“Not too much. But I could see that he was upset. He gets real quiet and doesn’t talk much when he gets upset, but you can see it in his face.”

Alex nodded. “Look, I really am kind of worried about it. I think I’ll go down to the tree house and see if he might be there. You think you could get in touch with Christopher and maybe some of the other kids and look around some of the places he goes from time to time?”

Phoebe nodded. “Yeah. I can do that”

“I mean there’s no reason to be alarmed. But I’d just like to know where he is.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Alex raced to the reservoir, and started down toward the beach at a speed that was too fast for the bumpy and winding path. He was unable to slow down enough to make one of the turns, veered off the path, ran into a log, and ended up lying on his back in the ferns. He was not seriously injured. He picked himself up and glanced at the bike. It looked pretty banged up. So he jogged the rest of the way down to the beach. As he neared the small beach on which the tree house was located, he saw Kyle's bike. He walked over to the base of the tree and shouted. "Kyle! Kyle! Are you there?" He received no answer.

He looked out over the water, and shuddered. Then he decided to climb up and look in the tree house. When he arrived at the top of the steps and peered in the doorway, he saw Kyle huddled with his back to him in a corner.

"Kyle. What's wrong?"

"Go away."

"It's because of what Phoebe told you, isn't it?"

"I came out here to be alone."

"I was going to tell you myself. I'm sorry you heard it from someone else first."

"What's the difference?"

"Kyle, we need to talk about this. Turn around. Look at me."

Kyle turned around slowly, and looked at Alex. "What's to talk about?"

"About my leaving."

"You're leaving. So? Good riddance." Kyle's lower lip began to quiver. "I should never have let myself ..." His body began to rock back and forth slightly.

"Let yourself what?"

Kyle glared at him. He shook his head. "I'm not going to think this one away with all that stuff about elephants. I thought you loved me."

"I do."

"I mean really. Not just that noble stuff about how you should love everybody. I thought that you really loved me. Just me. Different from anybody else."

"I do, Kyle. Trust me. I do. Different from anybody else. More than anybody else."

"But still you're going away. You're leaving me like everybody else has."

"I have to go Kyle."

"Then go."

"I don't mean right this minute. I mean sometime within the next couple of weeks I need to go try to find the Horse Gypsies." Kyle shrugged. For some time the two sat facing each other unable to talk, but also unable to pull away from each other. Alex rubbed his temples and closed his eyes. He was trying to consult with his inner self. He wanted to get this right. Finally he opened his eyes and looked at Kyle. "Would you want to come with me?"

"You would want that?"

"If you did."

"Alex, everybody says you're the smartest man around. And you seem smart to me too. But now I see you can be really really stupid. I mean as dumb as a stupid dog. As dumb as a ... slug."

Alex discerned the faintest smile on Kyle's face. He was sure that it was because Kyle was satisfied with himself for coming up with the slug comparison.

"That's pretty dumb. I don't deny it, but what is it exactly that makes you say that?"

Kyle looked him straight in the face. "You know I love you right?" He rolled his eyes back in his head. "I mean if you didn't know that you'd be even dumber than a slug."

"I guess I know that."

"Well, if you love somebody you want to be with them. Right?"

"Right."

"So of course I want to be with you."

"Of course you do."

"How could you not see that?"

"I guess it's because I'm dumber than a slug."

Kyle nodded. "This isn't a trick is it? I mean you're not going to tell me I can come with you just to make it okay for now and then sneak off?"

"I would never trick you about something like this, Kyle." Alex came the rest of the way into the tree house and scooted over closer to Kyle.

Kyle didn't pull away. "Why did you have to ask about whether I would want to come with you?" Kyle asked.

"I guess it was because I wasn't sure that you loved me as much as I loved you."

Kyle smiled. "You're not really dumber than a slug" he said. "At least not most of the time."

"Just now and then."

"Yeah, just now and then." Kyle scooted very slightly toward Alex. Alex reached out and pulled him onto his lap, and put his arms around him. "You know I love you as much as you love me," Kyle said, putting his arms around Alex. "That much, and more."

"You'd have to leave the people here, and you love some of them too."

"I do. But it's not the same. You're the one I want to be with most of all." Kyle looked up at Alex. "It's not a trick is it? Tell me that again. Promise me."

"It's not a trick, Kyle. I promise you. As long as you want to be with me, you can be."



Kyle went to stay with Phoebe that night. As they lay on their backs in her bed, Kyle told her about his conversation with Alex. "So he really does love me," he concluded.

Phoebe was silent for a few moments, reflecting on everything he had told her. "So it's a sure thing. You are going with him when he goes to find the Horse Gypsies?"

He nodded. "Yes. I will go anywhere he goes."

“Won’t you miss the rest of us?”

Kyle turned his face toward her. “Of course. But it can’t be helped.”

“I don’t think I could do that. Leave everybody I know here and go off to ... just anywhere.”

“You grew up with these people. Your real mom and dad are both here.”

“You and Christopher had family in Baltimore – and they were nice to you. Yet you both just up and left.”

“We were looking for our dads.”

“But I thought your dad was” Then she stopped. “But of course. You mean someone who could be like a dad to you.”

Kyle nodded and turned over onto his side. “I’m sleepy,” he said.

When they slept together, Phoebe slept inside, next to the wall, and Kyle on the outside. After a while Phoebe could tell from the rhythmic breathing that Kyle had fallen asleep. The thought of Kyle leaving made her feel a bit lonely. Phoebe lay down on her side, facing away from him – toward the wall. But in those postures they did not fit well into her narrow bed, and she was uncomfortable. After a while she sat up and looked down at Kyle who was sleeping peacefully and had begun to snore. She would miss him. She even thought about asking to join him and Alex. But she knew she couldn’t. She had too many attachments here in the settlement.

She reached over and ran her fingers through his hair. It was soft and silky. Then she ran her finger along the line that his shoulder blade made on his back. Finally she leaned over and kissed him on his cheek, and lay back down on her side behind him, fitting herself to his contours. She put her arm around him and listened to him snore. When he snored it was like a cat purring. She liked it. After a long time she fell asleep.

Everybody in the community now knew about Alex’s plan to go find the Horse Gypsies, and they knew that Kyle was planning to go with him. But Alex did not want the others to know the exact hour of his departure. He said he didn’t like to deal with the business of saying goodbye, or at least he preferred a different way of saying goodbye. He wrote each of the people in the community a letter, which would be delivered to them on the day he left. He didn’t even let Kyle know.

One morning Alex rose at his usual time – before daybreak. It had rained the day before, and drizzled into the night. He looked out of his bedroom window. The clouds were gone. The sky was brightening with the first hint of dawn, but much of the sky was still spangled with stars. It was his favorite time of the day. He knew there would be mushrooms, and also knew where he was likely to find them. He decided at once that he would go out and hunt for some of the more tasty species to include in the omelet that he planned to prepare as a special breakfast treat for Kyle.

As he pushed on the gate in front of his house, he found that something was in the way. It wouldn’t open. He had been preoccupied with some thoughts and had not been paying much attention to the world around him. He looked over the gate and saw what at first looked like a bundle of rags. Then he saw that it moved. From that pile he heard the slightly alarmed voice “Oh!”

"Kyle?" he said.

A hand reached out and pushed some of the covers out of the way, and he saw the the face that peered out at him was, indeed, Kyle's.

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing."

Alex laughed. "Well, then. Let me put it this way. Why are you doing nothing here?"

Kyle stood up and tried to wrap the blankets around himself, but Alex could see that they were wet, and that Kyle was shivering. "You'll be mad at me, if I tell you," he said.

"Probably not. But you're cold."

"I got wet. I would have been all right."

"Look. Come on in. You can tell me about it when you are warmer."

Kyle allowed himself to be led into the house. Since he was spending so much time at Alex's house, he kept some of his clothes there. Alex had, in fact, set aside a small dresser in his room for Kyle's use. "I can put some dry things on," he said.

Alex nodded. "But first we are going to get you dried off and warmed up. Your lips are blue and you're shivering. You're chilled."

"Well ... I am cold."

When they got into the house, they went to Alex's bedroom where he had Kyle take all his clothes off. Then Alex dried him with a towel, rubbing him briskly.

"Now we're going to wrap you up in some blankets, and I'll get you some hot chocolate." After Kyle was swaddled in blankets and sitting on the edge of the bed, Alex looked at him and smiled.

"Don't go anywhere," he said. "I'll be right back."

Alex went out in back of the house, and turned the generator on so that he could heat some water for a bath. Then he fixed two hot chocolates and brought them into the bedroom to Kyle, who was lying down and savoring the warmth that the dry blankets provided him. Kyle sat up and Alex gave him one of the cups of hot chocolate. He pulled the chair he used for reading around so that it faced the bed. When they were both settled in, sipping their warm drinks, Alex said, "So, you were just telling me why you had decided to do nothing in that particular place."

Kyle stared into his cup. "It's sort of stupid," he said.

"Why don't you let me decide whether I think it's stupid or not."

Kyle looked up at him. "Okay."

"So tell me."

"I thought ... well it happened before, you know. With ... well, you know. It's that ..." Kyle paused and looked off to one side. "I was afraid you would leave." His voice was barely audible. Alex was not able to make out the last word.

"That I would ... ?"

"Leave. That you would leave." There was a hint of irritation in Kyle's voice.

"Without you?"

Kyle nodded. "Without me." For a moment neither of them spoke. Then Kyle looked up to see how Alex was reacting. "You're crying," he said.

"Only a little."

"I thought you might yell at me for being so stupid. Or that you might laugh. But I didn't think you would cry."

"It was stupid of me that I didn't know right off," Alex said.

"Why are you crying?"

"I got left once, just like you did with Diego." Alex said. "So I don't know why I didn't know that you would be afraid of the same thing."

"If you really don't want me with you, I guess it would be better if you just told me," Kyle said.

Alex wiped the tears from his eyes. "Why would I want to leave without you?"

"I don't know. Just because ... because ... I really don't know. Just because I'm a bother I guess."

"You're the nicest bother I've ever had. I promise that I won't leave without you."

Kyle looked down and thought about this. Finally he looked back up at Alex, and smiled. But it was an uncertain smile, and it did not conceal the fact that he was on the verge of tears.

"Okay. I believe you. I guess I do. You've never lied to me." He drank a little more of his hot chocolate and was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I think I just couldn't trust it ... I mean it was hard to believe that anything I wanted so much wouldn't just fly away." He took another sip from his cup. "Okay. You won't. So I won't be sleeping in front of your gate anymore. I know that was kind of weird."

"Is this the first time?"

"No. Ever since I knew you were going to leave I've been sleeping here."

"Didn't anybody miss you?"

"Mark thought I was at Phoebe's, and Phoebe thought I was with Mark."

"Did you tell them that?"

"No. I just let them think it."

"Why did you think I would be mad?"

"Because I thought I had to make sure you couldn't get away."

"Trust is hard to come by. It takes time. I'm not mad."

"You're not?"

"No, I understand. Look, you might as well move in with me. That would be the easiest thing. If you wanted to, that is. Unless you'd rather stay with your friends."

"No, I'd like to move in here ... if you want me to."

"I think it would be great. It will give us more of a chance to get to know each other before we start out. Maybe we could go out today and find a bed you could use, and we could put it right over there on the other side of the room."

"I won't need a bed," Kyle said.

"What are you going to do? Sleep on the floor?"

Kyle blushed.

"Well, I don't know." He glanced around at the bed he was sitting on. "Your bed is ...". He made a gesture with his hands suggesting something that was very wide. "I don't take up too much room." He paused and shrugged his shoulders. "Unless you don't want anybody in the bed with you."

"I don't want anybody in bed with me. But you're not just anybody."

"Then it's ok?"

"It's more than ok. Go get a bath now, and put on some dry clothes. We've got to go get some mushrooms. I want you to see how good they are in an omelet."



Phoebe was glad that Kyle had come to spend the night with her again. For about three weeks he had been sleeping over at Alex's, and she had seen very little of him. They were lying on their backs talking in low voices before going to sleep, as was their custom when he stayed the night.

"I've got something important to tell you," Kyle said.

"What?"

"Alex and I will be leaving tomorrow morning."

This announcement was followed by a long silence. Finally Phoebe said, "Shouldn't you be with him, getting ready to go?"

"No. Everything is ready. I just have to get up early and get over there."

"I see."

"I told him I had to come say goodbye to you."

"I'm glad you did."

"You're what makes it hardest for me to go."

"Are you sure you want to?"

"Yes. It's the most important thing in the world to me."

"I'll miss you." Another silence followed, longer than the first one. Then Phoebe said, "Before you go, let's do each other."

Another silence, and then she added. "It would be a way of saying goodbye. It doesn't matter if you are the other way."

"Ok. But I don't know how to do a girl."

"I'll show you. First we have to take off our underpants."

They did so, and then lay side by side for a few moments, with neither of them doing or saying anything. Then she took Kyle's hand. "You have to feel me down here," she explained, guiding his hand to her genital region. "Now, feel that little bump there?"

"Unhuh."

"Rub that."

"Okay."

"Hmm. Not quite so hard. Here. I'll put a little Vaseline on it. I keep it here for when I do it to myself. It makes it a little nicer."

"Ok."

After he rubbed her a bit, she began to make little noises, which seemed somewhat like purring to Kyle. "Does that feel good?"

"Very." Then she became tense and moaned a little and then relaxed. It was similar to what Christopher did when they used to do things like this together. Phoebe lay quietly for a few moments and then said, "Ok. Let me do you. You have to tell me what to do. I never did a boy before."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Like me with girls, huh?"

"Un huh."

"Well, I can tell you what Christopher and I did that worked. But you might think it was ... not nice."

"What was it?"

"Well, one of us would put the other one's dick in his mouth and sort of play with it with his tongue, and suck on it. But you don't have to."

"It sounds okay to me."

"Well, all right. Try it. Nothing will come out. I'm not quite big enough yet."

"Ok." She slid down in the bed and rubbed his penis until it was erect. "It's okay if you think of Christopher or Alex," she said.

"I don't think I'll have to."

She put his penis in her mouth and before long he felt that good feeling that sort of exploded down there and went all through his body.

When they were done they snuggled together in sleepy contentment. "Now I'll have another way of remembering you," Phoebe said.

The Question of Technology

I am afraid that I must conclude this study with no adequate answer to the question that prompted it: Is humanity destined to repeat the tragedy of the Plague, or some similar technologically induced cataclysm, in the future?

In her book, 'The Tragic Cycle', Professor Andriette put forth the hypothesis that once technological power reaches a critical point, it will dictate the nature of the society that must support it. Furthermore, she argued, technological society is incompatible with human freedom and ultimately incompatible with the wellbeing of the ecosphere. I am not sure she is wrong. Nevertheless, I would at least hope that careful reflection on the matter will enable us to combine technological knowledge with a spiritual understanding that will be adequate to the challenges we will eventually face as our numbers increase once again.

... from 'Re-inventing the World'
by Alan Kleinschmidt, p 724

Chapter Six

The Horse Gypsies

Alex and Kyle were eight or ten miles down the road toward Bloomington before the sun rose. It was clear and slightly brisk, a perfect day for riding their bicycles. Alex insisted that they would not use any motorized form of transportation on their journey.

"The point isn't just getting there," he had explained to Kyle over breakfast a couple of weeks earlier. "It's being alive while you are going. Motors make noise, and noise makes you partially blind to what is around you. It's better if we hear where we are as well as see where we are."

Kyle had accepted this, and had helped prepare the two bikes for the trip. The bikes were what Alex called 'touring bikes'. They were quite sturdy, but had enough gears for pedaling up most hills, and moving along at a fairly good clip on level ground. They were loaded down with camping supplies and some food. Communities were not close together, but they knew they would come across them from time to time. Travelers were always welcomed and supplied with food, in exchange for whatever news they had gathered from their travels. Also, since the Plague, everybody knew something about hunting and gathering. Alex was quite expert with regard to edible plants, and had no compunctions about eating fish and clams from the streams. He was not against killing a bigger animal for food if it was actually needed. They did not need to carry a lot of food, and they were very careful in selecting just what they needed for the trip – but they still carried enough luggage in the front basket and the rear platform to slow them down a fair bit.

"You set the pace," Alex said. "Slow and steady does it. It's not a race."

Kyle slowed down a bit. He knew that he could not keep up the pace he started at for the whole day. He smiled at Alex. He hoped that his smile would convey to him the enormous happiness he felt to be pedaling down the road in his company.

In the afternoon the flat overgrown fields that they had been traveling through gave way to a wooded and rolling terrain. They set up camp that first night beside a stream, a little north of Bloomington. When they were settled in beside their campfire, Kyle asked, "Do the Horse Gypsies have tests to say who can join them and who can't, like the Bike Gypsies do?"

Alex studied Kyle's face in the firelight before he answered. He noticed a slight twitching by his left eye. He had learned that this was an indication that Kyle was upset.

"Yes, they do," he said. Then after a short pause he continued. "The two groups of gypsies were originally one. Tensions emerged in the group around some philosophical points. Things about how groups should make decisions. Things like that. And maybe it was partly a struggle between two

strong personalities. One of the strong personalities was a man named Hans Mueller. Hans was – is, for that matter, he is still alive so far as I know – a very intelligent and well educated man with very definite ideas about things. One of his issues had to do with machines. He thought that there was what he called ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ technology. He was aware of all the violence that was created before the Plague by wars over oil, and also how the use of oil degraded the atmosphere. So he was down on internal combustion engines.”

“Like on motorcycles.”

“Yes.”

“So that’s why we are riding bikes?”

“Partly. There aren’t enough people using engines at this point to create serious problems with the atmosphere. So I don’t share all of his concerns completely. He knows this, but would argue that we need to establish sustainable patterns of living even while our numbers are still fairly small.” Alex shrugged. “I suppose he has a point, but I’m a bit more pragmatic than he is, in general. Anyhow, concerns like that led to the group dividing into the two that are known now as the Bike Gypsies and the Horse Gypsies.”

“And what about the test for being a member?”

“I don’t really agree with that at all. But I guess it’s still part of their community.”

“If I fail a test they give me, I’m going to be a big drag on you. You know, like a burden.”

“I don’t think you’ll fail.”

“I failed one test already. The Bike Gypsies didn’t want me.”

“The Horse Gypsies are different.”

“But they may not want me, either. I’m not athletic. I’m not that strong.”

“Those probably won’t be the main things they are interested in.”

“Still, they may not want me. I may fail that test just like I failed the Bike Gypsies test. You don’t know that’s not true, do you?”

“No, I can’t be sure that that won’t happen.”

“Will you have to take a test too?”

“I already belong to the community.”

“Did you have to take a test?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“Well, I just lived with them for a couple of weeks. Different things happened while I was there. Then one day they told me that I had passed the test and that I was a member of their community. They said that I would always be a member of their community whether I lived with them or not. But they never did tell me what the test was. I guess something happened, or I responded to something that they did, in some ways that were okay with them. And so they decided I was one of them and could join the community. I really don’t know what the test was.”

"So one day maybe they'll come to me and just say, 'Sorry Kyle, you had this test, you didn't notice what it was, but you failed'. What then? How do you know that won't happen? And I'll be all alone."

"You'll still have me."

"But you'll be going with them."

"Not without you I won't."

"They're your people. You have to go with them."

"No. You're more to me than they are."

"But if you didn't join your own community because you had to stay with me, it's just like I said. I'd be a big burden."

"You're not hearing me, Kyle. It's not that I would have to stay with you, Kyle. It's that I would want to stay with you."

"You would want to?"

"Yes."

"Even after I messed everything up for you?"

"Even if you failed some stupid test they gave you, yes. I would want to stay with you. That would mean that they're not the right place for us."

Kyle thought about this for some time. His body relaxed, and he said, almost in a whisper, "You must love me a lot."

"You are my happiness."

"I'm glad." He shook his head and sighed. "Still though, I'd be a burden. I don't like all these tests. People should just be who they are and you either love them or you don't. Tests are really stupid."

"I think so too. I love the Horse Gypsies. But even they aren't perfect."

Kyle lay as close to Alex as he could get, listening to the heavy breathing that told him he was asleep. Kyle was thinking about the test. Whatever Alex said, he was a burden. At least he would be a burden if he failed that stupid test. Maybe if he did he would just run away. He didn't want to take Alex away from his people. Little by little, the fatigue of the previous day overcame his anxieties, and he drifted off into a restless sleep.



The next several days passed happily. The leaves were changing and the daytime temperatures were perfect for bike riding. The nights were chilly but Kyle and Alex were warm as they cuddled together in their tent. They did not rush. As Alex said, 'Trips are not something to be gotten over with as quickly as possible'. They always ended their day's travel before reaching a point of exhaustion, and did not hesitate to spend extra time at any location that was particularly beautiful or appealing. Still, they moved steadily toward the location in Virginia where Alex believed they would be able to intercept the Horse Gypsies.

Only the anticipation of the test that he would be subjected to when they reached the Horse Gypsies cast a shadow on the deep contentment that

Kyle felt. He seldom thought about the dreaded test during the daytime, but it frequently came to his mind, and agitated his heart, with the setting of the sun.

Before going to bed one night, Kyle and Alex were sitting beside their tent letting their camp fire die down. It was a clear night with a star spangled sky.

"They make me afraid sometimes," Kyle said. He leaned against Alex for warmth and comfort.

"What do?"

"The stars."

Alex looked down at him with raised eyebrows. "Really? Don't you think they are pretty?"

"I guess. But there are so many of them. Mark told me about them. The ones we can see are all just from our galaxy. And ours is just one regular sized galaxy. In the sky beyond them there are billions more galaxies." He paused and took a deep breath. "And, as far as anybody knows it all goes on forever."

Alex could feel him shivering. "You're cold," he said.

"I am. But I've got on most everything that I have to wear."

"Wait here a minute." Alex went into the tent and emerged with their one big blanket. "Sit between my legs and lean up against me." When Kyle did so, Alex wrapped the blanket around the two of them. "Does it make you feel insignificant – you know, real small and unimportant – that the universe is so big?"

"Maybe that's part of it. But also it's that I can't understand it. Everything has to end somewhere. Yet when I think about how it might end, I think, well, after the end, then what? It has to just keep on going. See, all that is impossible. It's impossible that it ends and it's impossible that it doesn't end. And when I think about this it makes my stomach upset."

"I see. And seeing the stars make you think of this?"

Kyle nodded. "That's not the only thing it makes me think about, either," he said.

"There's more?"

"Yes. But you have to put your arms around me."

"They are."

"Tighter."

"Ok. There. So what else is there about the stars?"

Kyle sighed again. "See, when I was little I used to think that the stars were the souls of all those billions of people who died during the Plague. My mom read me a story sometime about how the souls of people became stars when they died. I liked that idea. I sort of believed it. At least I didn't question it, really, until Mark explained what stars are. How they are just big fireballs. And I said to myself, see, he's telling you what grown-ups think. Your idea is just a way a child might think. It's nice, but its not true."

"So you were left with what happened to all those billions of people?"

Kyle twisted around and looked up at Alex. "You really do listen to me, don't you?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Well I've noticed that most people don't. Marcie does. She listens like you do. But most people just listen to you out of the corner of their ears. Half their brains are somewhere else with something that they worry about or are planning to do or whatever. That's why I don't talk more than I do. With you I just talk on and on and on." He laughed. "It must sort of drive you crazy."

"No, I like to listen to you talk."

"Ok. Then I'll tell you the hard part to explain. I never tried to say it before. It was just something I sort of saw in my mind. And it doesn't make too much sense."

"Give it a try. Sometimes more gets across with words than you would expect."

"Well, see. It's like this. When it sunk in what Mark told me, all at once the billions of stars that were souls up there went out. Like light bulbs. They were just made of darkness. And they floated away from the real stars that went on shining but the real stars were only balls of fire. So when I look up there I see the real stars - with these eyes." He raised his hands and pointed to his eyes. "But in my mind's eye I also see billions of no-stars. Of nothings. You can't see them with your ordinary eyes, but you know they are there. But they are only no-stars. Nothings."

"I never knew a kid who thought as much about things as you do."

"Sometimes I wish I didn't. Mostly my thoughts don't make me happy."

"My thoughts have not always made me happy either."

"So what do you do about thoughts like that?"

"Well I don't have any answers to the most basic thing you're really asking. The fact is that whenever we follow our thinking as far as we're able to, we seem to come up against that thing for which there is no answer at all. How can space go on forever? How can time go on for ever? Why is there something rather than nothing? All of those questions can make us get that hollow empty feeling in our bellies."

"So you feel that too."

"Yes."

"That makes it a little better."

"Not being alone with it?"

"Yeah."

"It does for me too."

"What do you think about time and space going on forever?" Kyle asked.

"Well, as far as that's concerned, it doesn't seem to me as though time and space are anything at all. They don't either go on forever or not go on forever because they're just things in our mind. Like when you dream of two people who are a few feet apart, really there is no space at all. It's all just something you are dreaming. It's sort of like that. The space between them is just your way of thinking about how they are related to each other. What's real is things around us and other people and things like that. Space is just a way of thinking about how two or more things can be related to each other. They're far away and close together, or whatever. But there's only the two things.

Space is just a way of talking about how they're related. Time is just a way of talking about how those two things can change. So what's real is just things that are related to each other in some way or another and changes in the way they relate to each other."

"That's sort of hard to understand."

"It is. It may take quite a few times for us to talk about it, and then maybe you'll see a little bit about what I mean."

"I think I sort of see it."

A moon that was a deep red-orange had been rising above the horizon as they talked. "The moon looks huge doesn't it?" Alex said.

"It does."

"Does it make you feel afraid too, like the stars do?"

"No, the moon seems friendly to me. It's big but not too big to understand. The moon and the earth are like friends. They're like you and me."

"Yes. Like you and me. They revolve around each other. You know, all this talk about stars and mountains and big things and little things and how some things are too big to understand reminds me of a dream I had once. I was looking at some mountains. Then all at once I saw that behind them there was another huge range of mountains. This second range made the ordinary mountains that I was first seeing look like tiny molehills. I think then I had something of the same kind of feeling you have about things just being too big for you to even be able to think about them. But I also had a feeling of awe or wonder. It was good and bad at the same time."

"Yes, that's how I felt when I learned that just the stars that we see are only a small part of what's there. Beyond them there's galaxies and galaxies and galaxies. That's what Mark told me about."

"Yes, it's huge way beyond our imagination. But still, I don't think it all goes on forever."

"Do you know that?"

"No. With all these kinds of questions it doesn't seem to me that we can know for sure. Anyway, I can't."

Kyle twisted around and looked up at Alex. He smiled. "Well maybe someday I'll figure it out. And then I'll tell you."

Alex laughed. "Maybe you will," he said. "But I'm pretty tired right now. Why don't we just go to bed and think about it again tomorrow?"

In the tent they opened both their sleeping bags so that they formed large blankets. They took off all of their clothes except their underwear in order to be comfortable. And they put the big blanket over the top. Kyle lay on his stomach while Alex rubbed his back. Kyle wriggled out of his t-shirt and underpants. "You can rub me all over," he said. "It feels good."

For a while they were quiet while Kyle received his rubdown. Finally he said, "When I'm here with you, those ideas don't scare me so much."

"I haven't forgotten about those no-stars," Alex said. "We'll talk more about them some other day."

"I'd like that," said Kyle.



It was already well into the fall. The nights were chilly but the days were still warm. One day, at about the time the sun was highest in the sky, they came across a clear and rocky stream. They pulled off the road and decided to take a swim before eating lunch. A natural beach formed on the inside of a curve in the stream, and some flat rocks provided a convenient place to sit and spread out their lunch. Two days before, they had stopped to visit a small community, and they had been well supplied with bread, cheese, and a couple of bottles of wine. It was warm and sunny now, and after their swim they sat on the a large flat rock, bare skin drying in the sun, and set out their lunch. As they began their lunch, Kyle turned to Alex. "You told me you had more to say about the no-stars."

Alex poured them each a little wine, and said, "Yes, I do."

"Tell me now."

Alex thought for a moment and then said, "Okay. I'll try. It's a little difficult. Tell me if you don't understand something."

"I always do."

"Yes, that's one of the things I like about you."

"That and how intelligent I am, and how beautiful I am, and how charming I am, and how fun it is to talk to me, and ..."

Alex laughed. "Don't get carried away now," he said.

Kyle laughed with him. "But those are all things you've said."

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you all those things. It might give you a big head."

"I don't always believe it all. Like, I don't see why anybody would think I was beautiful. But I like to hear you say it."

"Okay. Maybe I'll still say things like that, but less often. But back to the no-stars. Many of the kinds of things that you're interested in are philosophy. The ancient philosophers had a theory that there were four main kinds of things. Earth, air, fire and water. Well, I've got my own theory about the four kinds of things."

"I'll bet it's a lot better than what those old ancient philosophers thought," Kyle said.

"You're making fun of me now," Alex said. "But do listen to my theory."

Kyle cut off another sizeable chunk of cheese, and a piece of bread to go with it. "I'm all ears."

"Well, in my theory the four kinds of things are – things that are no longer, things that are not yet, things that are right now, and ... in the center of all this ... all the things that we want."

"Okay," Kyle said. "I get that. Like some of those things that are no longer are all those people that died in the Plague."

"You already see where I'm going with some of this," Alex said. "But first, there is another basic idea I want you to think about. Let's suppose that the things we experience – the events of our lives – don't just happen in a smooth flow but in little moments."

"I'm not sure if I quite get that," Kyle said.

"Okay. It's like this. When you watch a movie it looks like one continuous stream. You don't see a lot of little breaks. But on the film itself, what really exists is a whole lot of individual frames. Each one moves the action forward just slightly."

"Yes, I've seen films, and seen how they work," Kyle said.

"Now just imagine – we don't need to prove it's either true or not true for the moment – imagine it's like that with our lives here. Our experience seems continuous like the events seem on the screen that you see. But really, behind that smooth flow, our experience happens in little units, like the individual frames on the film."

Kyle thought about this for a moment and then nodded. "Okay, I can imagine that."

"All right. It gets just a little more complicated. Imagine that these little units of experience – the things that are like the individual frames in the film – are organized so a group of the smallest frames joins together to make a bigger frame, and that this bigger frame joins together with other bigger frames, to make an even bigger frame. And that's how our lives are lived – that's how we move from things that are no more, to present things, to things that are not yet. The main thing to understand about all this is that each frame has a beginning and an end."

"I can sort of see how that might be. But in real life what are these small frames and bigger frames and an even bigger frames?"

"In this way of looking at things, the smallest frames would be very small moments that happen so fast that we don't even notice them and have the illusion of its being continuous. Then these frames are organized into bigger frames. The event of our eating lunch here together is such a frame. And then this whole day would be a frame. And the trip would be a frame. And each of the different periods of our life would be a frame."

"All right. I think I see what you're saying."

"Good. And now comes the main feature. Here's the big idea I'm trying to lead up to. Each time one of these frames ends, it's like a death. We are no longer the person we were in that frame. That person is gone. As each new frame happens, we are born again. But we don't simply start all over – we take something of the previous frame with us."

"Like each frame in a film is just a little different from the one before, right?"

"Right. Like that. So as we move from frame to frame we die and are born again continuously. This happens on a very small scale and on a very large scale, and on many scales in between."

"I think I can see what you're saying. Do you think it's true?"

"I do think it's true, but I'm not asking you to believe it. I'm just suggesting that you imagine it and think about how it might be. In other words that you understand it. Deciding whether it's very likely to be true or not is another matter."

Kyle thought about this for quite some time.

He imagined the different frames of his life and could in fact sort of see them as Alex was describing them. Then a problem with all of this way of thinking popped into his head.

"I don't think it's true," he said.

"And what makes you come to that conclusion?"

"It's because I'm the same person I was before all these things happened. I'm the same person I was yesterday and the day before and last year and even a long time ago. If I'd been dying all these times, how could I be the same person? I'd be dead. Not just once, but zillions of times dead."

Alex smiled at him. "I knew I could depend on you to come to the very heart of the matter," he said. "That's the whole thing. As I see it, that's the whole, most fundamental, riddle of our lives. We die and we are born, we die and we are born, over and over. And each time that we are born we are a little different. That seems true to me. So it seems like the one that we were can be no more. Yet at the same time what you say is also true. We are the same person. On some very deep level we know that. Even though everything you can imagine – at least by the time you're my age – has died and is not the same as it once was, I am the same person I was when I was, for example, your age. I am the same person I was before the Plague, and I lost most everything then."

"That's what I want you to tell me about," Kyle said.

"I'm getting there. But let's begin with the little changes that happen all the time, for a moment."

"Like each morning I wake up a little different than I was the day before."

"Exactly. And you have bigger units than days. When you left your home in Baltimore to go on that adventure with Christopher, the you that you were in Baltimore died. You remember him, but he is past. You might go back to Baltimore looking for him, but he would not be there. A new person who you would now be would take his place. When you chose to come with me rather than stay in Indianapolis, again it was a kind of death. You will probably return to Indianapolis from time to time, but it will never be as it was."

Kyle thought about the last night he spent with Phoebe. "It will never be the same." He nodded. "That's why I was sad about leaving even though I wanted to."

"Yes. It was the same for me."

Kyle took the bottle of wine and poured himself another glass. "But I was more happy than sad."

"Yes. But things only ratchet in one direction. We can never go back to what we were. That's why in everybody's life – no matter how good it might be – there is sadness as well as happiness."

Kyle poured another glass of wine for Alex. "But where are those billions of people who died?" he asked. "You were going to explain about them. They got ratcheted right out of life."

"So you are thinking there is no way for them to come back?"

"Yes. It is too sad to think about. It makes me not want to live. I look up into the darkness at night and I think about them. About how they are not there."

"You think about the no-stars."

Kyle nodded. "Yes. All those no-stars. Whole galaxies of no-stars."

"I understand. I'm not sure if I can give you an answer that will satisfy you. But let me try. Each time we die – whether it is a little death like we have thousands of times a day, or a bigger death like the one we experience each night, or an even bigger one like the time you spent in Indianapolis, we return to the One, and then are born again in accordance with our wishes and what is possible in the world around us. That's where that fourth thing I mentioned comes in. What we want affects how we are re-born."

"When you say 'the One', do you mean God?"

"I guess. Except that I don't think of it as a person. So maybe it's not what most people would think of as 'God'."

"But it's something that is real big. Something that made all this stuff?" Kyle swung his arm around, indicating what he meant by 'all this stuff'.

"Yes. Something real big that keeps on creating it."

"But what about the people who died?"

"I think that probably our lifetime is like a single day in a much larger lifetime of some sort. That we return to the One and that we will get born again into something."

"Like another person. Like the reincarnation idea."

"Perhaps. I don't think we can know for sure. But that does seem possible. But somehow I think the dying and getting reborn continues."

"But we won't be just like we are now?"

"Not likely. Always there is change. And always with change there is both loss and gain."

"Always some sadness."

"Yes."

Kyle swallowed down the rest of his wine. His cheeks were slightly flushed and Alex could see that he was somewhat affected by the wine. "But that's a sadness that I could live with," Kyle said. "Everything isn't just – poof – gone." He threw his hands up into the air at the word 'poof'. "Something gets born again."

"That's what I think," Alex said. "I can't prove it. But it would fit with everything else."

Kyle smiled, and stood up. He came over to Alex and settled in his lap. "Let's just stay here and cuddle and swim for the rest of the afternoon," he suggested.

Alex laughed. "You're just too drunk to pedal," he said.

"I could pedal, but I do feel the wine a little bit."

Alex put his arms around Kyle and hugged him.

"Sure. Let's just spend the afternoon here. We're not in a race."



Alex knew the general route that the Horse Gypsies followed each year. He set out on the trip with the confidence that as he got closer to them, he would be able to pick up news from people they encountered as to exactly where they had last been seen. This proved to be the case. The previous day as Kyle and Alex were pedaling along Skyline Drive in Virginia they had happened upon some people on a picnic who said that the Horse Gypsies we camped in a valley off the Skyline about 20 miles up the road. They described how to recognize the road that they needed to take to descend into the valley. "It's not really a safe road," one of the men in the group had said. "But it's the shortest way there. Just be careful."

The dirt road descended down the side of the mountain ridge in a series of hairpin turns. In places it was partially washed out but it was negotiable on a bike. The sun filtered down through the tall pine and hemlock trees, and Kyle could not help but resonate with the beauty of the scene. But his happiness was marred by anxious questions that he could not hold at bay, now that he and Alex were so close to their destination. How will these people receive me? Will I pass their test? Will Alex be ashamed of me if I fail? What will we do then?

They encountered a stream flowing down the mountain in a series of little cascades when they were about half way down. Each time they reversed their direction at a hairpin curve they would soon come across it again. The third time they encountered this stream Kyle was a few yards ahead of Alex. When he approached the stream he saw that it was flowing over the road rather than under it as had been the case previously. But the water did not appear to be deep and he was confident he could plow through it. His wheel caught in a rut that was not visible below the surface of the water, and he was thrown off his bike. He sprawled painfully on the other side of the stream.

Alex jumped off his bike and was at Kyle's side almost immediately. A quick examination revealed that Kyle had a cut on his left cheek, and scrapes on both elbows, but he was not seriously hurt. He also complained that his ankle hurt, but it was not broken. He sat up and shook his head. "I can't do anything right," he said.

"What a thing to say! You do fine. Everybody has accidents."

"Not like I do. When I was with Christopher I was always the one that messed things up."

Alex was washing off the scraped places. "Don't beat on yourself like that," he said.

After Alex bandaged the cut they looked at the bike. The front wheel was badly bent.

"Look," Alex said, pointing to a bit of smoke rising from the valley. "That's got to be them. We can walk there from here."

Kyle picked up his bike and tried to push it, but the wheel would not turn at all. "Just leave it. We'll get some help, and come back for it."

As they walked on down the mountain, with Alex pushing his bike and Kyle limping along beside him, Alex talked about the Horse Gypsy community.

"You'll get to meet Miguel Fuentes," he said. "He's one of my very best friends. I think you'll like him a lot. He was a street kid who lived in Mexico City. He says he probably would have killed either himself or somebody else except that a man from the University befriended him and took him under his wing. They were in love with each other."

"Like you and me," Kyle said.

Alex smiled at him. "Yes. Like you and me. Well I think Miguel must have had a gentle spirit to begin with, but I suppose it took that relationship to draw it out. He became one of the most warmhearted people I've ever met. He lost his friend during the Plague, but he survived. All at once he was on the same footing with everybody else. He was no longer a poor street kid. So except for losing his man-friend, the Plague was actually not a bad thing for him."

"I'd like to meet him," Kyle said.

The Gypsy camp was only a little more than an hour's walk from where Kyle had his accident. The Horse Gypsies lived in tents and tepees which were clustered along the side of a fast flowing stream. The dirt road on which Kyle and Alex were walking followed the stream once it arrived in the valley. The camp of the Horse Gypsies was on the opposite side of the stream and was accessible by a wooden foot bridge. As they crossed the bridge Kyle felt that he was seeing something like paradise. He and Alex paused on the bridge for a moment, and watched a group of children playing naked in the water. Slightly in back of the encampment and off to one side they could see a corral with horses of a variety of sizes and colors moving about it restlessly. The tepee made Kyle think of pictures he had seen of Native American camps before the coming of the Europeans. This was a group that Kyle knew he would like to belong to. But he tried to not let his hopes rise too high, because he knew he still faced a test.

A group of five barefoot children dressed in blue jeans and t-shirts had spotted Kyle and Alex and came to greet them. Several camp dogs prancing at their feet mirrored their excitement.

"Alex, you're back," a small boy shouted as he ran up and took Alex by the hand. Another child – a girl – took the other.

The other three children ran into the village shouting. "Alex is back! Alex is back! He's got a friend with him. It's a boy."

Adults emerged from everywhere and came to greet the new arrivals. Alex was obviously very popular with this group of people. Soon a slender and rather short dark-complexioned man came to the fore.

"Alex, my brother. How happy I am to see you again."

"Miguel! You are looking good." The two men hugged each other warmly. Then Alex pulled back and put his hand on Kyle's shoulder. This is my friend, Kyle. Kyle, this is the man that I told you about."

Miguel offered Kyle his hand and said how pleased he was to meet him. "The two of you will have to set up your tent at my fire," he said.

As they walked back toward Miguel's tent, Alex told him about the bike accident.

"I could see that he is a little scraped up, and I wondered why you had only one bike with you." He turned and motioned to a teenage boy who was following them on a horse. "Alo," he said. "This is Kyle. He had an accident coming down from Skyline Drive. He had to leave his bike which was damaged. They need some help getting it."

"Sure," Alo said. "We can do that, can't we?" He turned to two boys and three girls who were with him, also on horseback. "We were just looking for something to do. Thomas. Go get a horse out of the corral for Kyle." The command was given to a blond boy of perhaps 11.

"I'm afraid that won't help," Kyle said.

"Why not?" Alo looked down at him. "Are you hurt? I saw you limping."

"No, that's not it. It's that I don't know how to ride a horse."

Thomas stared at him in disbelief. "Don't know how to ride a horse?" It was as though Kyle had said that he didn't know how to walk or perhaps to breathe.

"Not everybody was brought up on horseback," Alo said. "It's not a problem. Come here, Kyle." Kyle came and stood beside him, and Alo motioned to Alex. "Hand him up to me, Alex," he said.

Alex lifted Kyle up and Alo took hold of him and settled him in front of himself on the horse. Kyle was surprised at how strong this youth was.

"He doesn't even know how to ride a horse," Thomas said.

"Hush," Alo said.

"Thomas is jealous," one of the girls said.

"You hush too," Alo said.

"You can take my horse to carry the bike," Miguel said.

As they started off toward the road back to the bike, Alo bent over and whispered in Kyle's ear. "But, you know, she is right. Thomas is a jealous little bugger, he is."

They retrieved the bike without difficulty, and then showed Kyle around the grounds and the immediate environs. Then they took time out for a swim. Kyle could not help notice how handsome Alo was. He could see that the others in the group – both boys and girls – also appreciated his beauty.

By the time they dropped Kyle off at Miguel's campfire, there was a happy spirit among the entire group. Even Thomas gradually warmed up to him.

Miguel lived with his woman friend, Anna, and with their three-year-old daughter, Tanya. They suppered together around the campfire and chatted until Anna and Tanya returned to their tent. Kyle was very tired and soon he retreated to the tent that he and Alex shared, leaving Miguel and Alex talking at the campfire.

After they talked a while about old times and caught each other up-to-date on things that had happened since they last saw each other, Alex raised a serious concern of his.

"I don't think these tests for membership are a good thing," he said. "They go against one of the main things that the Horse Gypsies stand for. We aren't supposed to divide the world up into those that are acceptable and those that are not. Inclusiveness!"

With this last word Alex stabbed the stick he was holding into the fire. Sparks flew up into the sky.

"I agree with you, Alex."

"What about the others?"

"I think a majority of them agree."

"So why isn't the practice set aside?"

"Hans doesn't agree it should be changed. Out of respect for him, many people are unwilling to make an issue of it."

"I respect Hans too. But he isn't God. He doesn't ask to be treated that way. He believes in consensus when possible and majority rule when it's not."

"He says he doesn't want to be treated that way, and probably he doesn't. But that doesn't change things. He was the founder of this community, and people defer to him. Some things probably won't change until he dies."

"Have you tried talking with him?"

"Yes. I reminded him of the Further Adventures of the Bodhisattva story."

The story to which Miguel referred was one that Hans Mueller had told on a number of occasions. Everyone in the Horse Gypsies' community was familiar with it. It was a part of their collective lore. Alex was quiet for a few moments while he recalled the story as Hans had told it.

The Illumined One came to the edge of this vale of tears – this realm of duality – and was on the verge of stepping into the dimension of perfect unruffled bliss, and he then paused and chose to return. As the story is told, compassion for all the pain suffered by creatures in the world brought him back and led to his famous vow that he would not separate himself from this world of struggle and difficulty until every sentient being was liberated from suffering.

Well, that's close. He was indeed compassionate, and that has something to do with the story, but actually it didn't happen quite the way it has been handed down. Being the most enlightened entity of his day he came to realize that he simply couldn't take that final step by himself, even if he wanted to, for the simple reason that on some deep level we are all one, and therefore so long as anyone suffers we all suffer. Furthermore, he also saw that the realm of perfect bliss in the unmoving center of all things exists as the unmoving center of a wheel, the spokes and rim of which are meant to move. Hence, the goal of spiritual development is not to escape this wheel which is the world of becoming, but to transform our manner of being in it.

His actual vow at that time was to hold off doing anything very decisive until he had a few more centuries to think it through more carefully. Later he came to think of this as his 'First' or his 'Wishy-Washy' vow. It was not a vow he talked a great deal about, realizing perhaps that it didn't have a nice ring to it. "I vow to bide my time and think things though a bit more." It was not the sort of thing that makes for a good story or lofty poetry.

To his credit he tried to explain everything to the scribes of his day. He mentioned his vow, which he admitted, really wasn't so much a vow as it was

an interim plan to tide him over until he could think of something better. He said he didn't mind if they chose to call it a vow, but he then tried to explain about how he couldn't have gone anywhere in any case, unless everybody was ready to go with him, which was really the important point. The scribes, however, were much like the scribes of every tradition and of all times, and they simply could not or would not hear any idea that varied in the least from what they already thought. So they wrote down an account that seriously misrepresented what he told them.

In time, the Bodhisattva came to realize that, although he could live without eating or drinking, and could move mountains, and could understand mysteries deeper than the oceans, and could heal the sick, and could work all manner of miracles, he could not change the mind of a scribe. So he withdrew from the realm of the respectable. He became a wanderer once again – a vagabond – a man without a home either in this realm or the next. He wandered through many incarnations determined to understand why humanity could not realize its true nature. He became mentally ill and spent time in state hospitals. He became retarded and spent time in institutions for people who could not tie their shoes. He became a criminal and spent time in prisons. He became a bag lady and an illegal alien and a beggar. He spent several incarnations living the lives of different sex perverts, and he enjoyed their pleasure and suffered their condemnation. And he said to himself, "What shall I do for this humanity that cannot seem to understand that they share a single wound?" And that was when he made his second vow.

Outside the circle of acceptable humanity, the Bodhisattva lived with the riff-raff, the outcasts, the slimeballs, the ignorant, the deformed, and the demented, and he vowed that he would never step back into the circle of acceptable humanity again until every last broken and despicable specimen was welcomed back with him. This was a vow he was happy with. "For the whole problem is that we draw a circle that can leave somebody out," he said. "That's the First Noble Truth." He dictated this to the scribes, and again they couldn't hear.

"For the whole problem is that we draw a circle that can leave somebody out," Alex quoted. "He's the one that brought this story to the community. So what else did he say?"

"He told me another story."

"Which was?"

Miguel leaned back and reflected a moment. "It went something like this," he said.

A man of great enlightenment was walking with a group of disciples through a small village, when suddenly a large and vicious dog bounded out from between two huts. Bared teeth and vicious barking clearly communicated the dog's hostile intentions. As the dog rapidly closed the distance between itself and the group of seekers, the teacher raised his walking stick into the air, and

just as the dog came within range, he deftly dealt it a sharp blow to its side. The dog yelped with pain and surprise, and withdrew to a respectful distance.

When they had walked on for another hundred yards or so, one of the disciples mustered up the courage to speak. "Teacher," he said, "you have always taught us the God dwells in all creatures and that whatever we do to the lowliest we do to Him. Knowing this, how could you strike that dog?"

"Indeed," said the teacher. "What you say is true. We are all God. Knowing this, and being so well attuned to the Absolute Mind, I was able to perceive immediately that God would much prefer to be struck with a stick than to be bitten on his leg."

Alex chuckled. "Hans is always good for a story."

"He is."

"What do you think the vicious dogs that we have to protect ourselves from are?"

Miguel thought about this question for a moment. "I think it's something like this. Hans believes in consensus. At the same time he is afraid that if we accept too many members in our communities that don't understand what we're really about, they might vote to exclude those principles that are fundamental. So his way of dealing with this is to screen those who want to join us."

"This is still a contradiction."

"It does seem so. Hans is a very exceptional man, but he is full of contradictions. Some of those contradictions have become a part of our community."

Alex nodded in agreement. "Life itself is full of contradictions," he said.

"It may be," Miguel agreed. "But the dilemma is a real one, it seems to me. How would you solve it?"

"I don't know. But I'd get rid of that goddamn practice of testing people. It's not right. It violates everything the community stands for." Alex stood up and paced back and forth near the fire for a moment. Then he went over to a stack of wood and picked up a small log. He threw it somewhat aggressively onto the fire, and then sat back down. "I'd sure as hell get rid of that practice."

Miguel could not remember ever having seen Alex so thoroughly upset. "You really love your little friend, don't you?" he said.

Alex stared at Miguel as if this was a new idea and he needed a moment to evaluate. "I do," he said finally. "More than anyone – or anything."

Miguel looked at him with a sly smile. "And you've taught him to make love?"
"No."

"I am surprised. The way he clings to you and always seems to be wanting to merge right into you, made me sure that you and he must make love."

"We do. But I didn't teach him. He taught me."

Miguel laughed. "Wonderful. You always were a little too aloof. And has he been a good teacher?"

"The best. I teach him philosophy, and history, and the meaning of words, and he teaches me love."

"It sounds like an ideal arrangement."

Alex nodded. "I think I get the best part of the bargain."

"Perhaps both of you do."

"But I also love this community."

"I know you do."

"You must understand, Miguel, if Kyle fails whatever test they set up for him, I'll leave with him, and never come back."

"Of course. When you make love to someone like that, you become married. From then on, until he becomes a man, he must be your first responsibility." Miguel reached over and patted Alex on his knee. "But try not to worry so much. Kyle will probably do fine."



Kyle was walking along the path that skirted the stream close to the camp, hoping to find some exposed clay for his pottery when he saw the tall gaunt figure he now recognized as Hans Mueller striding toward him. He could see that he had a rifle slung over his shoulder. Kyle left the path and slid down the embankment so as to be out of his way. He was afraid of Hans and didn't want to engage him in conversation. But Hans stopped on the path, just above him, and looked down.

"Hello, Kyle," he called out.

"Hello."

"Going to be a nice day, eh?"

Kyle looked up toward the sun, which was still fairly low on the horizon. "Yeah. You going out for a walk?"

"I am. Could use some company, if you aren't doing anything."

Kyle hesitated. He didn't really want to go. He felt ill at ease in the presence of this important man, and would have preferred to continue hunting for clay. But he felt it would be rude to turn him down, so he said, "Sure. If you want me to come with you, I can." He clambered up the embankment and joined Hans on the path.

"I want to check out a side trail that splits off a little ways up the path here."

"OK."

"Seen any wild dogs?" Hans asked as they started up the path.

"Not around here."

"Hmm. They're around. You can be sure of that."

"Really?"

"Yep. And I think I know where some are."

"Are they dangerous?"

"They won't attack us, no. Some will, but the dogs from this pack won't."

"So every pack of wild dogs is different?"

"Right. Dogs are social animals. They have developed cultures that are passed on through imitation and learning. To this degree at least, there is

a Lamarckian aspect to evolution. There is some possibility that this kind of learning can directly affect the gene structure.” It seemed as though for a moment Hans had forgotten who he was talking with and was just sorting out some things in his own mind.

“I don’t understand.” Kyle protested. “You’re using too many big words.”

“I’m talking about animals that run in groups or packs.”

“Right.”

“These dogs can be socialized. By that word I mean they can learn the ways of whatever group they are born into.”

“Like people do.”

“Exactly. And we have found that some packs will kill and eat human children and some won’t. Almost none of them will attack an adult human.”

“They do what they’re taught by their pack.”

“Yes. And if they are raised in a human culture they learn the ways of that culture – or at least they learn how dogs are supposed to behave in that culture. They learn their ‘role’ in that culture.”

“‘Role’ means what their job is – what they’re supposed to do. Right?”

“Right.”

“So there are three kinds of dogs,” Kyle reflected.

“How do you arrive at that?”

“There are dogs that are really people. They grow up with people and are sort of four-legged people. Then there are wild dogs, but there are two kinds of them. Ones that will kill and eat people if they get a chance, and ones that don’t”

Hans nodded. “Well, yes. That would be one way of dividing them up.”

“Are there other ways?”

Hans laughed. “Yes. I’m sure there are all sorts of ways they could be divided up. But for our purposes, dividing them up into ones that eat people and ones that don’t is probably the most useful way of doing it.”

“And the ones that follow your group are ones that don’t eat people.”

“True.”

“Are there lots of packs that follow you?”

“No. Only one. It will chase off any other packs that get too close to us. Will kill them if need be. It wants us to itself. Our group owns us. We are like a herd they follow and protect for their own good. In large part they live off the remains from what we kill and eat. That’s why they follow us. To get that.”

“So they are no problem to you.”

“That’s not quite right. They don’t kill our children, but they hunt on their own as well as eat our scraps. They get some of the deer in the area that our hunters want. So they are a problem. For that reason we have decided to thin them out a bit. Maybe just leave a few of them.”

“I see.”

They walked on for some time in silence. Kyle did not like the idea of killing dogs that were not a danger, but he didn’t want to argue with the spiritual head of the Horse Gypsy group.

It wasn't long before they came to the side path that Hans had mentioned, and he led Kyle up this path that climbed up the side of the mountain. Kyle was in good shape, with all the bike riding he had been doing, but it was still hard to keep up with Hans. He's a tough old fart, he thought to himself.

They came to a plateau where the path leveled out. They followed it another few hundred yards when Hans signaled for Kyle to slow down and be very quiet. Stealthily Hans moved toward the edge of a clearing of trees, and then crouched down. Kyle caught up with him and crouched at his side. They looked down into a little cove where they could see two adult dogs with three smaller ones – hardly more than puppies.

"Someone told me these dogs were here," Hans whispered. "So I came to see."

Hans took his gun, and arranged himself in a position to take a shot at the dogs. Kyle noticed that there was a silencer on the end of the gun. It appeared that Hans wanted a chance at several shots before the animals ran. Kyle didn't want to see the animals shot. He turned his head away and waited. But the shot did not come. Instead he felt Hans tapping him on his shoulder.

He turned and faced Hans. Hans handed him the gun. "Here," he whispered. "You do it. Your hand is steadier than mine. And your eyes are probably better. I don't want them to get away. They will probably be confused. We may be able to get them all."

Kyle took the gun. Moving very slowly he positioned himself to shoot. The dogs were not that far away, and the sights on the gun were good. It would be almost impossible to miss. He took aim at the biggest one – a male. It occurred to him that this sub-group to the larger pack was probably a family. The three frisky ones had probably been born in the spring.

"Go ahead," Hans prompted him.

Kyle thought about missing on purpose. He could pretend to try, but shoot over the dog's head. But he knew that he would probably have a chance at another shot. At this range even one miss with a dog that was just sitting there would not be convincing. Then it came to him that this was his test. He had to kill these dogs – or at least some of them, or he was out. He lay there for some time with the largest dog in his sights.

"No," he said, finally.

"What do you mean, 'No'?" Hans whispered. "Shoot."

Kyle stood up and taking the gun by the barrel, swung it around and flung it as far as he could in the direction of the dogs. The noise caught their attention and the bigger dogs led the others off into the woods where they were lost to sight.

Kyle stared at Hans for a moment, his face distorted and unchildlike from anguish. Then he turned and ran, almost blinded by his tears.

Hans tried to follow him for a while, and if Kyle had stayed on the path he might have caught him. But Kyle ducked into the thick underbrush. His dexterity and small size enabled him to weave through it far more effectively than Hans could, so he soon gave up the pursuit and returned to the camp.

When Kyle thought that he had succeeded in eluding Hans, he slowed down and then stopped. He listened and could hear nothing. He lay down and tried to think. He had run on an impulse. He didn't even know why. He had no plan. He knew it would be difficult to survive in the woods by himself. But he knew he had failed the test, and didn't want to see any of the Horse Gypsies. He was done with them. He wasn't sure he wanted to see Alex either. He loved him, and in one way wanted more than anything in the world to get back to him. But he was also ashamed. He would be the reason neither of them could stay. He didn't want to be a burden to Alex. Perhaps he could find his way back to Indianapolis, or even to Baltimore.

After a while, Kyle stood up and began walking. Whatever he was going to do, he had to make it back to the trails and then to a road. He couldn't get anywhere floundering around in the underbrush. He tried to retrace his steps, but soon realized that he was lost. He had not paid enough attention to where Hans had brought him to even be sure of exactly what direction the Horse Gypsy camp or any road might be. After a couple of hours of walking he sat down again, feeling hopeless. He dreaded being lost when the sun set. It would be terrifying to be out there alone. There were animals that might kill a small human being. And suppose it rained. Even without rain, the nights were getting cold.

Then he heard the dogs. They were barking as they did when they hunted. He lay very still, hoping that they would not find him, and that if they did, that they were the dogs that did not kill people. He thought about climbing a tree, but decided that would make him more visible. He huddled in the thicket of bushes and hardly breathed.

The sound of the dogs got louder. They were coming closer. All at once, Kyle understood. They must have picked up his scent. They were hunting him. Terrified, he leapt to his feet and noisily pushed his way out of the thicket where he'd been hiding. As he emerged and glanced behind him he could see the lead dogs bounding through the underbrush. He saw no trees with branches that were low enough for him to clamber up to safety before being caught. He was on a hillside with the dogs above him. In his rush down the steep slope he lost control of his speed and his legs could not keep up. He fell and rolled a ways. When he came to a halt he realized that they were too close. He had no time to stand up and run again.

In a state of rage at the Horse Gypsies who had allowed this to happen to him, of helplessness, and of terror, he curled up into a fetal position and awaited his death. He hoped it would not hurt too much.

But when the dogs arrived they did not eat him. They barked wildly and happily, and nuzzled his face, teasing it out from Kyle's protective arms, and they licked him. They wanted to make friends with him. It was all a game of tag for the dogs. He was a worthy prey, but they had captured him and now they wanted to celebrate.

Kyle sat up and petted the nearest dog. Another one pushed the first dog aside, vying for Kyle's attention. Kyle hugged and petted the dogs the best he

could, considering how they didn't stay put in one place long enough for more than a few seconds.

After a bit he heard the people who had loosed the dogs coming through the brush. They were the Horse Gypsies. They may not have unleashed killer dogs on him, but they were still not his friends. They had set him up with a test which he had failed, and he would have to leave another possible extended family.

Alex was among the first to break into the clearing. Kyle leaped up and fell into his waiting arms.

"I thought they were going to kill me." He began to cry.

Alex held him tightly. He kissed his face and rubbed his back. "You're ok. Nothing will hurt you."

"Then they licked me." Kyle laughed through his tears. "They were friendly."

"They don't have dogs that would kill people in the tribe here. We just used them to find you."

For a moment Kyle gained some control over his crying. Then he pulled his head back and looked at Alex. "I'm alive," he said. "But I failed." The tears began to flow again.

"You did ok," Alex said.

"No. I failed, I failed." His weeping was uncontrollable. "I failed you. We have to leave."

"We don't," Alex said.

"We do."

Hans drew his face close to Kyle and started to say something, but Kyle turned his head to the other side. He wanted nothing to do with the man who had put him through such a cruel test. Hans moved over to that side and tried to speak again, but again Kyle turned his head away. So Hans spoke to the back of his head.

"You didn't fail."

After a few seconds, Kyle turned his head back and looked at Hans.

"I didn't?"

"No."

"I didn't do what you ordered me to."

"We can't afford to have people who sell their souls in order to please authorities in our group," Hans said. Kyle stared at him blankly. "Never mind." Hans said. "Alex will explain it to you. But the important thing is that you passed. You are one of us now. If you want to be."

Kyle looked up at Alex for confirmation of what he thought he was hearing.

"We can stay?"

"Yes. We can stay." Alex kissed him again on his face. "Everything is ok. I'm sorry, though, that you had to be put through this." Alex cast an accusing look at Hans.

"I'm sorry," Hans said. "But I had to know. We can't afford to let just anybody join us. Not at this time at any rate. Not when we are trying to build a new kind of community."

Alex shook his head. "I don't agree with you on this one, Hans. It's not all right to subject people to these tests."

"I understand that you don't agree. Like everything, it's open for discussion."

"I'll be pushing for that discussion."

"Do. But for now I still think we need to protect our community." Then Hans looked at Kyle. "I'm sorry I had to do that," he said. "But I am glad you believe in your own self." Kyle was not ready to forgive yet, and turned his head away again. For a moment it looked as though Hans himself was on the verge of tears. He turned to Alex. "I am sorry he was so upset," he said. "But he will be all right with you now." He turned to go.

There were three other men and a woman in the group that had followed the dogs to find Kyle. One of them was Alo. Each of them either hugged Alex and Kyle together, or patted Kyle on his back, and welcomed him to the community.

"I will tell the others that you are one of us now," Alo said. Then they departed with the dogs, leaving Kyle and Alex alone.

For a long time Alex held Kyle and rocked him gently.

"I am very proud of you," he said.



That night Kyle and Alex sat at the campfire they shared with Miguel. The others had turned in early and they were alone. Alex was explaining as well as he was able why Hans felt it was necessary to test anyone who wanted to join their community.

"I don't like Hans very much," Kyle said. "He's too rough."

"Hans is a hard man," Alex agreed. "And sometimes I don't agree with him. But if he weren't such a hard man he probably would not have been able to pull this community together."

"You think he's ok."

Alex shrugged. "He's not perfect," he said. "But I think in time you will come to like him."

"Maybe," Kyle said, but he did not sound convinced.

"Or maybe not," Alex conceded. "But in any case I didn't like how he tested you."

"I thought those dogs were going to eat me."

"I can imagine how terrified you were."

"I was."

"These dogs that follow the Horse Gypsies would not have killed you."

"Hans told me that. But I didn't know that these dogs were from that group."

"As it turned out they weren't even wild dogs at all, but camp dogs. So Hans never did put you in real danger."

"Ok. But he wanted me to kill some of the wild dogs, and he told me himself they weren't dangerous."

"He didn't want you to kill those dogs."

"But he gave me a gun and told me to. He would have let me do it."

"He had loaded the rifle with blanks."

"Oh." Kyle took a minute to take in this new information. "So I couldn't have killed them?"

"No. It was just a test. You couldn't have killed the dogs, and they wouldn't have killed you."

Kyle stared at his friend for a few moments and then at the fire.

"Ok, that's something," he said. "He wouldn't have let me actually hurt the dogs."

"No. The Gypsy people are as protective of the dogs as the dogs are of them. Not only is there a kind of friendship between them, but the dogs perform a real service by keeping other dogs away that might be dangerous."

"Hans told me that. But he said that they competed for the same food, so they needed to thin them out."

"He made that up. The Gypsy People even adjust their travel to the yearly cycle of the dogs. Puppies get born in the spring, and are not big enough to travel for a few months. During that time the Gypsy people stay in one spot, waiting until the dogs don't have to choose between following them and abandoning their pups."

"Do the Bike Gypsies do the same?"

"No. They come and go as they please. Because of that they are hounded by dangerous packs from time to time. They use rifles to kill them."

"It's better to be with the Horse Gypsies."

"You want to stay with the Horse Gypsies, then?"

"Of course. I miss Marcello. But these Horse Gypsies are our people."

"I thought after they treated you as they did in that test, that maybe you wouldn't want anything more to do with them."

"No. I don't feel that way. Nobody's perfect."



Kyle spent the next couple of days with Alo and his friends. They began teaching him to ride a horse, they gathered berries and nuts and other things to eat, and they helped out around the camp with whatever needed doing. They even helped him find some gray clay and had him teach them to make pottery. When they felt like it they took time out for swimming and games. Kyle could not imagine a happier place to be, more convivial company to be with, or things to do that would be more fun.

On the third night of their stay with the Horse Gypsies, Alex and Kyle turned in early. They were lying on their backs under a shared cover. As was their habit when they slept together, they were both naked.

"The tribe will be packing up to be on the move again tomorrow," Alex said.

"I will be fun to see new places," Kyle said.

"It will."

Kyle was quiet for a few moments, thinking about the test he had been put through. He thought about how Alex held him and comforted him, and how he was ready to stay with him whether he passed the test or not.

"I love you a lot," he said.

"I love you too."

They were silent again for a period of time. Then Kyle felt around under the blanket that covered them both until he found Alex's penis. He took it in his hand and felt it becoming erect.

"Let me do you," he said. "You always do me, but I never do you."

"If you want to."

"I do. But just with my hands."

"That would be fine. I would like that."

Kyle positioned himself so that he could reach Alex, and began playing with him gently.

"When I finish, you can do me," he said.

"Of course."

"With your mouth. That's what feels the best."

"Whatever you like."

They made love and then fell into a peaceful sleep, with Kyle snuggled in Alex's arms.

Later in the night, Kyle woke. He had to pee. He slipped out from under the cover they shared, and crawled out of the tent. The cool air felt good on his naked skin. He knew he would not be out there long enough to get chilled. The moon was about half full, and the sky was bright with stars. They were very beautiful.

