

THE VAVILOVIAN CONSPIRACY

by Blackbird Crow Raven

Chapter 1

Dee averted her gaze. Her father wanted to know what her plans were now that she had graduated from school. Was she going to get a job? If so, doing what, and where? Was she going to continue her education? If so, in which field was she planning to specialize?

Dee sighed. Not a sigh of contentment, nor one of melancholy. It was an exasperated, impatient sigh, a sigh whose intent was clear--she wanted her father to know that she was fed up with the interrogation, and was in no mood to answer his interminable questions.

"Well, Dolores? You're 17 years old now, and you need to start thinking about your future," her father went on. He wouldn't let it go. Mr. De Parto never does.

Dee's irritation was reaching the boiling point. In a way, she was inwardly relieved to be angry, though, because the loss of temper led to a lessening of inhibition, which made it easier for her to divulge her plan to her father. She had been dreading telling him about it, already knowing what his reaction to it would be. But she had to tell him sooner or later. Or just give up on the idea. And she wasn't willing to give it up. So she took a deep breath, drew up her shoulders, and looked her father square in the eyes. "Dad, I don't want to begin working just yet. And I don't feel like going back to school, either. After all, I just got *out* of school--after all those years of slavery and boredom! In fact, I'm not at all sure if I *ever* want to go back to school. I want to take some time off, to think about things; maybe do some traveling."

You see, Dee (only her father calls her by her given name, Dolores) was as yet undetermined as to what she wanted to do with her life. To be more specific, like so many young people down through the ages, she was completely clueless about what she really wanted to do now that school was out and she was free to make up her own mind about how she would spend her time. She now had the freedom she had longed for, but now that she had it, it didn't seem so special. Actually, the freedom was kind of scary. Intimidating. She could now decide which career to pursue, if any; whether to stay home with her parents or move out into a place of her own; whether or not to get married; if so, when, and to whom. The freedom was bittersweet--simultaneously exhilarating and oppressive.

Dee was on the bridge between girlhood and womanhood, and it seemed to her more like a dilapidated, makeshift suspension bridge made of rope dangling over a deep canyon than the sturdy little wooden bridge on the De Parto's property spanning their shallow creek.

Mr. De Parto's initial reaction to his daughter's 'irresponsible tirade' (as he thought of it) showed his frustration: "Dolores, you can't just run away from life. You have to do *something*. You need to contribute to society--either get involved with some kind of work you can accomplish now, or prepare yourself for something you want to do in the future.

"I don't understand why you think you need time off. You've had your whole life to decide what you want to do. Didn't you know this day was coming? And what will traveling accomplish? That's something to do after you've *earned* a vacation. The purpose of a vacation is to rejuvenate you so that you can return to work. As for school being 'slavery' and 'boredom,' you just don't appreciate how good you have it. You know, Dolores, there were people in the old system of things who were *literally* slaves. I don't think you really even know the meaning of the word."

Mr. De Parto caught himself. He knew he wasn't getting through to Dolores. In her ears, he was just ranting and raving. *Why don't people ever learn?* he wondered. *They have to make the same mistakes other people have made, over and over, one generation after the next. Rather than learn from other people's mistakes, they reinvent the same old tired blunders time and time again. An intelligent person learns from his own mistakes, but a wise one learns from the mistakes of others. Why is wisdom at such a premium? Oh, well. That's just the way people are, I guess.*

Now it was Mr. De Parto's turn to sigh. He paused, looked out the window at the rolling green hills amidst which his family's land was situated, smiled wearily, and turned again to face his daughter. "Maybe you're right, Dolores. I think you need a little perspective." He paused, lifted his right hand to his chin, remained in that attitude for a couple of moments, and then removed his hand from his chin and raised his right index finger. "I'll make a deal with you," he continued. The *Museum of the Failed Experiment* is opening tomorrow in King & Kingdom. If you spend the day there, and really concentrate on what you see and hear, I'll permit you to take the rest of the summer off, to think or travel--or whatever it is you feel you have to do."

"You won't hound me about going back to school or to work for the rest of the summer?"

Mr. De Parto nodded in the affirmative. "No, I won't. But you have to go by yourself. I don't want any of your friends along to distract you or turn the whole thing into a lark. Get there for the opening ceremonies, stay till closing, and take in all the information you can. That's your end of the bargain. Deal?"

"Deal!"

Father and daughter solemnly shook hands. Dee then walked outside onto the porch, smiling. The showdown was over. Another sigh escaped her lips. This time, the emotions conveyed by its tone were a mixture of resignation and contentment: she was resigned to the idea of having to spend an entire day in a stuffy old museum, but also content that she would have the entire summer to enjoy her freedom and meditate on what she wanted to do with her life. Instead of being under pressure to make an instant decision, she could now do so at her leisure.

Tomorrow she would have to get ready early so as to catch the train into King & Kingdom for the museum's opening ceremonies. Dee wasn't so much looking forward to it as just looking forward to getting her part of the bargain over with, so that she could enjoy the fruits of her one-day servitude.

Chapter 2

Dee awoke refreshed, and quickly prepared herself for her trip to the museum. She would eat there at the museum, or somewhere in the vicinity, so there was no need to take along a lunch. Dee was sure that there would be plenty of good restaurants in downtown King & Kingdom, and Dee was an infrequent enough visitor to *any* city that eating out was something to which she eagerly looked forward. She would sup on the train during the ride homeward, if she was hungry.

After having breakfast and saying goodbye to her parents (her mother had been informed of the arrangement and was glad that her husband and daughter had been able to come to a mutually satisfactory truce in their little feud regarding Dee's plans for the future), Dee grabbed her tablet computer and stuffed it into its holster on her right hip.

"I'll see you tonight," Dee said to her parents, as she shut the door behind her. She strode out onto the porch and called Ross, her horse. The chestnut stallion galloped up to her from around the side of its stable, where it had been grazing. Dee got on, riding bareback. She didn't saddle her steed due to the short distance she would be riding him--just a couple of kilometers north to the train station.

The sun was shining, the dew was sparkling on the grass, the birds were singing, the scent of the air was sweet, and the temperature was perfect--just changing from briskly cool to pleasantly warm in the early-morning sun. Nothing was better on a spring morning, Dee thought, than to go riding through the woods and meadows in and around the village of Esitrevda, where she, her parents and her grandparents had all been born. She knew that in the "old system of things" the area where Esitrevda is located had been known as Asheville, in a state called North Carolina, but Dee didn't really concern herself much with things from 'ancient history,' as she viewed it.

Ross seemed to enjoy the brisk pace through the woods as much as his rider did. Just as he was beginning to get a little winded, the pair came within sight of the little red building which served as Esitrevda's train station. It was unmanned, as it is used mainly as a visual aid for passengers to let them know where they need to stand in order to catch the train. It also serves as a shelter during inclement weather.

By shifting her weight back, Dee indicated to her steed that she was ready to climb off. Ross gradually slowed his pace, then stopped, and snorted. Dee got off, walked in front of Ross and looked him in the eyes. "Thanks for the ride, boy." She then gave him a light slap on the flank

and added, "Go home now, Ross." The horse whinnied, shook his head up and down as if he was acknowledging the order as having been received, decoded, and accepted. Ross then backed up a few steps, wheeled, and capered off, back through the meadows and forests toward the De Parto homestead.

Dee walked over to the flag, and flipped it up so that the train would know to stop there for her. She was the only passenger waiting for the morning train heading north. That was not unusual, for this particular 'station' only served a handful of families, as Esitrevda is a small village. If the flag was up, the train's sensor would detect that and stop; otherwise, as was normally the case, it would continue on, past the little village nestled in the piney woods, onwards the 800 kilometers to King & Kingdom, making scheduled stops in the cities along the route and at any other 'flag' stops, as needed, at villages on the way.

Maybe I should tell you that here in Vavilovia (formerly called 'earth'), we have universally converted to the metric system. We use it because it is more natural than any other method of measurement. For example, the distance from Vavilovia to the Sun is 300,000,000 kilometers (which distance seems rather arbitrary when expressed as miles--186,000,000); Vavilovia's circumference is 40,000 kilometers, etc. For the same reason, the Celsius temperature system has superseded Fahrenheit: 0 degrees Celsius is freezing (instead of 32), and 100 is the point at which water turns to steam (rather than 212)--Celsius is much more intuitive.

Only a few minutes had passed when Dee saw the train crest the hill about a mile to the south. It picked up the signal from the flag and began to slow down. The trains we have now are a little different from those you were used to in the old system. Instead of riding on tracks, they levitate above the ground. Even in the old system, Maglev (magnetic levitation) trains were developed which were the precursors to this type of train. We have taken the technology a step further by doing away with the tracks altogether. Rather than using the magnetically-charged tracks to provide a cushion of air between the train and tracks, our trains magnify the magnetism present in the soil--Vavilovia's crust, so to speak--and thus the trains glide over a 'virtual' track. This not only obviates the need to build and maintain railroad tracks, it also makes it possible for the train to change course as conditions or situations dictate. By using a combination of radar and jet propulsion (learned by studying bats and squids, a subset of biomimetics), trains (as do all other non-living modes of transportation that we use) use a built-in collision-avoidance system for safety. One particularly interesting use for this is that animals which otherwise would be struck by the train are instead spared--the trains swerve out of their way.

As a matter of fact, as the train rounded the final bend before the station, Dee saw this very feature in action. Situated a little south of the

station is a stand of pine trees growing in a semicircle along the perimeter of the train's normal route. This morning, though, a deer was standing right in the middle of the area the train was about to pass. In order to avoid hitting the deer, the train made a quick swerve around the back end of the deer, fairly brushing the pine branches extending outwards. After the swift-moving and very nearly silent train had made its automatic adjustment, the deer noticed the train's presence and bounded off into the meadow.

The shock absorbers on the train are so effective that the passengers barely notice such a maneuver when it occurs. The evasive motions are absorbed so well, and then released so gradually that, as far as the passengers are concerned, even a ride consisting of several automatically-generated swerves and dips feels as smooth as if they were sitting in their easy chair at home. Any violent twistings and turnings that it is necessary for the train to make to assure the safety of the passengers and any living creatures outside are very gradually dissipated so that they are almost imperceptible. In fact, the ride is so smooth and quiet that you have to look out the window to perceive any real sense of movement.

As the train stopped for her, Dee took one look back in the direction of home. She couldn't see her house from the station, but she gazed in that direction, and wished she was already returning from the museum and was back home again. Anyway, she would make the most of it, and before she knew it, she *would* be back again.

Dee climbed aboard the sleek, gleaming, streamlined train, found a seat, and settled in for the long ride. As it was 800 kilometers from Esitrevda to King & Kingdom, it would be about a four-hour ride. The train could travel much faster than the 200 kilometer-per-hour speed that it averaged, but it maintains that relatively slow speed so that the passengers can enjoy the scenery. Additionally, a reduced speed makes the pickup and drop-off of passengers easier.

As the train left the station, it flipped the Esitrevda station flag back to the 'no passengers waiting' position.

Dee spent the four hours watching the scenery as they passed by the various villages and stopped at the few cities that this particular train serves. The only incident of note that occurred during the trip was the group of young boys who tried to outsmart the train's collision avoidance system. They were standing facing the oncoming train, in a v-shaped array of bodies resembling that of a flock of geese flying south for the winter: One boy stood where he estimated the train would pass, the next boy was a few meters behind him and to his right, the next boy the same distance beside *him* and a little to *his* right, etc., half of the group of boys extending all the way back to a rock wall. The other half of them formed

a mirror image of this arrangement, extending backwards and outwards in the opposite direction. At the rear of this phalanx was a thick grove of trees. In this way the boys were cutting off the train's normal path of evasion--it couldn't swerve to the left without hitting the rock wall, and it couldn't swerve to the right without running into the grove of trees. Based on previous observations and experimentation, one or the other of these maneuvers is what the train had always done in the past when encountering obstacles (such as deer, cows, and sheep) on or near its path.

Boys! Dee thought to herself. What are they trying to prove? Do they actually want to get hit by the train? Either the train will outsmart them by avoiding them somehow, or they would outsmart it and it will hit some of them. What kind of victory would that be? It would certainly be an extreme example of a Pyrrhic one, that's for sure.

As the train bore down on the boys, those standing at the apex of each diagonal line of challengers stared at the approaching behemoth. The eyes of the boy on the right grew wider the closer the train came. The boy on the left maintained a bravado, an outward semblance of courage, but his body involuntarily trembled, and his legs began to turn away, as if intending to separate themselves from the boy's torso and leave it to fend for itself. By sheer force of willpower and dogged determination, though, the trembling boy controlled his legs and remained at his post. His eyes reacted in the opposite way of his peer a scant two meters to his right--they gradually began to close. The closer the train came, the more tightly he squeezed his eyelids together, until he could barely see a thing. The train was now within 20 meters of the boys. In spite of herself, Dee opened her mouth to scream.

Just at that moment, when the boys were bracing themselves to be hit, the train made an instantaneous move--upwards, above the heads of the daredevils below. Once the last car had cleared the gang of boys--some of whom had fallen backwards and were sitting on the grass, others of whom were leaping and shouting and pumping their fists in the air--but most of whom had simply swiveled their bodies around, and were staring back after it, mouths agape--the train gradually descended, resuming its normal elevation above the ground of approximately 3/10 of a meter. It hadn't had to slow down at all.

Dee was glad, of course, that the boys hadn't been hit, but extremely irritated with them for their inane behavior. She couldn't imagine her father having ever done anything like that when he was a boy. He irritated her at times, too, just as those silly boys had, but at least he wasn't an idiot.

During the whole time Dee was simmering and stewing about the boys' shenanigans, she was looking out the window. Yet, she was not seeing a

thing--not consciously, anyway. When the small city of King & Kingdom (population 30,000) came into view, the image processed by her subconscious mind somehow triggered an awareness in her that then registered with her conscious mind. She prepared to detrain.

Chapter 3

When the train entered King & Kingdom, it made a circuit around the perimeter of the city, stopping every few hundred meters to let off and take on passengers. Dee disembarked at the City Commons stop. She wasn't the only one who did so; it seemed many of the passengers had taken the train for the same reason she had. It surprised her a little, because she didn't think the museum seemed all that interesting, and didn't know why people would be in such a rush to visit it if they didn't have to.

It indeed seemed as if the museum was the focal point of the city that day. People were swarming in by the thousands--perhaps tens of thousands. Dee joined the throng and marched along with them, towards the museum's entrance.

Now that the Museum of the Failed Experiment had been completed, it was the largest building in King & Kingdom. The museum is laid out in such a way that a visitor can see the highlights of the entire 6,000 years it covers in as little as an hour or so by making a circuit through the main hall. When you walk in, artifacts, displays and exhibits from circa 4026 B.C.E. are displayed on the wall at the right. You can follow that around to the modern-day exhibits directly across from it, near the exit. For those with more time, or more interest and inclination to delve further, there are corridors connected to each time period which lead into ancillary wings that go into more detail concerning the people, events, and culture of each particular time period.

By way of example, the first corridor you come to leads into a wing of the museum that houses the exhibits for the time period ranging from 4026 B.C.E. to 3000 B.C.E. This may seem like a rather odd span of time to cover, but from then on all of the wings cover an exact millennium (2999 B.C.E. to 2000 B.C.E., etc. on up to the final complete wing, which covers the time period from 1000 C.E. to 2000 C.E.).

The expanded examination of a particular time period doesn't end there, though, for if you enter the 4026 B.C.E. to 3000 B.C.E. building, there are further wings connected by corridors dedicated to the various *centuries* being represented. Again, you can get an overview of the entire millennium by making a circuit through the building (and then back out again to the main building, if you want), but you can also "dig deeper" into a specific century by following a corridor into yet another building. For instance, your interest might have been piqued by something in the 3699 B.C.E. to 3600 B.C.E. section, and you follow the corridor that opens into a building focusing on that time period. And that's not the

end of it yet, either--from there the museum is further divided into *decades*, and you can do the same thing if you're especially interested in a particular decade--follow the appropriate corridor to its end, where it empties into a wing devoted to that specific decade. So, you see, you follow your own interests from the general to the specific. And, of course, you can come back to the museum at any time, and as often as you like. In fact, it is expected that most will return, as it's impossible for a person to see, much less comprehend, everything that it contains in one day.

Dee, along with the thousands of others who had been drawn to the museum's opening, streamed toward the Great Hall. It is a massive, open-beamed hall with a stage at the far end spanning the entire width of the building. The stage is large enough to accommodate an entire orchestra, with room to spare. On the ceiling, huge panels of glass let in the sunshine--or the starlight, depending on the time of day. On this brilliantly sunny morning, the orb's rays spread diffusely through the entire area, bathing everything and everyone with their soft glow. Pillars of marble line the walls, blending into the cedar paneling on the walls and the redwood beams between the glass panels. Wide walkways extend down both sides of the hall and its middle, juxtaposed between the long, sturdy oak benches.

There must be hundreds of benches, Dee thought. And each one can accommodate at least dozens of people. I would guess there are around 10,000 people here. Dee found a seat near the middle of the auditorium. As King & Kingdom itself is (as has been mentioned) home to only about 30,000 people--which is about average for our cities, with villages housing from a couple hundred to a couple thousand--Dee calculated that people must have come from all over Alegria--and maybe even from some of the other zones--in order to be here for this event.

Dee now began to wonder if maybe the day wouldn't be such a bore after all. If this many people are so eager to be here, perhaps she would find something of interest here herself.

Chapter 4

Dee had expected to have to sit through a speech or two extolling the virtues of the museum and bla, bla, bla, but she now noticed that it seemed as if the first part of the program would be some sort of a concert. A large organ was wheeled out onto the stage and positioned towards the middle and near the edge. Other instruments were subsequently brought out and placed in stands around about the organ: a cello, a violin, and several woodwinds of some type or other (Dee doesn't know a French horn from a French poodle, so she didn't know exactly what they were).

Just then Dee noticed a device that looked something like a small black baton being lowered on a wire from the middle of the ceiling. The mysterious mechanism snapped into place several meters above the audience's head, and a moment later the morning's program was projected onto the white center section of both of the long walls. It said that the ceremonies would be opened with a musical piece composed for the occasion by J.S. Bach, who would also (of course) perform the piece, along with various members of his family. Following that, Samuel Clemens would give a speech. It seemed that directly after that there would be a reprieve for the long-sufferers, as immediately thereafter the audience would be set free to roam at will among the new exhibits.

Right on time, the chairman strode onto the stage. The podium had a built-in microphone, and each bench had an embedded speaker installed onto the back. In this way, every person in the audience was able to hear the speaker as if he was seated right next to them.

The chairman welcomed all, and thanked them for coming. He proclaimed it an exciting day and asserted that he was confident all would be more than pleased with the new museum. It was a story that had to be told and... yeah, yeah, yeah. Dee tuned him out. But finally the chairman introduced the Bach family, and Dee partially returned from her reverie. She would give it a chance, anyway. *Maybe* it would be worth listening to.

A solidly built man, big boned and burly, walked directly and purposefully to the organ. He stopped abruptly once he got to the bench, bowed to the audience, and seated himself. He had no sheet music. Dee found that odd as she wouldn't even consider playing a song without sheet music. Even if she didn't really need it, she would want to have it as a 'safety net,' just in case.

The patriarch looked around at his fellow musicians, who had followed him onto the stage, to see if they were ready to begin. His son

Friedemann was adjusting his violin beneath his chin. Finally, Friedemann nodded to his father, who then directed his attention back to the organ and, after a short pause, began the piece.

Every year Mr. Bach composes a new song with the same basic title, adding the year to differentiate one composition from another. The program confirmed the name of this first piece being played: "Hallelujah 2107." It seemed to Dee that it was a composition she would like more as time went on. She liked it well enough at the time, but seemed to like it more in a subconscious than a conscious way. It was almost as if she really *did* like it, but didn't quite know it yet. Or she liked it, but didn't know why, or what it was about it, exactly, that she liked. Or she knew there was something there that she wasn't really 'hearing' yet, on the surface, in her conscious mind and ear, let alone in her heart. Anyway, she was reasonably satisfied with the piece and looked forward to hearing it again--sometime, but just not right then.

After the applause died down, the Bachs all stood and bowed in unison. Johannes Sebastian, the father, stepped to the podium and explained that the next piece was, indeed, composed in honor of the opening of the new museum, and that it was entitled *Rückblickend, aber vorwärts strebend*.

That composition also was received well by the audience, and while they were clapping (and some were even whistling, which seemed rather gauche and unrefined--even unbecoming--to Dee), the Bachs bowed one last time, waved, and exited the stage.

The chairman returned to the podium, beaming. He had obviously been touched by the performance and was barely able to contain his emotions. It seemed as if he wanted to simultaneously weep and jump for joy. He did practically shout into the microphone, extolling the Bach family for their talent and genius. The built-in speakers in the seats automatically compensated by attenuating the amount of amplification of the excited chairman's voice. Nevertheless, the almost strident nature of the speaker's tone was still perceptible, and it grated on Dee a little. She discerned no cause for hysteria.

The chairman then took a deep breath, and seemed to regain his composure, although he was still smiling from ear to ear. He introduced the keynote speaker as 'the incomparable Samuel L. Clemens.' After a few awkward seconds, the awaited personage stepped onto the stage and ambled rather slowly towards the podium. The chairman nodded his head, shook Clemens' hand, and disappeared behind the stage.

Dee was amused because the new speaker, a serious-looking man with curly auburn hair, a big, bushy mustache, and adorned in what appeared to be a purple bathrobe, glared at his audience for several

seconds. Finally, a chuckle began somewhere in the middle of the crowd and spread outwards. The mirth was contagious, and soon practically the entire auditorium was filled with gentle laughter. The speaker then broke into a broad grin, which only served to completely unleash the hilarity--several people burst out into loud guffaws and hearty laughter. Dee didn't understand what was so funny about it all. A little bemused and befuddled, she looked around at her fellow members of the audience. *I guess they're just easily amused*, she thought.

"Well, I'm glad to be here, too," the speaker said. "It truly is a privilege to be asked to deliver the speech at this ceremony. The Museum of the Failed Experiment, located here in the city of King & Kingdom (which was Cedar Point, Ohio in the old system, by the way), has been a long time in the planning and in the constructing. Not only are there artifacts and exhibits for all of mankind's history contained in this wonderful new museum, there will also be docents who lived in each of the time periods represented. These guides will fill you in on details and first-hand experiences and can answer questions you have about their era of expertise--the eras in which they lived. These docents are volunteers and will rotate in and out of these assignments, so I've been told, every few weeks. That is to say, a person who lived in the 1700s, for example, might prowl that area for a couple of weeks, and then give way to the next volunteer. As there are, obviously, many people here (in Vavilovia) who lived in the 1700s, it will be a long time before that original volunteer will be recalled for another 'campaign'--perhaps hundreds, but at least scores, of years.

"To provide you with some concrete examples, we have here presently serving as volunteer docents (representing various time periods) celebrated personages such as: Abel, Abraham, Daniel, J.S. Bach (who we thank for those auspicious and happily un-Wagneresque compositions), Caleb, Miguel Cervantes, Esther, Mohandas ('Mahatma') Gandhi, John the Baptizer, Chief Joseph, John Merrick, Mordecai, Moses, Noah and his entire family, Ruth, Studs Terkel, Harriet Tubman, and a myriad (so to speak) of others whom many of you will know, if not personally, then at least by repute. Spelling them after their few weeks of service will be another batch of distinguished experts. To enhance the effect, all of them will be dressed in the garb that was current during the time period being illuminated in their section. Put otherwise, they are dressed as they were in their day; that is to say, how they dressed during their first life here on Earth--or, I should say, Vavilovia.

"Anyway, enough of that. Now that I've warmed up a little, let me take a little side-journey into one of my favorite topics: myself. I've been here since 2061 (not at the museum, of course, since it is brand new, but rather in Vavilovia). As a person who had traveled widely and experienced much, I was only too familiar with the ways of the world in the 19th century and on into the beginning of the 20th. Although I was not

happy with everything my country did, and in fact lambasted the politicians (among others) quite often and at times scathingly, I was most decidedly a dyed-in-the-wool American. In fact, I considered myself not only *an* American, but *the* American.

"I will admit that it was not easy for me to adapt to life in Vavilovia at first. After all, a round man cannot be expected to fit a square hole right away--or vice versa. He must have time to modify his shape. And that I have--to a certain extent, anyway. I still have some rough edges, and some people are still trying to dust me off now and again, but all in all I can say that I now feel very much at home here, and my only real complaint is that I don't have much to complain about anymore. It's no longer necessary to write vitriolic denunciations against the unholy trinity of corrupt politics, greedy commerce, and hypocritical religion, as they are no longer in existence. Instead of being warmed up in hell, my pen is now cooled in the refreshing streams of a blissful consciousness.

"As some of you may know (I hope that many of you do), my main writing focus is now on travel, which I do mainly on foot (the traveling, that is, not the writing). But that's neither here nor there, is it? My point is that there's a profound and fundamental difference between life in the old system and this one. Our new museum, of the Failed Experiment, serves to edify its visitors about what life was like not only in a general sense down through time, but also *specifically, in detail*, in various eras of our earlier history. By way of contrast this knowledge will indubitably serve to enhance our appreciation for the present milieu.

"Henry David Thoreau said that most men lead lives of quiet desperation. That was so true then. If all the rage and despair and frustration could have been tapped, converted to steam, and then used to drive the turbines of industry, the duration and strength and potency of the resulting force would have met all that system's energy needs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, for as long as that old system lasted.

"But this was yet another example of a source of energy that remained, in the main, ignored. Rather than use clean and renewable sources of energy--the sun, the wind, the tides, etc., we chose to bore and blast and deplete and pollute. I know this seems ludicrous to those of you here who never lived in that old system. And it was, I freely admit. But why?--Why did people do these crazy things--befoul their own nest, and that of their children and 2children and 3children and so on?"

* * *

Maybe I should explain at this time what Mr. Clemens meant by "2children" and "3children." This is a kind of shorthand terminology that we now use to avoid having to say things like 'great-great-grandchildren.' Of course, in that case, there's not a huge benefit in using this

nomenclature. But once you start to refer to your ancestors several generations back--or forward--this method of designating relatives saves a lot of syllables and is easier to understand. As you are well aware, it was rare in the old system for a person to refer to their great-great-great-great grandparents--but that is no longer the case. Back then very few people even knew the *names* of their 6parents, and none at all actually knew them in life. And scarcely anyone lived long enough to get to know their 4children, let alone 5children, 6children, etc. In fact, that is one of the things that made it seem acceptable to people to pollute the earth--not only would they *themselves* not be around to suffer the consequences a few generations later, but neither would they have to explain to their 4children (and up) why they had made the decisions they had.

Now everybody knows their lineage all the way back to Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and sometimes further back. Dolores, for example, is very close to her 6Parents, who were born in 1934 (Ted) and 1938 (Rosalie).

* * *

To get back to Mr. Clemens' speech, he addressed the reason why man was willing to pollute the earth: "In a nutshell, it was a lack of humility. Well, I guess I shouldn't say 'in a nut's hell,' for actually it was heaven for a nut--a nut's paradise! But anyway--let it go. Every parallel of latitude believes it should have been the equator. And such was too often the case with men in that time period also. Rather than humbly serving others for the common good, they wanted to be served abjectly.

"What most men lacked at the time was a healthy dose of self-deprecating humor. Nobody should take themselves *too* seriously. That is, everyone should take themselves seriously, but not overmuch. Every man--and woman, for that matter--should be able to laugh at him- or herself. We need to remember that man is the only animal who blushes--or needs to. And besides this warped view of ourselves, there was an overriding ambivalence--at best--toward truth, love, and justice, which caused or exacerbated man's multitude of mostly self-inflicted problems and wounds.

"Examples of some of the more egregious events manifesting man's disregard for pure truth, selfless love, and justice for all are delineated for you here at the Failed Experiment museum. In the 1900s wing, note the information on King Leopold of Belgium and the atrocities he committed in the Congo (which later had a name change to Zaire, so I'm told). Ten million people died as a result of his avarice. If you can stomach it, find out about how men, women, and children who took refuge in a mountain valley were massacred in the Philippines by machine-gun wielding soldiers. And about how in San Francisco, when I lived there in the 1860s, policemen stood by as Chinese immigrants were beaten, sometimes to death, just for sport--with these 'peace officers'

sometimes participating in the vicious beatings themselves.

After I died, things only got worse (although I'm not saying there's a connection there). The rabid and demoniac Adolf Hitler killed millions of innocents; Josef Stalin did the same, with the bizarre twist that he killed untold numbers of his own people, oftentimes with the full knowledge they were innocent of any crimes--he just wanted to instill fear and 'keep everyone on their toes.' Or, rather, on their knees. Terrified and subservient, not happy and content, was what he demanded of his people.

Benito Mussolini, like King Leopold, was behind outrageous atrocities carried out in Africa. He systematically gassed the inhabitants of Ethiopia in the 1930s. There were other wicked men: Idi Amin Dada in Uganda, Mao Tse-tung in China, Suharto in East Timor, Pol Pot (or "Polecat," as I call him) in Cambodia, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Slobodon Milosevic in Yugoslavia, the Saudi madman Osama bin Laden, on and on the list goes, but time does not permit us to enumerate their misdeeds in detail. The entire system of things was a failed experiment, that is a certainty.

"Yes, The Museum of the Failed Experiment--it is ingeniously named, for it looks just like a failed experiment would look if it looked like something else. No, the museum itself--I'm confident you'll agree, following your visit today--is an unmitigated triumph. And as to its appearance, I'm sure you'll also agree with me that it is a wondrously beautiful building. The Museum itself is a wonder to behold, comparable to the Taj Mahal. And like the Taj Mahal, it also is a sort of mausoleum. The old system has passed away. But the museum was not created to praise, honor, or commemorate that old system. It is, rather, a record of what can go wrong when wrong choices are made."

Chapter 5

Mr. Clemens ended his speech and 'dismissed class,' as he put it, so that they could 'light out for the museum proper' without any further unnecessary delay. "Ladies and Gentlemen, stir your stumps!" he bellowed, urging them up with energetic gesticulations and gesturing towards the exits.

Dee entered the main section and followed the flow of foot traffic to the right side of the circular room. The 4026 B.C.E. to 3000 B.C.E. section was first. Abel himself was there, talking about what life was like among the first human family; about the flora and fauna of the region; where exactly the garden of Eden had been located; and answering questions about what sort of fruit it was that his father and mother had found so enticing, whether his parents had navels, etc. After listening for a few minutes, Dee continued her circuit through the museum's antechamber.

Next, Dee walked past the 2999 B.C.E. to 2000 B.C.E. millennium section, where Noah was speaking to an informally assembled crowd and answering questions about whether the animals he took along had to be captured, or were they miraculously drawn into the ark? Were they babies, or mature adults? Did they hibernate, or did Noah and his family have to fill the ark with food? If so, how much food? Didn't the noise and smell of all those animals, in combination with being cooped up all that time, drive them to distraction? Were there any dinosaurs on the ark? Did all the birds roost on top of the ark, or did some perch inside? Why had he brought flies and mosquitoes along with him—or had he?

Dee listened for awhile, then passed on. The flood was interesting enough, and she did certainly respect and admire Noah and his family, but the arcane details of their months-long stay in the ark didn't particularly spark her interest. At any rate, it was hard to relate to events that had occurred so long ago.

In the 1999 - 1000 B.C.E. section, Moses and Caleb were holding court. In subsequent weeks Samuel (the prophet, not Mr. Clemens), David, Ruth, and countless others worked in this area. Moses had just answered somebody's question by saying that even he himself did not know where he had been buried. Seeing the two patriarchs together, Dee thought of the event that brought about the transferal of leadership from one to the other. She had what she thought was an extremely clever idea. She wasn't sure how it would go over, but she couldn't help herself. She addressed Moses: "I'm really thirsty. Do you know where I can get some water?" Although it was not meant maliciously, Dee immediately regretted her little joke as Caleb glared at her and many of those

standing around the two men turned around to frown at her--as they apparently deemed it--impudence. Moses, though, acted as if he did not understand the jab and replied "Miss, there are water fountains situated in each corridor." Although she had not really been thirsty when she launched her ill-fated joke, she now was, and she was also highly embarrassed, so she quickly passed on to the next section and ducked down the corridor, partly to quench her thirst but mostly to get out of sight from the crowd. Her faux pas had left her a little flushed, and the refreshing liquid also served to cool her down a little.

Dee re-emerged into the main area of the antechamber, at the 999-1 B.C.E. section. The prophet Daniel was functioning as head docent here at the time. Accompanying him were Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (more commonly known to some by the Babylonian names that their captors had given them, namely Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). After the initial service performed by these four men, the position as docents explaining this millennium has subsequently been filled at times by Esther and Mordecai, Ezra and Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, as well as many others.

Daniel spoke of dreams, visions and Kings, and answered questions about lions. His three companions related their experience on the plains of Dura--regarding the image to which they refused to bow down, and the fiery furnace into which they were then hurled. Dee listened to them for awhile, then passed on.

There was no year zero, of course, so the next section covers the time period from 1-999 C.E. Here John the Baptizer was the main attraction. Of course, many other prominent men and women of the time period were unavailable, as they are co-rulers with Christ in heaven, serving as Kings and Priests there. John was wearing a camel hair garment and a leather belt. As he spoke of his illustrious cousin, he took an occasional bite of honey from a pouch that hung at his side. He answered questions about his imprisonment, and when exactly it was that he realized his cousin Jesus was 'something more than Abraham.'

After a few minutes, Dee passed on to the final section in the antechamber: 1000-1999 C.E. She skimmed over summaries of events involving Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, Johannes Gutenberg, the Crusades, the Inquisition, various wars and diseases, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, volcanic eruptions, and many other fantastic and grotesque things.

When she got to the 1900s, the last full century of the last millennium in the old system, she saw a few things which especially piqued her interest: The Titanic, World War I, World War II, widespread famines and disease. She had heard of such things, but had never really paid attention to the specifics regarding them. She was intrigued by some of

the photographs and summations of various events and people.

Chapter 6

For the first time, Dee turned down one of the corridors, the one leading to more detailed information on the 20th century. On the wall of the corridor, illustrations of the fashions of the century were displayed. From corsets and floor-length dresses at the turn of the century to the mini-skirts and 'hot pants' of the 1960s, Dee couldn't help but be amused at the extremes in modes of dress and grooming: Women went from being practically hermetically sealed from neck to ankle to the point where they were almost revealing more than if they had been totally nude--all within a span of just a few decades! Men went from a variety of styles of facial hair (mustaches, beards, sideburns of various sculpturings) to no facial hair at all in the middle of the century, and then back again.

In those times, though, different from now, they didn't have all these fashions simultaneously. Back then all dressed and groomed themselves the same--that is, like everyone else around them at the time, in accord with the current fashion. They were seemingly in lockstep with each other: either practically everyone wore long sideburns, such as in the 1960s, or virtually nobody did, such as in the 1980s. Strange! Men wore their trousers practically at their navels in the early part of the century, and then they dropped down to their waist, and finally further yet, to the point of discomfort for, presumably, both the wearer and the onlooker. Pants were worn very loose at the fore end of the century, and then tight a few decades later--so tight that if a person had a dime in their back pocket it could practically be discerned whether it were heads or tails that was outermost--, then finally, in the 1990s, trousers were worn so oversized and baggy that a person had to walk with one hand holding them up to avoid tripping on them. Who started these farcical fashions, and why did everyone else then follow them? Dee couldn't understand such mindless conformity.

She then stepped into the room containing the artifacts and exhibits for the 20th century. She read about the Boer wars in South Africa, the Dutch occupation of Sumatra and their defeat of the Achinese tribe there, of Belgian King Leopold and his dealings in the Congo. *Hey, Mr. Clemens mentioned something about that*, Dee thought to herself. She read more about Leopold. Eventually he transferred the Congo to Belgium. "What?" Dee exclaimed, incredulous. She didn't even realize she had said it out loud. Others looked over to see what it was that she was reading, and made a mental note to give it a read themselves when they got to that section. Dee read further. The Congo had been considered his *personal property* before that. *This is really laying it on a bit thick*, Dee thought. *How could a person own another country? Especially one in which he didn't even reside?* Dee noted King Leopold's life range: 1835-1909. She recalled that Mr. Clemens' had been almost identical prior to

his resurrection, namely 1835-1910. *What a contrast in people who had lived in the same time period, and no doubt experienced much the same things, she thought. And one a fighter against slavery in all its forms, the other a proponent, seemingly even an addict, of that peculiar institution.*

Dee had forgotten to check her watch for over an hour now. She continued her circuit around the room, where Mahatma Gandhi (who was splitting his docent duties between the 19th and 20th century wings) and Studs Terkel were entertaining and edifying the crowd with an unrehearsed interview, the former being interviewed by the latter.

It seemed to Dee as if the world had begun to really spin out of control early in the 20th century. There had always been problems before, but it was as if man had been sucked into a vortex, had passed the point of no return in a swirling whirlpool of ever-maddening and dizzying and inexplicable events and counter-events. She also thought of the term critical mass, but didn't really know what it meant or whether it applied. Maybe an analogy at least as fitting, she thought, as that of the whirlpool, is of a snowball that picks up speed and mass as it rolls downhill. At the bottom, either the monstrous wave of snow or whatever it strikes--or both of them--is going to suffer, to say the least.

Just reading about these changes, mankind being bombarded by one catastrophic event after another, overwhelmed Dee. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like to have actually lived during these times and through these things. Especially without knowing what the eventuality of it all would be. She knew the old system was like the Titanic: considered by many at the time to be unsinkable. Unthinkable, that it could suffer a fall, but the old system rushed right into an 'iceberg' of its own in just the same way that the Titanic had.

Chapter 7

The wheel of destructive behavior began rolling along at a fever pitch in 1914. The Great War (later renamed "World War I," after another global confrontation and conflagration proved to be even 'greater') began in that year, quickly followed by the Spanish Influenza in 1919, in which year there were also race riots in a place that was then called Chicago. Continuing along the panorama of insanity, Dee learned that a virtual multitude of rulers were assassinated or executed. She had a hard time comprehending how such a thing might occur. She could imagine being mad at the Prince of her village if he made a decision she didn't totally agree with, but couldn't imagine anyone trying to harm him, let alone kill him.

The next thing to confuse Dee were the accounts of widespread labor unrest. *Why didn't those people just quit their jobs if they didn't like them?*, Dee wondered. *Surely they could have found a better situation elsewhere, or at least gotten by on their farms. All they needed to do was plant a few trees and get a good garden going, and everything they really needed would have been taken care of.*

From there, things got only more confusing for Dee. According to the information she read, World War II resulted in the deaths of some 55,000,000 people. *That's the same number of people that live in all of Vavilovia!*, she thought. *Inconceivable!* In 1949, Apartheid was established in South Africa. Dee had no idea what that was, or where that was, had never heard the term before, and had a difficult time comprehending it after she found the definition. The situation itself, of course, was easy enough to understand: apartheid was simply another word for forced segregation, as had been practiced where she lives back in the old system of things. But she couldn't understand the *mind set*, the motive, behind it any more than she could the segregation that had stained the American South, as it was then known, in the old system.

In 1963, there were more significant race riots, some of these taking place in Birmingham, Alabama. In that decade, there were a rash of assassinations in the United States: Robert Kennedy, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, G.L. Rockwell, George Wallace. All of the assassinations seemed to be politically and/or racially motivated. Not only that, some people assassinated *themselves*, so to speak, sometimes by self-immolation--burning themselves to death.

Thinking about these bizarre events, Dee shuddered. She thought about the people she knew and tried to imagine them killing someone else, or themselves. It was a completely foreign concept. No one she knew would ever do either one of those things. It was simply incomprehensible that

anybody would even *consider* acting in such a barbaric and disgusting way. She moved on, practically in a daze.

In 1969 fierce fighting broke out between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland. This type of conflict continued on down through the rest of the century, not only in Ireland, but also between Arabs & Jews, Pakistanis and Indians, Iranians and Iraqis, and many others. Dee knew that the Persians (Iranians) and Babylonians (Iraqis) had been fighting each other for thousands of years, but seeing the pictures of tanks, and of young children forced into military service and mowed down by the thousands sickened her. It brought home to her the madness of war.

As if that were not enough, Dee read about drought-induced famines that affected millions throughout Africa in 1974. She couldn't really process any more information at this point. She was completely overwhelmed by what she had read, and the pictures she had seen. Although it was past noon, she didn't feel hungry. She felt, instead, a bitterness in the pit of her stomach. She had expected to be bored at the museum, but the emotions she was feeling were far worse than boredom: she was angry and confused.

Dee began to wonder if there was something fishy about this 'Museum of the Failed Experiment.' She had heard, and even read a little bit about, wars and other disasters that had taken place in the old system, but she had never really meditated on what it all had meant, or how these things had affected people--she had never thought about just how cruel, insane, and dysfunctional a people would have to be to perpetrate such atrocities.

Would a person really round up and systematically, mercilessly, kill millions of people, just because they happened to have come through Shem's line, instead of Japheth's? Or would anyone really enslave other people simply because they were from Ham's line, or because their skin tone was darker? Dee began to feel a burning rage rising up inside of her. Nobody could ever do such things! This is ridiculous! How can they expect us to believe this? What's their game? Why do they want us to believe these far-fetched lies--or, at best, gross exaggerations? Who is behind this, and what do they expect to gain from it?

Convinced that she was being duped--by the founders of the museum and its curators, by the docents like Gandhi and Terkel who were talking about the 20th century, by Mr. Clemens and maybe even by Mr. Bach and--who knows who else? --Dee began to stalk out of the building.

As she entered the corridor leading out of the 20th century antechamber, with the photographs of the absurdly baggy clothing that were fashionable at the end of that century, Dee noticed something that had

escaped her attention on the way in: There were pictures of people with tattoos of all sorts, some covering their entire body, and there were even pieces of metal stuck in various places on their body, apparently as some sort of marking, or identification. Or was it simply used as punishment? Was this how certain criminals were 'branded' she wondered? She was highly skeptical of this, too. There were metal pins in navels, noses, eyebrows, even nipples and tongues!

No, she concluded. That does it! There is absolutely no way that anyone would ever do that to a fellow human. Imagine the excruciating pain of having such a thing driven into your nipple or tongue. Dee shuddered at the thought of it. People wouldn't stand for it. That is to say, law-abiding people would not have stood for such a cruel and unusual punishment. And nobody would have carried it out. Even if somebody like this hypothetical Joseph Stallion, or whatever his name was, were to try to force somebody to do that to someone else, they would sooner be executed themselves than inflict that kind of torture on someone else--no matter what crime the would-be victim was guilty of. Just how gullible do they think we are, anyway?

Dee's hot temper got the best of her. She grabbed the nearest docent by the arm (which happened to be Gandhi) and demanded to know what made him think that people today were so stupid that they would believe such things. "Of which things are you speaking, Miss?" Gandhi wanted to know.

"This, for example!" she said, jabbing her finger at the photographs of the pierced body parts. "Do you mean to tell me that you expect us to believe that this form of punishment was used on people? It's totally inhumane! It's preposterous! Nobody would ever do that to a fellow human--or even an animal!"

Gandhi covered his mouth with his hand. He didn't want to offend Dee by letting her see his amusement at her misinterpretation of the photographs.

"Well, Miss, I *am* familiar with nose rings, but as for the other things, I will have to refer you to my colleague Mr. Terkel. You see, I lived in India, and only until 1948, shortly after the end of World War II."

"Ha! That's another laugh," Dee fairly sputtered. "World War II! As if people would really massacre each other like that, all because of genealogy or some other stupid reason! What are you all trying to pull on us?"

Mr. Terkel had walked over and, remarkably, had been able to maintain his serious demeanor. He sympathized with Dee. Some of these things were truly Buffoonery personified, he granted her, but he knew all too

well that they had not been fabricated. "Miss...?"

"De Parto. Dolores De Parto."

"Miss De Parto, I have some even more shocking news for you on both fronts."

Dee folded her arms across her chest and stared at Mr. Terkel. "Well?" she impatiently demanded.

Mr. Terkel raised his eyebrows, turned to the side, and coughed. "As for the 'punishment' to which you were referring, it was self-inflicted, a voluntary impalement. It was fashionable among many, and not just the young. As for the psychological reasons behind it, I have some theories, but I'm not a professional psychologist, so I won't go into that."

"Oh, come on, give me a break! You're trying to tell me that people would deliberately do that to *themselves*? Get real! That's absurd."

"Absurd? Maybe so. In fact, I agree with you on that score--it was, indeed, absurd. But it *did* happen. And not just once or twice."

Dee rolled her eyes. *Yeah, right*, she thought. "And the other thing?" she asked.

"Yes, about the war--World War II. Not only were many fighting over genealogical differences, as you put it, but many that fought simply didn't know *why* they were fighting. And some probably didn't particularly care. Many of the combatants fought because the government under which they lived wanted them to, or forced them to."

"Is that so?" Dee retorted sarcastically. That really took the cake. A person would kill other people, and put his own life on the line, without even having a compelling reason to do so. *Yeah, right!*

Dee left the docents with a derisive whistle and a dismissive gesture. She was about to exit the building and leave the museum, never to return, when she remembered the deal she had made with her father. She didn't want to spend another second in that 'Museum of the Big Fat Liars,' as she now considered it, but she also wanted to have the summer free. As she was deciding what to do, she slackened her pace. After she had calmed down a bit (from a raging inferno to a slow boil), she stopped in her tracks, bit her lip, and returned, back down the corridor again, to the 20th century antechamber.

Chapter 8

As Dee re-entered the wing, she gave the two docents a look whose intent was to convey to them that she wasn't going to put up with this, that she was 'on to them' and their unseemly tricks, and that she would do whatever was necessary to expose them as the dirty rotten liars they were.

Dee walked down each corridor in turn, leading to the individual wings dedicated to each decade. In 1900-1909, she saw a picture of Samuel Clemens. *That miserable, no-good, lying phony!* she fumed to herself. At the wing's 'Additional Reading' kiosk, she plugged in her tablet computer and downloaded some books written during and/or about the decade--including, in spite of herself, some essays by Clemens on various topics that sounded interesting ("To the Person Sitting in Darkness," "The War Prayer," and "King Leopold's Soliloquy," to be specific).

In spite of the animosity she also felt towards that author, she also downloaded "The Great War" by Studs Terkel while taking in the exhibits, primarily about that war, in the 1910-1919 wing.

Dee concentrated on acquiring information that contained what she considered to be the most blatant lies: she downloaded books on World War II from the 1940-1949 building, the Korean war from the next decade, and the Vietnam war from the next and the next. Additionally, she thought some other works on the supposed racial problems would prove to be especially easy to disprove, and downloaded several of those. *What a load of manure*, she thought. Her former anger was overcome by mirth at the gross magnitude of this deception and the macabre nature of the lies being presented. She laughed out loud. *What could be more ridiculous?* She smiled wryly at the sheer colossal proportions of the lies. *How easy they are making it for me*, she thought, and smiled as she checked the time on her watch. The museum was going to close in about five minutes. Fine; she already had more than enough information to debunk this whole cockamamie story.

Dee shoved her tablet computer back into its holster, straightened her shoulders, and marched for the exit, avoiding eye contact with any one. She had one goal: to get out of that den of iniquity, make a beeline for the train, and head for home.

Chapter 9

During the few minutes she waited on the platform for the train back south to Esitrevda, Dee didn't initiate any conversations with any of her fellow travelers. Everyone else seemed to be either beaming with enthusiasm over their visit to the museum, or in a rather reverential mood. Dee considered both of these to be odd reactions to the incredible fabrications that had just been foisted on them. She absent-mindedly smiled at the children who looked up at her, but when asked by any of the adults how she enjoyed the museum, she just replied, "Hmpph!" and turned away. If they commented on how interesting and enlightening it all had been, she retorted, "You believed that stuff!?" to which they would stare back, with a mixture of surprise and confusion, not knowing what to say in response.

The people Dee brushed aside in this way gave her an occasional concerned glance, but she didn't pay much attention to them. She stared straight ahead. She just wanted to get on the train, avoid conversation with anyone else, and read the information she had downloaded. Dee was sure she would catch these charlatans in their lies somewhere. There had to be places where 'facts' were given that could be incontrovertibly disproven, or that contradicted other such 'facts.'

As it turned out, Dee was so involved in her reading material that she didn't even notice any of the stops the train made along the way home. She was so absorbed in the amazingly far-fetched accounts she was reading that she even lost track of time.

Dee wasn't entirely naïve. As I said, she *did* know about war and other causes of death. She knew vaguely about pollution, overcrowded cities, and crime--that is, that such things had existed in the old system. It was just that she had never been confronted with photographs and detailed descriptions of the actual impact these things had had on individuals, the scope of the damage, and the degree of avarice, selfishness, shortsightedness, and vileness that were involved.

As she read, Dee felt that she was reading a deliberately outrageous and overtly shocking piece of fiction, all interrelated and stitched together from the various sources she had downloaded.

The more she read about conditions in the old system, the surer Dee was that it was all a big charade. The atrocities committed in war, the heartless rending apart of families and total lack of human kindness that were portrayed in some of the supposedly true accounts were beyond comprehension. *A very poor and amateurish attempt at duping us*, she

thought. Dee kept copious notes of the claims about the old system: what exactly was claimed, and in which books. She wanted to nail the perpetrators of this scam with specifics, not just vaguely recalled generalities. She knew that accusations such as, "I read somewhere something like..." wasn't going to cut it. She would have to be able to recite book, chapter, and verse the egregious lies being propounded if she were to expose these frauds and be able to shut them up once and for all.

Dee read the allegations about the huge numbers of people who took drugs and the amount of money they had spent on them. *They expect us to believe people would spend that kind of money on drugs, which would have poisoned them both in mind and body, making their problems worse instead of better, and even at the expense of paying for housing, food, and in some cases even clothes and other necessities for their children? That's a laugh.* Dee tried to imagine her parents buying and ingesting drugs. She smiled and shook her head at the outlandish thought. And then, taking the scenario further, spending money needed for *necessities* on such folly. She laughed derisively, inwardly, and shook her head again. *Have these people no shame whatsoever? Who in their right mind would believe such nonsense?*

Continuing further, the assertion that people would smoke cigarettes, when they knew full well that it was making them sick and would lead to premature death for them (not to mention the effects on others around them) boggled Dee's mind. *How far are they going to stretch this amazing tale?* Dee wondered. *If only these guys would direct their efforts elsewhere--with their wild imaginations and gift of hyperbole, they could be the greatest comedians that ever lived.*

The list of things Dee read about, all of which were supposedly prevalent in the old system, which she dismissed out of hand as manifestly impossible, went on and on:

Child abuse *Nobody I know would ever deliberately hurt anyone else, especially a child. And their own child? I don't always see eye-to-eye with my parents on everything, but I know they would never deliberately harm me.*

Domestic violence *Husbands beating their wives?* Dee asked herself, shocked. Trying to imagine her father turning on her mother in anger was so far out of character for him that she closed her eyes tight, rapidly shook her head for a couple of seconds, and then opened her eyes again, as wide as she could, as if trying to dislodge some cobwebs and take a renewed focus on her surroundings.

Abuse of animals Although she knew nobody would have really done such a thing, the very thought of it made Dee livid, as she imagined

someone beating Ross. She would give them what-for! And to claim that rabbits were clamped into place in “scientific” laboratories with their eyes propped open, and that chemical irritants were then poured onto their eyes--only Satan himself would have done such a thing!

Environmental pollution *Sewage pumped into the oceans and rivers? Toxic clouds released into the air? Deadly chemicals sprayed on food? The same guy that came up with that one must have been the one with the whopper about drugs! Dee thought, enraged that somebody--apparently many people, for this had to be a plot carried out by a large group--actually believed people were so stupid that they would believe this malarkey. This book even goes so far as to claim that people continued to use oil-burning vehicles even after technology was available to switch over to more environmentally friendly alternatives. And that practically everyone insisted on driving his own pollution-spewing vehicle around, usually carrying no passengers, even when trains were available, and in spite of massive traffic jams. Yeah, sure they did.*

Religiously-motivated violence *The Crusades. The Inquisition. The Arabs and the Jews. The Irish killing each other over some minor differences in rituals. Would I go over to my neighbor's house and whack him upside the head with a baseball bat just because he insists on milking his cows while sitting on his haunches, whereas I prefer sitting on a stool while milking? That's really too much.*

Materialism *People sacrificed friendships and families for money? Come on. People aren't that stupid. Of course, I know that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, but Judas killed himself shortly thereafter. That handful of money didn't make him happier. And everybody knows about that. As J. Paul Getty said, money has nothing to do with happiness, but rather, perhaps, with unhappiness. No, things of real value like relationships and a clear conscience would never have been sacrificed by more than the occasional imbecile. And they say it was rampant! Ha!*

Prisons *Rather than seeing to it that a wrongdoer made reparations to the one whom he wronged, they erected huge buildings in which to incarcerate millions of people throughout Vavilovia at the expense of everyone else? You mean a person would be robbed, not receive his possessions back, and then be required to help support the person who robbed him, sometimes for years? That is so illogical as to be not even worth considering.*

Dee was so angry about the colossal scam that she caught herself just in time--she was about to delete that particular tome (the one that told about prisons) from the collection of files that she had downloaded from the museum. She drew a deep breath, copied the salient information to her notes--her 'case,' as she thought of it, and gazed out the window. She

couldn't help but smile when she saw the little girl, about ten years old, with long blond hair riding a pony in the distance. It reminded her of herself at that age. And then the anger welled up in her again. *They are trying to fool that little girl, too! They want her to grow up believing this incomparably asinine pack of lies!* Dee set back to work. She would snare these miscreants with a deluge of evidence. She would hammer them into the ground until they would be unable to sprout up again. The litany of absurdities continued, and Dee dutifully persevered with her meticulous note-taking:

Prejudice *If this isn't the craziest thing I've ever heard, I don't know what is. People didn't like someone else based on their lineage or the color of their skin. We all come from Noah and his wife; we are all related. Hating someone else for their lineage is tantamount to hating oneself. These guys are going to have to get up a little earlier in the morning if they think they can pull that one over on us. As if the color of a person's skin is going to have any affect on how someone else views them! When I return home from a camping trip into the hills with Ross, am I less welcome because those few days in the sun have darkened my skin? Am I received with less affection, or more animosity, the more tanned I am? Of course not! It's ludicrous!*

If such were the case, in the summertime everyone would begin to love one another less; if somebody wanted affection, respect, or esteem from others, they would shut themselves inside, away from the sun, to get as bleached out as possible. No, it makes no sense. I can't buy that... Dee giggled; she couldn't help herself. These allegations were so silly they were funny.

After reading the next paragraph in the book, Dee's mouth dropped open. *Outrageous! Those dimwits also expect us to believe there was prejudice based on where a person lived. It's as if to say when I meet someone from one of the other zones outside of Alegria, such as Amour, Paz, Bonta, Bienveillance, Fe, Milde, Stesso-Controlla, or Longo-Sofrimento I would look down on them or be suspicious of them just because of that. If anything, I'm drawn even more toward them, because I want to learn about their culture and what life is like in those regions.*

And here's some pictures of a group of these fabricated "racists": They supposedly called themselves the Ku Klux Klan (what a ridiculous name!) and dressed in sheets with cutout eye-holes, two-bit sashes, goofy-looking conical caps, and carried around these hokey staffs. And if this doesn't beat all: they purportedly had silly and childish titles such as Grand Dragon and Knight of the Koffee Klatch. Klaverns? Kreeds? Kriterion Konservator? What are we supposed to make of that, that when the group originated the 'c' key was broken on their keyboard? No self-respecting jackass would stand for such a getup and titles of that sort. It seems to me as if whoever is behind this mega-hoax appears to have something about

making us look lower than the beasts. Now I've heard everything. I don't think anything will shock me now.

Poverty *All right, what next?* Dee wondered, reaching the point of being a little blasé about the baseless claims she was reading. *They say that many people had a superabundance of luxuries while millions of people didn't even have enough to eat. Oh, sure! They couldn't just walk up to a tree and pick some fruit? And they had no garden? What, these greedy guts stole their land from them? And the government just allowed that to happen? A minority was able to force a much larger group of people to submit to that kind of a situation? And the same disparity was supposedly extant between various regions of the earth? As if one zone wouldn't provide whatever was needed to another zone if there was a need for it.* Dee sighed, resigned to what seemed like an ever-receding level of logic in what she was reading.

Abortion Dee was fuming now. *Mothers would kill their children before they were born?! she seethed, shocked at the degree of wickedness of this newest claim. As if anybody, anywhere, would ever even consider believing such a flat-out, vile and despicable lie! What mother would intentionally harm her babe? Such a ridiculous claim alone proves what shameless liars these people are!* she reasoned. *Would Gelbi (the De Parto's yellow Labrador Retriever) bite the head off one of her pups? Or maul it to death? Or even just refuse to allow it to nurse when it was hungry? They are trying to put us below the animals again! Prejudice! Abortion! If humans were to act in such ways, we would truly be the unworthiest life form on earth. That's patently ridiculous.*

Dee switched off her tablet computer (after painstakingly noting the latest information and its source in her notes), and jammed it into its holster. She crossed her arms, pursed her lips, and stared out the window. The sun was dipping toward the western horizon, and the sweet light that prevailed at this time of day spread diffusely over the beautiful countryside they were traversing. The scene had a calming effect on Dee. She had worked herself up into such a pitch that she had tired herself out. Gradually, she dropped off to sleep. Bigger surprises were yet to come, though.

Chapter 10

When Dee awoke an hour and a half later, it was dark. It took a few seconds for her to realize where she was. When she remembered, she was a little surprised that she had been able to sleep, as agitated as she was. Now she was a little worried that she may have slept through her stop. The nap had mellowed her surly mood a bit, so when she asked the lady sitting behind her whether they had passed Esitrevda yet, there was no trace of the bitterness in her voice which would have been obvious earlier had she addressed any of her fellow passengers then.

Dee was glad to hear that no, Esitrevda was still ahead, and so she pulled out her tablet computer again to resume her research. The rest of what she learned was primarily more of the same, but there were a few things that she read "between the lines" which were, albeit not totally unbelievable, very hard to imagine. Among these were that people voluntary bunched up into noisy, dirty, dangerous cities like rats in a cage instead of finding a nice place for themselves in the country to live; that they would prefer to work in factories instead of with the land; that men would hunt and eat animals, and sometimes even vice versa. She imagined someone killing Ross and eating him. Revolting! Or... ah, that was just too far-fetched to waste any time considering. Also, that many people were invited to live in Vavilovia and *refused* the invitation! Dee muttered under her breath, "If things really were half as bad as they claim, everybody would have clamored for a way out, an escape from the madness that purportedly existed. Isn't that obvious to these quacks?" *If everyone had lived in such straits, with the agony of either being an oppressor or being one of the oppressed--or both simultaneously--they would have striven with all their might and main to get out of the there and then and into the here and now.*

Dee was still concerned about the scope of the hoax, and confused about the motive behind it, but was more relaxed about its eventuality: she felt she would prevail in her "case" against the perpetrators without much cause for concern about the outcome. The evidence would speak for itself. She now began to view the further information as a form of entertainment. What other ridiculous assertions could she find, just for the fun of it?

Browsing through a book that compared conditions in the old system to the present one, she was amused by a list of occupations and professions that were said to have existed which do not, of course, exist now:

- Physicians
- Locksmiths
- Alarm systems/burglar alarm manufacturers and installers

- Advertising personnel
- Apartment managers
- Attorneys
- Military personnel
- Everything automobile related, from design and manufacture to road building and maintenance, mechanics, highway patrolmen, etc.
- Social workers of all stripes
- Prison guards and all related occupations
- Undertakers
- Butchers
- Casinos/all gambling-related work
- Tobacco (manufacturing/distribution/sales)
- Drugs (manufacturing/distribution/sales)
- Chemicals (manufacturing/distribution/sales)
- Collection agencies
- Insurance companies
- Law enforcement
- Nursing homes/elder care
- Employment agencies
- Translators/interpreters
- Wigs/toupees (manufacturing/distribution/sales)
- Handicapped “industry”
- Religious “professionals”
- Stock market analysts and brokers
- Labor unions
- Sexploitation industry
- Private Investigators
- Pest control
- Suicide prevention
- Animal "testing"
- Weight control/wellness programs

Dee knew that some of these occupations had existed in the old system, when they were needed. For example, she knew there had been physicians, for hadn't Luke, after whom one of the months is named, been one himself? And she knew that most countries had had militaries. Also, as strange as it seemed, she knew that people had died back then. She also knew it was true that most people could not understand other the speech of people from other zones or regions of Vavilovia (or the Earth, as it was then called)--that they had spoken different languages based on where they lived or where they were from.

Maybe they're trying to make this silly list seem more believable by throwing in a few jobs that really did exist, Dee reasoned.

She had never even heard of many of the other occupations in the list, and thought they must have been a frivolous addition on the part of the

list-compiler. She couldn't even imagine what they were supposed to be. Examples of some of these were Casinos (*Never heard of anything even remotely similar*); Collection agencies (*What would they collect, and why?* Dee mused to herself); Wigs/toupees (*Never heard of them*); Labor unions (*Did all the pregnant women join a club so they would try to find some way to give birth at the same time? I don't get it.*); Sexploitation (*What the devil could that purport to be?*); Suicide (*No idea--the etymology escapes me*); Animal "testing"? (*Testing them for what? Strength? Endurance? Intelligence? If that were the case, a cricket would probably test higher than these bozos. Oh, why am I trying to figure something out that never even happened, anyway?*)

Dee was wrenched from her reverie as she saw the village center of Esitrevda come into view. The community hall was lit up, and there were many bicycles parked around it, and some horses lolling about the front entrance. *Probably a basketball game*, Dee deduced. She flipped open the cover on the Stop Request button on her armrest and pressed it. The train would stop at the next station, the one near her house, from whence she had begun this journey.

As she detrained, Dee pulled out her tablet computer and switched it to voice transmit mode. She speed-dialed the number that would send her message to the tiny transmitter/receiver clipped to Ross' mane. "Ross? I'm at the train station. Will you come and pick me up?" When Dee released the transmit button, her device switched automatically to receive, and she heard Ross whinny in response. He would be there in a matter of minutes.

Dee sat down in the grass at the edge of the little train station and leaned back against the wall, waiting for Ross. It was still warm and pleasant. The smell of the pine cones rejuvenated her spirits. She was home. Or nearly so, anyway.

Chapter 11

The ride back home on Ross was uneventful and Dee was, although happy to see her parents again, taciturn and noncommittal when they inquired about the museum. Dee wanted to get her thoughts straight about how she was going to divulge what she had seen and heard and what her reaction to it had been and explain it all in a calm and rational way rather than just blurt it all out helter-skelter. For the time being she merely said that it was interesting, but that she was really tired and needed to sleep.

And she was, so she did.

At breakfast the next morning Dee's father broached the subject again. "I read in the paper that Johannes Bach performed his new 'Hallelujah' plus a song composed expressly for the opening of the museum."

"Yes," Dee responded, and stabbed a piece of French toast with her fork.

"How were they? I wish I could have been there to hear them myself," he inquired further.

"They were nice. I think you both would have liked them. His sons were there, too."

"Yes, that's what I heard--and also that Mark Twain gave the dedication speech," Dee's mother added.

"No, it was Samuel Clemens, mom," Dee replied. "You know, that auburn-haired guy with the bushy mustache who talks *real* slow?"

Dee's parents exchanged smiles. "Yes, Dee, I'm familiar with Mr. Clemens," Dee's mother said. "Well, how was his speech? Did you enjoy it?"

"Oh, it was fine," she replied in a monotone.

Dee's parents held their tongues for a minute, hoping Dee would volunteer some specific information or feedback about the museum itself. But she didn't. She continued eating her French toast and hash browns, concentrating earnestly on them, or so it seemed. But she knew they wanted more information, and weren't about to just let it drop. When her father questioned her concerning what she thought of the museum's exhibits, she put down her fork and looked at him, then her mother. She then fixed her gaze at a spot on the table between them, and proclaimed,

"I don't know what's going on yet, but there's something very strange about that museum!"

Dee's parents were completely unprepared for that assessment. They were hoping she would say that it was interesting, and supply some examples of what it was in particular that she had found interesting. That's what they were *hoping*, but they more or less expected her to say it was boring and that she hadn't remembered much in particular ("just a bunch of stuff about Adolf Whozit and Josef Whatzit and Benito Whatchamacallit and I don't remember what else" was more or less what they had expected to hear).

"Strange in what way, Dee?" her mother asked. Her father hadn't found his tongue yet. He was staring at Dee with a concerned expression.

Dee took a deep breath. She knew this was going to take awhile, and gulped down the last of her orange juice before answering. "Mom, dad, there are things that they are saying happened in the old system of things which are just--I don't know how to put it. They're crazy! They're ridiculous! That's all."

Mr. De Parto had regained control of his vocal cords by this time. "Dolores, what exactly do you mean? You'll have to be more specific if you expect us to understand what you're talking about. What in particular did you find so fanciful?"

Dee replied that there were so many 'fanciful' things that she didn't know where to begin. She retrieved her tablet computer and used it as a sort of 'outline' as she spoke. She recounted the atrocities attributed to some of the dictators mentioned earlier; also the "information" about prejudice, poverty and pollution. She was on a roll and, although talking very quickly (she has, after all, a conversational style the exact opposite of Sam Clemens when she's excited), kept on for twenty minutes solid.

When she had finished her torrent of accusations about the plot that was being fomented, her father held out his hand to try to calm her. "Now Dolores, I know some of those things are shocking, and they are certainly the polar opposite of what we enjoy now, but I thought you knew about war, and famine, and pestilence, and food shortages, and so on?"

"Yes, I did know about them, in a vague, general sort of way, but...you just don't understand, Dad. The things they say happened are just way too strange to have ever really happened. It's impossible."

Dee's mother was sitting silent and somber, her head bowed a little. Dee interpreted this to mean that doubtless her mother believed as she did--she realized, too, that this was all some sort of hoax. Maybe her father was in on it somehow! If so, did her mother know about his complicity?

Dee decided she would "play it cool" and talk to her mother about it later in private, after her dad had left the house to work out in the fields.

Chapter 12

"Mom, you wouldn't believe the things they claim happened in the old system," Dee said after her father had left the house. "I know things were bad, people died, and they even waged war against one another on occasion, but..."

"Dee, darling," her mother gently interrupted, "I didn't live in the old system, either, and I don't concern myself overmuch with exactly what happened back then--the little bit that I hear is so disturbing that I'd rather not even think about it--but I'm sure they wouldn't lie to us about it. Why would they?"

"I don't know, mom," Dee responded. "But I just can't believe people could have ever done things that inane and depraved. It must be that we are being duped with all their talk about how bad things were. They simply can't be true. Life could have never been that horrific, that horrendous. People would never act in such an atrocious and pathetic manner. It's got to be an intricate plot--and I intend to uncover it and expose whoever's behind it!"

Ms. De Parto paused, then walked over to her daughter, gently took hold of her shoulders, and looked into her eyes. "Dee, I'm sorry that learning about these things has upset you so much. However, I can't agree with you that we have been deceived. Perhaps you should go back to bed and get some more rest. I'll take care of your chores for you today. We won't say anything to your father about it."

"No, mom, I'm not tired--really. In fact, I feel like I'm about to jump out of my skin I'm so anxious to begin."

"Begin? Begin what?"

"I told you, mom. I want to--I need to--expose this plot. Who all is involved in it? What do they expect to accomplish by brainwashing us with these outrageous lies?"

"Dee, as I said, I haven't really thought much or delved into the distant past. I just accept that there will always be things I don't understand. For example, even now people do things that make no sense to me. To be specific, what about most of the men here in Esitrevda--why do they like to play and watch sports so much? I don't get it. It seems silly, and like a waste of time to me, but I'm not going to waste *my* time trying to change them. Maybe it's the same with how people behaved in the old system: it can't be explained logically, and there's nothing we can do to understand

certain things that transpired back then--and we certainly can't change them now, can we?"

"That's different, mom. Chasing a ball around a field or a court is one thing; kidnapping and systematically executing people to make others fear you, or gassing them because their skin was darker, or befouling Vavilovia or oneself without regard to future consequences and generations is quite another. Do *you* think people would have ever done such things? Come on, be reasonable! It's ridiculous to even entertain such a scenario. What really burns me is that they think we're stupid enough to fall for these big fat lies."

Ms. DeParto *was* taken aback at Dee's mention of these things. She shuddered in horror at the thought of living in such a time period. She felt empathy for all the mothers who had had to raise their children under such circumstances. "I understand how you feel, Dee. Those things you mentioned are truly terrible and hard to imagine."

"There are even goofier things they are trying to get us to accept," Dee replied, "and I'm not going to take this lying down."

Dee was working up steam again. Ms. De Parto could see that this was not just a passing whim for Dee. She wouldn't rest until she succeeded in her quest to expose the historians--or convince herself that they were, after all, telling the truth, as unpleasant as it was. Dee's mother reflected a moment, and then made a suggestion:

"Dee, I have an idea. Why don't you talk with some people who lived during the time of the end, when conditions were at their worst--the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st--and see if they can corroborate the things being taught at the museum?"

Dee considered the suggestion. "That's sensible. But how will I know who is in on the plot and who isn't? The people I can think of who lived back then—such as most of the Princes--who lived during that time period are the very ones who would probably be in on the plot."

"Why don't you just pick some names at random from the New Scrolls? The *Residents* volumes, I mean?"

Ms. De Parto walked over to the bookshelf at the far corner of the living room. The volumes comprising the New Scrolls took up practically an entire shelf, and the Residents volumes, a subset thereof, were a large part of this compendium. She grabbed volume 11, which contained the information for those who had been resurrected (and also for those who had been conceived) between 2050 and 2090. In fact, Dolores herself is one of the last entries in this volume, having been conceived in the month of James Alphaeus, in the year 2090 (which corresponds roughly

to the month that was called December in the old system). Those brought back to life during this time span were those who had lived in the 20th century. One line is devoted to each individual, in the following format:

<i>Full Name</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Land Assignment</i>
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Full Name is self-explanatory. The Dates column contains the year span in which a person lived and died, followed by the year of their resurrection. For example, the date information for Samuel Langhorne Clemens reads *1835-1910, 2061*.

There are actually several different possibilities as to the form that a person's date entry can take. If they had never died (for example, they had been born in Vavilovia, as had Dolores), their date entry would simply be the year of their conception (such as, *2090*).

It is rare, but there are some who were born and died in the old system, were resurrected, and then died again (because, oddly enough, they didn't want to live under the present circumstances). At the time they were resurrected, their entry originally read something like:

<i>Full Name</i>	<i>1654-1712, 2101</i>	<i>Such and such a place</i>
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And if their entry was retained (but it is, in actually, blotted out altogether in such a scenario), it would thereafter be in this format:

<i>Full Name</i>	<i>1654-1712, 2101-2105</i>	<i>Nowhere</i>
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And of course, there is the most common scenario--so far, anyway--that of someone being born and then dying in the old system of things, and thereafter being resurrected in the new (as explained in the case of Samuel Clemens).

Of course there are also those who do not appear in the *Residents* book at all, because, logically enough, they are not here, not alive (and thus, of course, are not residents of Vavilovia). They lived and died in the old system, but were not resurrected. If there *were* an entry for such people, it would look something like this:

<i>Josef Stalin</i>	<i>1879-1953</i>
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In the interest of completeness, there are some extremely rare circumstances where a person has two sets of date ranges in the old system (a birth and death, then a--temporary--resurrection and subsequent death), followed by a permanent resurrection date. As an example of this, Jesus resurrected Lazarus. His entry is as follows:

<i>Lazarus</i>	<i>21 B.C.E-31 C.E., 31 C.E.-65 C.E., 2111</i>	<i>Longo-</i>
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Sofrimento.Denrub Reven.Melasurej.Transformation.47N,53W

You see, we know in advance when people are going to be resurrected back to life. In that way, we can plan for their reappearance and prepare to welcome them back.

As for Land Assignment, the complete address of the individual is provided, including the coordinates of the northwest corner of their land relative to the center of the Village Commons of the village of which they are a resident (the coordinates of the village can, of course, be looked up in any Atlas). For example, in Dee's own case the entry reads:

*Dolores De Parto 2090
Emitemos.Esitrevda.312N,97E*

Alegria.Erehwemos.Noos

The numbers involved in these coordinates are not degrees--parallels of latitude or meridians of longitude--but signify, rather, distances from the center of the village Commons to the northwest corner of their parcel of land, expressed in meters.

As everyone alive resides on Vavilovia (at least for now--it's not clear yet whether other planets may eventually be colonized), that portion of the Land Assignment data is left out and can be assumed. From left to right the location information provided proceeds from the general to the specific: First the Zone (which can be thought of, geographically speaking, as being similar to what were called 'countries' in the old system), then District (roughly equivalent to what were often formerly referred to as states), Circuit (think county, or parish), Village, and finally the coordinate.

Ms. De Parto handed the volume to Dee. "There are tens of thousands of people in here. If there were a plot, they certainly couldn't *all* be in on it, don't you agree?"

"Yes, you're right, Mom. If I have to--that is, if I suspect the people I talk to, also-- I can always talk with my 4-, 5-, and 6parents, since they lived back then."

"That's a good idea. You've got the whole summer free, if you need it; there's really no rush."

"The sooner this scheme gets quashed, the better," Dee replied. "I don't want to wait."

Like father, like daughter, Dee's mother thought to herself. "All right, then, dear. Do what you have to do," she said, and smiled at Dee.

"I'm going to pick three people at random from the book and contact

them to see if they'll talk to me," Dee said, thinking out loud. She flipped the tome open to a random spot. The entries on each page were numbered.

"Mom, pick a number between 1 and 48," Dee yelled to her mother, who had by then returned to the kitchen. Having received the reply, Dee located it on the page. The entry read:

Autumn Woods 1910-1989, 2029

Amour.Owdnegri.Dlabnnawdnegri .Victorious Faith.43S,11E

Dee stepped to the videophone built into the wall of the living room, with her finger anchored securely on the line containing Ms. Woods' information.

Chapter 13

Dee touched the videophone to activate it, and read the line from the *Residents* volume aloud.

At her home in an area on the outskirts of what was formerly known as Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, Autumn Woods responded to the incoming call by activating her videophone by means of a touch. When she saw Dee standing there with a rather nervous-looking smile on her face, Autumn said, in a friendly tone, "Good morning, young lady. Do I know you?"

"No, ma'am, you don't," Dee replied. She introduced herself and asked if she could come and talk with her sometime soon. Ms. Woods was nonplussed about why a stranger would want to come and talk to her, especially one who lived thousands of kilometers away, and inquired about it.

"Well, Ms. Woods," Dee began, "I attended the opening of the Museum of the Failed Experiment yesterday, and--"

"Oh, you did?" Ms. Woods interjected. "In that case I envy you. I was hoping to make it there myself, but I'm just so busy now that I couldn't get away. I'll get there some other time, though."

"I don't want to disturb you if you're that busy, then," Dee replied, thinking maybe that Ms. Woods was giving her a hint that she would really rather not be troubled just now.

"Oh, no, Dee, I didn't mean it that way. I just didn't have the time to travel all the way down there yesterday. But I am more than willing to spend some time with you here. I apologize, though, I interrupted you-- why is it that you wanted to see me?"

"It's the museum. I have, let's say, *reservations* about some of the ways they portrayed life in the old system of things, specifically during the 20th century. I know that you lived then, and I would like to discuss these things with you to see what you think about the claims they are making."

"Well, I lived through most of that century--all but a decade or so at both ends of it. Dee, I'll be glad to answer your questions."

"Thank you, Ms. Woods."

"When would you like to come?"

"How about tomorrow?" Dee inquired.

"Tomorrow? That should be fine, but let me check my calendar to make sure I'm not forgetting some prior engagement... Let's see, tomorrow is the 19th of Petra--oh, I do have an appointment tomorrow with the Prince of our village. He's going to give my husband and me some pointers on how to add a patio to our roof--he's a carpenter, you know."

The mention of the local Prince caused Dee to stiffen up. He might be in on the game himself. If Ms. Woods mentioned what Dee said to the Prince, he might try to recruit Ms. Woods herself into playing along with the ruse. Dee already liked Ms. Woods, though, and wanted to meet with her. On an impulse, Dee asked "How about today? Is it possible that I could come today?"

"Today? Well... Sure, why not? But you're going to have to really hurry to make it here today. It's already past 9 O'clock."

"Yes, I know. I'll reserve an air slot in the upper atmosphere so I can set my AirJet to Ultraspeed and zip right on up there."

"All right, then, today it is--but it's a shame you couldn't travel at the normal altitude and speed. It really is beautiful up here. You'll be missing out on a lot of gorgeous scenery."

"Yes, I know. I've heard a lot of good things about that area. But I really would like to talk to you as soon as possible."

"Then it's settled. At Ultraspeed you should be here around lunchtime. How does soup and sandwiches sound?"

"Fine! I'll be there, Ms. Woods"

"And I've got a fresh Huckleberry pie for dessert."

"That sounds great! Thank you, Ms. Woods. I'll see you soon."

Dee rushed into her room to grab her tablet computer and its holster. She found her mother in the garden, gathering vegetables for the salad she would, along with homemade biscuits and apple cider, prepare for lunch.

"Mom, I have to leave now to catch Ms. Woods before...I mean, Ms. Woods--that's the first person I'm going to talk to--has an appointment tomorrow, so I'm going up to see her right now."

"Wouldn't the next day--or the next--be soon enough?" Ms. De Parto

wanted to know.

"You know what dad always says, Mom," Dee reasoned, "Never put off until tomorrow--or the next day--what you can do today."

"Yes, I know," Dee's mother said reluctantly. "Call me when you get there, if you think of it."

"Will do, mom, bye. Tell dad I said goodbye, too."

Chapter 14

Dee removed the tarp from her AirJet, which she only used for trips directly to the houses of people who lived a good distance away, and when time was of the essence. For close destinations, she always either walked, bicycled, canoed, rafted, or, as was usually the case, rode Ross. Other people sometimes ride elephants. Bears and tigers are especially popular with children. When traveling to distant cities, such as King & Kingdom, it is customary for people to ride the train, because it is too far for the other methods of travel, and cities are too crowded to fly into comfortably, especially when there is some special 'event,' such as the opening of a museum.

After climbing in and securing the canopy, Dee switched on the engine and pulled the yoke towards herself one notch to hover a meter above the ground. She then pulled the stick back a little and navigated her way slowly out of the barn. Dee made one pass over the pasture where Ross was grazing contentedly, and waved goodbye to him. He saw her, nodded his head, and swished his tail. He knew she would be back before long, and went back to eating.

Young Ms. De Parto pulled the throttle back with her right hand and the yoke back with her left. Her craft was a Langewiesche model, built in 2101. Her father had acquired it for her brand new the first time she went to visit her 6parents in the village of Enmulekom, where they had lived for over 130 years.

In a matter of seconds Dee was at 5,000 meters. She requested an air slot into which she could safely go into Ultraspeed without worrying about any other traffic crossing her path. The navigation software assigned her a slot at 12,000 meters that would take her directly to her destination. She scanned the area behind her for traffic (on the radar), and, having seen none, moved the position of her jets from the rear of her AirJet to the bottom, and pulled the throttle back all the way. She zoomed straight upwards. The altimeter clicked as it reached 6,000 meters, then 7,000, then 8,000. Every second her craft rocketed upwards another 1,000 meters. When she reached her assigned altitude of 12,000 meters, Dee pushed the throttle all the way forward to idle the engine, and rotated the jets back to the aft position. When they clicked into place, she pulled the throttle gradually all the way toward her again. After reaching top speed in normal mode, she flipped the Ultraspeed toggle, accelerating her airspeed from 800 kph to three times that. Finally, Dee entered the coordinates to Ms. Woods' house into the navigation panel. Since she was flying at Ultraspeed in an assigned airslot, she was in automatic mode, and the AirJet controlled its own

navigation.

As are the trains, the AirJets we use for personal transport all have built-in collision-avoidance software, which prevents us not only from hitting each other while flying, but also from hitting birds. If an object is detected in our path, the software automatically veers the craft to the right and either up or down depending on the direction of travel of the detected object. In most cases these 'collision candidates' are birds--very rarely other AirJets, as air corridors, or slots, are requested and assigned for most flying, and are only occupied by one AirJet at a time. It is only when someone is sightseeing, or 'free flying,' that collisions with other AirJets are even possible.

Dee was too high, and traveling too fast, to make out much below, so she reclined her seat back, put her hands behind her head, and gazed through the bubble canopy--or skylight, whichever you prefer to call it--heavenward. The beautiful scattering of cumulonimbus clouds was far below her. The azure skies above soothed her, and soon she was, albeit wide awake, calm and relaxed. She was at peace with herself. She wasn't at peace with *everybody* on Vavilovia at the moment, but at least she was with herself, because she had a purpose, a plan to carry out her purpose, and she felt her mission was important.

At 11:49 a.m. her rear jets shut themselves off, and her front jets engaged. As her craft slowed, the reverse jets gradually decreased their speed until finally they shut off, too, and she glided down the invisible slope to the Woods residence. She switched to manual mode and took over the controls. Having spotted the house, on the top of a hill above a pond at the front and a grove of spruce trees in the back, Dee maneuvered her Langewiesche to a patch of grass next to a long rock fence that encircled the garden area.

Dee turned the depressurize switch, waited for the gauge to signal that depressurization had completed, then flipped open the canopy, swung out of the seat, stood up, and stretched. She patted her tablet computer in its holster to verify its presence, as it was the repository of the 'goods' she had on the fomenters of the malicious inaccuracies she had confronted at the museum. The back door of the Woods residence opened, and a woman appeared.

Chapter 15

Ms. Woods appeared to be in her 20s. Of course, all people in Vavilovia appear to be in their 20s, unless they are in actuality younger than that, in which case they look their actual age. You have to refer to the *Residents* volumes if you want to determine a person's actual amount of life experience, since it is impossible to tell by any outward sign how old a person might be.

The clothing fashions people wear aren't even much of a clue as to when in the old system of things people lived, because some people from the 20th century prefer the garb of the 19th, and vice versa--or that of some other century, even. Dee's 5father, for instance, although from the latter half of the 20th century, dresses more as if he is from the 1870s. And Samuel Clemens, who was very much alive in the 1870s, now oftentimes dresses more like what most people would associate with the 1960s and 1970s.

"You must be Dee," Ms. Woods said, extending her hand in greeting. "How was your flight?"

"Very nice. You certainly do have a beautiful land assignment here."

"Thank you; we love it, yes we do. You're just in time for lunch--I just now finished the sandwiches, and the soup is heating up on the stove. Come on in."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Now that we've met personally, you can call me Autumnn."

"Yes, ma'am...I mean Autumnn," Dee smiled.

Ms. Woods had been curious ever since Dee had called her and, as soon as they got into the house, said, "Now Dee, what was it you wanted to ask me, or tell me, about what you saw at the museum?"

Dee sighed. "There are so many things. Where to begin?" Dee said, thinking out loud. "You probably don't remember World War I, you were very young at the time...?"

"Only vaguely; of course, I'm familiar with it and its aftereffects. What exactly are you curious about regarding it?"

Dee took a deep breath. She was sure that Ms. Woods would be outraged

when she heard what Dee was about to tell her. "They claim that in wartime, not only were soldiers *killed*, but they were sometimes tortured--even gassed to death. And they claim that innocent civilians were killed, too. They're even saying that oftentimes the 'enemy' were considered such solely because of their genealogy or the relative reflectivity of their skin."

"What?" Ms. Woods had not understood what Dee had meant.

"Isn't that absurd?" Dee said, who thought Ms. Woods found the statement incredulous, rather than confusing. "They claim that people would collect together into groups based on skin tone, and then slaughter others who were noticeably different in appearance than them!"

"Dee?"

"Yes, Autumn?"

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, Dee honey, but that's true. People *did* do those things."

Dee didn't know what to make of this. Could it really be so, or was Ms. Woods in on the plot, too? Or was she pulling her leg? "But that would make no sense. I mean, I can't think of a more preposterous postulation. It boggles my mind!"

Ms. Woods smiled at Dee. "I agree with you, Dee, it made absolutely no sense and was beyond logical comprehension. But I assure you, there's nothing at all concerning what you've told me that even begins to stretch the truth. And suchlike actions, and the thinking behind them, were so commonplace that it didn't even seem strange to most people back then. They grew up in such a world and gradually got used to it, thinking such was normal, always had been, and always would be. In fact, in many cities people of different backgrounds grouped together in one section of the city. Taking New York City as an example, the Chinese had their "Chinatown," Harlem was almost all "black," and Spanish Harlem..."

"Had people from Spain?" Dee asked.

"No, not exactly," Ms. Woods answered. Dee was even more puzzled now. "Actually the 'Spanish' part of the place name referred more to the native language that was spoken by the majority of those who lived there. But expatriates from Spain itself were not represented nearly as well in Spanish Harlem as were other Spanish-speaking lands, such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico."

"Oh. That's odd."

"Yes, and what was sad about it was that a person of another nationality was not always safe in those areas, especially at night. In fact, someone told my brother once that he, as a so-called 'white' person, *might* be able to walk through Harlem at night and survive; and he *might* be able to make it through Spanish Harlem, too. But if a *Hispanic* person tried to walk through Harlem, or a so-called 'black' person attempted a late-night stroll through *Spanish* Harlem, they would surely be goners."

"Goners?"

"Doomed. They wouldn't stand a chance."

"Somebody would beat them up just because they originated from a different zone? Are you sure that whoever told you that wasn't exaggerating, Ms. Woods? I admit, I find that..."

"Hard to believe?"

"Yes."

"I didn't test their theory empirically, if that's what you mean," Ms. Woods said. She didn't tell Dee that the fate that awaited the visitors whose color didn't match that of their 'hosts' was probably in most cases worse than just being 'beat up.'

Ms. Woods continued: "I did see some unmistakable racial prejudice back then in the old system, though. These manifested themselves mostly in disparaging comments that people would make about those of another race."

Dee didn't know whether to believe Ms. Woods or not. She stared blankly out the window. It made her sad to think that such things could possibly be true.

"The only way I can make sense of it is if everybody was insane back then," Dee muttered under her breath. Then she spoke up and said, "I've heard about this malady--read a little about it, and although I don't really understand it--since I've obviously never known anyone who is insane (as I was born in this system and wasn't around when that disease existed), it seems to be the only halfway-logical explanation for these things—that all those people were *nuts*."

"Dee, the soup is ready." Ms. Woods told her. "Let's sit down and eat. We can continue this conversation over lunch."

"All right, Autumn, thank you."

After the sandwiches had been assembled and the soup ladled out, Ms.

Woods tried to explain the situation to Dee. "Maybe you have something there, Dee. After all, in the old system not only did we oftentimes deal with physical sickness, debilitating stress, and environmental pollution, there were other factors that prevented people from developing and maintaining a completely healthy viewpoint, too.

"I guess what I'm getting at, Dee, is that nobody was *completely* sane back then. Another way of putting it is that everyone was at least a little insane. It wasn't as if some were sane and some were not. Sanity was not an absolute, full-scale "are" or "aren't" proposition like being either male or female or north/south or..."

"I get your point," Dee said,

"Yes, sanity was more like a continuum," Autumn continued. "Very few people were all the way at the insane end of the scale, and nobody maxed out at the other end, either. The great majority of us were somewhere in between. If a person was at least somewhere near the middle of the scale, they were considered by most to be sane. Any who strayed far from the midpoint, though--in either direction--were suspected by the majority in the middle.

"So yes, Dee, I think you're right--recognizing the prevalence of insanity at the time can be an aid in understanding the conditions that prevailed in the old system."

Dee shook her head in disbelief. Although she was the one that had floated the theory, so to speak, she found it hard to believe--couldn't imagine a whole Vavilovia full of less-than-sane people. What a chaotic mess it would be! "I don't know," she said. "Don't take this wrong, but I'm having a difficult time conceptualizing that."

"Remember, it was your hypothesis, Dee--your theory."

Dee looked at Ms. Woods and then out the window. After meditating a few seconds, she looked at her hostess again. "I know. But that's all it was--just a theory, a wild guess I'm even tempted to call it. I'm not at all sure it really makes sense to me once I really think about it."

Silence reigned for several moments, and then Dee asked, "Autumn, you said that there were 'other factors that prevented people from developing and maintaining a completely healthy viewpoint.' What exactly did you mean by that?"

"Life at the time, for everyone to some extent--again it was more of a continuum than an absolute--was unbalanced, unnatural, even somewhat abstract."

"What do you mean?"

"The type of life we were often more or less forced into back then more often than not went against our natural grain, so to speak."

"Meaning?"

"We were created to work with the land, to steward the earth and reap its fruitage. It's a symbiotic relationship, man and the earth. In Vavilovia we have that. You know it; you've lived it all your life and have never experienced anything different. But back then, and more and more so toward the end--and especially for those who lived in the large cities--people usually had little or no connection to the land. Very few people ate food that they themselves had grown. Many people were never around animals, either.

"The unnaturalness of the situation back then is hard to really explain, except to say that it was too often a very shallow kind of living. What purported to be progress just wrapped the bonds of slavery tighter. It was often hard to find any real worth in whatever it was you did to earn a living. In fact, you may have actually preferred that what you 'accomplished' at work didn't get done at all, but you *had* to do it in order to earn money so that you could buy food, clothing, and shelter for yourself and your family."

Dee didn't really understand what Ms. Woods was getting at, but it did seem odd to her that people didn't grow their own food or spend time with animals. "Yuck, that sounds...what's the word--depressing?"

"You said it. In fact, depression--both caused by chemical imbalances (for which the industrialization of the world was primarily responsible) and by situations hard to deal with, was rampant in those days. Man-made chemicals were everywhere--in the air, on the land, in the seas, in the food we ate and in the water we drank. As for the situations people had to try to cope with, some of them were so far beyond what humans were created to endure that...that you're having a hard time believing that they even ever happened! Yes, serious clinical depression was so common, in fact, that anti-depressant drugs were sold by the millions and millions of bottles."

The abuse of drugs was another thing Dee couldn't really comprehend. That is to say, she understood the concept of what they were and what their purpose was, but as there are no drugs in Vavilovia (prescription drugs being unnecessary and illicit drugs being unwanted and unavailable), she didn't even have any second-hand knowledge of their effects.

"All right, Ms. Woods, here's some information that I'm sure will shock

you: at the museum they claim that women sometimes *aborted* their babies--which is supposed to mean that they deliberately made themselves un-pregnant after being pregnant."

"I know what it means, Dee."

"You do? How? You said you hadn't gone to the museum."

"It's true, Dee. Some did. Many. A lot. Untold millions, in fact."

Dee's jaw dropped open, and then her eyes narrowed. "Ms. Woods, you can't tell me that! No mother would ever do that. In fact, no father would ever allow his wife to do that. I can't believe it! I won't!"

Autumn smiled wanly. She didn't tell Dee that the fathers were not always husbands of the pregnant women. Dee wasn't ready for that kind of information. She would probably implode, or at least pass out if she heard such a thing.

Chapter 16

"Dee, it is a very complex subject, and we could actually talk about various aspects of it all day long, but let me tell you just one thing that subtly made it easier for people to accept such a thing. You know how now it's possible at your birth--or any time thereafter, for that matter--to determine the date of your conception?"

"You mean that hasn't always been so?"

"No. In the old system a person counted their life as beginning when they were *born*, not when they were conceived. If a person in the old system were to claim that they had just turned 30 years old, they were in actuality 30 years and nine months old, or thereabouts. If they said they were 8 1/2 years old, they were really 9 1/4 years old, and so on. So they were saying, in effect, that they weren't alive during the gestation period that they spent inside their mother's womb. It didn't count. They weren't 'living' yet. And so an inroad was made for the intellectual and emotional acceptance of abortion—because if the baby is not really *alive* until birth takes place, it's questionable whether a murder is taking place if the baby is aborted.

And that's all it takes for a bad thought to make an inroad: all you need to do is consider it, from afar, and let it linger. If you don't drive it away, and slam the door on it, it will return. The next time it won't look quite so atrocious. Gradually, what was once unthinkably horrible becomes acceptable. And once it's acceptable, the actual practice of it is sometimes not far behind. Once you're willing to consider doing something—even if it was initially repugnant to you--the battle is half lost, whether the repugnant thing is abortion or anything else. That is why we need to set up mental roadblocks to prevent wicked things from accessing our hearts. They can make it to the firewall of our mind, but there they must be stopped and turned back--deflected, repelled and expelled.

Anyway, getting back to the line of thinking that can lead one down the slippery slope to accepting abortion as a viable option: if a person is not really alive until they are born, then the life that is arrested is not really a life at all, you see? That's how they reasoned."

"I guess. It still seems like a rather lame way of looking at it, though. Why *would* anybody do it? No, I still don't believe it. I hope you don't think I'm rude or hard-headed, Autumn, but that's one thing I definitely cannot accept, no matter what you or anyone else says."

"Maybe there's no reason *to* believe it, Dee. We can just let it drop, if you like. I'm willing."

"Fine," Dee agreed. "Something you mentioned which I guess I can believe *maybe* happened--although it, too, seems odd--is that people worked for other people. That is, you said they didn't all work on their own land. That's at least conceivable, as unnatural as it sounds."

Ms. Woods laughed. "I'm sorry, Dee, I don't mean to appear condescending. But my husband worked for a company for almost fifty years!"

"Didn't he hate it?"

"Sometimes. But there really wasn't much choice--it was either that or starve."

"*Starve*? What do you mean? Couldn't you live off your land?"

"We had none; at least, very little. Not enough to farm, or even have a decent-sized garden."

"What? Who took it from you? I don't get it..."

"We had none to begin with. We barely got by as it was. Rocky had to work 50 weeks a year, for almost 50 years, and all it did was keep us out of the poorhouse. There was no extra money for buying land or anything of that nature."

"Fifty weeks a year? He only had two weeks a year off? That's crazy! That's insane! Oh, I feel sorry for you. I bet you really appreciate Vavilovia, don't you?"

"Yes indeed, we do. You know this place we have here--it's a very nice place-- but so is yours...I know that, because *everyone* here has a nice place to live, and all have more or less the same amount of land. But in the old system only millionaires could have afforded a place like this."

"Millionaires?"

"Oh--I mean, people with a lot of money. In fact, most people back then would not have even been able to afford 40 acres and a mule, let alone the feed and seed they would need to make such an enterprise a going concern."

"That's another thing they claim, Autumn--that some people had way more than they needed, and there were *millions* who didn't even have enough to eat."

"True, all too true."

Dee slumped back against her chair. She began to seriously suspect Ms. Woods now. Autumn *seemed* very nice and sincere, but she had really gone too far in saying everything that was presented at the museum was true, when Dee knew that at least most of it--if not all of it--*had* to be lies. Maybe if she had said *one* of the things were true she could perhaps believe it, but since she says that *all* of the things are true... She must be in on the plot somehow.

Maybe the Prince of the village got here before I did, after all, Dee mused. Or maybe this is some sort of an elaborate joke, not a scam at all. 'Let's all have a laugh at Dee's expense, and see how gullible she is.'

Dee decided to leave; there was no point in staying any longer. Well, there was the huckleberry pie. After dessert, Dee thanked Ms. Woods for her hospitality, and for taking the time to talk with her.

"Come and see me again when we're both less busy, so you can take your time flying in. Nothing can compare to the beauty of this area. Well, it's my favorite place in all of Vavilovia, anyway."

"It is beautiful, Autumn. Thanks again."

"Before you go, let me tell you that I think you're doing the right thing: you *should* look into these matters that disturb you until you're satisfied one way or the other. Talk to as many people as you can. I'd be glad to refer you to some of my friends, in fact--they can fill you in on details regarding things I don't know much about."

Dee didn't say it, but she thought to herself, *Yeah, right! If you're in on it your friends probably are, too. You're trying to set me up.* Instead, she told Ms. Woods about her plan to contact a couple of more people at random. Ms. Woods agreed that that might be best, and bid her goodbye again. Dee smiled and waved as she climbed into her AirJet. She could take her time on the way home, enjoy the scenery, and meditate.

Chapter 17

During her flight home, Dee heard a man interviewed on the radio that had experienced a lot of opposition in the old system when he attempted to preserve the traditional lifestyle of his people. In fact, he had ended up being killed for his tireless and outspoken efforts. She decided to see if this man would be willing to talk to her about his experiences. It sounded as if he would have some interesting things to relate, and could fill her in on what did and did not happen in the old system. She wrote down his name: Francisco Alves Mendes Filho. People call him "Chico."

Just as she had been on her return from the museum, on returning home that night Dee was reticent and non-committal regarding her visit to Ms. Woods in Victorious Faith. Her father was not especially pleased with her self-assigned 'project' (having been informed about it by his wife), but kept his peace and didn't prevent her from pursuing it. Mr. De Parto knew that Dee had lived up to her end of the bargain and, although he considered it a waste of time (and talent, for he felt that his daughter had a lot to offer and could really be a valued and respected citizen of Vavilovia once she finally decided to settle down), begrudgingly allowed Dolores her 'lark,' as he considered it.

The next day Dee contacted Mr. Mendes who, as she discovered, lives in Paz.Epiphany.Alguma Vez Logo.Kingdom Loyalty (formerly Rio Branco, Brazil). He warmly invited her to come by and see him any time. He said that he was almost always around--somewhere within walking distance of his home, anyway.

When she arrived in the rainforest village of Kingdom Loyalty, Dee was struck by the pungent odors of the jungle. The smell was simultaneously sweet and bitter. She couldn't decide how she felt about the smell. It was without doubt an *interesting* smell, but for some reason she couldn't quite determine whether she loved it or hated it. The aroma was one of those things that was too strong to be reacted to ambivalently. You *must* either love it or hate it--no middle ground was possible. Even after concentrating with all her might and trying to force herself to make a decision one way or the other, she didn't know on which end of the spectrum this unique fragrance lay for her. Maybe she would get used to it--it would grow on her, so to speak, and she would love it; on the other hand, she may quickly tire of it and learn to detest it. Only time would tell. At any rate, she wouldn't be here long and she could either treasure it as a memory or use it as a comparison point to love her own land and its unique aromas all the more.

Dee approached the simple, thatched-roof building and was about to

knock on the door when she saw a man step out of the kitchen and gesture to her. "Hello! Come on in," he insisted. He retreated back into the kitchen and, as he reached the counter, after scooping a set of dominoes off the kitchen table and placing them in a drawer, peered back over his shoulder. "Espresso?"

"What? Oh, yes, sure. Thank you."

"Have a seat at the table there. I'll be with you in just a moment."

Mr. Mendes poured two cups of Espresso into small, dainty cups that seemed to clash with the stocky, swarthy man. In his hands, they looked to Dee like the teacups from her old doll set that she played with as a young girl. With a flourish, Mr. Mendes placed one of the cups in front of Dee, stepped to the opposite end of the table, and sat down. "I'm expecting a young lady from Alegria soon. Dorothy De Pinto, I think she said her name was. Are you her?"

"Yes, well, actually Mr. Mendes..."

"Chico. Chico. Call me Chico. Everybody does," interjected Mr. Mendes, hand raised, palm outwards.

"And you may call me Dee. My name is *Dolores De Parto*, but everyone calls me Dee."

That's kind of a strange name, Chico thought. "My apologies, Dee...How is your Espresso?"

"It's good. It's very...strong."

"You better know it," Chico replied. "A macho drink for macho people!" he intoned in a stentorian voice, spreading his arms away from his body and flexing his biceps. Then he commenced rapidly raising and lowering his eyebrows, and chuckled. Relieved to see that he had not been serious, Dee joined in the laughter.

Dee then noticed the intricate paintings on the Espresso cups: Tapirs and monkeys, armadillos and jaguars, sloths and antbears. Chico noticed her interest in them. "Can you believe it? I used to *eat* those animals."

Dee eyed him without lifting her head. "That's what I came to talk with you about, Mr. Mendes," she said in a rather gruff voice.

"Chico," he reminded her.

"Chico," she corrected herself, nodding. She was about to ask him a

specific question when he--seemingly all in one motion--drained his cup, smacked his lips, bounded out of his chair, and quickly grabbed a machete from behind a cabinet. He stepped quickly toward Dee and brandished the sharp blade in her face. "Let's go!" he said.

"Where?" she asked.

He flipped the machete in the air, caught it deftly, and thrust it, handle foremost, towards Dee. "We have work to do. We can talk as we walk. Now where did I put that other machete?" he asked himself, as he stepped into the middle of his living room and began frantically looking about, his head turning first this way, then that. "Aha! I remember now! I left it outside in the wash house. Come on, Dee," he said, returning to the kitchen, "let's go out the side door."

Passing the washhouse, Mr. Mendes ducked in quickly and retrieved his tool. "The extraction reserve is this way," he said, pointing down a red dirt path that led into the jungle.

"What are you planning to extract, Chico?" Dee asked, falling in behind him. She hoped it wasn't her teeth.

"Latex--and Amazonia nuts. Have you ever tapped trees for latex? Or gathered Amazonia nuts?"

Dee was having a hard time keeping up with Chico. His legs weren't especially long, but they were powerful and obviously accustomed to long marches through the rain forest. "No, I haven't. Neither one."

"It's not that difficult. It involves more walking than anything else. I'll teach you."

And he did. He showed her how to make the diagonal cut in the *Hevea Brasiliensis* tree just below the last cut and secure a cup below it to catch the latex juice that would gradually ooze out.

As Dee regarded Chico's stocky but firm body, the healthy glow in his eyes and sheen of his skin, she remembered another of the "little lies" that had amused her: The miscreants behind the museum had claimed that there were 'fitness centers' in the old system where people would, after spending their entire day in sedentary activities (which supposedly caused them to lose their muscle tone and become flabby), pay money to exercise *indoors* and would tan themselves artificially, using lamps (again contradicting the ridiculous idea that dark skin was looked down on). Why would anyone do that when all they need to do is live a normal life, and they would get all the exercise and sun they needed? As if people would sit inside all day and let their vegetables go to seed and the fruitage of their orchards wither on the vine. Dee laughed under her

breath at the ludicrousness of the thought.

When the unlikely duo came across a smattering of Amazonia nuts dotting the forest floor, Chico showed Dee how to hack into them with the machete so as to get to the cluster of nuts encased within. He instructed her to drop the nuts into the sack he had hung over his back.

Dee wanted to question Chico about some of the far-fetched things they were teaching at the museum, but first she wanted to satisfy her curiosity about this new activity. "The use of Amazonia nuts is obvious, but what is the latex used for?" she wanted to know.

"In the old system, the latex was used primarily for automobile tires. But since we don't have cars any more--which is kind of a shame, since I was such a magnificent driver--it is now used more for things like, oh, playground equipment, AirJet bumpers, things like that.

"But I'm more inquisitive than acquisitive," he added, simultaneously underscoring both the similarity and the difference of the words by emphasizing the first syllable in each. I don't overwork the trees or myself. I like to have as much free time as possible for learning about--everything, really. Thinking is the best way to travel."

I guess that's why he told me that he's always around, Dee thought to herself. He doesn't think it's necessary to change location geographically to broaden his horizons.

Chico allowed Dee to try her hand at making the cut in the next tree. Although she didn't have the same practiced expertise of Chico, she did an admirable job of it. After Dee had attached the collecting cup below the fresh cut, Chico pointed to the next tree about a hundred meters away, up on a ridge, and they headed in its direction.

"You didn't come here to wield a machete and talk about latex, though. Tell me, Dee, what did you want to discuss with me?"

"At the 'Museum of the Failed Experiment,' as they call it..."

"Wait a moment, Dee. Who do you mean by 'they'?"

"They--the people behind the museum. Those that planned it and had it built, the people who decided what to put in it and what to say about the past."

"I know some of those people. They are friends of mine," Chico told her.

Oh, no, another co-conspirator, Dee thought, disappointed. But as long as I'm here--and kilometers from my AirJet, at that--I may as well see how

Chico reacts to my observations and how he decides to answer my questions.

Chapter 18

"They claim that people polluted the earth *deliberately*. That they didn't care about what the next year brought, or how their 2children and 3children and so on would be affected. In fact," Dee continued, "they claim that here in Epiphany they polluted the air and depleted the rainforests, even at a point when not more than a mere fraction of the flora and fauna in it had been catalogued. Now tell me, would anyone with half a brain befoul their own nest and destroy something that was so vital to his own health and well-being?"

Dee was beginning to lose her composure. "You *know*, Chico," she said, shifting her machete to her left hand and jabbing her right index finger at him, "that all of that is a lie. You lived here. I can believe that *possibly*, just *possibly*, there may have been *one* insane person bent on self-destruction and that of his fellows, but it's obvious that he wouldn't be allowed to carry out his diabolical scheme. *You* would have stopped him. Your *neighbors* would have stopped him. The *community* would have stopped him."

Chico had stopped walking and was surveying Dee's face carefully. She was flushed and a little out of breath. Probably a combination of the hike and her emotions getting the best of her, he concluded.

"Dee, it was complicated; very complicated."

Here we go again, Dee thought. *Ms. Woods said it was 'complex,' Mr. Mendes says it was 'complicated'.*

"How complicated could it be?!" she blurted out. "Right is right and wrong is wrong. Sense is sense and nonsense is--just that! There is no logic in people destroying their own habitat."

"You have to remember, Dee, that back then people took a short-range view of things, and there were many factors involved that promoted that sort of thinking. Some of these factors were accidental, but many were very much contrived and consciously disseminated and perpetuated. Since none of these ways of thinking prevail now, those old ways of doing things are rejected out of hand as ridiculous--as you and I know they are.

"You're obviously having a hard time accepting that those ways of thinking and doing were ever popular. But they were. I know. I was there. People made decisions based on *today* and what they perceived was their own benefit, not based on an eternity and what would benefit everybody.

"It always came down to money. When the 'Indians', as they were called, stood in the way of 'progress' (meaning commercial gain, primarily for a minuscule percentage of people) here in Brazil--or Epiphany, I should say--they were given garments from victims of smallpox."

"Smallpox?"

"A deadly disease."

Dee was confused. *So people died from a disease called smallpox and then their clothes were donated to the Indians. So what's the point--if it's even true at all?*

"The point is," Chico said, seeming to read her thoughts, "that smallpox was communicable--contagious. The Indians then contracted the disease and died."

Dee cocked her head to the side and gave Chico a dubious look. "You *don't* expect me to believe *that*," she said, and stormed off, back in the direction of the village, and her AirJet.

"Hey! Dee! Where are you going?"

"Back home! It's obvious you are not going to level with me--I'm just wasting my time here."

Chico spread his arms out at his side, in a gesture of confusion and pleading. "Dee, come back!"

But it was too late. She was already out of earshot. *Wow, that girl can really cover ground when she's mad*, Chico muttered under his breath, shaking his head. Turning back around, he headed toward the next *Hevea Brasiliensis* and made the diagonal slash. *I guess all that would sound pretty unlikely to someone who had never experienced it firsthand*, Chico mused. *I wanted to explain to her that not everyone who participated in polluting the earth was wicked or wantonly destructive. Sometimes people were 'between a rock and a hard place,' as the saying was. Their conscience may have chafed at the job they were doing, but if they didn't do it, they couldn't provide for their family. What was a person to do then? They may have known that what they were doing was not positive in the long run, but they felt they needed to take care of the here and now--the there and then--immediately, and work for a solution for the future in their spare time, or sometime later. If maintaining integrity had been easy, everyone would have been an Abraham, a Job, or a Daniel.*

Thwack! Chico expertly eviscerated an Amazonia nut with his machete. He pried a few loose and chewed them. They were tasty. *As good as any*

I've ever had, he thought, smiling. He deposited the rest of the nuts in his sack, dropping them over his shoulder. He moved on, towards the next tree in his 'latex orchard'.

I wonder if the Luddites would have fought against the new machines if they had profited from the technology themselves? Were they against technology, or were they simply against losing their jobs? What about us rubber tappers? Would we have opposed the destruction of the rain forest if it hadn't affected our livelihoods? Would we have cared if it was happening somewhere else, to somebody else, but not on our land, and not to us?

Chico frowned when he considered this conundrum. Had his motives been pure? He was honest with himself (not always, and never completely, of course--after all, human nature *is* human nature--but in the main he was). The motives of the destroyers was seldom one hundred percent diabolical, neither had his own motives been consistently and absolutely selfless. He assured himself that they were more good than bad, more pure than impure, or otherwise he wouldn't even be here now. He would simply have remained dead, and not been resurrected, if he had displayed a predominantly duplicitous nature. But what about Dee? What was her motive? And why was she so unwilling to believe him, so close-minded about the way things were in the old system?

Chapter 19

Dee's next 'target,' selected at random from volume 11 of the *Residents* set, was a man. His entry read:

Aldous Swift
1927-1974, 2011
Bienveillance.Senegoid.Jour Bientôt.Theocracy's
Increase.411S,137W

Mr. Swift's wife answered Dee's call, and informed her that Mr. Swift was in his study and didn't like being disturbed once he had ensconced himself therein--nevertheless, Ms. Swift was sure her husband wouldn't mind her stopping by. How about tomorrow? She knew that Mr. Swift would be glad to see her then. So it was settled, and Dee went out to see Ross.

Dees' horse was certainly glad to see her when she returned home, and Ross made his impatience to hit the trail known to her by whinnying and shaking his head in concentric arcs, first clockwise, then counter. Dee realized how long it had been since they had gone for a ride and apologized to Ross, caressing him and stroking his mane. He snorted loudly and scratched the ground rapidly several times in succession. He was, in effect, saying to her, "Come on, girl! Get on, and let's trip the trail fantastic! I'm full of energy, tired of standing around this pasture, and feel like a long, hard gallop is in order."

Dee smiled, and jumped on. "To the barn, old friend. This isn't going to be just a hop, skip, and a jump. Let's ride till dusk!" She felt like taking off for a long ride, over hill and dale, across meadows and pastures and streams. Away; away from people, to sit and think. "Let me throw a saddle and halter on you, and then away we'll fly," she addressed her impatient companion.

Ross whinnied his approval and ported his little woman to the tack room. After going through the necessary gyrations--bending and pulling, straightening and tightening--Dee led Ross out to the courtyard. Her left foot lightly pushed against the bottom of the stirrup as she leaped into the saddle. She rode up to the side window of the house and tapped on the glass. Some animated sign language on Dee's part and expert lip-reading by her mother culminated in a smile and a wave from Ms. De Parto.

* * *

When Dee and Ross returned after sundown, they were both tired but content. After rubbing him down and brushing him with a currycomb, Dee turned in for the night with barely a word to her parents. As she drifted off to sleep, Dee wondered what the next day would bring. Would Mr. Swift help her expose the charlatans from the museum?

Chapter 20

Arriving at the Swift home, which was located in an area formerly referred to as Ballyshannon, Ireland (again, she had reserved an air slot and made the trip at Ultraspeed), Dee was invited into Aldous' sanctum sanctorum, his private study. It was lined with bookshelves on every wall, from floor to ceiling--history, poetry, novels, atlases, dictionaries, all sorts of reference works. Dee was impressed, and a little intimidated.

"Young lady, how may I assist you?" Mr. Swift inquired.

If this was another trap, if Mr. Swift was another accomplice in the quackery afoot, Dee wanted to find out right away, so she dispensed with the niceties as quickly as possible and got down to business. "Mr. Swift, I attended the opening of the Museum--"

"--of the Failed Experiment, in King & Kingdom? I was there myself," Mr. Swift beamed. "Wasn't it grand?"

"I guess that depends on your definition of 'grand,' sir," Dee sighed. Prompted by Mr. Swift's raised eyebrow, she continued: "I don't believe all the things they say about life in the old system. It's beyond my comprehension that such things could ever have occurred, anywhere, anytime."

He didn't tell Dee, but Mr. Swift had himself contributed some of the materials for the various exhibits, particularly on 20th century political affairs. He considered it prudent not to mention this for two reasons: one, he had already said how much he enjoyed it, and claiming part of the credit would seem rather conceited; two, if he admitted to such collaboration with the museum's curators, Dee would doubtless be less willing to listen to what he had to say. So, he kept it under his hat. "I sympathize with your viewpoint, Ms. ...?"

"De Parto--Dee De Parto."

"I sympathize with your viewpoint, Ms. De Parto, but perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what it was in particular that you found... questionable?"

Where to begin? Dee wondered for a moment. "What about the scope of war, its frequency and severity? Surely soldiers did not torture one another, massacre civilians, or engage in war just because of genealogical and cultural differences."

"Ms. De Parto, rather than get embroiled in a verbal table tennis match of my 'yes, it happened' bouncing off your 'no, it didn't happen,' back and forth and careening around the room, etc. etc. ad infinitum ad nauseum, let me just tell you a little about what people were like--and what society in general was like--in the waning decades of the old system. Why don't you have a seat? This might take awhile. Once I get my word-mill going, and get a head of steam up, I'm liable to ramble on for awhile."

Dee sat down, took a deep breath, and pulled the tablet computer out of its holster. She realized that she hadn't used any of her 'evidence' yet, because nobody had challenged her on her claims of what was being taught at the museum. They had all simply accepted it, without so much as batting an eyelid.

"I've been here in this system for around a hundred years, and I lived in the old one for almost 50. For the most part, life in the old system is a bitter memory. Granted, life was still usually worth living--that is to say, it was better than the alternative--but it was nothing like what we have now. Now, we experience the real life. Real. Genuine. Purposeful. Enjoyable. Normal, natural, and direct. Constantly improving. Life then was unnatural and unbalanced, abnormal, abstract and unfulfilling. One evidence of such was the artificial famines."

"*Artificial* famines? What do you mean?"

"Cases where there was enough food, but the distribution of it, or lack thereof, caused many people to go without. Not only to the point of hunger, and malnutrition, but even to the point of death."

Dee stiffened involuntarily. Her skepticism was returning. Another quack! What were they trying to do? Drive her mad?

"The odd thing about it was," Mr. Swift continued, "that many of those who suffered the most and the longest were the most vocal and avid supporters of the very framework that slowly but surely crushed them to dust-bits. Many loved their servitude. It is an odd bit of human nature that sometimes causes the captive to form an emotional bond, an attachment, even affection--sometimes even rabid love for--his captor. They suffered from a self-inflicted wound of aching alienation, exacerbated for many by unnatural city life. Choosing city life to country life is preferring the life of a bee or an ant to that of an elephant or a wolf. Not that there's anything wrong with bees or ants--we need them--but we humans were not meant to live like that."

Great learning has apparently driven this man to madness, Dee thought. I have never seen a crazy person before. This should, at least, be interesting if nothing else.

Mr. Swift went on to tell Dee that there were three sorts of people in the old system: those who made things happen, those who watched things happen, and those who ended up asking 'what happened?'

"So many were molded into watchers, consumers, passive, armchair-everything; they were vicarious livers," he continued. "They had no life of their own but lived fantasy lives through others they followed on television. Now, as you know, everyone is creative--how could it be otherwise, for otherwise we would not be children of God, the Grand Creator? We were made, of course, in his image.

"Dee, you know how an animal's spirit can be broken? I mean to say, you do realize that it's possible to break the spirit of an animal, such as a horse or a dog?"

"Yes; but I think that anybody who does that should be slapped silly."

"You're ever so right, my dear," Mr. Swift continued. "But I just said that to make a comparison with the mass of people of those days: their spirit was broken. They usually didn't know it consciously--in fact, they felt the opposite was the case. Subconsciously, though, most-if not all of them--knew that something important, something precious, had somehow been stolen from them, stripped out of them. This led countless of people to insanity and depression, desperation and drugs."

Has your spirit been broken, Mr. Swift? Dee wondered. *You are certainly mad as a Matthias hare.*

Mr. Swift had noticed Dee's skeptical mien, but plunged ahead undeterred. "An example of the brokenness of spirit is the devotion to money so many felt. 'Money makes the world go around' was a common expression. So were semi-serious sayings such as 'Money is not the only thing--but it sure beats whatever comes in second.' Caesar's mintings meant more to them than anything else. In a paroxysm of abjection they would bow before the lucre god--figuratively speaking, of course. And that is the way the governments and, of course, the merchants, wanted it; indeed, that was exactly the way they had so carefully orchestrated it. Never have so many been manipulated so much by so few. Even for those who knew in their hearts that that way of living was banal, gauche, shallow, self-deceiving, self-defeating--and worse--they eventually capitulated. It was just too hard to fight such an uphill battle all one's life against such formidable odds and against such strongly entrenched foes."

"Mr. Swift," Dee asked mischievously, "what about insanity? You claim that many people ended up in that condition; so does the museum. Was it really that prevalent?"

"The alarming thing about it was that the ones who appeared normal were actually the most insane of all. Since society itself was so profoundly artificial, abnormal, anonymous, and abstract, those who seemed to fit in with it the best were actually the ones who were themselves hopeless--too far gone, beyond hope of redemption. They were normal only in relation to a very abnormal society. Those who were incorrigible and hopeless *appeared* to be well adjusted to that old mode of existence, because they had been so thoroughly de-individualized. Those who were so well aligned with that misaligned and dysfunctional lifestyle showed no symptoms of their madness.

"There was hope, though, for those who manifested symptoms of their adverse reaction to the madness built in to the very society around them. That was actually a natural reaction, but those who reacted in that way were thought to be abnormal--insane. The sanest people of all were institutionalized, while those crazy as a loon walked around free, always in step, always in fashion, always politically correct, spouting the company line, toeing the mark, and in the majority on every issue."

"You mean to say that all crazy people appeared normal, and all normal people were shut away in the insane asylums?"

Mr. Swift smiled and shrugged. "Perhaps I exaggerated a little. After all, the thought-manufacturers and mind-manipulators weren't *that* efficient. Some--many--slipped through the cracks into one side or the other."

"Someone told me that nobody was totally sane, nor was anybody totally insane--that everybody was somewhere in the middle of that continuum."

"I'll subscribe to that. That's actually a perceptive insight, yes. People got worse, progressively and rapidly worse, starting with World War I. In fact, a wise man once wrote, in 1958:

50 years ago, when I was a boy, it seemed completely self-evident that the bad old days were over, that torture and massacre, slavery, and the persecution of heretics, were things of the past. Among people who wore top hats, traveled in trains, and took a bath every morning, such horrors were simply out of the question. After all, we were living in the 20th Century. A few years later these people who took daily baths and went to church in top hats were committing atrocities on a scale undreamed of...

"The 1900s could well be termed 'The Century of Total War'. The collective insanity of war had gripped the world, and never really let go again until the Millennial Dawn. And because war is, in spite of the old governments' addiction to it, unnatural for humans, they turned to artificial comforts, and opium (and its brethren) became the religion of the people, as the people became self-medicated.

"The minds of the people were raped with propaganda. But as I said about people loving their captivity and servility, captives learned to love their captors. People whose minds are held captive do not know it, and so do not complain. The leaders of countries deliberately and maliciously manipulated their subjects. Adolf Hitler, a manipulator/agitator extraordinaire, was a prime example of this. Writing in 1939, Hermann Rauschning said:

Hitler has a deep respect for the Catholic church and the Jesuit order; not because of their Christian doctrine, but because of the 'machinery' they have elaborated and controlled, their hierarchical system, their extremely clever tactics, their knowledge of human nature and their wise use of human weaknesses in ruling over believers.

"And Hitler's followers, when captured and put on trial for war crimes, claimed in their own defense, 'We were just following orders.' Those orders were a message Garcia--or Günther--should have ignored. They were claiming they had no choice, no free will, and that conscience didn't enter into the picture. If you say you have no choice, you are admitting you are one of the oppressed. You then *cannot, must not*, oppress your fellow oppressed. When the oppressed give in to the oppressor, they become oppressors themselves--without being liberated. In fact, they are oppressed to an even and ever greater extent. They are both oppressors and oppressed--it is a double dose--they are still oppressed and thus not free; they oppress others and thus have no peace of mind.

When will this guy shut up? Dee wondered. She thought he was 'one brick shy of a load,' or 'half a bubble off,' and was looking for an opportunity to make her exit. But the next thing he said caught her ear:

"The right choice was obvious at the end: The Vicious Circle (as I call the old system) was doomed. It was either get in the ark or drown, so to speak. All who are here *want* to be here--all who *truly* wanted to be here, and demonstrated that by their words and deeds, are here."

Mr. Swift paused, leaned forward in his chair, and looked at Dee imploringly.

"There are no dirty secrets, no skeletons in the closet, nothing to expose or on which to blow the whistle here in Vavilovia. Everything presented at the Museum of the Failed Experiment is accurate. Think about it: if you--that is, we--were being duped, it would have to be for the benefit of those doing the duping. Who would benefit? How? In what way? We are all in the same situation here. Ishi could ask the whole world 'everybody happy?' and not hear a discouraging word in reply from anyone. The sad thing was that so many opted out--they refused happiness."

Dee didn't buy that, but she let it slide. She was curious about this

fellow who apparently had a speech impediment. "You mention this fellow Ishi as if I should know who he is. I don't. Who is he?"

"You haven't heard of Ishi? He was a Yahi Indian who went from the stone age, so to speak, into the modern age when, in 1911, he walked down from the hills above what was then called Oroville, California into that town. People thought that all the Yahis had been dead for generations. He'd been living up there alone for years.

"Anyway, after Ishi learned a little English he was known to inquire of people's welfare by asking: 'Evellybody hoppy?' The Yahi language did not have an 'r' sound, and so that was how he would say 'everybody.' Of course, now Ishi is able to pronounce the 'r' sound as well as anybody, but it's just one of those things: he was known for that question, pronounced in that way, and so he acquiesces and 'gets that out of the way' every time he speaks to a crowd--otherwise, there would be certain ones among them who would be disappointed and not really hear anything he had to say until he graced them with that particular inquiry pronounced in that particular fashion."

Bla bla bla. Mr. Swift went on and on about linguistic theory, multilingualism, philology, and who knows what else. Dee had tuned him out. Dee endured it as long as she could and then made a show of trying to conceal a yawn. As soon as Mr. Swift paused to take a breath, Dee looked at her watch and rose from her chair in one motion. She told Mr. Swift that she needed to get going, had a long flight back, her parents were expecting her home and who knows what else.

Reluctantly, Mr. Swift bid her adieu, and Dee left, shaking her head. Her confusion was mixed with frustration at somehow finding yet another cuckoo co-conspirator in the plot. She was feeling a bit overwhelmed and was looking forward to putting her AirJet on autopilot and relaxing on the flight home.

Chapter 21

I have one more person I've committed myself to visit, although I don't know who it'll be yet--one more person chosen at random from the Residents volume, Dee thought to herself after she had safely set her vessel on autopilot and was hurtling through the skies in the smooth upper atmosphere. But before I do that, I think I'll pay a visit to this Ishi fellow. He sounds like he would probably not be the type of person to be in on the plot. He likely wouldn't be recruited, and even if so, would most likely not acquiesce. He might be just the person I need. If by chance he has been approached by them, maybe he'll divulge what he knows about the intrigue.

Dee arrived home late--actually, very early in the morning of the following day--but her parents were waiting up for her. They were not so much worried about her (after all, what could go wrong?), but were very curious about how her interviews were going. Despite the hour, Dee was not overly tired and, in fact, felt refreshed after a long catnap in her AirJet. Without revealing too much information, she told her parents all about Ms. Woods' huckleberry pie, Mr. Mendes' lessons in latex and Amazonia nut extraction, Mr. Swift's 'sanctum sanctorum'--as he calls it--and the imposing array of books that inhabit and decorate it.

When Dee went on to recount some of Mr. Swift's critiques of old system society, her parents gradually became restless and, before long, began stretching and yawning, and mentioning the need for them all to get some rest. So Dee was successful in deflecting their inquiries: she had been able to refrain from voicing her suspicions about the people that she had interviewed. Before blowing the whistle on them, she needed to find someone who would validate her suspicions, a confidant who would stand by her and back up her complaints and accusations.

* * *

Dee was awakened the following morning when Ross stuck his head in her bedroom window and whinnied. Wanting a little more sleep, Dee rolled over and covered her face with her pillow. Getting a little exasperated, Ross whinnied louder, snorted, and stomped his feet. Dee sat up in her bed, her eyes puffy and her hair flaring out in every direction. She heaved her pillow at Ross, but the pillow missed its mark, hitting the wall below the windowsill. Ross whinnied once more, and capered off, making a circle from Dee's bedroom window to the barn and back again. Having returned from his circuit, he peered in at her again, seeing if she was finally ready yet.

The rumped girl had at least thrown the covers aside and was sitting up in her pajamas, bare feet on the floor. Ross whinnied again, and nodded his head up and down. "All right, all right, boy," Dee told him. She shuffled to the window, and Ross stepped aside to give her room. Dee lifted herself up onto the sill, swung around, and dropped to the ground. Her steed stepped up alongside her, and she grabbed its neck and hoisted herself aloft. With that the horse and its rider took off at a gallop, around and around the pasture, and then darted off into the woods.

* * *

A couple of hours later, Dee and Ross returned home exhilarated. After taking care of her companion's grooming, and giving him a snack of oats, Dee walked into the front door.

"I thought you were still asleep, dear," her mother said, looking up from her breakfast. Mr. De Parto glanced up from the *Morning Herald*.

"I wanted to be, but Mr. Impatient out there woke me up," Dee explained. It was obvious that she wasn't really angry with her restless friend. On the contrary, she felt rejuvenated after the ride, and it showed in her countenance. Dee sat down to a hearty breakfast--the only kind ever served in the De Parto home--and told her parents about her plan to visit Ishi next.

"I thought you were going to visit another person you were going to choose at random from the Residents volume, dear--have you changed your plans?" Dee's mother asked.

"No, that's still my plan; I just want to visit Ishi first. Mr. Swift mentioned him, and he seems like an interesting person."

"That's nice, dear."

After breakfast, Dee located Ishi's entry, which read:

Ishi
1861-1916, 2047
Alegria.En Algún Lugar.Adaven Arreis.Integrity
Keepers.37S,1109E

So he lives in the same zone we do, Dee was glad to note. After contacting him, she was cordially invited to visit him if she came straightaway, as he would be leaving on a trip the day after next. She would take the 'scenic route' this time, and fly manually, at normal speed, so that she could enjoy the scenery on the way.

Chapter 22

It was a long flight, almost ten hours, but Dee enjoyed it. Adjusting her altitude as necessary--flying low over the plains and then gradually rising to cross the rockies--she stayed always within a hundred meters of the ground, sometimes barely skimming over herds of bison, altering the glide path of a flying squirrel here and barely avoiding a grizzly bear there. She buzzed the houses of friends along the way, waving down at them by rocking her wings, and started a stampede of wild horses in the desert by diving straight at them and lifting up at the last second. Perhaps not the best example for young aviatrixes, but it was harmless fun.

Dee finally passed over the Sierra Nevadas and was on the 'home stretch.' She passed over granite mountains, dotted with pine and fir trees, and then, as the elevation dropped, she soared over countless green hills, decorated with oaks and resplendent with daffodils and other wildflowers.

Landing on a grassy knoll above the area formerly known as Oroville, California, Dee spotted the man who she thought must be Ishi about 50 meters away. He was barefoot, working in a garden at the base of a hill in a clearing below her.

Dee approached him, as silently as she could. He seemed to be unaware of her presence, fully absorbed in his gardening activities.

"You must be Ms. Dolores," he said suddenly, straightening up and extending his hand in greeting. Dee was surprised that Ishi had known she was there. He had given no indication of it until he spoke.

"Yes, I'm Dolores De Parto. You can call me Dee, though--it gives you a 300% savings on syllables."

"I'm not much of a syllable conservationist, Ms. Dee. Tell me, though, how was your flight?"

Dee described the scenic wonders she had enjoyed on the way: the Mississippi River; the subtle but majestic rolling Plains; the Rockies; and finally the Sierras (she didn't mention anything about her shenanigans with the indigenous fauna on the way). Dee noticed that Ishi was standing stock still, facing away from her at a 45 degree angle, with his eyes closed.

"Mr. Ishi, are you praying? Or am I boring you?"

Ishi slowly opened his eyes again. "Neither one, Ms. Dee, I was imagining those scenes as you were describing them to me. It was almost as good as making the trip myself. But you didn't mention anything about the animals you saw on the way. Surely you saw some."

Dee paused a moment. "Oh yes, I did."

"And?" Ishi asked patiently. He closed his again; he appeared to be preparing himself for a long and enjoyable report from her.

"They were nice," is all Dee said, a little nervously.

"Oh!" Ishi said, opening his eyes. He looked at Dee quizzically, and shrugged. "Well, then," Ishi said, exhaling heavily. He was standing close enough to her that Dee could smell his breath. It was sweet-smelling; a sweet smell like like that of the rain forest, without the added bitterness. It was sweet, but not overpowering. Nevertheless, she backed up a little. If you can smell another person's breath, she thought, you're too close.

"I guess you didn't come here to tell me about how you came here, Ms. Dee. What was it you wanted to ask me? How to start a fire with sticks and grass? How to remember places with your feet?"

"No, not exactly, Mr. Ishi. The truth is... First of all, have you heard of the Museum of the Failed Experiment?"

He had.

"I was there recently," Dee continued. "I have, let's say, my doubts about some of the things that are being presented there as being factual."

"Oh?" Is all Ishi replied to that. He would be heading to that very museum the day after next to act as docent for a few weeks, but as he was proud of being chosen for this assignment, he didn't say anything about it, modest man that he is (thinking that mentioning the exact nature of his upcoming trip would sound like a boast). To Ishi, bragging always seemed very unbecoming in a human.

"Anyway, Mr. Ishi, they say all kinds of nonsensical things there, for instance that the land," she swept her hand toward Mount Shasta, towering above them, and back towards the long valley that flanked it, "was ruined by people deliberately polluting it, and that some people didn't have enough land to even grow enough food for themselves. Say it's not so."

Ishi's face clouded over as he remembered how it was. He practically harumphed in indignation at the memory. "But Ms. Dee, it *was* so. And do you know why? People thought it was their right, and in their very

nature, to *conquer* the land, to alter it, to bring it into abject submission. They turned orchards into amalgamations of concrete and plastic. They dammed the rivers, diverted the creeks, cleared whole mountains of their trees, poisoned the animals. It was nothing but a travesty, Ms. Dee."

"Why, Ishi, why? Why would people do that? I don't understand. It makes no sense."

"Dee! Don't worry about it. It's all over. That's all in the past. As you can see--as you saw on your trip here--the whole earth is clean and beautiful again. The animals are back--*notice* them on your way home--plentiful, and happy. They are no longer sick from poisons or driven out of their natural habitats.

"You know, in the old system people used to say 'all good things must end.' But it was the *opposite*! All *bad* things had to end--and they did! The old system was almost inconceivably warped and twisted. It was too bad to last, and almost too bad to believe, as I think you have realized yourself."

In the warmth of the day, Dee envied Ishi his bare feet and had kicked off her shoes. "But *why*, Mr. Ishi? For me to believe something as fantastical as that I would have to hear some kind of at least somewhat credible *reason* first. People don't do things *just because*. Not *big* things like that, anyway."

"Ms. Dee, have you ever heard of evil-ution?"

"Do you mean *ev*-olution? That's another one of those tall tales being promoted at the museum: that a huge number of people, maybe even a majority, had believed that life had arisen spontaneously (as if they had never heard of Louis Pasteur and his proofs that such was impossible) and that monkeys eventually turned into humans. Some monkeys remained monkeys, whereas others shed hair, began walking erect, developed written languages, somehow began to contemplate spiritual things, plan for the future,--"

"Ms. Dee?"

"Don't tell me...they did?" Dee put her hands behind her head, intertwined them, and sat down on the grassy hillside.

Ishi crouched beside her. "Yes, Dee, many did believe such things. I call it *evil-ution* because, whether or not that was how it was intended, it *was* in fact an evil theory. It gave validation to those who took advantage of others; the theory taught that 'survival of the fittest' was only natural and, in fact, inevitable. It also made them feel that no matter what they did to the earth, they would be able to somehow cope with the

ramifications, because they would simply adapt to meet whatever new situations arose.

"For imperialists and other oppressors--in fact, anyone on the top of the heap and those who were hopeful of someday attaining that height--evil-ution served as a justification of their methods. After all, *they* were surviving magnificently, albeit at the expense of everyone else. The conclusion they reached about this was, not that perhaps others were not as cynical and opportunistic, as cold and callous as they themselves were, but that they were rightfully seated at the foremost spot, as they were the most magnificently fit for that position. Not to be overlooked was the seductive side 'benefit' that if man had not been created, and thus there was no God, then man was the highest being in the universe and accountable to no one but himself.

"Another factor that made the near-destruction of the earth much easier was the belief by a great many others that they were going to heaven after they died (most people back then either believed in evil-ution, *or* that they would go to heaven after they died, and some even believed *both*). The belief in heaven paved the way for the mismanagement and dys-stewardship of the earth. Believing themselves to be 'short-timers' on earth, they concluded that there was no compelling reason to exercise much concern in their caretaking of the earth and the life on it--after all, in their eyes it was just a temporary habitation, destined eventually for destruction, or at least abandonment.

"Man's ability to ruin the earth was greater than they thought, and their ability to adapt to the ruination didn't go as well they hoped. By the end of the old system, early in the 21st century, their continual meddling in and muddying up of the earth had caused severe water shortages, catastrophic changes in weather patterns, and--as the earth is symbiotic and extremely intricate and interdependent--eventually a situation where there was no way out but to scrap the whole experiment and start over again--as happened in Noah's day."

Dee didn't know what to think now. She trusted Ishi, and liked him, but thought that perhaps he also was being misled. She didn't think he was exactly *in* on the plot, but he seemed to be a victim of it. He obviously believed those bizarre stories, and seemed to accept them with no compunction whatsoever, without a thought of testing them for logic or reasonableness.

He had been there, but he must have disremembered how things were, or been brainwashed into accepting an alternate history--a revamped, reconstructed, reconstituted, revisionist history. Maybe it had been a bit of a waste of time coming here, Dee thought, but at the same time she wasn't really upset about it, because the trip had been so beautiful. It was just too bad that a world so lovely was inhabited not only by

straightforward and honest--albeit misled--people like Ishi, but also by scoundrels like those dastardly ones who were trying to undermine the very fabric of society. She was still determined to unearth--somehow, some way-- some clear-cut evidence against them.

Chapter 23

A Polynesian woman was the next random selection from the *Residents* volume. Her entry reads:

Sandi Loam
1958-1976; 2034
Bonta.Divine Justice.Querencia.Bayport

Bayport is located on a remote island at a place that was called Papeete, Tahiti in the old system.

After following the coast for several hundred kilometers south, Dee nosed her craft approximately 45 degrees to the right and set her sights on Bayport. As it was 8,000 kilometers off the coast (from the point at which she left it), Dee requested and was assigned an airslot, whooshed upwards, and jammed her Langewiesche into Ultraspeed.

Dee's AirJet was sandwiched between two shades of blue: Cobalt blue above, aquamarine below. From a distance, Vavilovia was blue and green. No snow-capped mountains from this vantage point, but white strips of clouds trimmed the seascape below. From this location, the blue patches overwhelmed the green, making the occasional island below all the more striking and beautiful. Dee decided that someday she would take the time to visit them all--all the islands in the chain. Maybe she would have time for that after she solved this riddle and saved Vavilovia from the revisionist history the hoax-perpetrators were attempting to thrust upon it.

When Dee landed on the bluff above the beach that rims Bayport, Ms. Loam was walking at the water's edge. After Dee introduced herself and voiced her concerns about what she had seen at the museum, Ms. Loam responded with her light and airy falsetto laugh.

"Where do you get such whoop-jamboree notions, girl, that they would *lie* to you? Come on, let's sit over here by the cove, where we can watch the sea-tortoises and the dolphins while we chat."

Dee sat down on the turf, drew her knees up practically to her chin, and wrapped her arms around her ankles. Sandi was obviously going to dominate the conversation, so Dee looked at her, waiting for her to begin.

As Sandi saw she had Dee's undivided attention, she dove right in, without preamble: "Dee, let me tell you about just how out of kilter things actually were. Sex was degraded by being viewed as cheap. It was

just a form of recreation for many people, and had nothing to do with love or procreation. You know, in actuality sex is near-sacred and should remain private and limited. It is not a spectator sport, but that's what it was made into. It is not something to be engaged in casually or cavalierly, but it was back then--commonly.

"The people who overemphasized sex actually took it *less* seriously than it should be taken. It is not 'just' sex or 'only' sex or a 'if it feels good, do it' thing. The chaste, those who view sex as something sacred, and private, are those who give it its just due. But the way it was at the end of the end, back *then*--what chaos, girl!"

Dee was taken aback, and a little embarrassed. She felt like she could talk to Sandi, though. "Why do you say 'private'? How could sex be anything *but* private?"

"There was something called pornography. Maybe you've never heard the word..."

"No."

Sandi explained to Dee what pornography was. Dee blushed, but was almost as confused as she was prior to the explanation.

"Why would anybody want to look at pornography? And who would submit themselves to producing the stuff? To tell you the truth, Sandi, I..."

"Don't believe it? Believe it, girl. Life was so topsy-turvy back then that some people reacted to the madness by reaching out for any type of escape--for some people, the more extreme the form of escape, the better it seemed to serve their purpose. The framework of society robbed many men of their masculinity--and women of their femininity--and this turning towards pornography was, for some of them anyway, an attempt to regain or attain their lost or missing masculinity or femininity via an extreme display of sexual attributes and behavior. It was burlesque and grotesque. The participants merely acted out what the consumers wanted to experience vicariously--or they reveled in watching others degrade themselves, making themselves feel, perhaps, cleaner in comparison.

"As for the people who acted out the fantasies of others in this sorry and sordid form of 'entertainment,' it was often almost impossible for them to escape the milieu in which they had found themselves. This was especially the case with many of the women. I once heard it said that the difference between a prostitute and a mercenary is that a mercenary *enjoys* his work. Circumstances practically forced some women into this terrible lifestyle. Others were *literally* forced into it."

Dee knew neither what a prostitute nor a mercenary was, and wasn't at all sure she really wanted to know, so didn't inquire further. Ms. Loam had forgotten to take her young charge's naivete about such matters into account, and had just assumed she was familiar with those terms.

Ms. Loam followed up on her prior comments by saying, "The worst people of all in the old system were those who took advantage of those unable to defend themselves--those who were weaker genetically, by circumstance, or because they as a group were fewer in numbers. Predators have been barred from Vavilovia--we don't have to worry about them any more.

Sandi noticed Dee looked distracted, and maybe a little lonely. "It's getting late. Why don't you come on to my house? We'll make supper together and talk this out. You can spend the night and be on your way in the morning. It's too late to go back home now, anyway. You can call your parents from my house and let them know you'll be staying with me tonight."

"That sounds fine," Dee said, still wrestling with her feelings about what she had just heard. She couldn't comprehend them, but, as was the case with Ishi, she trusted and liked Sandi.

During the preparation of dinner, and for the rest of the evening, Dee and Sandi discussed life as it was then compared to life as it is now. Gradually Dee began to wonder if all--or at least some--of the seemingly impossible things she had seen and heard at the museum were, after all, indeed based on some semblance of truth.

Dee fell asleep that night to the sound of rustling palm fronds, and the surf gently lapping against the shore. She slipped into a deep and exquisitely sweet sleep.

Chapter 24

The next morning, as Dee prepared to go home, Sandi said, "I'll tell you what, Dee. My brother Red has a good friend you ought to go and talk to. His name is Malcolm Komboa. He lives halfway around the world from here, in Fe. He can explain about some of the things that especially confuse and distress you. Will you go see him? I'll write down his address and coordinates for you."

I may as well, Dee thought. She said "Yes, Sandi, I will. Thank you for your time."

They were standing on the bluff where Dee had left her AirJet. The sun was rising, painting the horizon pink and mauve, the breeze was refreshingly cool, and the scent of the air was sweet and invigorating--fresh and clean, with a hint of coconut.

"Take care of yourself, girl. Don't be a stranger," said Sandi, as she closed the canopy on Dee's cockpit.

Dee waved, hovered a moment, and then began her takeoff, slowly gaining altitude as she followed the shoreline. Banking to the north, so as to get a view of the whole island as she departed, Dee rocked her wings, waving goodbye to her new friend.

Bayport is located on a gorgeous island, filled with turquoise ponds, breathtaking waterfalls, thousands upon thousands of palm trees, and an assortment of exotic birds. As she straightened her craft, pointing its nose homeward and trimming its wings, Dee realized how much she missed Ross--and her parents. *Integrity Keepers may be as beautiful as Esitrevda--or even more so*, Dee thought, *but there's no place like home*.

By nightfall Dee was back in Esitrevda. Home. She didn't feel like going to see Mr. Komboa right away. She'd been gone from home too long and needed to spend some time there, to get her bearings. She had never before been away from home so often and for such long stretches of time.

After a late dinner, and a talk with Ross in the pasture, Dee went to bed. She was still undecided about what to make of many of the things she had been wrestling with over the past week. One thing was certain, though--she had definitely broadened her horizons by means of her travels and conversations with a variety of people from a variety of places who had lived in a variety of time periods.

The next day Dee helped her mother around the house and in the garden

in the morning, then took a long ride on Ross in the afternoon. The following day, and the one following it, were spent in much the same fashion. Finally, Dee decided she had better make the trip she had assured Sandi she would, and contacted the person in question, whose entry reads:

Malcolm Komboa

1925-1965, 2022

Fe.Ett Eller Annet Sted.In Qualche Luogo.Light Bearers

The trip to what, in the old system, was called Nairobi, Kenya, took an entire day. Again, Dee flew low and slow while over land, to enjoy the scenery, but when she got to the ocean, transferred to an upper air slot and day-dreamed as she shot through space.

Almost before she was ready for it, her craft began its automatic descent. Having made visual contact with the landing location, an adobe house at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro, Dee switched to manual mode and took over the controls. The area is beautiful--as much so, in its own way, as is Integrity Keepers halfway around the earth, where Sandi lives.

After parking her AirJet in the shadow of a large boulder, Dee found Mr. Komboa pruning peach trees in his orchard. He welcomed her warmly, and made small talk while he finished up his work for the day. "Now tree, I expect to see some *good* fruit out of you this year. You can be replaced, you know!"

Mr. Komboa motioned Dee to follow him, as he headed toward his house. "I hope you like vegetable stew, Dee," he said, glancing back over his shoulder. "I just made it last night; it's my specialty."

"That sounds good to me, Mr. Komboa."

Dee mentioned Mr. Komboa's friend Red Loam, and that his sister Sandi had recommended that Dee make this trip.

"Yes, I know all about you, Ms. De Parto. Sandi called me a few days ago. I had almost given up on your coming when you finally called yesterday."

"I apologize, Mr. Komboa."

"No problem. I'm usually here. There was no rush, really. I was just curious about why you hadn't come yet."

"I've been doing a *lot* of traveling lately, and just wanted to spend some time at home, with my family," Dee explained.

"I understand. Family is important; so is home."

Chapter 25

Several of Mr. Komboa's neighbors dropped by around dinnertime. They had smelled his famous stew as they had walked by his house earlier in the day and, knowing they were always welcome, showed up with a bottle of wine, a homemade loaf of bread, or some other item to contribute to the festive board.

After dinner, the guests repaired to the porch on the west side of the house, to enjoy some homemade peach brandy Mr. Komboa's neighbor Angus MacDougal had brought, and to watch the sun set.

"You're among friends, Dee, you can speak freely," Mr. Komboa said, once everyone was settled in a comfortable chair with their glass of brandy in hand. "Red--after talking with his sister Sandi--filled me in on the gist of what you wanted to discuss. I hope you don't mind?"

"Oh, no, that's fine, Mr. Komboa," Dee replied.

"Fine. I don't know how much of my background you know--if any--but most of my friends here," he gestured, indicating his neighbors, "are well acquainted with it.

"It was strange--no, more than that, it was even beat-your-head-against-the-wall silly, that racial prejudice--in fact, prejudice of any kind--ever existed."

"I've heard mostly about racial prejudice, but to what other types of prejudice are you alluding?" Dee asked.

Mr. Komboa chuckled. He didn't find prejudice funny in a comedic, humorous way, but rather in the sense of being ridiculous. "You name it, Dee: there was gender-prejudice, income-level prejudice, age-prejudice, prejudice against people who lived in other countries, prejudice *within* countries based on what specific region a person lived in. Throughout the earth in the last days, Americans were unpopular almost everywhere. *Within* the United States, people from California, in particular, faced prejudice from residents of other states. *Within* California, animosity sometimes existed between those who lived in the southern part of the state and those who resided in the northern part of the state. Within cities there was prejudice based on the exact *neighborhood* a person lived in. There were even prejudices over superficial things like facial hair, the type of automobile a person drove, or where it had been manufactured. I could go on and on, I guess, but probably the primary ones were the first few I enumerated."

"That's just so...I don't know," Dee stammered. "I don't know how to express it."

"Stupid?" Angus suggested.

"Yes," Dee laughed. "You took the words right out of my mouth, Mr. MacDougal"

"And prejudice spanned all class lines," Mr. Komboa continued. "Saloon-keepers, dog-fanciers, and hod-carriers were racists; It spanned all economic lines: the haves as well as the have-nots had representatives who suffered from that particular mental disease; It spanned all levels of intelligence: some of the bright and articulate as well as many of the dull and illiterate were prejudiced; It even spanned time and space: during whatever time period a person lived in the old system, and no matter where on the face of the earth, *some* group was discriminated against by some other group, for one superficial reason or another.

"I myself faced a lot of racial prejudice in my life during the old system. In fact, as a reaction to that, I became quite a rabid racist myself, and remained so for quite awhile. I'm not proud of this, mind you, but I used to call white people 'devils'."

"Apparently some were," Dolores interjected.

"It still wasn't right--or logical--for me to call them that. Yes, white people had committed a lot of atrocities. But if I had been totally honest with myself, I would have seen that many of my fairer-skinned fellowmen were as good as anyone else. And I would have had to admit, too, that there were many non-white people who were not at all exemplary. As proof of that, people of my *own* race murdered *me*. And their motives were not even sincere--they killed me out of jealousy and as revenge for wounded pride and an attempt to retain power or gain more power.

"Religion proved to be the most divisive of all things in the old system. It was too often marked by greed, inordinate pride--that is, pride that elevates oneself above ones fellowmen--and rabid intolerance ('my way is the right way, and if you don't accept it, I'll kill you').

"Anyway, after being resurrected and learning better, I was ashamed of that--my earlier manifestations of prejudice, that is. After meeting all the truly wonderful people here now--of every race, color, national origin, and background--what I should have seen earlier became obvious to me: no race or group of people had a monopoly on wickedness in the old system, nor do any corner the market in good qualities.

"When I recall now how I used to feel about certain things, it just kind of bemuses me. That was so long ago, things have changed so much--and

I've changed so much--that it almost seems like it was a different person who felt that way. And, you can only be penitent so long. After all, death pays for all sins, right? I was resurrected with a clean slate..."

"For what it's worth, *I* forgive you, Mr. Komboa."

"Thank you, Dee. And I, in turn, have forgiven everyone else," Mr. Komboa added.

As amazing as it seemed to her, Dee was slowly giving credence to the things she had found so outrageous: so there really *had* been prejudice--not just racial, but a cornucopia of prejudices, seemingly as many flavors and types and subtypes as there were people; atrocities in war *had been* commonplace; many people had lived in luxury while their fellowmen literally starved to death; women aborted their babies, sometimes as nonchalantly as if they were simply throwing out the bath water.

Dee shook her head. "I sure am glad I didn't live back then," she said. "I would have just wanted to crawl into a hole and hide."

"Let's forget about all that mean old stuff," Mr. Komboa suggested. "I've got just the idea! Let's all go to the dance."

"The dance? What dance?" inquired Jasper Barleywine, Mr. Komboa's neighbor to the north.

"*The Funky Toadstool Crushers* are playing down at the community hall tonight," Mr. Komboa answered. "Those cats can really jump and jive! It's sure to be a rip-roaring good time. What do you all say?"

As if on cue, the entire assemblage of friends rose and clopped their way down the wooden steps and onto the dirt road. On the way they talked about this and that--nothing of heraldic import, just the type of things friends discuss when they're relaxing and enjoying one another's company.

* * *

After an evening during which the musical offerings ran the gamut from doo-wop to jazz, from bluegrass to blues, from reggae to soul, and some musical styles you have never yet heard or heard of, and during which the dances ranged from the jitterbug to the stroll, the fox-trot to the bop, and from the twist and the mashed potato to break dancing, and all sorts of impromptu improvisations, the exhausted group of friends headed back to their respective homes.

Mr. Komboa was the best dancer Dee had ever seen. She spent the night in the village hostel and, after stopping by in the morning to thank Mr.

Kombo for his time and hospitality, hopped back in her AirJet.

This is a great place to visit, but there's only one place in the world like Esitrevda, Dee thought, as she slid into the seat of her Langewiesche, which had accumulated more miles in the last week than she had put on it in the first 5 years she had owned it.

Chapter 26

Instead of flying straight home, Dee flew a northerly course and, after leaving her AirJet next to a train station she spotted in a rural area, boarded the train heading west to King & Kingdom. She wanted to pay another visit to the Museum of the Failed Experiment.

With a fresh perspective on the veracity of the curators and the credibility of the exhibits and merit of what they had to offer, Dee planned to spend the entire day there--this time voluntarily--and try to get a better understanding of just what things were like in the old system, and why.

As she entered the 20th century building, she heard a familiar voice. "Everybody hoppy?"

It was Mr. Ishi, of course. She followed the sound of the voice down the corridor that led to the 1910-1919 wing. Dee approached the crowd that was gathered around the Yahi Indian, anxious to get a chance to talk to him--but she was a little embarrassed, too, in light of her less-than-friendly manner the last time she had seen him.

Mr. Ishi saw Dee but betrayed only the barest sign of recognition: a momentary twinkle in his eye and the trace of a wry smile that graced his face for a fleeting moment, but then quickly vanished.

After Mr. Ishi had finished his presentation and answered a few questions--and yes, demonstrated how to make fire without the aid of matches or a 'fire finger' (lighter), he addressed the young lady smiling, albeit somewhat sheepishly, at him from behind an exhibit case.

"Ms. Dee, welcome back! I see you've come to acquire some more misinformation at the Museum of the Big Fat Whopping Lies," he teased. He could tell from Dee's countenance that that was not at all the case. Somehow she had realized that she had been wrong--that was obvious to Mr. Ishi.

"Mr. Ishi, I... I owe you an apology."

Ishi held up his right hand, palm outward, towards Dee. She had seen a few of the old 'cowboy and Indian' movies from the 1930s and 1940s, and almost expected him to say 'How!' in a melodramatic, baritone voice.

He didn't, of course.

"There is no need, Ms. Dee. Now you are here, and your last visit doesn't matter. You will see it now with unclouded eyes."

There was no one else in the 20th Century antechamber at the moment, so Mr. Ishi grabbed Dee lightly by the tip of her elbow and escorted her around the wing, showing her the exhibits dealing with The Gilded Age, The Great War, the Spanish Influenza, and various and sundry other things.

When another group of visitors entered the building, Mr. Ishi excused himself from Dee to speak with them. She tried again to apologize to him for her rudeness on her visit to him at his village, but he held up the index and middle fingers of his right hand and pressed them lightly against Dee's lips.

"Shhh," he whispered, and smiled at her. "Go, and teach other skeptical ones about what you have seen and heard. If you didn't believe, there will be others. They can benefit from your experience."

With that, Mr. Ishi turned on his heels and greeted the new visitors. "Everybody hoppy?" he asked, with a grin so wide that it was obvious that *he* was.

* * *

After slowly perusing the various exhibits in the 20th Century wing, and its ancillary, decade-specific wings, Dee noticed a section that she had overlooked on her first visit: the 21st Century room. The exhibit was not large enough to command an entire wing--it was just one room with a few alcoves depicting various key events.

What struck Dee the most about this section of the museum was the set of 'before and after' pictures it houses. Sets of photographs taken from all over Vavilovia--both in the old system and again in the new--visually depict how various areas have changed from then until now. Images taken from the upper air slots showing entire zones--covered by deserts in the old system, bedecked with rivers flowing through green valleys now; others showing fires and smoke in the old system contrasted with the lush green of the rain forest canopy now; yet others show close-ups of individual land assignments, some of which had been covered with garbage and monstrous signs advertising such things as Irish restaurants bearing a pair of grotesquely stylized golden rainbows as its logo, but which are now verdant fields producing vividly-colored crops from rich, black soil; still others displaying the sites of former megalopolises such as New York, London, Rome, Athens, Teheran, Baghdad, and Cairo.

In the 'now' version of these photographs, these areas now support small

cities, or a few villages--there are no more colossal cities. Where New York City used to stand, for example, in the section that was called Manhattan Island, there is a charming little village inhabited primarily by Native Americans.

Dee shuddered at the thought of what it must have been like to live in the old system. The dirty, dangerous, and noisy cities. The acrid stench of the pollution. The coarseness of daily life. If such could even be called living. Dee was glad she had never had to experience such first hand, and felt empathy for those who had. And yet, for those who knew both worlds, the contrast would surely help them appreciate this one all the more. *I can now understand my 4-, 5-, 6-, and 7parents better than I ever did before*, Dee realized.

Dee thought particularly of those particular ancestors--although she has many others, too--because they had lived during the worst part of the old system, when it was in its death throes, in the final decades before the Millennial Dawn.

Chapter 27

On the short train ride east back to her AirJet, Dee mused about how her father was right, after all (as much as it irritated her to admit that, even to herself). And now she thought about how she needed something tangible to do; something that she could really sink her teeth into. Being footloose and fancy-free was enjoyable for a time and a season, but one does need to make some kind of a contribution in order to go beyond fun to the more important feelings of contentment and satisfaction.

As Dee walked over to her AirJet, a man stepped into her path, seemingly appearing from nowhere. Barefoot like Mr. Ishi and Ms. Loam, the eccentrically dressed man (who was wearing an old Cleveland Indians baseball cap, a long and loose shirt, and cut-offs) offered Dee an apple--a Golden Delicious.

"Mr. Chapman! What a surprise," Dee exclaimed. "I haven't seen you for quite some time."

"Dee," (Mr. Chapman was on first-name terms with practically everybody, and never forgot a name or face, or the mapping between the two) "I've been on a walking tour throughout the southeastern part of Alegria--just returned."

The two chatted for awhile about Mr. Chapman's peripatetic ramblings. Dee didn't mention her own recent trips. Someday she would tell Mr. Chapman about them, when he stopped by the house--which he usually did when he was in their neck of the woods.

"My mother told me to tell you the next time I saw you that you are to stop by for a piece of pie. She has a whole cellar plum-full of apples, you know--thanks to you."

"Apple pie? You don't have to ask me twice about that. I'll be there one of these days soon. I want to check up on your father's orchard, too, to see how it's getting along."

"He would enjoy that, I'm sure," Dee replied. "I know he appreciates benefiting from your expertise."

John Chapman disappeared into the brush as suddenly as he had arrived.

* * *

As Dee flew south, homeward, she played a game of aerobatic mimicry with the birds. She would catch sight of one, fly up alongside it, and copy everything it did. If it dove, she dove. If it circled, she circled, staying abreast the bird's outside wing. If it did a roll, so did she. Some of the more enterprising avians, realizing what Dee was up to and in an attempt to 'stump' her, even flew upside down for a time, or hovered in one spot. But Dee, natural-born aviatrix that she is, could perform even these maneuvers, albeit surely not with quite the same fluidity and grace the birds had--but don't tell her I said that!

As Dee returned home and carefully guided her trusty AirJet into its accustomed spot in the barn, and covered it with the tarpaulin, she marveled at just how bad life was in the old system, especially compared to how good it is now. Dee has always had a *joie de vivre*, but on reflection and by comparison, she from then on appreciated even more just how good things are now.

Dee entered the house. Her parents looked up as she walked in. Her mother approached and gave her a hug. "Dee, we missed you. How was your trip?"

"It was great, mom!" Dee beamed.

"Great?" her father inquires, hands on hips. "You mean it was *fun*, or you learned something?"

Dee walked up to her father and eyed him gravely. "Dad, I'll tell you exactly what I learned: You just don't appreciate how good you have it."

Dee's father flinched. An exasperated expression clouded his face. He stared, dumbfounded, at his daughter. Mr. De Parto was taken aback by his daughter's reproof and almost shocked speechless that she would think he didn't *already* appreciate how good he had it.

But then his expression changed to a bemused comprehension. He realized that his daughter was pulling his leg. He smiled at her; a smile with a depth and degree of warmth she hadn't seen from him since she was a little girl. Father and daughter hugged. Then Ms. De Parto approached the two and joined in, adding her pair of arms to the mix.

"Welcome home, Dee," her parents said in unison. After a few moments, Mr. De Parto, with a hand lightly resting on her shoulder, looked inquiringly at his daughter.

"What are you going to do with the rest of the summer, Dee?" he asked. Dee couldn't recall her father calling her 'Dee' since she was a little girl. She smiled.

"Dad, I have some fences to mend and apologies to make. I need to go back to visit some people whom I mistrusted and offended."

"You could just call them, Dee," Mr. De Parto suggested. "I'm sure they would understand. After all, it's a long way, and--"

"No, dad, I feel I need to go see them personally. I insulted them in person, so I should apologize in person."

Grabbing a couple of apples from the kitchen--one for herself, and one for a friend--Dee headed out the door.

A few minutes later, Dee and her mount were traveling westwards, with the orange-red celestial canvas slowly and softly undulating, signifying the day's termination.

Chapter Last

Dee, in the end, decided to become a history teacher. Her area of expertise, that is to say the time period on which she concentrates and in which she has become a noted authority, is the early 21st Century--the time period when everything in the old system collapsed, just prior to the Millennial Dawn.

Dee likes to teach people about the things that brought about the disintegration of that old system: religiously motivated wars, environmental pollution, terrorism, water shortages, and disease. Dee teaches a people-centric (as opposed to event-centric) brand of history. She relates events from the standpoint of real people. It is easier to *truly* understand the import and meaning of events when we can empathize with actual people who dealt with those events and the conditions that such events brought about, or caused. Considering just the surface facts and figures, it is sometimes difficult to get the import of what those things *really* meant to the people involved, the contemporaries of the events. As Dee often says, 'We all have a story to tell--and, sooner or later--we do.'

But don't think that Dee got right down to work that summer after returning from her fence-mending and amend-making trips. She took full advantage of the remainder of her time to ride Ross, spend time with her friends, and visit her relatives.

In fact, it was on a trip to visit her 5parents that summer that Dee and I first met. In the course of time, we married. Dolores De Parto is now Dolores Free. It is the year 2525, and life couldn't be better.

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BlackbirdCRaven@aol.com