

The God Story

By John D. Boenke

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John D. Boenke was born in 1926 in Rossford, Ohio and grew up during the Great Depression. He served in the U. S. Army in 1946 - 47 in the Medical Corps. In 1951 he received a degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics from the University of Michigan. After college, Mr. Boenke worked in research and engineering for the General Electric Company. Later he was the Manager of an engineering test laboratory for Lau Blower Company, then Chief Engineer for Halsey Taylor Water Cooler Corp. and Senior Design Engineer for The Werner Ladder Company. Before retiring in 1989, Mr. Boenke also owned and operated a small motel in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

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“This is the way the world ends.
Not with a bang, but a whimper.”
T. S. Eliot

Introduction

The most intriguing question for the human race since the beginning of consciousness has been, “Why are we here?” It is often answered by, “We are here to do god’s work.” This then demands that there be a god. That is, there must be a superior unknown force which has caused all of the World, including Humans, to be in existence. These Humans therefore must live in the World according to god’s rules, and the rules are usually enunciated by the older members of the group who are the ad hoc, self proclaimed wiser ones.

This story is a fictional account of a reasonable, loving and charitable god in the same scenario, with a few different twists. It is intended to amuse and entertain while poking fun at ourselves and our human failings and frailties. I hope my reader will be able to enjoy it with an open mind and a carefree heart.

John D. Boenke

Characters

God	the one and only
Sumandra	a Guru and God's archangel associate
Walter Altman	history Professor
Harriett Altman	wife of Walter
Thomas Altman	son of Walter and Harriett
Jim Gentry	physicist
Sara Gentry	wife of Jim
Tim and Eli	twin sons of Jim and Sara
Anne	daughter of Jim and Sara
William Tyndale	Newspaper Editor
Elizabeth Tyndale	Daughter of William
Dan Bromley	Director of Sanderson Laboratory
Louise Braun	Bromley Assistant
David Sanderson	Donor of Gravitation Laboratory
Patricia Green	Climatologist - gardener
William Starnes	Manager of Pollution Control Research
Dr. Donald Mason	Obstetrician - researcher
Edward Burns	Research Director, Solent Institute
Jules Maranski	Theoretical Physicist
John Grady	Paranormal Investigator
Androv	infiltrator - illegal immigrant
Donna Latimer	Supervisor Forever Yours Insurance Co.
Margaret Odelle	VP Forever Yours Insurance Co..
Bill Adams	high school coach - farmer
Ed Jackson	Zoologist - gardener
James Gordon	Captain of Cruise Ship
Robert Smith	Inspector at Emigration Office

VENUES

A Lush Garden in Heaven

Central City - A medium sized city with many suburbs

Eastwood Hospital - A small neighborhood hospital

Central City University - The local university

Central City Government Offices

Federal Government Offices

Fair Weather Ann - A Cruise Ship

Parkman Hospital - A large central hospital

Central City Elderly Care - An Elderly and Hospice care facility

THE GOD STORY

CHAPTER ONE

With his hands firmly on the steering wheel, Walter drove cautiously but as rapidly as he could in the dark considering the rain and slick streets, while remaining ever mindful of the precious cargo the car carried. Eastwood hospital was not much farther, and though he was intent on his driving, he was aware of a soft moan from Harriett who was lying back on her reclining seat, which told him she was having another contraction causing him to redouble his attention to his purpose. Turning the corner onto Main street, he was presented with several blocks of straight ahead driving, which seemed to pass by at a snail's pace until the hospital emergency entrance gradually emerged out of the gloomy night, and he carefully guided the car to the lonely looking, dimly lit, admissions door. They had arrived.

The hospital personnel rapidly and efficiently maneuvered Harriett into a wheel chair and whisked her off to a bedroom while Walter took care of the of the inevitable paperwork. Some minutes later when he rejoined Harriett in her hospital room, doctor Mason was already there standing by the bed and examining some charts. Turning decisively towards Walter he made the reassuring pronouncement, "It won't be long now. I'll have her taken to the delivery room right away."

Walter sat down and took Harriett's hand, as she looked up at him. "Everything is going fine, dear." he told her. "The doctor says it won't be long." and she smiled. He sat holding her hand until the nurses came to wheel her away, then he gave her a parting kiss and watched them disappear down the hall.

Walter elected to wait and rest a while in the plush waiting room across the hall from the delivery rooms and settled into a deep soft chair. It had been a long hard day and now it was late at night. As he sat his thoughts wandered. "I am satisfied that Harriett and I have elected to have just one child. One is really all we can afford to assure we may give the child the best opportunity to succeed in a confusing world which is in turmoil in so many ways. With all the conflicts, competition, political and social problems, and the apparent degradation of human life in general by pollution both in the environment and the culture, in addition to all the usual problems of just existing, it is simply not fair to have more than one child." Walter thought of today's world compared to the world he had known as a youngster, which was during a much simpler time. Life was more straightforward back then, but now so many old ways were being dropped, and the modern world at times seemed to be running out of control. As he sat and became more and more comfortable, he dozed.

He was awakened by a nurse summoning him to the delivery room for the final minutes of the birth. It was amazing and it seemed almost immediately the doctor was handing the child to a nurse for his first bath. He looked down in wonder at his son and smiled at his handsome face as he mused, “Well, Thomas Altman, what kind of life are you going to have?”

Harriett was very tired and almost asleep but he bent down to give her a kiss as Tom was placed in her arms. Walter then helped trundle the gurney back to Harriett’s room so they could be together as a family.

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God sat in his favorite garden, enjoying the fragrance arriving on the heavy air from the perfect rose blooms. Other bushes bore more exotic flowers, and several had different flowers on each stalk with color variations which covered the complete range of possibilities. Beyond the roses, dark green shrubs and trees provided a fitting background for an idyllic, timeless scene. God waited quietly, knowing that Guru Sumandra would soon be there. The Guru had just completed a long and useful life on Earth, and was ready for a calmer, more rewarding experience for the foreseeable future.

After an indeterminate time an old man entered the garden gate. Though his appearance was that of a man in his 80's, his step was that of an eager youth. Archangel Sumandra quickly crossed to where God sat, and with a bright smile said, “Oh Lord! it is good to see you again.”

“Ah, Guru! It is fine to have you back here in the garden. Although your work on Earth was marvelous and useful, your return here is most pleasing to me. You have earned any reward you wish, and I have realized the joy of having you again at my side.”

“Lord, it is a wonderful feeling to be here in your presence, and to be able to put behind me the stress and intensity of life on Earth.” Sumandra sat back, relaxed and opened himself to the aromas and visual pleasures of the garden. His Being seemed to become more vibrant as he absorbed the healing atmosphere of the exotic garden. The two fell into a reverie, and communed simply by appreciating each others spiritual entity.

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Harriett had done a lot of investigative work and knew that the Pumpkin Patch day care facility was the best child care facility in town. She

parked the car and disentangled Tom from his seat. He seemed eager as he toddled along beside her, holding her hand as they proceeded to the front door. They came into a bright neat office with a smiling lady behind a small desk.

“Hello, I am Harriett Altman, and this is Tom.”

“Yes, Ms. Altman, we have been expecting you.” The receptionist squatted down in front of Tom and held out her hand with a smile. “Hello Tom, would you like to go with me and play with some toys in our playroom and see some other children?”

Harriett had explained as best she could to Tom that the place they were going would be fun and safe, but Tom looked up at his mother to see her reaction. She smiled and looking straight at Tom assured him, “It’s alright Tom, you may play a while and I will be back to pick you up later.” Tom turned and toddled off with the receptionist. Harriett watched and thought, “He always seems comfortable with others. I hope that never changes.”

Harriett planned to return in two hours which was all they recommended for a first time at playschool. After the child became accustomed to the surroundings the time would be gradually lengthened. Turning to leave she felt a slight pang of regret that childhood could not last forever. but she knew Tom would be well cared for in this new experience. As she drove off she sighed, “Tom is beginning to grow up.”

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After many moments in the peaceful garden or perhaps only a few, God stirred and spoke further, “I am particularly glad you are here, Sumandra, because I have stored up many topics to explore with you. Your reactions to my ideas have always been of prime importance to me, and now I can once more have the benefit of your keen insight and clear thinking which is your greatest attribute.”

“Lord, you overestimate me. You know I am but your servant, and I only express to you what is in my heart. I am your creation, and my joy is in being useful to you.”

God smiled. His eyes twinkled, the creases of his face radiated warmth and understanding, his hair electrified the atmosphere, and an aura of peace and acceptance engulfed his Being. “Yes, Sumandra you are my trusted and worthy servant, but you are also my indispensable savant. Your responses to my probing thoughts help me more than you can understand. Truly, it is my pleasure to have you with me to enjoy the exchange of ideas and to renew our neglected companionship.”

The two Beings rested for a season, or perhaps it was an only an instant, quietly accepting the comfort and gratification the rose garden so copiously exuded. After a time God turned slowly but purposefully to the Guru and spoke, "Sumandra, you have just had a tiring and trying, but very worthwhile experience on Earth. I want to talk to you about that. I must tell you I have been concerned for a long time that the experiment there is not working. The steady stream of pleas I hear on all sides from the world, the knowledge of outrageous behavior, the small-minded actions of such a large number of my Beings and the greed and meanness which run rampant on Earth, all disturb me. Although many souls have a relatively positive experience on Earth and return here in pleasure such as you, the enormous crowd of basically good spirits which return here in shame and disgrace upsets me and even disrupts our peaceful atmosphere. As you remember, Earth was to have been a place where large numbers of innocent souls would have the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of physical existence for a lifetime, but it seems there is more displeasure than there is pleasure. I have begun to have serious doubts as to the usefulness of human life on Earth. It does not seem to be improving many of my pure souls, but only abusing and distracting them from their enjoyment with needless suffering and by their vulnerability to experiencing evil."

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Sara Gentry fell back in the large soft chair and relaxed. The boys had just dashed out of the door to get to school almost on time, and Sara could now turn to the day's housework. But for a moment she relished the condition of not doing anything and followed her thoughts.

"The boys are active and bright. Having twins was more than we had bargained for, but the worst is over and life is busy but easier. I still wish one had been a girl. A sweet little girl who would not be as noisy as two boys. Perhaps there is still time. We could do it again, we are both in excellent health, and we can certainly afford it. Yet the population is getting to be a problem, would it be fair to have another child? I wonder how Jim would feel about that?"

The thought followed her around all day, and she struggled with the pros and cons of the action. "What will Jim think? What will our friends who are committed to only one child think? Who cares what they think? Am I just being self indulgent? What if it turns out to be another boy?" The day passed, the boys returned from school, Jim got home from work, and the little family slipped into evening activities. It was very late before she could broach the subject with Jim.

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The two Beings sat again for a long while, or perhaps only a moment, while absorbing the enriching and healing ambiance of their exotic surroundings. Finally, Guru Sumandra turned his face toward God and sadly began, "Lord, you have reason to be concerned. The Earth is, or was, a beautiful place. For millions of years it flourished with the natural laws you set in place. There were checks and balances on all life, and the planet thrived in its diversity. Then, when you introduced a thinking being, so that some of us fortunate spirits might inhabit the Earth and relish physical existence, a mighty change occurred. As you certainly know and have observed, humankind gradually learned to conquer the environment, and as a result our honest souls were adversely affected. The ability of humans to control their environment caused a disastrous imbalance. Gradually, and lately more and more rapidly, the Earth is being destroyed. Even pious souls have great difficulty controlling their own powerful human emotions when they are immediately involved with the everyday occurrences on Earth, and you know I speak from experience.

"The result has been that humankind thrives at the expense of the rest of the planet. I do not see any way this will change. As it is now, emotional reactions continue to override reasonable actions which will result in the Earth being totally consumed and becoming unlivable sometime in the near future."

Sumandra paused to rest and to allow time for his words to be considered. He also arranged his thoughts for further comments, so as to present them most clearly. When he was ready, he continued, "Then there are the wars. The human animal does not seem to be able to exist in peace with other humans. Wars are always in progress, and while each side names you as their leader and claims their position has your endorsement, the true reasons for the wars are usually greed for possessions, or land or power over others. Yes, most often it is power over other humans which drives them to war. The result is to degrade the quality of life for all humans, and compound misery and pain in the world. It leaves their spirits poorer, and leads them to confusion in their purpose.

"The spirituality of Humans demands peace and cooperation, but the press of circumstances sometimes forces ill considered actions. When some wiser individuals point out the inconsistency of their action with their basic nature, it causes the group to split. Some take an ethical stance and others adopt a pragmatic stance which results in the group which is more persuasive dominating. Some will still resist, but most will choose to avoid disagreement and conflict by going along with the dominant group and may commit destructive and degrading actions, if that is the intent of the winning side. The mob psychology is difficult to counter. I am afraid that human nature will never change. Humankind could achieve such greatness, although its erratic irrational behavior makes it difficult. But again, I am aware that I am not telling you anything of which you are not cognizant."

When Sumandra stopped speaking, a prodigious silence resounded throughout the garden. He sat quietly and let the pleasures of the garden ease and relax his mind, which had become agitated by his expressions of the Earth's problems. When he had recomposed himself, he resumed his discourse, since further ideas needed to be expressed. "The human mind is an extraordinary result of the evolution process which you created, but it has some serious flaws. The human mind is gullible and seeks easy answers. It adapts to whatever environment in which it

finds itself. Children, for the most part, accept without question the attitudes and ideas their parents hold. Very few give serious thought to their basic life purposes, but bend to the will of the majority of their compatriots in the same way the stalks of grain in a field bend to its will of the slightest breeze.

“This easy compliance only enhances the power of anyone who does take a stand and steps out, no matter whether it is in a good or an evil direction. Followers with lazy minds find these leaders, and without exercising critical thinking or using clear judgment, they increase the numbers in the leader's movement and make it viable.

“In contrast to this, the human mind can also be very stubborn, and narrow in thought. The slightest difference in another human's ideas or even appearance is cause enough for others to isolate that person or group. This results in many small groups separated by trivial differences. The various ethnic groups are one example. The numerous sects and schisms in their, so called, ‘religious’ world is an even better example. As you can see, I have serious doubts that the experiment is a success.”

Sumandra stopped, having finished his answer to God's question. He sat, somewhat surprised by himself as he considered the extent and forcefulness of his own words. He sat quietly and cautiously anticipated with trepidation how God would receive them.

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Walter Altman threw the evening paper down in disgust, and sat back in silent contemplation. “They are at it again. Nothing but war to settle the small differences people hold.” He recalled the Comparative Religions course he had taken in college. That, along with his studies in history had led him to his position of Atheism, or as he preferred to call it, Secular Humanism.

His thoughts continued. “If there were a god, I think it would be a reasonable god which was not capricious or narrow minded. The discoveries of science show the universe and our world to be coherent and justifiable in the sense that their structure is logical, and the system is controlled by definable and reliable rules which we are continually uncovering. From what we have learned about our well functioning universe, if it were constructed by a super intelligence, that Being would have to be reasonable, rational and intelligent since it is a sensible, rational well ordered universe.

“A reasonable god is in contradistinction to the usual demanding and all powerful god force which is described as the founder of many religions. This idea of a rational, intelligent god is more plausible to me than the traditional anthropomorphized character of most religions which exhibits many if not all of the less than perfect human characteristics and frailties. The traditional god was created in Man's flawed image. This more credible god view is a contrasting concept and gives a more complete representation of a highly intelligent ruling deity.

“If any super intelligence were able to create a universe or multiple universes, I cannot conceive that it would purposely make its creation

into an unrewarding, uninteresting and desolate structure as its end result. By the very nature of being a extremely intelligent god, any structure or system it created would result in an expression of the god's characteristics, and the structure or system would thus be reasonable also. Such a universe resulting from this god's mind would be beautiful in the sense that it would be intricate, complex and work in interesting modes of operation.

"It would be illogical to construct anything with non- functioning parts which would result in chaos rather than a well founded, smoothly running universe. Any conflicts in the system would be avoided and they would be ruled out in the basic plans of the edifice.

"Claiming that a god is the builder of the universe in the first place is an assumption which carries with it the condition that god has the characteristics of a builder rather than the characteristics of a destroyer. As a creator, it would follow naturally to expect the god to create an elegant structure and not just manufacture junk."

Ending his musing and returning to reality, Walter picked up the paper again and turned to the comics. "Perhaps, there are some sensible actions to be found here."

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God considered Sumandra's responses for a minute, or perhaps an hour. His features alternately glowed and glowered, showed joy and pain, distress and calm, then seriousness and finally a relaxed peace. "And what must I do about this situation then? Have you any ideas about that?"

Sumandra smiled. He knew better than to suggest what God should do, and suspected God had already decided on the proper course of action. "No, my Lord. But I am very interested in what you will decide is the correct thing to do."

"What if I inflicted plagues and natural disasters on the human race to make it become more aware of the folly of its actions?"

Without changing expression, Sumandra replied, "Has that worked before?"

God gave him a stern glance, then continued, "An alternative would be to let humankind succeed to an even greater degree, so they would see all the sooner the inevitable outcome and the stupidity of their irresponsibility."

Sumandra shook his head negatively, "It is hardly necessary. They are progressing rapidly enough already. How could their pace be

accelerated?"

God returned to silent meditation, and Sumandra continued to immerse himself in the ambience of the garden. After a long while, or perhaps it was a lifetime, God returned to the conversation. "Thank you, Sumandra, once again you have helped me with a serious decision. Now we can go on to more pleasant things."

"But I don't know what I have done, my Lord. What about Earth? How will you deal with the problems with the human animal?"

God smiled a warm, but inscrutable smile, and added succinctly, "I have taken care of it."

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Sara whistled while she washed the breakfast dishes. She was happy. She was pregnant. Oh, she had not tested herself yet to be positive. She would do that in a few days, but she was sure she was pregnant all right. It had happened just last night. She could not explain how she was certain last night had been special. Many nights had been mostly the same, but she knew. She also felt confident it was going to be a girl. After two boys it was only right that this one should be a girl, so it would be.

Jim would be pleased, too. Jim! She stopped in the midst of rinsing a dish, and while the water played absent mindedly over the clean china, she daydreamed of Jim. He had been the most handsome of the boys in her class at school. Tall, dark haired, and always interesting and pleasant. She often found him immersed in a new book, and was amazed at the way he could explain the most complex ideas or gadgets to her in a manner in which she could understand them. How lucky she had been to begin dating him. How lucky they both were to have each other and a comfortable life together. They were not rich, but they had all they needed and enjoyed good health, at least so far. The noisy splashing of the water brought her back to the present, and Sara smiled again. She was pregnant.

CHAPTER TWO

Professor Bromley was puzzled. Something was wrong. His slight body was lost in a tent of a lab coat topped by his dark hair as he stared

vacuously through the heavy plastic lenses of his glasses out of his office window overlooking the huge building below. The morning sun gleamed on his balding head and highlighted the look of consternation on his face. The large structure he looked down on represented his life's work, containing as it did the culmination of twenty years of his study, learning, and inventive genius.

The building was otherwise known as the Sanderson Gravitation Laboratory. David Sanderson was the alumnus who believed so strongly in Dan Bromley's work that he donated his own resources, ran fund raising drives, cajoled others to contribute, and some people even said he stole, to acquire sufficient finances to build and operate the fantastic structure which bore his name. In the building's interior was housed the graviton detector which was the product of Professor Bromley's mind and his claim to individual greatness. The gigantic structure was required to provide adequate room not only for the massive detectors, but for all the necessary ancillary equipment, the vacuum pumps, the enormous hydraulic facility, the fantastic power circuits, and the delicate and intricate electronics.

Dan Bromley was inseparable from this, his laboratory. Now however, something was wrong, or was it some unique new information which he would have to interpret? During the three years since they had finally made the systems operational, the gravitation data had flowed in steadily and predictably. The variations which occurred related to the changing position and distances of the sun, moon and planets. All had been according to theory, and the results were widely acclaimed. Then, today, or rather, early this morning, suddenly, with no apparent cause, there began to be a slight variation superimposed on the theoretically predicted measurements. What was causing it? Problems in the equipment? Or was it something that had been there all along, but they had not noticed? No! that was improbable. It must be some new phenomenon, but where did it come from? What was causing it?

He was jarred out of his musing by the door of his office opening. A young blonde haired woman entered in her usual brisk fashion carrying papers and notebooks and wearing a very concerned look. Louise Braun was a brilliant physicist who had been an assistant to Doctor Bromley since the laboratory opened. Her concern for the research lab bordered on an obsession. It was her baby as much as it was Doctor Bromley's. "What is it Louise? What have you found?" he inquired.

Louise looked at him blankly, almost as though she had not heard him, but then slowly spoke, "Nothing! We have found nothing to explain the disturbance. All the equipment is functioning properly. We have tested, we have switched circuits, we have checked the isolation systems, and we have found nothing."

She slumped dejectedly into a chair and stared at the floor. Silence followed as the two struggled with their own thoughts. The disturbance was completely unexplainable, and yet it was very clearly there. What was going on?

The tense quietness was shattered by the dissonant reverberations of the telephone bell. Professor Bromley spoke into the instrument. "Bromley here. - What do you mean? --- Well, yes, we do have some unusual results. —(Damn, someone has leaked it already) --- No, we don't believe there is anything wrong with the equipment, but we're in the process of checking everything. --- No, we're presently evaluating the data, but it is much too early to draw any conclusions.-- Of course, --yes, certainly, certainly, As soon as I know, I'll call. --- Yes, goodbye."

Dan Bromley turned to his assistant and vented his feelings, "Damn! That was Sanderson already, wondering what was going on. I couldn't tell him I don't have the foggiest notion. That is the trouble with having generous major benefactors, they're on top of you all the time. He must have an informant in here somewhere among the technicians. I don't know how else he could discover happenings so quickly." He sighed and shifted his attention purposefully to his co-worker. "Let's look at the data again, Louise." The two scientists spread some charts on the desk and studied them intently. "It's certainly a very steady frequency, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Louise, "It measures precisely 37.336 Hertz and does not change. It overrides all the other measurements. It is there on every chart. Look, here is an identical observation from yesterday. Notice the smooth variations. Now today, and the superimposed oscillation. Where did it come from?"

"Yes, where did it come from? How can we explain it? How do we proceed?" He paused a moment and reflected on the situation until the silence seemed unbearable. A wall of frustration seemed to be forming in their minds, nurtured by the silence and seeming to assume the shape of an impenetrable barrier to action. Then, just before the barricade became permanent, Dan Bromley shattered it with a calm and straightforward analysis.

"We can do only two things Louise. Continue taking data on our regular schedule, and continue checking and rechecking all the equipment." Dan turned back to the window and again looked down on the lab. After a few moments more of silence, he added, "One other thing, Louise. Think! Think of what might be interfering or generating or causing this spurious signal. We must have an answer for Sanderson." Louise left him and he turned again to be absorbed in his thoughts. Professor Bromley remained leaning against the window staring into space without seeing and muttering to himself.

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"You have taken care of it, Lord?" Sumandra replied with an astounded expression engulfing his whole being. "I do not understand. But

pardon me, I realize I do not need to understand the marvels that you work, although they do amaze me.”

God had an amused smile on his visage. “My faithful Sumandra, you above all are entitled to know my works. When I set this whole operation into motion a while ago, I built in some safety relief valves so to speak. All I had to do was to initiate the proper action and several events could take place to change the experiment or do all manner of modifications to it or to terminate it, so I used them to solve the problem.”

“And if I may ask, what action was that?”

“It is much too complicated to explain, so let me just say I pushed the NO MORE PREGNANCIES button. I have decided to end the experiment.”

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Patricia Green read the gauges again and rescanned the overnight reports. “It can't really be that high can it?” she muttered to herself. She jotted Some numbers into her notebook, and closed it resolutely. With a determined look on her face she drew her slight frame to its full height and headed for the manager's office. He had not believed her up to now, but these numbers were decisive. The Kappa Factor contamination calculations were increasing rapidly. They were approaching dangerous levels.

“This has gone far enough,” she exclaimed out loud, “I will have to convince him this time. Maybe it is already too late. Perhaps the human race cannot survive this level now.” She sighed. How could she do more to make these dangers known. Time was running out, and she would just have to do her best. Walking firmly down the hall to the corner office she stopped in front of the imposing door which was boldly inscribed “Dr. William Starnes, Manager of Pollution Studies.” Taking a deep breath Patricia knocked.

“Come in,” a deep voice resounded on the other side of the door. She stepped into the room and stood in front of the massive desk. William Starnes was a stocky white haired person with a pleasant face and a bland smile. He was a political appointee and he filled the position as adequately as anyone else. It was a quiet and easy job. “What can I do for you Pat?”

“Sir, I have just completed the monthly review of our local numbers and the nationwide readings and they have increased again. The Kappa

Factor is higher now that it has ever been, and I am concerned that it is getting to be a real threat. I think it is time to let others know so that some action can be taken.”

“Now Pat, calm down. We have been through this before. You know there are many initiatives being undertaken to control these pollution problems, and many good people are working on the solutions. If we were suddenly to raise an uproar it would upset all the good work which is being done and may compromise some of the studies. That would not be to anyone’s advantage. The President has had enough resistance already to doing all that he is doing and we cannot make that look ineffective.”

“But Sir, aren’t we supposed to be sort of a watch dog group and alert others if the course of events gets worse?”

“Certainly, but we cannot cry ‘wolf’ needlessly either. We need to wait until we are positive of the situation. That will be time enough. You know the Kappa Factor is sort of a fictitious number anyway, combining weighted averages of many components. I believe the individual numbers of the various pollutants may be more important than the combined total actually. Please relax and go back to work.”

Patricia’s determination sagged as did her shoulders and her chin, She turned and exited the office. On the way back to her laboratory she mused, “What am I supposed to do? Doctor Starnes is in charge, all I can do is follow orders.”

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Sumandra was stunned. “No more pregnancies! How can you accomplish that?”

God remained quiet for a long period and Sumandra realized the Lord was unhappy with the turn of events, but Sumandra did not doubt for a moment the reasonableness of God’s decision. It must be difficult for him to abandon a project he had untaken with such enthusiasm. “I am sorry Lord, I must not question you. It is one of my many failings.”

“Oh Sumandra, the decision to stop the human race is the difficult part, but accomplishing it is easy. Actually the humans will do it mostly to themselves.”

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The Obstetrician's office waiting room was unremarkable. It was similar to hundreds of such rooms in any part of the country, but it was special to Sara only because she had been here on previous occasions with the former pregnancy of her twin boys. It was very early in the pregnancy, but now it was going to be a girl! She just knew it. Doctor Mason had practiced many years as an obstetrician and followed a regular schedule with his patients, which made her feel comfortable under his care.

While she waited, Sara thumbed idly through a medical journal laying on the table. It was a relatively recent publication, just a week old in fact, but her eyes caught a small article on a back page which she read in its entirety. It seems the office which keeps statistics on the volume of the baby business had noticed a strange anomaly in the last month. New patients reported by the participating doctors had taken a precipitously steep drop, and the newer ones were those who were already a few months along in their pregnancy. There was speculation that it was caused by the weather, or economic conditions, or various other reasons, but a rosy assurance followed in the article that it would undoubtedly be up again next week.

Sara laid the magazine aside and sat back to relax and close her eyes. What would this child be like? Her boys were healthy and “all boy” as Jim liked to say. They were active in sports, but good in their school work also. Now they would have a little sister. How will they react to that development? How would they treat her? She would be too much younger and smaller to join in their games, “But she'll hold her own with them, I'll bet.” She heard herself saying out loud, then looked around self-consciously to see if anyone had noticed. She reassured herself the other two women in the office were too absorbed in their own conversation to have heard her remark. Sara smiled, and enjoyed the thought of a little girl in her life.

That evening as she and Jim watched the news, Sara was quickly reminded about the article she had seen that day in the doctor's office. On the news there was a major story about the decline in pregnancies. In fact, they were now saying there had been no verifiable new pregnancies in roughly the last month. That was about when Sara's pregnancy had started. Had there been no more since then?

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Sumandra closed his eyes and laid back in meditation. After a time he spoke “You are right, Lord! My own recent experience on Earth showed me the human race cannot contain its desire for greater and greater acquisitions and growth. I might say they seem to have no regard for how they are ruining the environment. Earth is still beautiful in many places, but their actions are gradually destroying everything. They are building a hell in Eden.”

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The following day the morning paper had a blazing headline “NO MORE CHILDREN?” The newspaper reported that there were detailed investigations going on in all parts of the country, and even all over the world. For some inexplicable reason, it seemed women had not been getting pregnant for at least the last month. Studies were being conducted in all countries, but nowhere was anyone turning up evidence of new pregnancies. The latest ones without exception had all started before about July 23rd. It seemed to be the same date worldwide. There was widespread speculation in the scientific community, but almost universal disagreement. Every expert had his or her own theory as to why this had happened, and many research projects were being initiated to determine the cause.

Sara read the newspaper articles completely, then went back and read them again. “What is going on?” she wondered out loud. “Whatever it is, I’m certainly glad I got pregnant when I did. A day later would have been too late.” On another page of the newspaper, the religious community had picked up the subject with a vengeance. The popular evangelists were raising a hue and cry that “The Lord is passing his judgment on the human race. Repent now oh ye sinners! Armageddon is coming!” More moderate, mainstream sects were advising caution in actions, but counseling their parishioners still to be sure their hearts were “pure and with the Lord” and to pray for the end of this curse on reproduction.

Some of the radicals were claiming it was a plot by one of the more advanced countries to limit the population of the world only to themselves. She read aloud to herself, “Eventually we will see pregnancies again, but they will be just among the perpetrators of this abominable act and everyone else will be excluded. They are trying to eliminate everyone who is not of their special group.”

Sara set the paper aside, and pondered the news. “What if there never are any more children conceived? What will happen then? What would happen to the human race? Why has this come about, really? Suppose it was some foreign group working for its own ends. Still, how did they accomplish it?” It was too much for Sara to consider, and she put it out of her mind and turned to her daily tasks. She could live her life only one day at a time and wait with the rest of humanity to learn the outcome of this situation.

CHAPTER THREE

Eight Months Later

Most people heard the news of the end of births with stunned silence which quickly changed to every other reaction imaginable. Some countries had riots in the streets blaming an already unpopular government with further crimes against the people. It seemed everyone was demanding explanations which were not forthcoming because they were nonexistent.

Churches found themselves besieged with congregations which demanded answers. The religious radicals were warning of God's judgment and advising all to repent and join their true religion before the final days. Other more moderate faiths, were advising prayer and soul searching, but offered no plausible explanations.

Practical people immediately thought of their own old age. The mature adults who had already made retirement plans considered the ramifications of this event for them. Most young people had not fully realized the implications of what a declining and aging population would be like.

Scientists were scrambling to find some rational explanation in any field of investigation no matter how obscure. No one could say with certainty that a particular cause was the one related to the termination of all pregnancies. There was a massive effort started to determine whether in vitro processes could replace the natural order, but early results were completely negative. Even with previously successful frozen sperm and eggs, no fertilization took place. It was as though the fertilization process was no longer a possible biological event.

In general, the whole world was in turmoil and the birth crisis affected everyday actions of almost everyone. Social pundits compared it to the mass extinctions of animals which the archeologists reported happened in much earlier times. The implication was that this event was only another natural event of some sort through which some individuals might survive.

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Sumandra watched in wonder. He had never seen God this way before, quiet, composed, and yet very disturbed. The Lord's face was a cacophony of expressions. The extremes of joy and sorrow alternately flashed from his eyes and his electrified hair writhed in emotional release. From his long relationship with the Lord, Sumandra realized this was not a good time to interrupt Him. Sumandra sat silently and waited, while the moments dragged by. Finally the Lord's face returned to calm, He smiled and looked again at Sumandra and spoke.

“There! I have worked through the emotions! Now I can take a rational view again. Would that all my dear souls could do the same during their life experience. Emotions are good for many situations, but they do at times get in the way of rational thought and judicious ways of behaving.”

“I realize you are very upset, my Lord. It must be most disturbing to give up an effort that has meant so much to you.”

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April 1st! April fools day. “What a laugh it would be,” thought Sara, “if all this nonsense of no more children suddenly came to an end today.” Unfortunately, it did not. For the last eight months the topic was in the news every day with new theories and new implications for the world economy. However, she was more concerned with her own impending delivery. Doctor Mason was almost out of the “Baby business.” She and one or two more were the last of his patients, and he had decided to turn to other activities when the last child had been delivered.

Some of the obstetricians were switching to pediatrics, although most of them saw that as a disappearing field also. Many of the younger obstetricians were transferring to disciplines far from children’s concerns, some even moved into geriatrics. There were major changes in the hospitals also. Delivery rooms and nurseries were becoming available for other purposes along with the inevitable reduction in staff. Sara felt secure in her thoughts, since the hospital had already made a commitment to have the facilities ready when she needed them. After the end of this month though, would they ever be needed again?

Sara turned on the television. Watching TV was all she wanted to do these last few weeks. It took so little effort, and her bulk demanded that extended effort be reduced. Jim and the boys were being very helpful, even to the extent of doing some cooking and housework, but there were still many things that she felt she must do herself. She wondered idly whether Jim’s and the boys’ attitude would change again after little Anne (she knew it was a girl now from the sonogram) arrived. She certainly hoped not.

It was a relief for her and a great experience for the boys to be involved with the house and family more than they had been before this pregnancy. Sara detected they felt a certain excitement with the prospect of having a little sister also.

The television picture seized her attention as she recognized the large congressional hearing room where so many investigations had been played out recently. The crisis committee named Fertility Lack Of Populations (otherwise known as FLOP) which had been appointed by the President was presenting its first report on the sudden fertility problem throughout the world which had begun last July 23rd. It seemed the

investigators offered several possibilities, but would not isolate any particular one. This was a preliminary review of those scientists who had any ideas at all about the phenomenon.

One expert had made a case that the recent increased solar activity resulting in the Earth experiencing unusual radiations was the cause. Another faction held that the general level of toxicity of the atmosphere due to all forms of pollution had finally reached a level sufficient to cause a drastic reaction in all human systems. None of the experts could prove their case, and many objections and dissenting opinions were vociferously expressed on all sides. The conclusion was, that there was no conclusion and the investigations would continue with even more greatly intensified efforts.

Sara watched with disinterest. She was not affected. She would soon be having the last child she wanted, and all her thoughts were on that - the new little life - her daughter Anne. Sara switched the TV off and picked up the newspaper. That was only a little better as a diversion. Most articles dealt in some way or another with “the crisis.” Business people warned of drastic upheaval in the business world due to the lack of demand for certain products, which would result from the lack of children.

Evangelistic messages seemed to be everywhere admonishing all sinners to come back to this, that, or the other true religion and pray for deliverance from this scourge. One radical cult which had appeared only recently was claiming the crisis arose from the prophecies of their Guru, a certain Sumandra, who had died on July 23rd while fasting in protest of the lack of concern for the environment. Scientists on every side were demanding funding for studies and investigations to “find the real cause of the dysfunction and correct it.” The United Nations was bombarded by the high mortality countries for help in slowing their population decline. The messages of their representatives carried heavy overtones of conspiracy, and their speeches contained unveiled implications that someone was somehow taking advantage of underdeveloped countries for their own gain.

On the hopeful side, some groups were beginning to deal with the hard facts of the situation. Some governments had instituted study committees to recommend changes which might be necessary, if indeed, no more children would be born in the future. Such things as the use and maintenance of school buildings were high on their agendas.

Sara set the newspaper aside with a sigh. “How much longer will it be? When will Anne decide the time was right to be born?”

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Sumandra considered his Lord with sad thoughts. How devastating it must be to see such an extensive experiment come crashing down after so much effort has been expended on it. Sumandra could only imagine the sense of loss the Lord must feel. And yet he felt compelled to inquire about a serious consequence to the action. “Lord, I must ask. What about all the souls who have been waiting for their turn to go to Earth and experience its pleasures. What can you tell them now that the possibility is gone?”

“Oh Guru, it is considerate of you to ask, but even now the souls who wanted to go are meeting with many of the souls who have returned and are learning the intimate details of earthly life. What you do not know is that in recent times the number of souls who sign up for the experience has vastly declined. Evidently the word has gotten out that earthly pleasure is not all that it is imagined to be. I do not see this as a great problem, but it is good of you to think of it. What is of greater concern to me is the reaction on Earth now, come stand by me and look down for yourself.”

The two turned their attention to the bright blue and white orb sailing along on its circumnavigation of the Sun. The outward appearance was beautiful and serene, but on the surface all was in turmoil. In a solemn mood, they observed various events transpiring on Earth:

“Citizens, this is a great conspiracy of the large nations against us, the less powerful. We must unite now and oppose this action with all our resources. All forms of attack on the great powers are justified since this is a direct attack on us and our beliefs and our way of life, and an attempt to wipe us off the face of the Earth. It is your duty to do all in your power to defeat these powerful heathens.”

“Sinners, repent now and be saved when your time comes. This omen from the Lord will result in everlasting hell if you do not change your ways now. You can start by supporting this great cause of informing the lost souls in our society as to what they must do. Send your donations of support to the address on the screen now before it is too late.”

“There is no doubt now that the pollution of the atmosphere is at the root cause of our infertility crisis. All scientific studies confirm the rising level of contaminants in the atmosphere in the sea and on the lands is real and increasing with every passing day. Anyone opposing cleaning up our act to reverse this pollution either has their head in the sand or is incapable of understanding facts.”

“How can we possibly know what strange things may happen in the universe. This new event is obviously something we have not encountered previously. All visible matter is only five percent of the mass and energy of the universe. Who can know what strange unknown entities are out there. We must move cautiously, because suddenly applying other actions may cause more harm than good. Caution must be our guide.”

“As always, prayer is the only solution. Support our prayer mission now.”

“Come to Europe’s playground now, before your time is gone and irretrievable. You owe it to yourself to experience all the pleasures we can offer before you must leave them forever.”

“It is the religious fanatics which have incurred the wrath of an otherwise loving God. We are all suffering because of them.”

“Hurry to your dealer and get your Monster Master all terrain vehicle now before production is suspended. This is absolutely your last chance!”

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“Men, you know why we are here. There is a great conspiracy in the lands of our enemies. We have been plunged into a dangerous situation by their evil intrigue.” The General was very serious and his troops were intent on what he was saying.

“By some means our enemies have been able to suspend the natural order and our women are no longer having children, but I am sure you are aware of that fact. We have an extensive program to counter their efforts. You will all receive specialized training, and when you are ready, you will be given alternative identities and papers so that you may travel to the land of our enemies and live there for an indefinite period of time. When you discover any relevant information, you will send it to us by a special route which we will establish.”

The General droned on with the details but a small person at the rear of the room was very surprised. Androv drifted off into his own mental direction, “Why is he saying that? It was whispered to me by my cousin that the epidemic is worldwide not just here. Why does the general try to mislead us? There must be something else going on. But he said we would be sent out of the country. That is amazing, since I have wanted to leave for a long time, but it was not allowed, and it was even dangerous to mention. Perhaps this will be an excellent opportunity to get away from this awful place. I must keep my own counsel on this, but maybe it is my chance at last.”

On an earlier occasion Androv encountered strangers traveling though the land, and had an opportunity to talk with them. In the process he had learned something of the rest of the world. From what little he knew it sounded like a very good and fascinating place. Androv returned to listening to the General very carefully.

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The Nations of the World had seemed to enter a chaotic period of time. From legislation and government, to future planning. to foreign policy and prosecution of wars, no one was quite sure what to do. There were questions in the minds of all the world leaders. What will happen as our populations decline and we become weaker forces in the world? What should we do to plan for the end? What should we tell our populations to do to prepare for this? Will the scientific community come up with a solution before it is too late? Will disorganization impose itself on declining populations? How do we plan for an uncertain future? There were more questions then answers, and even at the highest levels there was more inaction than there were positive suggestions.

Although daily activity proceeded almost normally, there was an air of uncertainty which permeated everyday activities. Time moved inexorably on, but the mood was directionless and unsettling. Amidst this tumultuous atmosphere several new books came out. The most popular and outstanding one was “The End Game” by a well known Economist which outlined a plan of action for the business world which made some valuable suggestions, and pointed out that as communities shrank to the smallest size the only needs would be for the basics of food, clothing, shelter and, of course, health care.

Another useful book was “Planning For The End” by a Social Scientist and City Planner that suggested the construction of self contained and self sufficient centralized living communities was the only practical route to follow. All populations could migrate to these central locations as they aged. Another title which surveyed the entire problem was, “Down Sizing With Reason” outlining the problems with progressively smaller needs of products.

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It was Friday evening and a relatively quiet Saturday lay ahead. Jim Gentry sat up late reading a science fiction book. It was what physicists did in their free time. His thoughts wandered though, and he could not concentrate on the story, “What will the future be like? What will happen to the children we have brought into the world? Considering that we were aware of the population problem before we started, was it even fair to think about it? Tomorrow we will be gadding about hauling the boys to their sports activities and consuming more than our share of the earth resources just like millions of other persons as though nothing has happened. But a drastic event has happened, and we should start doing something about it. But what to do? Nobody knows the cause, nobody knows the cure, nobody can predict the future, and we are left in limbo more or less. Is there now any point to conserving? If nothing is done or if we cannot find the cause, in a hundred years it will not matter at all.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Months Later

Sara awoke slowly from a sound sleep. It was Christmas day. Little Anne's first Christmas. Sara smiled. Anne was a normal eight month old little girl, but she had been a national celebrity already. It happened April 30th when Anne was actually the last child born (a little late) in the country. The television crews had been there to interview Sara and show Anne to all the world. They asked all the stupid questions they could think of. "How does it feel to be the mother of the last child to born? Are you going to try for more? What do you think of the 'birth curse?' When do you think it will end?" Sara had answered as best she could, but was relieved when they all went away to leave her and Anne and the rest of her small family alone.

Now it was Christmas! The boys were excited as usual, but it was Anne that Sara thought about. She had indulged herself in buying some nice clothes for Anne, and some suitable baby toys. Such things were plentiful at the moment as the companies concerned were dumping all their stocks while there was still some market for them. There would be no more made since the manufacturers were all going out of business in the baby lines.

It suddenly occurred to Sara that the scarcity of small size clothes might become a problem in the future. She thought, "Perhaps it would be wise to buy some larger sizes ahead of time just to be sure of having them when Anne is big enough for them. Through the years this will be a continuing problem. Anne would be the last one needing all manner of items made for any specific age groups. As she reached an age, the manufacturing of those age group items would be ending. What a strange problem to deal with." Sara shook her head in amazement considering what the future held.

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Walter and Harriett Altman spent a quiet day with their son, Tom. Walter's knowledge of ancient history and his minor in religion had convinced him of the completely man made nature of all the religions, and he had stopped indulging himself in the Christmas craziness of excess shopping long ago. He and Harriett provided Tom with all the constructive toys and learning devices he needed whenever they were appropriate,

not because it was the cultural thing to do at the moment, but because it was a useful thing to do for educating a young mind.

As he played on the floor with Tom putting together and running the model railroad train set, Walter thought back to when he was a boy. Christmas had been so very different in his family. Although they were not rich, they went all out at Christmas time with gifts, decorations, and the usual Santa Claus stories and religious events and caroling. Looking back on it, the exercise was extravagant and prevented them from engaging in other, family activities, which perhaps may have been more useful. Moreover, many of the gifts were cheaply made and did not last beyond the Christmas season. That was wasteful in the extreme!

Harriett came into the recreation room and sat down to watch. “What are you two boys up to now?”

“Look Mommy, I can make the train go, see?”

“Yes!, I see.”

“I can even make it go backwards, see?”

Harriett smiled, “Yes, I see, and you do it very well also, just like a real train engineer.”

Walter looked up at Harriett and smiled. He mused to himself, “What a wonderful lady she is. I am so lucky to have found her when I needed her.” He remembered when he had first met Harriett just after his religious blow up and argument with his father. She had been very sympathetic when she shared with him her background of coming from a free thinking family, and she announced she was very much in tune with his views. It was over a martini that he unloaded his consternation with his family, and their conversation led to another martini which was not the last. By the end of the evening they were dear friends, and it just got better from there on.

“When the train comes into the station, would you two trainmen please come to dinner. I have prepared a nice holiday meal for you, and it is all ready.”

“Oh great! Tom. Let’s go with mommy now.”

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Sumandra tried to absorb all that was happening on Earth but it was overwhelming. He turned away and in exasperation lamented, “What will happen on Earth now? There is as much disagreement and animosity as ever. Do the humans not realize what is going on? Do they not understand that the world is really coming to an end? Their pollution is causing drastic changes which will make it mostly if not completely unlivable.”

“Well Guru, you did what you could while you were there, now you must do what I have done for ages; no, actually for eons, we must wait and see. Patience, my dear Sumandra, patience.”

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Representatives of all the organizations which had spoken out on the birth crisis were invited to testify at the scheduled spring meeting of the new Senate subcommittee on Extraordinary Affairs by the Chairman of the group. The committee was selective in whom they invited to talk although anyone with some credentials was included. The religious groups were turned away as a matter of policy, although there was one that made a good case for the warnings of their recently deceased Guru, a certain Sumandra, who claimed the pollution of the atmosphere would eventually cause widespread deleterious effects on the environment and all life forms.

The meeting notes of the Extraordinary Affairs sub committee were detailed and extensive, but the National Free Press printed a list of the introductory remarks which are in the individuals own words. The list follows:

Dan Bromley, Director of Sanderson Laboratory

“Beginning on July 23 of last year an unusual, and as yet unexplained, interfering gravitational oscillation was observed superimposed on the gravitation measurements which we have been making for three years. This signal has a frequency of 37.336 Hertz, and relates to nothing we have been able to discover so far. Because of the coincidence in time with the cessation of pregnancies, we believe this frequency must be somehow deleterious to the activity of sperm and it may very well be the active agent in the prevention of pregnancies. We are using all our resources to try correlating this frequency to some other physical phenomenon but we have been unable to do so as of today.”

Edward Burns, Research Director, Solent Institute

“At the forefront of our efforts is the investigation of dark matter and dark energy in the universe. We know they have some effects on the visible universe, but we are still in the dark so to speak of all the ways they react. While searching through all our studies, we are keeping in mind to look for any indication that these physical qualities may react directly with animal tissue, but we do not yet have any leads on whether that can happen.”

William Starnes Manager, Pollution Control Research

“We have been monitoring pollution levels for a good many years now, and although there are ups and downs, the consistent trend is towards higher levels of pollutants. A particular measurement known as the Kappa Factor is a weighted summation of all the levels of pollutants. This factor has shown a drastic increase in the last year which is supported by the changes in the levels of the other individual pollutants. We cannot say any particular pollutant is responsible for this unique effect of lack of fertility, but we feel the high levels must be affecting everyone to some degree. However, our investigations have not yet shown any connection.

“On the other hand it is well known that the levels of many of the pollutants generated by business and our general culture are well above recommended amounts. As you are aware, the government and many private and community groups have programs addressing these problems, but in spite of their efforts the numbers remain high and increasing. These control efforts need to be expanded until the upward trend is reversed, since the environment and the climate are being affected in many unforeseen ways. This problem must be solved, but I cannot say with any confidence that we can relate the pollution to the birth crisis in any way, because there is no mechanism we know of which would result in lack of fertility.”

Jules Maranski -- Nuclear Physicist

“My studies of the sun indicate that the various solar flares over the years have had some differences in characteristics. Recently, the extreme solar activity has shown there has been a gradual increase in the ions actually reaching the Earth, but I cannot say with confidence that this is a factor in the so called ‘birth crisis’.”

John Grady - Paranormal Investigator.

“The scientific study of paranormal events has been going on for many years, and these studies have always shown that there are reasonable explanations to happenings which are classified as paranormal. However the occurrence of these events and the effect they seem to have on individuals has always suggested there is the possibility of forces we do not know or understand. So initially, we must be open to the

idea that there exists a chance that they are true, although we cannot measure it. The situation requires that we must be open minded and investigate the phenomenon thoroughly.”

The Subcommittee on Extraordinary Affairs announced it has recorded all of these submissions. These items along with the extra testimony and references plus all the voluntary contributions of many others will be recorded, and the information will be studied thoroughly. The committee will then publish the results in a comprehensive document in the near future and make all their findings available to the public.

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“Lord, your forbearance must be infinite to put up with the foibles of the humans. Why do they not take advantage of their intelligence and solve some of these situations that arise? You certainly gave them sufficient comprehension, why is it so difficult for them to use it?” Sumandra was more upset than was dignified for an Archangel.

“Ah Guru! I respect your concern, but it was necessary for humans to have strong emotions to evolve to the degree they have. They may not have accomplished it otherwise. However now some emotions are getting in the way of clearheaded thinking. I had expected them to listen to their wise elders to a greater degree by this time. It took all of my creativity to design this experiment, but perhaps I misjudged the adaptability of adult brains.”

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In an idle moment, the head of the Zoology Department was talking with his doctoral assistant, Ed Jackson, about his field of study, the higher primates. “There can be no doubt. The people in the field have the evidence. There have been no births among the higher primates, chimpanzees, gorillas, orangs and others. The Birth Crisis seems to affect them also. But as we know, there is no lack of births among the lower animals. This thing is very selective.”

Ed inquired, “What do you think is causing it? Why is it happening now, and what should we do about it?”

“I do not know, really. It must be something beyond our current knowledge because all the tests we are running show nothing unusual, If we

do not find the answer soon it may be too late. Every year that passes leaves fewer women of reproductive age and ability, But there is still time. I am hopeful that some bright young scientist will come up with the solution. Perhaps you will be able to solve the problem after you complete your doctorate.”

Ed smiled, “Perhaps, but I hope it is solved before then.” but thought to himself. “When I get my degree, I want to work for one of the major zoos in the country and make some contributions. There are so many people investigating this birth nonsense that we will be beyond it by then and we will be back to normal.”

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The President of Wee Wardrobes stormed into the VP of Sales office, “What the hell are we going to do about this last quarter loss? What are you going to do about the decline in sales? We cannot continue this way or we will be out of business by the end of next quarter. What are you going to do?”

The VP sat back in dismay, “We have done all that we can to cancel unneeded supplies, stop scheduled production, and reduce production of the next older sizes of products, but there is just too much product in the pipe line. You recall we were going great guns and had plans to expand when this ‘birth crisis’ hit so unexpectedly. No one saw it coming or even could have known it would happen. All the experts are stumped and they are smarter than I am. But we did cancel the expansion plans and reduced costs as much as we could.”

“It’s not enough. Don’t you have any suggestions?”

“Well. We can switch to older children’s clothes, but even they will be unnecessary eventually, if they do not find the cause of this thing and fix it.”

“Switch our lines? Do you realize how much that would cost in development and startup? You have to do better than that.”

“There is nothing else we can do with our type of production facilities, and yes, I do understand the costs. Nevertheless, I will put my plan into a report for you as soon as I can. In fact, it is mostly done, and I will have it on your desk in the morning.” As the President turned to go, the VP added, “By the way, after that I quit.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Twelve Years Later

Sara had worried needlessly. As it turned out there were plenty of selections of clothing as the children grew. There had been a bountiful supply in the pipeline but the manufacturers were learning to cut back and stop production as each age group matured. Planning in the clothing industry had quickly adapted to reality. As the merchandise became outdated by being inappropriately small sizes, the clothing was no longer produced and it naturally disappeared from the shelves. Nevertheless, there was always a surplus available at good prices.

In addition, people were unloading children's clothing as the children grew up, since they knew there would be no more coming along who might need them, and the used clothing stores were well filled. The used clothing stores by necessity stopped accepting sizes which were no longer needed. Recycling and disposing of the unusable clothing began to be a customary and burdensome problem. More of a concern for the clothing industry though was to keep a balanced supply of adult wearing apparel available for a constantly aging population which was on its way towards zero.

Toys for children were another matter. Toys for the youngest children were mostly inexpensive, readily broken, and consumed in use. The manufacturers were able to judge the demand and reduce the supply to match the growing age groups. They had been burned on baby toys and were very sensitive to future projections being accurate. The small children toy experience was, in fact, a good exercise in helping to plan later for the general reduction in the requirements for manufactured items. The human culture was gradually accommodating to the idea that the population was going to continue to decline as people grew older. The fact that there would be no new generations to replace them was silently becoming apparent and grudgingly being accepted by the entire world.

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Being the youngest of all children, Anne Gentry was included in the last class to enter first grade, but by far she was not the shyest among her age group. Having two older brothers to contend with had made her stand up for her rights and she insisted on everyone being fair with her. She was not afraid to speak out and became something of leader of her student group.

Seeing an approaching decline in the school population and a reduction in the necessary expenditures, the school board had cut back

maintenance expenses and was using the money to retain the best teachers until they were no longer needed. Anne's class seemed to get the best attention as being the last opportunity to educate in the most effective way.

Anne was a good learner and by the sixth grade was at the head of her class. Sara and Jim helped their children as much as they were able to, since they realized that Anne and the boys would need all the education they could get to grapple with the strange and challenging world they seemed to be inheriting. The local schools were right in the center of a residential neighborhood, and the nearby children walked to school as a routine matter of long standing tradition in the district, while children outside the town limits had to be bussed into the schools.

While Anne was walking home after class one day with her friend, Elizabeth, the two girls decided to stop in the corner store for candy bars. Elizabeth bought her bar immediately, but Anne took some time deciding what she wanted.

"I'll be waiting outside, Anne."

"OK. I will be right there."

As Anne paid and opened the door to leave the store, she heard, "Help! Help! Get away!" Elizabeth was in trouble, two boys were trying to take her candy. One was holding her arms and the other was grabbing her hand to force her to release the bar. Anne ran directly at them and grabbed one of the assailants around the neck while trying to prevent him from getting his prize. Luckily, another person having seen the altercation, came running up the street and pulled at the second boy. The attackers, out numbered, gave up and ran away.

As Elizabeth composed herself and straightened her ruffled dignity, Anne turned to the new person. "Thanks for helping. I don't think we could have managed them alone."

The person smiled. "Well. I don't know. You seemed to be putting up a good fight. Maybe I should have waited to see how it turned out."

"Yes!" added Elizabeth, "Thank you for saving me and my candy."

Anne grinned. "You think we should call them back and have a return match with just the two of us and them?"

The boy laughed, "No, but I like your spunk."

The three youths stood silent for a moment, then Anne offered, “Would you like my candy bar as a reward?”

“No,” he replied graciously, “I don’t need that.”

“Would you consider half of it?”

He smiled, “Only if you insist.”

“Done!” Anne carefully broke the bar in two and offered the choice to him.

“We are walking towards Elm. Where are you headed?”

“That’s interesting. I live on Elm also, but way down at the far end. Usually I take a short cut, but I felt like walking farther today, so I came up around on Main street.”

“My name is Anne Gentry, and this is my friend Elizabeth. We live up at this end of Elm. What is your name?”

“Tom,” he paused, “Tom Altman.”

“Gee, I don’t believe I ever met anyone named Tomtom before,” Anne responded teasingly. “Do you go to the middle school?”

“No. I’m a Freshman in high school.”

“Oh, then maybe you know my brothers, Eli and Tim.”

“I know who they are. Everyone knows who the twins are, but they don’t know me. Of course, they are a couple of years ahead of me also.”

The trio exchanged school talk as they meandered along and turned down Elm street. Shortly, Elizabeth stopped. “This is where I live, Tom. Thanks again for helping me and saving my candy.”

“You are very welcome, Elizabeth. Any time.”

As the two walked farther, Anne offered, “And I live just four doors down. Would you like to come in and meet the twins?”

“Yes, I would, but another time though. I’m late now and I must be getting home. I’ll see you again when I can.”

As Anne watched him grow smaller in the distance, he turned to wave once and Anne thought, “Tom is about the nicest person I have ever met.”

X X X X X X

The lead story in the evening paper concerned the plans for the elementary schools and the small children’s play grounds. The school board and the city council were at odds as usual about the proper action to take. Naturally there were citizens on both sides of all the issues, and no progress was being made. Walter turned to the other news.

When Harriett came in and sat down, he looked up, “Listen to this dear, The Federal government is suspending some of the funding covering the search for the cause of the infertility in society. The funds will be continued only for those studies related to genetic effects and environmental changes, which means pollution. The savings are going to be applied to a new group called The Future Action Control Team or FACT which will start planning for the future and what we must do to accommodate to it.”

“Well it is about time they did something along that line. Do you realize it will soon be twelve years since this situation started? I am so glad we decided to have Tom before then. If we had waited, he might not be here today.”

“Twelve years?” Walter responded. “I guess that’s right. He will be fifteen this year. He is growing up rapidly.”

“More rapidly than you may think.” Harriett smiled, “He told me he met an interesting girl on the way home from school today. Her name is Anne Gentry. Do you remember who she is?”

“Anne Gentry? Yes it does ring a bell of sorts. Why does it sound familiar?”

“She was the last child born, the last girl born, the last chance to continue the human race.”

X X X X X X

Sumandra began. “I do not believe you misjudged anything, Lord. It is the humans who are not fulfilling their end of the bargain, and not using the intelligence you gave them. They made the mistake of creating images of you which are modeled after themselves and filled with their own failings. As you well know, most of the images they have created for their gods contain many negative attributes such as anger, vengeance, cruel punishments, unrealistic demands, lack of sympathy for misfortunes and other such qualities. All of these are, of course, so unlike you. Then they commence to act on this mélange of misrepresentations to promote their own self aggrandizement and gain control of others, furthermore when they encounter conflict, all they can do is fight to destroy their opponents. They have no sense of reasoning things out.”

“Come now my dear Sumandra, you are being too hard on them. I am sure they are trying to do their best, but being alive is not an easy situation as you know yourself. The environment, the limitations of living matter and the restrictions on the functions of human brains all work against them. You must learn to be a bit more charitable.”

Sumandra relented. “My apologies, my Lord. I am too recently returned from my own life experience. Perhaps I retain a little of its influence on me. As you say, it is a difficult situation. Again, my apologies.”

X X X X X X

Coach Adams looked down dejectedly at the floor, “Three more years, maybe four. Then it ends.” He was thinking about the high school intramural sports program. “Soon there will not be enough interested and qualified students to continue all the sports. Perhaps we should consider cutting back to just one sport, but which one? That might buy only a couple of more years though, as then the last class will be seniors and after that - nothing.”

Looking ahead to the now inevitable decrease of high school students to the number zero, coach Adams contemplated his life. “It’s not good. There is no real future in coaching sports. Perhaps the time for me to get out is now while other opportunities exist. My brother has been pestering me to come help run the farm. I know that makes a lot of sense. As populations decline we are going to be returning to just the basics and certainly fresh produce will always be needed. Although the farm would be a lot of work, it would be good to get away from the stress of

routines, deadlines and the anxieties of winning and losing. It probably would be better for my health to work in a different environment. I'll talk to my brother tonight."

X X X X X X

Jim Gentry was not a person who went to church. The whole idea of myths and lack of substantiating evidence in religions did not appeal to him. While growing up he often wondered where the Heaven which people talked about was located. As he matured, he realized there was no good explanation for where it might be situated.

Although Cosmology was not his field, from his general physics background he was well aware of the discoveries made concerning the structure of the universe and the components of our galaxy. From what he knew, there was no place that would be amenable to supporting the presence of a Heaven. He also did not understand how one would get there wherever it was found, and he could not bring himself to believe in something so tenuous and weird. He did not begrudge others from engaging in religion if they felt it did them some good, but it was not for him. His Sunday mornings were times for relaxation and indulging in his favorite pursuits and hobbies. One of his required routines was reading the Sunday paper. Jim Gentry looked up from his reading as Sara entered returning from church. "Well, what did the good Reverend have to say today, dear?"

Sara sat down with a sigh, "Not much that was encouraging. Sermons always touch somewhat on the fertility situation. He deplored the lack of progress on finding the cause, but added that if mankind cannot discover why this is happening and does not do something about it, then we must accept it as God's Will and make the best of it by keeping to our moral standards and living our lives in the best way we can. I did not feel very inspired by the talk, but I am not sure what else he can say these days."

"Well I have pretty much given up on religion having answers to anything. I don't think there are answers. We are caught in a mindless physical world and we are subject to whatever comes our way. This event is just somewhat more than we can handle, I think we are headed towards a mass extinction again and who can predict what will follow?"

"I hope you are wrong, but I am afraid you are right. What can we do for our children? What will become of them? I guess I don't really want to think about it." Silence followed, until their son, Eli, burst into the room and threw himself into one of the big overstuffed chairs.

"Coach Adams is leaving!"

“What?” exclaimed Jim. “What is he doing?”

“He is giving up coaching and going into partnership with his brother on the family produce farm. That’s not fair. We don’t stand a chance of winning without him. He’s the best coach in our football conference. Tim and I were planning on a good enough high school career to get to an excellent college career and into the majors. Now all that is down the drain. It isn’t fair.”

Sara looked at her son in disappointment, “That’s too bad Eli, but in a way you cannot blame him, there is not much of a future in high school sports these days. We all have to live with the fact there will not even be any more high school in a few more years. Anne will be in the last graduating class. Maybe you can still succeed without him though. You and Tim are both great athletes. Why not just go ahead as you planned?”

“But what can Tim and I do then? What can we do?”

“I don’t know son. Maybe no one knows, but as your father I suggest doing something that will still be useful; well into old age. The future from here is very uncertain, and I think even the experts cannot predict it. However, I think you should do something which will be good for old people. Yes, that will always be necessary.”

X X X X X X

“Build more cabins? You must be out of your cotton pickin’ mind. We are on the verge of extinction and you want to build cabins. What are you thinking?”

The Camp Director was venting on the President of Youth Incorporated. The Director had been under great pressure to have enough teen age attendees to make the camp profitable this year, and he was extremely worried about his future when the camp closed in two more years.

“I was thinking about the future, obviously, and I am thinking about the destiny of our company, also. It is a fact of life that we will soon run out of teenagers as our target group, The officers have come up with a plan to continue to be in business and perhaps even grow.

“Consider this, we have wonderful facilities and a great space. We have tennis courts, a great swimming beach and waterfront and possibilities to improve the boating activities, we have enough room to put in a golf course, the area offers many opportunities for hiking and even overnight backpacking, so taking all our assets into account we could be a vacation destination for all age groups. The officers of the company

have decided to branch out into the resort business. The facilities of most of our other locations are also adaptable and amenable to this new venture.”

“This camp? Become a resort? That will take a lot of building, won’t it?”

“Yes some, but as you well know vacation cottages do not need to be elegant housing. They should have all the necessary utilities and amenities, but they do not have to be as substantial construction as a permanent house. Besides we already have a good number of buildings with which to start. We have made some estimates and cost projections and it seems feasible for us to take this route.” The President of Youth Incorporated added with a smile, “It also guarantees that you will have a job at least for a few more years.”

The director was silent for a few minutes then replied, “I must admit I am quite concerned for the future, especially my future and what you say does sound at least reasonable, but won’t it be a major change to try attracting the general public now?”

“Very good question. You must realize, of course, we have a well established and respected name in the public eyes, we have an extensive list of teens who have been here and liked the place, and they are now the target group along with their parents for vacation spots. What I am saying is we have a good reputation and a favorable potential clientele. We know how to sell out product. All it takes is the right effort.”

“Well, it does sound interesting. What do you need me to do?”

X X X X X X

Bill Adams walked along the country road in the early morning. It was only a quarter of a mile from his house to his brother’s house and farm. He was happy and followed his thoughts as he walked, “How lucky can I get? I would have been out of work, if I had not decided to toss in my lot with my brother. There was no longer any real future in my coaching skills, and I certainly feel better physically without the stress I experienced previously. Now it seems I can work as long as I am able. Even with a shrinking population, there will always be a need to feed the population, and in the end we will at least have our own food.”

X X X X X X

“So how did you like the movie?”

“Not as much as I like being with you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” replied Tom.

Tom and Anne were just exiting the local cinema on a warm summer evening and enjoying the company of each other. Tom realized he could be very much at ease with Anne and she seemed to enjoy being with him a lot. “I don’t think they are putting as much time, effort and money into movie production these days. Some of the oldies are more appealing, especially the cartoons. But, what next? Would you like some ice cream?”

“Is it on my diet?”

“No, of course not!”

“Then yes, naturally, but only if it is the real thing. No low fat or yogurt or sherbet.”

“You drive a hard bargain. Luckily, I came prepared. I know of a little grocery store that makes its own ice cream which is guaranteed to be outrageously decadent and fattening.”

“That sounds about right, where is it located?”

“Over on East Avenue and Back Street.”

“That’s a long way. It must be five blocks.”

“So is it worth five blocks of walking for good ice cream?”

“That’s ten blocks unless you want to spend the night there.”

“I can go either way,” Tom grinned.

Anne laughed, “You are naughty, but good ice cream is worth the effort.” The two wandered off arm in arm laughing and talking. The present was precious, and the future was of no concern.

X X X X X X

Dan Bromley entered the laboratory office which overlooked all the massive equipment on the lower floor. As he closed the door the cacophony of the operational noise reduced to a whisper and the amount of noise returned to a conversational level. “Good morning, Louise.”

Louise Braun looked up from her charts and smiled, “Good morning Professor Bromley.”

“Anything new?”

“No, Everything is boringly the same. Even our interloping extra signal persists with no change. There are no clues to where it comes from or why it is there.”

Silently, Dan looked at the charts and compared numbers. Then sighed and laid them aside. “Why is this happening, Louise? Why are we plagued by something we do not understand, especially now when it seems the world will be coming to an end for the human race?”

“Well, I know we have come a long way in understanding our environment, but I guess there is just too much there for us to ever understand it all. This evidently will be as far as we are going to advance. There has to be an end somewhere, and this is it.”

“You are more pragmatic than I am Louise. I guess I will never be satisfied in not knowing it all.” He was silent a moment then added, “I have got to leave. I have a meeting with Sanderson about funding. Have a nice day.”

“I hope you have a nice day too, Professor.”

X X X X X X

Jim Gentry sat at his desk looking at bills when Eli returned from class, and not looking up he greeted his son, “Hi Eli, how was college today?”

“How did you know it was me? You didn’t even look.”

“There is something special about the way you come in Eli. There is a certain quality of the ‘get out of my way’ manner you have which makes me feel safer sitting out of the main thoroughfare here.” He looked up with a smile on his face to see Eli’s expression. “And where is your brother?”

“Tim is on his way to DC for the weekend with a group from the college. They are protesting the lack of congressional action in planning for the future and not yet setting an end game agenda for the country. I couldn’t go. I need to study this weekend.”

“That’s right. I remember Tim saying something about it. Do you think it will do any good?”

Eli hesitated, then blurted, “No!” He started upstairs, then turned around and came back, “Dad?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been thinking. You know Tim and I both enjoyed what little football we could play in high school, and we are both pretty athletic. What would you think about my majoring in physical education, and after college taking some physical therapy training. Then I could work at keeping people as healthy as possible as long as possible? There ought to be a future in that don’t you think?”

Jim took a moment to reply. He realized this was important to an otherwise fairly unexpressive guy, and it indicated some serious thinking on Eli’s part. Jim gave the obvious response. “Sounds like a winner to me. It certainly fits your personality and skills, Go for it!”

“Thanks Dad.” He disappeared up the steps.

X X X X X X

Elizabeth and Anne stormed into the Tyndale home and headed for the stairs. A voice from the back of the house greeted them, “Elizabeth!, Is that you?”

“Yes, Dad.”

William Tyndale had lost his wife to cancer several years earlier, and had to deal with raising a daughter who was now a teenager. His work as the newspaper editor sometimes required long hours and he did not get to spend as much time with Elizabeth as he would wish. Now that she was almost grown up and very self sufficient their contact was even less than before. The aroma of frying bacon preceded him out of the kitchen as he appeared in his shirtsleeves. “Oh, Hi Anne. I knew it had to be more than just Elizabeth from all the commotion. What are you two up to now?”

“Hi, Mister Tyndale. Elizabeth is taking me up to her room to show me the stuff about nurses training. It sounds very interesting and I want to read it.”

“Oh yes, I looked that over also. It sounds like a very good program. Are you considering that as a possible career?”

“I’m not sure. It’s getting difficult to decide on which way to turn with industries shutting down and the whole world changing, I don’t know what is going to be the most useful.”

Regarding the girls somewhat somberly he replied, “Yes, I understand your dilemma. The future has always been obscure, but now it is even more unknown. No one can truly predict what will happen in the future except that we seem to be heading for the end of human life. We still have to take it one day at a time.” He paused, then changed the subject, “Can I fix you both some supper when you are through?”

Anne piped up, “She’s coming to my house today. Mister Tyndale. We’re having chicken.”

“I see. That’s fine. Whatever works. Have fun girls.”

The two raced up the stairs.

X X X X X X

Tim, looking a little disheveled, entered and slowly sat down at the breakfast table. Jim looked up and offered a sardonic, “Good morning, son. All ready for a busy week of classes?”

Tim smiled a weak smile, “Not really. Got in late last night returning from DC.”

Jim replied more seriously, “How did your demonstration go?”

“Not as well as I hoped. We were a bit disorganized, but we did get some attention and we were able to make our point. We need to plan better for next time.”

“I’m glad you’re not discouraged from having a next time.”

“Oh, not at all. We made some good contacts and we set up a planning committee. Some gals from another college are going to do a news letter, and we have a PR committee also.”

“Am I raising a rabble rouser?”

Tim smiled, “If so, you are going to have to live with that fact. We are faced with a difficult future and we need to have plans and actions to meet it. We can’t just sit around and let it happen.”

With a more serious tone, Jim answered, “You are right. Tim. I am pleased you are doing something about it. Your mother and I are concerned about it also, and we will help you however we can.”

“I know Dad, thanks. Would you pass the milk?”

CHAPTER SIX

Year 17 of the Beginning Of The End

It was seventeen years since the Beginning Of The End, or BOTE as it was commonly referred to now, and Donna Latimer was spending a slow Sunday afternoon at home. Although she enjoyed her position at Forever Yours Insurance Company as Statistics Supervisor, it was stress enough for the week and the weekends were recovery time for her. While leafing through the news, she spotted a small article buried deeply in the obituary page.

The article drew her interest from a professional standpoint because it reported that since the beginning of the Birth Crisis, the suicide rate in most populations had increased significantly. It seems those who were disturbed enough to consider suicide had been given a little more impetus to proceed. Sad as that was, it was a fact of life. She stopped and thought aloud about the consequences of this information. "Since Forever Yours is one of the largest life insurers in the country, we should be looking at this." As she contemplated the article, she resolved to investigate it further.

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The Asian wars flared up again. Both sides of each conflict accused the other of initiating the sterility problem in the human race. With their natural ethnic hatred, the uneducated populace were easily convinced of the righteousness of their cause and fought their long term traditional enemies as fanatics. Many vicious battles deteriorated into mutual massacres, and the countries fell into decline. The only good to come from the conflicts was that both sides were left exhausted and overwhelmed by their internal problems because of the dwindling population, so their military was left with inadequate resources to pursue the war or cause other mischief in the global community.

The UN was unable to stop the wars nor did it have the necessary supplies to aid all the victims as most countries began retreating within themselves to deal more effectively with their own problems rather than the problems of the world. Governments began shrinking along with the rest of the culture.

There were changing demands on central political systems for the needs of all citizens as the populace grew older. Populations dwindled, tax income declined, but the basic needs of running government remained at significant, although lower, levels.

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God looked at Sumandra observing Earthly events and felt an empathy with him. God spoke. “I know what you are thinking Guru. You are thinking ‘Why don’t the humans use some of their intelligence to solve their problems rather than just fighting over them?’ Think back now to your experience down there, Did you find it easy or simple to maintain a rational outlook?”

Sumandra paused before answering. “You needed to remind me didn’t you?” He paused again. “Yes, I was quite a radical in my early years. I took a few hard knocks from my religious speculations before turning to atheism and reasonable thinking. After that I realized while religions served a purpose in making us feel good, the world was real and demanded being handled in a hard nosed practical way. Mythical stories were pleasant diversions, but everyday problems required immediate pragmatic answers. Believing in science and facts worked best, whereas emotional conjectures where often wrong. I felt much better about myself, and I was able to be more effective when I dealt with facts and reality.”

God smiled, “Physical laws are there for a reason, but we have to give humans the room they need to make mistakes. Unfortunately, they do a lot of that and many of them just do not enjoy the life experience, nor do they respond well to it. That after all, is the main reason I have decided to terminate it. Life on Earth is not working the way I wished it to. I accept that. I had wanted good souls to enjoy the experiences of being alive and sensing and interacting with the world. I probably planned it incorrectly. You did very well, Guru. You had an excellent life.”

Sumandra smiled and remained silent. One does not argue with God.

X X X X X X

Statistics Supervisor, Donna Latimer in the main office of the Forever Yours Insurance Company finished working on some calculations and sat back to review them. A strange smile crept over her face, and she rose to walk to the Vice President’s office.

Vice President Margaret Odelle was sitting at her desk looking out the window on the autumn landscape apparently in a deep reverie. The sound of Donna’s knock roused her, and she turned in her chair. “Yes, What is it?”

“Ma’am, I have just been running some figures on the projections of our income for the future and have developed some interesting results. Some new information has come to my attention, and I think you will be interested in it.”

“Fine, Donna. What’s the scoop?”

“The mortality rate has increased because of a larger number of suicides. This is related to the current crisis, and seems to occur equally in most populations. If we continue at the present level of income from investments, and factor in the data from the new mortality tables which take into account the increased number of suicides on which we are not obligated to pay any benefits, and assuming we keep the participants we have now, which will decrease in number over the years only by deaths, then in eight years we will have sufficient funds from payments and investments to cover all future benefits and continue to operate, pay dividends and maintain our employment level with the necessary staff without any further income. But because of the Birth Crisis our obligations are now finite and we are going to be having excess income from all sources including our reserves. Do you think this means we should consider reducing our rates to compensate for this development?”

“That is amazing Donna. I am impressed by your foresight. Whether we should reduce rates or pursue any other action is a decision for the board of directors, and I do not know what they may decide, but what you say is very interesting. Thank you for your effort. Would you put together a full report for me, so that I can introduce the situation at the next board meeting, and let the board discuss it. This certainly is an important opportunity. Although I suspect the board will see no necessity to make changes. They will probably be interested in higher dividends.”

Eagerly walking back to her office to get started on the report, Donna mused, “Impressing the boss can’t be all bad.”

X X X X X X

“Prom Night! Graduation coming up, and Tom will be here!” Anne was as excited as she could be with all the wonderful events about to happen. School had been a happy time, but now all that experience was going to end and new experiences were about to happen. She and Elizabeth had decided to attend Central City University where Tim and Eli were studying, and then go to Nursing School, but there would be a few weeks of vacation before all that, and they could be irresponsible for one more summer. In a whirlwind of activity Tom arrived home, stopped in to say, “Hi” and dashed off again to dress for the dance. A beautiful corsage arrived, and Anne found herself with great anticipation ready to be picked up. It was a dream world, the drive to the hall, all her friends in their finest, and happy faces abounding.

Anne did not remember having any of the refreshments, but only dancing with Tom and dancing with Tom and dancing with Tom. The slow last dance of the evening found them gliding into a secluded corner. Anne looked directly at Tom and quietly spoke, “So when are you going to ask me to marry you?”

Tom looked back with completely open emotions and softly replied, “Not until you finish growing up, and I graduate from college so I can support you.”

Anne smiled quietly and holding Tom close with her cheek on his shoulder she replied “I don’t think I can wait that long, so I will just say ‘yes’ now.” Kissing and dancing, the music ended, but they did not immediately notice.

X X X X X X

Twenty years after BOTE, all major industries were faced with the same problems. The planned downsizing of everything was now the norm. The only sectors not seriously involved yet were those relating to the elderly. That group was inevitably the last group that was going to be affected. The younger generations were looking ahead realistically and planning mostly never to retire, but to spend their declining years looking after each other.

Industries throughout the world suffered in many ways, but the main problem was to regulate the decline in demand for products against the decrease in production and the availability of employees from the shrinking pool of available workers. Some sectors of the economy flourished moderately, however, others faced drastic and immediate extinction. The secondary schools followed the elementary schools into disuse, although some were converted to commercial use, shopping centers and senior community centers. The fate of most of the buildings unavoidably was the wrecking ball. That is, it was the wrecking ball, if local governments felt moved to do anything other than to allow the unused structures to deteriorate slowly.

Colleges still had a role to play, although that would drastically decline to only graduate degrees in four or five years, also. A few institutions were planning beyond that time to stay in operation to serve as retraining centers for displaced workers in other occupations as the demands for elderly products and services became the primary market.

The mood of the country was strange and reserved as though they could even now not comprehend the extent and finality of the coming tragedy. The changes were mostly slow and not remarkable. They were not noticeable but the culture was irresistibly changing over time like a leaking water tank gradually going dry or a balloon which slowly loses its gas and sinks to the floor. The changes were slow, but inexorable and unidirectional, similar to a huge machine with a great amount of inertia slowly spinning to a stop.

X X X X X X

“What then is going to happen, Lord. What will become of all the good souls and humans left on Earth now?”

God seemed a little worried. “What will happen? Nothing much really. Human life will go on, but it will gradually slow down and not be replaced. My good souls will return, and many will need help in assimilating into their previous positions, but that will happen. I am troubled by the bad experience life has been for a lot of them, but I am also sure all of us will aid them in that healing process.

“In the end the Earth will return to being a more balanced place, and it will still be a glorious jewel in the darkness of space.” As He stared at earth, He seemed to become more relaxed.

X X X X X X

Androv was doing all that he had been instructed to do, and keeping his ears open for any plans against his country, but there were none. The General evidently did not like it when Androv reported there was no conspiracy against them, and the epidemic was really worldwide. He had been instructed to return home and his monthly payment was cut off. This had forced him to get a job, as he had no intention of returning home. It was too nice here in Central City, and life was good.

Androv had even earned and saved enough that when vacation time come around this year he could afford a trip on a cruise ship. There had been rumors the wasteful cruises would soon be stopped, but as of now they were still operating and he was on his way. His exuberance became verbal, “A whole week cruising on the largest luxury liner in the fleet, the Fair Weather Ann. This is going to be a great vacation.”

X X X X X X

The captain of the luxury cruise ship, Fair Weather Ann, surveyed all the activity from the bridge, Skipper James Gordon ran a smoothly operating vessel with a great crew, and the boarding and loading were proceeding on schedule. He had twenty years of experience behind him and he had never had any serious problems on board. He had a lingering concern though that all the fleet was getting old, and it was understood it would never be replaced. His blue eyes and weathered face topped by his bushy white hair obviously belonged to a seaman, and the impeccable white uniform made him the epitome of a Master of a ship. The weather looked good, and he was anticipating another fine cruise.

X X X X X X

A large work truck pulled in and parked in front of a weedy little plot of ground in a residential neighborhood, and two workmen got out.

“So what are we supposed to do?”

“Just clean the old stuff out and haul it away, I guess. They ain’t gonna use it no more. Let’s start with the swing set that’ll be easy to take apart.”

The two set to work disassembling swings, slides, a jungle gym and various other items and loading them into the truck. After a while they sat down for a rest.

“How come they’re doin’ this now? It ain’t been used in years.”

“I heard some of the locals complained about it and they want to make a garden out of it. So city hall said ‘Do it.’ and here we are, They’re planning to put in some benches too. But the locals gotta keep it clean then. That’s better than the mess it is now at least.”

“Yeah, I guess. But there’s a lot of empty houses also. They gonna do anythin’ about them?”

“Not unless they have to I don’t think. They don’t want to do much of anything these days.”

X X X X X X

With Tom away at college, Walter and Harriett spent quiet evenings reading or sometimes watching special television programs. This evening the special was a review of the progress on the investigations into the infertility crisis. It included all the previous theories and the experts had their opportunity to make points, but in the end no one yet had an answer. Walter turned the program off in disgust. “We should stop wasting money on those projects. This has got to be something completely new and immeasurable. I would opt for an effect from the dark matter but we may never know. Now it would be better to put our time and effort toward the end planning. There are many circumstances which must be planned for, and no one seems to care about them or to suggest anything useful. There needs to be more planning.”

With a twinkle in her eye, Harriett responded, “You should talk with Tim Gentry. Sara tells me he as been active in leading protests in Washington to get the government to do more. You could even go on a march yourself. You need to get out of the house more often.”

Walter laughed, “I’m too old for that, but I guess I could write our senator. He seems like a reasonable guy. What do you think should be done? What should I suggest to him?”

“It has been close to twenty years since the beginning of this lack of births. I should think all thinking persons should accept that fact now and start planning for how best to meet the inevitable demise of our civilization. What do all the old people do when they are the last ones alive?”

“Good question! I’m sure I would not like to be part of that group. We should even be concerned about the facilities which will still be available when we need them. Yes, I think I’ll get busy and write. Maybe I should talk to Tim.”

X X X X X X

It had been smooth sailing and another successful trip in the Fair Weather Ann. Now the liner was headed home, but still a long way from port as it slowed to allow the pilot boat to pull along side and transfer the harbor pilot to the liner. Four other men also transferred and the pilot boat pulled away again.

The group of five made their way to the bridge and entered. One of the group approached the Captain, “Captain Gordon?”

“Yes.”

“I am Inspector Smith from the emigration office. May I speak with you a moment?”

“Certainly. I have been advised you were coming, We may speak right here, if you wish.” The pilot went to the helm and the other three men stood by the door.

“Captain, I have a small problem and I need your assistance. One of your passengers is an illegal alien and his country very much wants him returned. My men and I have been observing him for several months and we have just received the final approvals to pick him up. That is why we are here, and this is the paperwork authorizing me to bring him in for deportation.”

Captain Gordon took the papers and perused them several minutes, “Well, we are still essentially on the high seas, so I cannot at this time allow you to do that. However, once we are in port, of course, the situation changes and the port laws and local laws are in effect. I see no problem with you being able to arrest him after we dock if you wish. Would you be willing to do it as inconspicuously as possible. I do not want to upset the rest of the passengers.”

“Of course, I understand. We can wait wherever you want us to. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Let me do this. I will assign one of my crew, let me think, probably an assistant purser, to escort you to the lounge to wait with you. All the passengers are advised to wait in their rooms at docking until called for debarking, so we know where your alien will be. I will instruct the purser to take you to Mr. Androv’s room after we are docked, and guide you all to the cargo door which will be open at that time. You can debark from there quite easily. That I think is the simplest procedure, and after you are off the ship you are on your own.”

In little more than an hour, the large ship had been maneuvered to the pier and gangplanks were being connected. Androv had enjoyed his vacation and was ready to leave when there was a knock on the cabin door.

“Yes?” As he opened the door he saw five persons there. “Are we debarking now?”

“Yes, Mr. Androv. We are debarking now, will you come with us please.” The group wended its way through corridors and down stairs to the rear of the vessel where a large cargo door was open and the gangplank was in place.

When they were on the dock the leader turned and spoke to Androv. “I am from the emigration service, and I am placing you under arrest to await deportation. Come with us now please.” Androv had no choice, and in a few minutes they were loading into a large limousine which then drove off.

X X X X X X

Donna Latimer knocked on the door, which was followed by a firm, “Come in.” from the other side. She stepped into the office, closed the door and turned to face the desk and VP Margaret Odelle. “You wanted to see me Ma’am?”

“Yes Donna, have a seat. I thought you might like to know what happened at the board meeting.”

“Oh? Yes. Was it a good meeting?”

“Well, they sometimes get bogged down in details, but this meeting moved along fairly well. The board members seemed to be much more serious than usual. Perhaps the current world situation was weighing on their minds.”

“I guess everyone thinks about it often.”

“Yes, it is an accepted fact of life now and we all have to plan on it. But I wanted to tell you about what they decided to do. I presented your report on the financial projection, which by the way was a well organized document, and they received it with enthusiasm. What surprised me was what they decided to do.”

“I thought you said they would opt for higher dividends.”

“Yes, I did, and they did, but they also did something else which was rather surprising.” Donna waited with great interest for Margaret to continue. “First they increased dividends up to the norm for the industry, then they committed all future excess earnings to be put into a new fund which they will create as a charitable fund to make grants to education.”

“My goodness, that is a great idea. How did they arrive at that decision?”

“One of the board members is an economist and an educator. In his view of what will transpire in the future, there will be an increased need for training and continuing education. As obsolete industries fade away, workers will need training to work in areas which are new to them, thus there will be a need for facilities and training programs and probably the need for funds to support them. In other words they seem to be planning for the future.”

Donna was quiet for a moment, then responded. “I guess the future is on everyone’s mind. It is an uncertain future unlike any other time in history and we do not really know what to expect.”

“You are right, we are in an interesting time.” There was a pause which felt a little ominous until Margaret continued. “The board wanted me

to send you their thanks for bringing this to their attention and commend you for your very good work. They want you to know involved employees are appreciated, and I appreciate your efforts also. For that reason there will be something extra in your check from now on.”

“Well.” replied Donna a little flustered. “Thank you. I am pleased if they liked it. I just try to do what I can, and I appreciate the raise. Thank you again.”

As Donna left, Margaret added, “Thank you, and keep up the good work.”

X X X X X X

The Garden remained in bloom and provided God and Sumandra with comfort and peace, but Sumandra stirred and addressed God, “Lord, It does not seem to me the humans are taking this seriously enough. True all activity is slowing down and the population is gradually decreasing, but I do not see any great activity to plan for the end.”

“Guru, I think you worry too much. Do you remember your human attributes? How far in advance did you plan activities? It seems to be human nature to wait until crisis forces action. Then the action is usually forth coming.”

Sumandra did not visibly wince, but he recalled some of his own procrastination when action would have been a better choice. Tactfully he choose to remain silent.

X X X X X X

Anne sat back and relaxed on the soft sofa. It had been a busy and exhausting week, but everything was working out so beautifully. Her thoughts wandered over all the happenings. “It was so good to see Tom when he visited last weekend.” She looked at her hand, “And he finally proposed. Such a beautiful ring. And he laughed when I answered, ‘I already said, “Yes” a long time ago. Didn’t you hear me?’ He is such a great guy and I love him very much and we are so lucky. I finish my Nursing course next month and he is getting his MD in June. The best thing is he

doesn't begin his internship until September, which is when I can get a Nursing position in the same hospital he will be in.

"But we have lots of time before then for a wedding and a honeymoon thanks to my parents. Funny, Mom didn't seem too surprised when I told her and she thought the wedding could be planned all right. It was as though she had been clued in before hand." Anne smiled, "I wonder how much has been going on behind my back while I was too busy to notice." She sank farther into the cushions and enjoyed not having to do anything.

X X X X X X

Walter opened the door with a hearty, "Come on in Jim and Sara, good to see you."

"Hi Walter," replied Jim, "We're a little early. I hope that doesn't matter."

"Not at all. Harriett has everything under control. Have a seat and she will be right out."

The group moved into a modest but well appointed living room and arranged themselves in the variety of comfortable chairs.

As Harriett entered Sara rose and greeted her with a hug. "Harriett, how nice of you to invite us down. Our house is a mess with all that is going on and we do need to talk, don't we?"

"Well it's our pleasure and I know you have lots to do even with all our advance planning. There is a lot of work and we want you to know we will help however we can."

"Yes, I knew Anne wasn't going to wait much longer and I assume Tom was ready also."

Walter chimed in. "I think we have all seen this coming for a long time. It is interesting isn't it. Since they first met I do not think they ever considered anyone else, and I'm pleased they are so sure. In the process, of course, we got to know you nice people."

Jim responded, "We are happy also to have found you as friends. Considering how uncertain the times we live in are, I like especially that the kids have decided to get married and be together. I don't know, but I think a lot of young people have given up on marriage altogether since there seems to be no purpose to it anymore. I still think it is better to have a companion than to be alone though."

“You’re right.” added Sara. “I am delighted they will have each other no matter what happens in the future. I feel relieved about that. But I wanted to tell you I talked with my minister today, and he was pleased Anne had agreed to have the ceremony there. We will decide on a date soon. Soon, that is all I hear from Anne these days.” she added with a smile then went on a little apprehensively, “I hope that is all right with you folks.”

Walter laughed, “You know my views too well Sara, but in a case like this we will go along with whatever the young’uns want. It’s their party, it’s your party, and we will be happy to be a part of it. But what can we do to help?”

At this point Harriett spoke up. “Well, Walter I believe it is traditional for the groom’s parents to put on a dinner the night before the wedding for the participants and for out of town guests. As a matter of fact I have spoken to the manger of our favorite restaurant about it. They have a large room available which I think will work.”

“Well Jim, it sounds as though the ladies have this event well in hand. What say we go and mix some drinks to celebrate.” Everyone laughed.

X X X X X X

Patricia Green reviewed the numbers and shook her head. The Kappa Factor was far above the values which were supposed to be the safe limits and still no one seemed to be bothered by them. Being the only person in her small office, she often talked to herself, “True, the rate of increase has slowed significantly, even so, it must still be undesirable. The declining population and decreased industrial activity have had their effect, but some of the changes are irreversible. At least, I think they are from how I read the data. Why isn’t more being done?”

She was interrupted by the door swinging open and William Starnes entering and sitting down in a convenient chair. “Hi Pat. How is it going this afternoon?”

“The same as usual, Mister Starnes, the numbers are up.”

“But not as much as previously, right? You must admit they are slowing down in the right sense. It seems the situation is gradually improving.”

“That is true, but I think that is strongly related to the declining population. Even at this rate the level will still be too high a hundred years from now. Of course, a hundred years from now probably nothing will matter.”

“Yes. Sadly that is most likely true, but that is part of the reason I am here. Everything is shrinking, population, business activity, taxes and even government. Unfortunately, with the present constraints the powers that be have decided even though we are doing all that we can to improve the environment with the human race evidently doomed anyway, there is not much purpose to gathering this data any longer. They have decided to close this division and we are all out of jobs in two weeks. I’m sorry to have to tell you this way, but there was no other option.”

Pat Green slumped farther into her chair. “Does this mean they are giving up on pollution control efforts?”

“No. Not at all. It simply means we cannot afford to monitor all the factors anymore since they will be on their way down anyway. All the efforts to improve the environment will continue as long as possible, but because they cannot change the outcome, it is irrelevant to continue to measure them.”

Pat sighed, “Somehow I think that is wrong, but I’m in no position to argue. For a long time I have felt rather useless here, so I have been making new plans and the fact that they are terminating us is no big deal, I have other options.”

“Oh! What do you think you will do?”

“I have an Aunt who lives in the suburbs and raises chickens and vegetables. She sells eggs and produce in the local market and she always seems to need help. I have an open invitation to go and live with her at any time, so that is one thing I could do. What about you Mister Starnes?”

“I am not as lucky. I guess I will have to register on the unemployed list and see what comes up.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

25 BOTE

After twenty five years had passed since BOTE, the human culture had sustained massive changes, children's holidays and celebrations were long gone. Halloween, Christmas and Easter were subdued observances in some churches, but as general social activities they had faded away. The final realization that the world as humans knew it was most certainly coming to an end had hit home and everyone was more concerned about their particular future and the plans they needed to make for that eventuality.

The population shift was quite evident, as no one was younger than twenty five, and Anne always held the distinction of being the youngest person alive. Career planning became a fluid activity. Most persons developed a "Plan B" or something to fall back on in case their job or industry became unnecessary. The uncertainty of the times resulted in most people still finding marriage a useful and comforting condition. Only the most independent decided to live alone.

Businesses of all sorts were in a continual phase of readjustment, lower production, down sizing of staff, reduction of inventory, decisions on maintenance schedules and when to stop operation altogether. The business world was a scene of continual reorganization. Companies consolidated or went out of business entirely, but there were always positions needing filling in the service and utility industries and sometimes there were no trained workers to fill them. Re-training was the norm for filling the specialized jobs. In general the work force remained sufficient for the culture.

X X X X X X

Anne rolled over in bed and looked at the clock. Turning back she shook Tom. "Tom, it's seven o'clock already. We've got to get going." Days were long and work was intense since the two had started their professional careers. Tom had a secure position as a resident physician at the hospital and Anne was on rotating assignments on the nursing staff. Sometimes their paths did not cross until the weekend, but they were happy and satisfied with their lives and the work they were doing.

"You must be joking, I only now got to sleep." Tom grumbled.

“Come on, Sweetness and Light. There are dozens of sick people waiting for you to cure them today. Do you want cereal or toast for breakfast?”

“I’ll have scrambled eggs and bacon with a side of hash browns.”

“No time now, but I’ll fix them for supper if you promise to be home on time.”

“I’m not into rash promises, but I will expect them anyway.”

Tom gave her a serious kiss and they hugged, “Okay supper is planned, but now you must get up.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Tom replied as Anne threw off the covers.

X X X X X X

Professor Bromley sagged in his chair and regarded the floor disconsolately. The Sanderson Gravitation Laboratory outside his window was humming and as noisy as ever, but he was very disturbed. He muttered softly, “With the population decline, there has been a lot of difficulty in finding qualified persons to continue the operation of the experimental building and its components as my older employees left or died. Now Sanderson says there may be a problem in funding. What will happen to my research and my findings?” He was interrupted by a knock on the door. “Yes?”

The door swung open and David Sanderson strode into the office. “Good morning Dan.” He slid into one of the large chairs and regarded Professor Bromley intently.

“What can I do for you David?”

“We have a problem Dan. I do not know what more I can do to help. I have threatened, cajoled and pleaded, but to no avail. I think this is the end. The University administrators are adamant in their decision. They will give us another six weeks, but then we have to shut down and cease operations.”

Dan Bromley was quiet for a moment then responded. “And there are no other supporters?”

“These days the only programs that matter to anyone are related to planning for the demise of the human race. There is no government money available for us, there is no private money willing to be committed to us, and there is no institutional money for such esoteric investigations as yours. We have been abandoned.” Dan Bromley sat very quietly and said nothing seemingly in a subdued state of shock. “What will you do Dan?”

After a moment of oppressive silence he answered. “Well, it will take at least two weeks to shut down all the equipment, and we should allow a little buffer time. So we will stop operating in three weeks and end it there.”

David looked at the little man and felt a wave of compassion for him. This had been his life’s work and now it was over. How could he be so composed? “Are you all right Dan? I know this is a very bad turn of events for you, What will you do?”

“What will I do? Well, I have seen this coming for a long time, so I guess I am resigned to my work ending. If the human race no longer exists, there is very little reason to understand the universe. Still, I have lots of data, so I can write my book even though it may never get printed, and no one may ever read it.”

David regarded the brilliant scientist now with nothing to do and was suddenly overwhelmed by the magnitude of this catastrophe which was consuming humanity. He slumped in his chair and the two men were silent with their own thoughts for a great while.

X X X X X X

Eli unlocked the door and walked into his home. “Elizabeth. Are you here?” His words echoed in the empty house and silence was his only reply. He had been busy all day and was ready for a good supper. Going to the refrigerator he looked at the prospects and considered planning a meal.

After a moment he decided Elizabeth was better qualified to do that, so he sat down and just rested. Drifting off into thought he contemplated his situation. “We’ve been married four years now and that was one of the smarter things I did. Without Elizabeth life would be very lonely.” He remembered Elizabeth graduating and completing her nurses training at the same time as Anne did. “She was so pleased to be entering a useful profession, and since I was already working as a Physical Therapist we found a lot to talk about. It just naturally followed we

realized we would be better off together, and we had known each other for so long, it was an easy decision.”

Lying back in a soft chair, he was almost asleep when the door burst open and Elizabeth entered carrying a bag of groceries. “Hi honey! Have a hard day?”

“No not really, just sort of continuous. How about you”

“It was normal enough.”

Eli took the bag and placed it on the counter then turned to give Elizabeth a big hug and kiss. “Um,” she said, “You must have been busy. You smell sweaty.”

Eli laughed, “You must have been busy also. You smell like a hospital.” and gave her another kiss.

Elizabeth hugged him then turned to the bag, “OK, now it is eating time.” They both scurried about setting table and unwrapping and cooking food. They talked as they worked.

“Oh! By the way, I saw Anne today. She invited us to Sunday brunch this weekend. Tom’s father will be there also. I found out they have been doing this sort of regularly since Harriett died as a way of keeping in touch better.”

“That’s fine. I like Tom’s dad because he always has something interesting to discuss.”

X X X X X X

Sunday turned out to be a clear sunny day. When the doorbell chimed its tune, Anne ran to answer it and greeted both Eli and Elizabeth with hugs. Tom came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of snacks. “Hi guys. Ready for some crackers and cheese?”

Handing him a bottle of wine, Eli responded. “Only if you can provide some glasses for this.”

“Oh, thanks Eli. Sure, I think I can do that.” After a few preparations and filling of glasses, the group settled down to small talk, and began to

pass the appetizers around. “My Dad and your brother are going to be here also, but we don’t have to wait for them.” He paused to consume a cheese covered cracker. “I see Elizabeth quite often in the hospital, Eli, but I haven’t seen you in a while. How is the world treating you these days?”

“Well I’m doing fine. I enjoy working at the East York Clinic. It’s a great bunch of people, and I feel I’m doing something useful to help people by offering them physical therapy. Of course, I get bogged down once in awhile, but Elizabeth always cheers me up.” He looked at his wife and smiled. “She’s great at that.”

Tom laughed. “Yes, I understand. I don’t know what I would do either without Anne.”

Elizabeth broke in, “All right you guys. You’ve gotten all the brownie points you’re going to get.”

Anne added, “That’s right, but the compliments are appreciated. Elizabeth, will you help me in the kitchen a bit. I think the others will be here shortly.”

“Sure, and the men can revert to man talk.” The two got up and went to the rear of the house.

“How long have you and Elizabeth been married now?”

“Four years.”

“That long? It seems not so long ago I was watching you and Tim play high school football, but I guess it’s been around ten years now.”

“Yes it’s about that. He was a good passer, and I was a good receiver. We scored a lot of points. I am sorry we were not good enough to get into a college sports program, but sports were phasing out at that time anyway, and there was no future in them. I am glad to be where I am, and I consider myself very lucky,”

“I remember some rather spectacular plays you two made. They were quite exciting.”

Eli grinned and looked pleased, “I remember that end of season game at State. I think that was the high point of our careers, and we were

lucky to win. But of course, after that it was over, and we were off to college. Too bad the Central City University didn't have a football team." They were interrupted by the melodious chime of the doorbell.

Tom went to the door and opened it wide which revealed Tim and Walter arriving at the same moment. "Come on in Dad and Tim. You're just in time. "

The women returned from the kitchen and there were hugs and greetings all around. "Let me pour you a glass of Eli's wine, Dad, and join in the crackers and cheese snacks which are intended to keep you from starving until dinner is ready."

"You've got ten minutes, but then dinner will be on the table." Anne added, then passed the snacks around and retreated to the kitchen with Elizabeth.

"We were just discussing your final football game, Tim, where Eli made that spectacular catch."

"It would have been just as spectacular if Eli had been in the right place."

"I was where I was supposed to be, but your pass was in the wrong spot. I still made the catch though."

Walter laughed. "You were both outstanding. No need to squabble boys. As they say, 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating'. The fact that Tim made the pass, and Eli caught it successfully is all that counts. It's the end result that matters."

Tim countered, "However there are those who would say the end does not justify the means. The process must be correct also."

"Now you're getting into Philosophy which was never my strong subject. All I know is that it felt good to make the catch. I enjoyed playing football and the good times we had then. I do miss that, but I am still glad to be where I am today."

Tom asked, "How about you Tim? Are you happy with your present position?"

"Definitely! Working on the staff of a congressman who is sympathetic to my issues makes work seem a lot easier. It is significantly better than being on the outside protesting."

Walter asked, "You think your protesting and my letter writing did some good then?"

"Certainly, sir. When enough people make abundant noise, the government starts listening, and besides even the opposition is beginning to worry about the future. They are gradually getting more cooperative now that they see the handwriting on the wall, and it becomes more personal to them. Almost everyone understands the programs in the end game strategy and they are supporting them. People in general are relieved to have some idea of how the future will be for them, and that there will be plans ready to go into place as the population shrinks to nothing."

"Well, Tim, thank you for doing all that you do and accomplishing some good results. I am sorry our generation could not have left you a better world."

"Right, but of course, not all factors are within our grasp either. We can do only that which it is possible for us to do."

From the dining room Anne chimed in. "Speaking of possibilities, how about the possibility of everyone coming to sit down for dinner."

"Great." "Sounds good to me." "I'm ready."

X X X X X X

Jim Gentry sat down and relaxed. Sara had just left for her regular Friday evening ladies club meeting at the church, and Jim was left with a lot of free time. Since all the children had left home, the once noisy house now often seemed a little empty and lonely. "I need something to do," he thought to himself as he sat in his favorite chair. After a few moments he spoke out loud, "I know what I'll do." Going to the phone he dialed a number. After a moment there was an answer and he spoke. "Walter, this is Jim. Sara is out at her meeting. How about coming up here and we play a little poker? -- Great! Do you have any chips? Ours seem to have disappeared years ago. -- Fine. How about I call Bill Tyndale also? -- OK I'll see you in a little bit."

In ten minutes Walter was entering the Gentry home. "Hi Jim, Hi Bill, Ready for some action?"

"Sure Walter, come on in. We're playing on the back porch" The Gentry home had an enclosed porch in the rear overlooking a spacious yard which had been the scene of much activity while Anne and the twins had been growing up. Now it was relegated to lawn and flower beds,

although there was a small gazebo with a swing which received sporadic use.

The three sat around a sturdy old card table and began. “So what are the house rules, Jim?”

“Dealer calls the game, two raise limit, we all get the same number of chips to start, and we play just for chips. The one with the most chips at the end gets an as yet undetermined prize.”

Bill interjected, “I propose the winner supply the beer.”

Jim laughed, “That means I’m the pre-determined winner. You’re drinking my beer.”

“How about the winner gets to supply the beer the next time.” suggested Walter.

“That’s OK with me,” Jim responded. “I’d like to make this a regular affair, I think we all could use some periodic distraction.”

“Good idea, We can call ourselves the Fathers-In-Law Club. We are all related more or less somehow.”

“I don’t care what we call ourselves. Someone start dealing.”

X X X X X X

Louise Braun awoke early on a Monday morning. Last Friday had been the final day of work and the Sanderson Gravitation Laboratory was no longer in operation. She had not slept well, because she could not shake the feeling of foreboding which followed her home each night. It felt like a cloud which was ready to rain on her at any moment.

As she sat on the edge of the bed, she talked to herself. “Today I must go down and register at the Employment Office I am now surplus. What will become of me?”

The Employment Office had been hard pressed to handle the dwindling work force. They continued to match up the newly unemployed with job opportunities which had opened up in the necessary industries. At the same time the office had taken on the additional responsibility of

guiding laid off workers to retraining institutions which operated to retrain and make available the skilled people required for new conditions. They also administered the funding as necessary to pay for the retraining. It was well understood that in the future as a shrunken population strove to fill all the responsibilities of operating a society, retraining would be continually necessary.

Jobs in general are difficult to find at the present time due to the great reductions in manufacturing and all other activities, but in the future it will be essential for everyone who is able to work to find the work they can do. It is anticipated that eventually there will be more people requiring care than there are those who are able to give it, and work opportunities will be abundant. The main sources of jobs for the unemployed at the present are the food industries and the elderly care institutions. Although there are periodic calls for positions in all the other support activities of the society to replace workers who have died or who are too incapacitated to still perform the necessary duties.

Similarly the Social Security system has expanded its purview. In a somewhat chaotic world many persons are displaced and need help to survive in a collapsing society. The up side is that many foundations which now have no purpose for their activity donated their resources to social organizations which then coordinate with Social Security to take care of the needy.

Louise arrived at the Employment Office early, but there was already a line. It took all morning to fill out papers and provide information, but before lunch time she found herself sitting in an interview room with a person somewhat older than herself, who was perusing a computer screen. "Well, Louise you certainly have a great work record, unfortunately there is not much available and most of that is in the hospital just now, and I suppose you are not really interested in that, are you? Lets look at the technical list, perhaps there is something there." Moments of silence followed broken only by the hum and operating sounds of an old computer.

"Wait, there is something new coming in." More silence. "Oh, that is not very great either."

Quickly, she posed the question, "What was it? What kind of job is available?" Louise thought quietly to herself, "I would rather very much like to work and make a living wage than to go on the dole and live with only that and my savings." She was feeling a little desperate.

"It is with the electric power company. Pretty routine, reading dials, setting switches, and watching the progress of power sources to keep them balanced. It is little better than a technician's job, but --"

Louise interrupted, "You understand, for many years I was responsible for running the Sanderson Gravitation Laboratory which involved many varied sources of power and critical management of various pieces of sophisticated equipment. I have read more dials and flipped more

switches than I care to remember, so that is not a novel situation for me.”

“Yes, of course. I just wonder whether you would be satisfied there.”

“I think I could find it interesting.” To herself she thought, “Any job is better than no job you idiot, and I will make it interesting.”

“Well, if you wish I will give you a referral to them. They, of course, will make the final decision.”

Ten minutes later Louise was on her way to the electric power company with determination in her eyes and an imposing confidence in her manner.

X X X X X X

Walter had fixed himself a small supper and sat watching and responding to the television news. “Damn Terrorists,” There was a report of a planned attack by a member of an extreme religious group which had been discovered and prevented, but not before the attacker blew himself up. “Eventually they will all blow themselves up and we will be done with them,” The newscaster continued and pointed out the last such attack had been sixteen months ago. “Well maybe they are fading out. What they ought to do is provide a large field in the open country where these idiots can go and blow themselves to bits without hurting anyone else.” Walter chuckled at his own emotional and unreasonable reaction. “Perhaps they are tapering off, just like everyone else they are probably finding it to be a problem these days recruiting new idiots when most people are concerned with more critical issues.”

X X X X X X

Sumandra felt comfortable with God even though they were not actively communicating. God’s features seemed to reflect his constant attention to many situations, and He was obviously aware of many other activities, but He responded immediately whenever Sumandra spoke. Sumandra now wondered about the events on Earth and a question occurred to him. “Lord, will the humans ever find the cause of their infertility? It would seem they have the intelligence. Will they have the determination or willingness to try to find the answer?”

“No Guru. This is now a final course of action. They have had many opportunities in the past to make life on Earth a pleasant experience, but they have not taken them seriously enough. My decision is final. To allow the humans to find a solution now would distract from the important

business of taking care of themselves until the end. As it is, they are using too many resources in a futile effort to solve the problem. I would hope they will soon give that up.”

Sumandra returned to his own musing. “I remember how some people could be determined and blind at the same time. It was often difficult to accept facts and follow to where they led. I must admit, I had some problems with that also. It is probably an aberration of the human mind.”

X X X X X X

She had been working at the power company for two months and Louise was making good progress. Operating the power panels was a snap, and they recognized she had abilities in the management area also. As she finished her supper, and was cleaning up afterward she mused, “If some of the elderly management have to quit, there are potential opportunities to move ahead. Who knows?”

Before she could start watching an old movie, the telephone rang. “Hello -- Yes. -- Oh, Professor Bromley, How good of you to call. -- Yes I was quite lucky. I am now a power management technician at the electric power company. It is a small job but satisfying, and I am doing well. How did you make out? -- Oh, That is too bad. I am sorry. -- Yes, I can understand the University training programs and the trade schools do not need your kind of expertise, and there is an over supply of teachers in the mundane fields that are open. -- I see, but how is your book coming? -- No, I think you still need to write it, for your own satisfaction if nothing else. -- I am sorry, Yes, a noisy environment can be very distracting. -- I just had an idea. Why don't you come here one evening, I will fix you dinner and you can relax in quieter surroundings. -- No I am sure it would be all right and no trouble. I work late during the week but Saturday would be just fine -- Great. I will look forward to seeing you then. About six? --- Okay, Bye.” As she hung up she thought, “It will be good to see him again.”

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Sara went to church fairly regularly, although she had her own ideas about religion, the concepts of spiritualism and some of the difficult dogma offered there. Church for her was a time in the week when she could get away from the hurly burly of everyday life and relax with comfortable friends in a pleasant surrounding. Most of the sermons she heard presented by the minister suggested useful ways of dealing with life and the world. She felt restored by the experience and the habit of church going was an acceptable one.

Today the topic was listed simply as “The Future”, and Sara wondered what the minister would say about that. After all the preliminary

rituals, the sermon time was next. He started in his usual slow fashion giving some background information but by the time he was in full voice, Sara was paying close attention.

“Friends, I know the situation with the termination of births is on your mind. It is on the minds of all of us whether we constantly talk about it or not. We are all wondering what is going on. Is God doing this? Why is he doing it? What will happen to all of us? Are the ideas about Armageddon and the Rapture all wrong? Were the ancient Sages and Prophets mislead?

“My friends, I believe we must adopt the attitude that whatever happens, it is God’s plan. God’s plan has worked for all the life of the Earth, and although He may seem enigmatic, He does not vacillate. What happens is His plan. If the human race simply fades away, we must accept that. We must keep faith that this is a loving God, and He cares about His children. We do not know the future. At the moment it looks bleak, and we have no guidance, but I say to you, and I believe myself, that the future will be to our liking, and we will find our peace with the Lord.”

These last words struck a very resonant chord with Sara, and while the minister droned on, she drifted away into her own thoughts, “Keep faith. That is a rather simple thing to do. I can do that. I know Jim and I will not live till the end, but Anne and Tom and the boys might. I hope they have satisfying lives whatever happens.”

X X X X X X

Dan Bromley rang the doorbell promptly at six o’clock. The large leaded glass door opened quickly and Louise welcomed him, “Professor Bromley! How good to see you again, do come in. Frankly, I have missed working with you and I felt badly about the absence of our many conversations.”

“Please drop the ‘Professor’ Louise. I am now only another unemployed displaced worker. I will respond very well if you just call me Dan. I decided I should bring a bottle of wine, since you are doing the dinner.”

“How nice, thank you. A Chablis! Oh! This is a kind I especially like. Let me get the opener and a couple of glasses, and you can do the honors,”

The two settled down to a small dinette table and started tending to their wine. “Thank you for inviting me over. I am having trouble adjusting to the new situation.”

“Yes, so am I. It was always enjoyable working at the lab, and I appreciated the opportunities to talk with you when everything was running smoothly.”

“I find no one near me with whom I can have an intelligent conversation. I guess I am feeling a little depressed.”

“I am sorry. All I can offer is the old saying, ‘This too shall pass.’ But aren’t you working on the book?”

“I am trying to, but I find it difficult to get started. It is discouraging, but how about you? Now you are helping to control the power grid we all depend on so much. Do you feel a great weight of responsibility?”

“Not as much as I felt at the lab. Actually, this is a much simpler job, but it is interesting enough.”

“Yes, you had a great deal of responsibility at the lab, but I am pleased you have a new useful job now. I must admit I feel at loose ends with nothing to do. I want to write, but I find it impossible in my quarters. There is so much noise from business activity during the day, and the neighbors and their children make noise or there are periodic parties in the evening, that I find the confusion very distracting.”

“Well I hope you can find a little respite here for a while. This is a quiet neighborhood. Can’t you find a similar place to live?”

“That is a bit of a problem for me. I never thought to save much, and my meager pension helps very little, so I have to live on the government stipend for unemployed people which is not a generous amount. Better quarters would be prohibitive on my income. I don’t know Louise. Sometimes I feel that life is over anyway, why should I make the effort. It seems rather useless.”

“Oh Dan you still have a lot to offer, and there is all the rest of life to enjoy yet.”

“I don’t find it much fun, Louise. I seem to have lost interest in most everything. All I see ahead are endings and decay. I often regard my life, and I feel as though the world and I would be better off if I were dead.”

“Dan Bromley! Don’t talk that way! You still have a lot to do! All you need is a quiet place to work and some inspiration, just like I need some pleasant company regularly. We would probably be better off if we both lived here. We could reduce expenses and provide some companionship for each other and you could work on your book!” She stopped abruptly as she suddenly realized what she had said.

“Why Louise!” he replied with a surprised look. “What an interesting idea.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

30 BOTE

“My Lord, I am amazed at how many otherwise good souls have such miserable life experiences.” Guru Sumandra had been gazing at the Earth quietly for a long time, and contemplating all the activity. “It saddens me that so many human groups find issues with other groups to the degree that they want to exterminate them.”

“Yes, humans follow their emotions to extreme degrees. I had hoped they could use their intelligence to solve the problems of living together rather than fighting to subdue each other, but that does not seem to be the case.”

“Why do they not use their great intelligence to create a peaceful world?”

“Dear Guru, remember your own experience. You told me it was not until you became an Atheist that you were able to cope with the Earthly problems. That meant to me that you learned to go beyond your religiously induced beliefs, and consider just the facts and reality of situations to enable yourself to find solutions. Is that not so?”

“True, My Lord. I am a little chagrined to admit it. However, I found the human religions confusing, and since living matter starts from practically nothing, it has no memory of this beautiful place. I had no recollection of my existence here, and I had to struggle as all other humans do with the idea of religion and what it meant. I believe from my basic nature I eventually found a true path, but it involved adopting an atheist viewpoint in order to solve the situations I faced.”

God smiled, “That is no problem, Sumandra. Most of the best human thinkers are or were Atheists. Religions are an outgrowth of emotions and they tend to cloud rational thought. But without emotions what good would physical life be? Not to have interaction with other humans or to have contact with the natural world would leave life as a barren wasteland.”

“What are humans to do then, Lord?”

“Is it not as obvious to you as it is to Me, my dear Guru? Most of human religions have the answer. They all say in one form or another the idea, ‘Treat others the way you yourself would like to be treated.’ That basic proposition is the foundation for successful living. Their religions have the concept, and they subscribe to it, but few follow it, even though it would eliminate many of their problems.”

Sumandra was silent for a moment , then spoke sadly, “It comes down to the same difficulty. Humans are emotionally driven and unfortunately their religion gets in the way of rational thinking, so if they could recognize their religious emotions in real life situations, and learn to separate themselves from the emotions and deal only with reality, they could operate at a more effective rational level.”

“You understand very well, my dear Guru.”

X X X X X X

“Well, I knew this would happen some day. I guess now is the time.”

Elizabeth turned toward her husband and replied, “You are looking quite sad, Eli. What is it that has happened?”

“They are suspending professional football next year. Even with fewer players and the shorter schedule they have, there are not enough fans to support it any more. It’s the same as happened to college football a few years ago except this is a little more gradual. It’s only that it is no longer economically feasible.”

“I guess that’s a little personal, isn’t it. I know you would have liked to have a professional career, but it just didn’t work out. I’m sorry, I wish I could help.”

“Well, considering the crisis the human race is facing, it’s probably not such a big deal. There are at least a few weekend warriors who have amateur leagues for fun and entertainment. Maybe I’ll join one of those to have some fun.”

“Those games can be dangerous also, Eli. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

X X X X X X

“Louise, is that you?” Dan Bromley looked up from his work to greet Louise as the door opened and she came home from work.

“Hi, Yes it’s good to be home.”

“Hard day at the power control panel?”

Louise laughed, “Not too bad, but it is going to get worse.”

“Oh. Why is that?”

“They are going to have to decommission another generating plant, which will cause confusion for while.”

“Which one is it this time?”

“It’s one of the few remaining nuclear ones.”

“That’s interesting. Why did they choose that one?”

“My understanding is that it is a high level business decision. The word is that it will be less expensive in terms of man hours and material to decommission the nuclear plant and use the company resources to refurbish three smaller gas fired plants. They will end up with more generating capacity at a lower investment cost. The main reason though is that the three plants will be more versatile in adjusting to the power load.”

“Well, I would assume they know what they are doing, although it seems strange.”

“And how is your book coming today?”

“I’m approaching the end of it, and I have looked at perhaps publishing it on the internet, although I will have several hard copies. I want to get it into the Library of Congress at least, but I am sure I will never sell any. The topic is just no longer relevant, but I feel good about having

written it. In some way it makes all my work worth the effort.”

“That’s great, Dan. You certainly deserve some satisfaction from all your efforts.”

Dan gave her a welcome home hug and replied, “And you are a wonderful person, Louise. I am sorry I did not recognize that earlier.”

X X X X X X

In a world where everyone was an adult the culture had undergone significant changes, although they had occurred very gradually. Young people’s activities had slowly faded away. Mornings were no longer filled with frantic races to get children to school nor were there time absorbing afternoon trips to provide entertainment or activities to the younger set. There were no more school buses or school zones slowing the work day traffic, and the volume of traffic was naturally down due to the reduced population.

In general, it seemed activities were less raucous and schedules were more regular. There were fewer new movies, and they were less action filled and contained less violence which mirrored the settled adult nature of the populace. The mood of the cultural atmosphere was calm and people were living with more attention to everyday activities.

Even with the reduction in production levels of many items, companies were reluctant to reduce the work force and did so only when it became an economic necessity for the company. Relocating displaced workers kept the Employment Office busy and unemployment reached very low levels.

X X X X X X

It was late at night, and Tim answered the phone in his campaign office. The voice on the other end was very familiar, “Hi brother, congratulations, I see the polls now say you are the projected winner, and you are our new Representative to Congress. Go get’ em Tim.”

Tim laughed, “Thanks Eli, I’ll do my best, but there is a lot to do also.”

“And you’re well qualified to do it. What are you going to work on first?”

Another laugh, “Well, first I am going to join the system and get oriented, but then I am sure there will be a lot to do. We still have pockets of poverty, unemployment and health needs. Of course, the biggie is planning for the future and how we handle our dwindling population. I have ideas on all of them, and I will work on them, if I can. But you realize freshmen congressmen don’t have a whole lot of clout. I’ll have to work my way up.”

“That’s great. You’re sounding like a real politician now.”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm. I am hopeful that we can make progress internally now that the international situation is calming down. I see that the mid east nations are making real progress in their regional peace negotiations, and that is all to the good for everyone. Evidently they have gotten weary of antagonizing each other.”

“Do you think the people of the world may be ready to just enjoy life while they can and let others do the same?”

“I don’t know. Eli, but I hope so.”

X X X X X X

Anne was just finishing a late supper when the door opened and Tom wearily found his way into the house. Flopping into a big soft chair he closed his eyes and shut out the world, but a voice still sounded. “You look exhausted. Which do you want first: A drink, a kiss or an appetizer?”

With an effort he replied, “I’ll take them in order of importance, the kiss, the drink, then a full course meal.”

Anne laughed and came to sit on his lap and snuggled up, “Tomtom, you need a vacation. I need a vacation, We need a vacation. Let’s go on a cruise and get away from it all.” They kissed and sat quietly for a few minutes.

“That’s a very good idea sweetheart. Will you arrange the details? We may as well do it now, since I’m sure they won’t be running cruises very much longer. And you’re right, society will survive a little while without us.”

“Fine! I’ll start making arrangements tomorrow, but where do you want to go?”

“I’ll go wherever you and the boat go.”

“I like your adaptability. I must say though, we in the know call them ships not boats.”

“Ship, boat, raft, I don’t care as long as you are there to make all the plans.”

“Is that because I am good at making plans, or you aren’t able to or you are just lazy?”

“Yes, all of the above.”

“Will you ever be serious?”

“No. Never.”

X X X X X X

The Fathers-In-Law poker club was in full swing,

“This must be your lucky night Bill. I think that is the third pot in a row you’ve won. If you keep that up you’ll be a big winner. What kind of beer are you bringing next time?”

Bill Tyndale laughed, “Let me win first, then maybe I’ll tell you. How did you decide on the variety tonight, Walter?”

“It was easy. I just went to the beer aisle, closed my eyes and grabbed.”

“I promise to give it more thought than that. There is a Mexican beer I have been wanting to try.”

“Mexicans don’t make beer, they make tequila.”

“Speaking of Mexicans, I heard on the news a report that the old problem of illegal immigration is practically extinct.”

“Oh! Why is that?”

“I guess besides there just being fewer people, there are enough goods and materials available for a shrinking population. With the constantly changing work force requirements there is a job for anyone who really wants it. I guess everyone feels more comfortable dealing with life’s problems in the environment they are accustomed to. The main point of the news item was that the number of those in poverty was rapidly shrinking also.”

“That’s interesting because the other day I heard that in addition to total crime being less, the crime rate relative to the population is way down also. Probably when people have all they need, they don’t resort to crime.”

“I think it is fascinating how the reduction in need for workers in most areas is staying rather well balanced with the reduction in total workers available. One factor may be that it is the production areas that suffer more than other activities such as the service areas and support functions. We still need maintenance, utilities and services in about the same amount even though we are producing less. Deaths and attrition due to general incapacitation seem to keep pace with the overall reduction of needs for workers. There is very likely an economic principle at work here about which no one will ever write a book.”

“Why not?”

“There won’t be anyone left around long enough to write about it.”

“Come on guys, next hand. Whose deal is it anyway?”

X X X X X X

After the impending end of the human race had been a fact of life for thirty plus years, the culture had become adjusted to continual chaos. The business community in particular was in a constant state of flux. Companies were going out of existence or merging and consolidating to remain functional. Product lines gradually changed to favor goods and services for the elderly because of the realization that in the near future everyone would be in the old age category. This fact became the guiding principle in deciding what was needed in society and what should be produced.

The most notable development on the international scene was the fading away of regional conflicts. The lack of production capacity to make war materials and the lack of young men to fight the wars were instrumental in causing the cessation of hostilities and reaching tolerable rapprochements. All countries had similar problems with deciding how to deal with the end of life and making plans for their citizens as the end neared. There simply was no time nor inclination to keep harassing the neighbors.

X X X X X X

“My Lord, I have been trying to explain for myself the failure of higher forms of life on Earth. I cannot understand it”

“Yes Sumandra, I have been reviewing this also. I have come to realize the basic problem is life itself.”

“Oh? How is that? Life has many complex and marvelously interacting functions. It evolved in a fantastic fashion and was successful for many millennia. How could it be flawed?”

God sat silent for a short time and Sumandra waited patiently. It was enough to enjoy the calm pleasant garden and not feel any need to communicate except when it was appropriate. God’s visage turned more somber, and He spoke. “I have now recognized that the basic quality that makes the evolution of life possible, and makes the evolution of advanced forms of life possible, also makes the sustaining of higher life forms highly improbable.”

Sumandra quietly considered this for a moment and looked perplexed, but then replied, “I do not understand.”

In His calm enduring nature, God began, “Life was able to evolve only because of its quality of randomly trying any path open to it. This basic drive resulted in the formation of many other more complex molecular configurations which were able to form. These new materials and systems then endured or failed according to whether they could survive in an environment which was hostile or friendly. As you well know, this process went on for such a great period of time that the higher life forms evolved and lived together in great numbers for an extensively long time. This was possible only because their growth was restrained by the balance of their successful struggle against the similar successful struggle of other life forms.

“When factors were favorable for the prey to increase in numbers, the predators also increased and the reverse was also true. Additionally, if the predator fell on hard times and disappeared for some reason, the prey was able to increase to the point it completely overwhelmed it’s food

supply and then perished itself.

“This balance of the natural forces kept populations in balance, but when something upset the balance, such as natural events or changes in the environment, causing a change in the balance, then other catastrophes happened. The ultimate disaster was the evolution of beings who by their advanced capabilities could find ways to protect themselves and destroy the balancing forces, thus being able to acquire all the resources for their own use and crowd out all others. This is the story of humans, they essentially destroyed the balance of nature. That is what they did, and they are suffering the consequences.

“The only thing humans could have done to avoid exceeding the limit of their resources was to have limited their population which is what a greater predator would have done for them, but there was no greater predator. This drive to unlimited growth was the one factor they needed to control, but they found it too difficult because of their primal urge to grow without limit. That is why the continuing success of the highest forms of life, that is human life, is improbable. Their advanced intelligence did not serve to perform the function of that greater predator. That is the great flaw, and that is why I have decided to stop the experiment.”

Sumandra was left with nothing to say. The tension built up in the garden by God’s obviously difficult exposition of the failed experiment gradually dissipated and serenity returned, but Sumandra felt something had changed. It was as though the flaw in life had invaded the garden and indeed the mind of God Himself.

X X X X X X

The Saturday market was the biggest one, and Bill Adams was one of the first vendors to arrive. Bill liked the give and take of selling his produce and always came to the Saturday market with his helper. Usually he let the helper come alone during the week as the volume of business was much less, and it could be handled by one person. After unloading and setting up his stand, Bill left the helper to tend to business before it got busy.

Bill liked to explore the rest of the market to see what others were offering and to say “Hi” to other vendors he knew. In the process he sometimes got ideas of what to grow and what not to grow. It was a form of business education which had been omitted in his formal training. As he walked along the aisles he saw a woman who seemed to be searching for something and looked very confused. As she approached he smiled and greeted her, “Good morning ma’am. Can I help you? Do you have a question?”

She immediately looked a little relieved and answered, “Perhaps, you can,” then she sighed and went on. “I don’t quite know how to proceed. How do I go about getting a place to sell? Who do I have to talk to? Where do I go to take care of that? Or do I just set up anywhere?”

Bill spontaneously laughed a friendly laugh, “That’s four questions lady. Can we take them one at a time?”

She smiled, “Yes, I’m sorry. It’s just that this is new to me and I don’t quite know what to do.”

“Well, why don’t we start with what do you want to do?”

“Yes, of course. That makes sense. I live with my aunt who raises vegetables and chickens and has a small herd of goats. She has always sold her products just in the neighborhood, but since I came to live with her some while back, we have increased the size of the goat herd, and added quite a few chickens to the flock. So you can see the amount we can produce is much larger, and we have an excess which I thought I might be able to sell here.”

“What do you have that you want to sell.”

“There are ten dozen fresh eggs and about fifteen pounds of goat cheese.”

Bill was silent a moment as he digested this information. “Ma’am the arrangement here is that stands are rented by the day, week or month. Mine, for instance, I rent practically year round by the month because we have a large volume of produce to sell, but most of the stands are rented for shorter periods of time including just by the day. The rental and stand assignment office is located over there on the north end of the grounds.” He pointed toward a little white shed next to the entrance road from the highway to the market grounds.

The woman looked around as she assimilated what he was saying. Bill continued, “But I think you will not find it particularly profitable with the small amounts you want to sell. After paying for a stand, you might not have much profit.”

It seemed as though her shoulders sagged a little and her facial expression again appeared confused. “Well, I do want to sell them. It is no good to just take them back home.”

Bill looked again at the woman and thoughts flew through his mind, “She speaks well and is fairly good looking, and she seems reasonably well poised, but her ineptness and awkwardness in the country situation, means to me she is from some other walk of life. I wonder why she is here and what her background is.” as they stood silently, he had an idea. “I tell you what. Let’s do this. You come to my stand, and I will make a

little space for your eggs and cheese and you can sell them there. I have plenty of room and you are hardly competing with me in produce. What do you say to that?”

In a flustered way she answered, “Oh, I couldn’t do that. I don’t want to impose on anyone. I only want to sell a few things.”

“I assure you it is no imposition. Now where are you parked? I’ll help you care you carry what you need to bring over, and I’ll show you where my stand is.”

After a few minutes of scurrying about, the eggs and cheese were on display alongside an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables. “There you go ma’am,” and he added with a smile, “If I do say so myself, I think it is a good addition to the product line. Perhaps it will draw in more customers for both of us.”

“Yes, thank you. I think this will work.”

As Bill regarded the new arrangement, he turned again to speak, “I apologize for forgetting my manners. Let me introduce myself. I am Bill Adams, and I work growing vegetables and fruit with my brother. We have made a reasonably successful business of it. I guess it’s because people like to eat.”

She laughed, shaking off all her previous worried and insecure feelings. “I’m pleased to meet you Bill. I am Pat Green, and as I said before I live with my aunt on a much smaller farm than yours.”

“But you haven’t lived there very long, have you?”

“Well, it has been quite a while now, but I have trouble adjusting to the rural way of life. After I lost my job in Central City, I could not find other suitable work and I decided to move in with her then. Why did you think I have not been here very long?”

“You just don’t have the country aura that goes with living in the country for a long time. What did you do in your other life?”

“I was a scientist. A Climatologist, actually. But I have been here a while. I must not be able to adjust well. I don’t think I will ever shake off my city ways.”

Wide eyed, Bill responded, “A Climatologist? Well I am impressed. I never met a Climatologist before. What did you do?”

“My specialty was long range weather predicting, and I worked in the Pollution Studies Office. We monitored the on-going pollution of the atmosphere and the ocean. We then projected the future level of pollution and issued our findings in reports to follow the way it was developing. We also worked with other scientists to develop means to control and reduce the pollution.”

“My goodness, that sounds like a very important activity and responsibility. Aren’t we doing that anymore?”

“Well, I feel we should be, but the decision was made that at this point in time and with the inevitable end of our polluting days, we no longer needed to expend resources on measuring pollution. So that is why I am now an inept farmer.”

Bill grinned, “I didn’t say you were an inept farmer.”

Pat laughed, “But your eyes spoke it very loudly. I know I am somewhat out of my element here, but it is my life now.”

“Well, let me tell you. You will eventually really like it and your ‘city ways’ as you say, will fade away. Look at me. What do you think I did in my other life?”

“I think you have always been a farmer. Haven’t you?”

“No, some years ago I was a football coach in a high school. That demanded all my time and when this crisis came along I was suddenly at loose ends, so I joined my brother on the farm and have been even busier since then.”

“A football coach? I can hardly believe that. Perhaps there is hope for me then, also. And you are happy working with your brother now?”

“Very much so. In fact we are a good fit. He is the growing expert, and I do what he says, and he hates marketing so that is my responsibility, but I enjoy it, so you see we are both better off. It sounds as though you have somewhat the same arrangement with your aunt.”

“Yes, now that you have mentioned it, I suppose that is true.”

Business was brisk and by noon Pat had sold all her eggs and particularly the cheese which was popular with the buyers. “Bill, I appreciate very much that you let me have a part of your space. May I pay you something for that?”

Bill laughed, “No, that is not necessary. But you could repay me by letting me take you to lunch at the diner across the road.”

Pat smiled, but looked down, “That is very nice of you, but I must get back. I know my aunt needs my help. She was reluctant to let me come in the first place and made me promise to return as quickly as possible.”

Bill looked disappointed, “Well, all right. Please come back whenever you want to. You will have a place to sell your eggs and cheese and you will also have a standing offer of lunch.”

Pat was blushing a little, “Well I - Bill I -- That’s very kind of you Bill. I’ll see what develops, I could be back next week.”

“I hope you are. I’ll be here.”

CHAPTER NINE

35 BOTE

The private foundations which had supported children’s activities and growth had nothing to do after there were no more children, so they had sought legal help in rededicating their assets to more pertinent activities. The courts had decided that under the unusual present conditions, it was permissible to abrogate the original intent of the trust funds when the need no longer existed as long as the funds were reapplied to similar charitable activities to aid people.

Most trusts had been able to contribute to the needs of the elderly, but some were also used for education and rehabilitation. This process had established precedents in how to deal with funds that had lost their purpose and as the population aged and activities and needs changed it was common practice to reapply trust funds where they would do the most good. Finally, all foundations were following the lead of the earlier foundations and were using their resources to assist wherever the need was the greatest.

X X X X X X

The department head had asked Tom to interview a doctor applying for an open position on the medical staff. As he waited in his office for the applicant to arrive, Tom stretched back in his desk chair, closed his eyes and relaxed. Days were very busy and he felt he was being useful as a physician, but even a few minutes of rest were welcome. His thoughts turned to the future, "It's a good thing we are maintaining a balance on the number of doctors available and the number of patients who need help. I guess the reason is because most doctors are becoming geriatric specialists by the demand of the natural turn of events. That fact reduces the number of specialists, and the ratio of doctors to patients remains relatively constant. However we still need all the good people we can get. I wonder what this fellow is like. He sounds well qualified, already retired, but wanting to work, has extensive experience, a widower and with a good range of experience." His musing was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Come in." A trim, well dressed, white haired man appeared in the doorway. "Come in Doctor Mason, and have a seat."

The man sat down in front of Tom's desk, and relaxed into the chair, "Thank you Doctor Altman."

"Just call me Tom. We don't need the 'Doctor' business."

"Right, and call me Don."

"I see you started out as an Obstetrician working out of Eastwood Hospital."

"That is correct, but that was a long time ago. When this unfortunate termination of births occurred, I had to move on to other things."

"I just realized something interesting. Eastwood was where I was born. Are you by any chance the guy that brought me into this world?"

"Altman? Altman. It does sound familiar. What was your mother's name?"

“Harriett.”

“Harriett, Oh yes, I recall. That was one of those late night arrivals. I do remember it.”

Tom laughed, “Well thank you for staying up for me. I’m sorry if I was a bother.”

Don also laughed. “That’s alright; it was no bother. We were accustomed to staying up late back then, and as I recall it was a fairly easy birth.” He then added, “Good to see you again, Tom.” They both laughed.

“Well, that is interesting.” Tom looked again and studied the resume, “I see you worked for many years at the Special Investigations Research Laboratory. and you retired from there.”

“Yes, after I went out of the baby business, I worked in Pediatrics briefly, but I knew that would not last either, so when this opportunity at the lab came up I took it. They had just received the federal grant to find the cause of the birth crisis and being an Obstetrician I was a natural to help pursue that investigation.”

“That must have been an absorbing line of work, but now that you are retired, why are you seeking to work again, and do you think you can be just a general practitioner and geriatric person now?”

“My wife passed away a few years ago. And retirement didn’t seem to agree with me. I found little to do which interested me, and I would really rather be around people who are doing something useful. I am in good health and I think the next few years are going to see the need for all of us to be as productive as possible. As far as whether I am able to handle the job, my research included keeping up with all the new advances in medicine and I think I can quickly pick up anything new I need to know now.”

“Yes, I believe you are right on both points. We are all going to have to work as long as we can and I certainly think you are well qualified Don, and you will be a valuable addition to our staff.”

“Thank you Tom, I will certainly do all that I’m able to do.”

“Well, I am looking forward to working with you and I am sure there will be plenty to keep you interested. Now that we have settled that,

would you tell me a little about your time at the Special Investigations lab. I am interested personally in what you might have found.”

“Certainly. The short answer is nothing. The longer answer fills volumes. We looked at all the proposed reasons for the birth interruption and studied them in detail. Pollution was of high interest naturally, but all the effects of pollution which we could identify involving biological processes were of a slow acting nature. There was nothing that indicated they would result in a sudden and complete shut down such as we had experienced.

“Then there was the strange gravitational event. Such gravitational waves could have their origin in massive bodies orbiting each other, but there are no such bodies near enough to have caused such an anomaly. There was one highly speculative idea that the effect may arise in the dark force or dark matter about which we know very little.

“Likewise, solar flares and unusual materials from the Sun proved to be a blind alley. What we finally spent most of our time and effort on were the DNA and the actual fertilization process. We learned a lot in doing all our testing, but we did not learn why fertilization was no longer happening. Even with sperm and eggs from sources which had previously been successful we could not cause it to happen. It was the most frustrating and baffling study in which I have ever been involved.”

“It’s fascinating that nothing can be pointed to as the cause. The Human Race has discovered vast amounts of knowledge during its time on Earth. Why can’t we find this? Why haven’t Anne and I been able to have children?”

“I have an evangelist friend who keeps telling me that if I cannot find a cause, it must be an act of God. I don’t like that answer either.”

“Yes. Why would a God do such a cruel thing?”

X X X X X X

“Listen to this Sara.” Jim Gentry was reading from the newspaper while Sara was reading a current novel as they sat relaxing after dinner. “The Special Investigations Research Laboratory is closing up shop. The government has accepted their final report. and is now dropping their funding.”

Sara sighed. “It is certainly about time. I guess the bureaucrats have decided not to fund it anymore and to stop wasting public money. It has seemed like a hopeless endeavor to me for a long time. There is no use trying to thwart the will of God.”

Jim went on, “It says here the report is essentially useless as no possible explanation has come out of all the study. Although there are several environment effects on the body, there is nothing to explain the catastrophic failure that has occurred.” He paused and read more, then added, “I guess there are some things we just do not have the resources to discover and know. It is the same as with the other dimensions in the universe, we simply do not have access to them. It may be better that way. If we don’t know where this effect came from, perhaps we won’t worry further about it.”

“I hope not. I hope people will just accept it and still live as well as they can. I believe the future is inevitable and we should face it with grace and trust in a correct outcome in the future whatever it turns out to be.”

X X X X X X

As the population shrank, and became preponderantly old aged, most people moved closer into the large population centers where their needs for products and services were most easily found. Clusters involving hospitals, large apartment buildings, elderly care facilities and extensive shopping malls became the normal organizing influence which controlled society.

Central City was no different, and Parkman Hospital became the hub of Central City. When the large Parkman Elderly Home was built it was adjacent to Parkman Hospital although the home was operated by the local government rather than a being a private enterprise.

X X X X X X

Sumandra had been absorbed with viewing Earth for a long time when he spoke his thoughts. “For me the most fascinating aspect of observing the decline of the Human Race is that even though the Earth looks the same, the population is only about half of what it was when the termination started.”

In a somber voice, God replied, “Yes, it seems to be progressing well.” But then The Lord returned to silence.

Sumandra sat and thought back on all their conversations, and realized a little of how great a disappointment terminating human life must be for Him. God had talked so expansively and enthusiastically about it when the idea had first come to His mind, and now after so much effort it was finished. Then a troubling thought came to Sumandra, and he needed to know the answer.

“Lord, if I may ask, what if the humans now find the cause of their infertility problem, and decide to continue having progeny and are able to do so? What will happen then? What can you do further?”

“That is not a problem. At their present rate of intellectual growth, it would take them close to a century to discover a mechanism for changing the existing condition. They are only now discovering the eleven dimensional nature of the universe, and there is a long way to go to find the method of correcting the situation causing their termination. Although it would be within their ability eventually, they will be long gone by that time.

“Now they seem to have given up the effort to find the reason for infertility. This is good as that search just wastes resources they need as the end approaches. I am pleased they at least seem to be using their intelligence in planning for the end. They will need to use their resources wisely in the next few years, and they seem to be doing that now. The cause of the end of fertility will never be known on Earth.”

“I am truly impressed by the abilities of the Human brain, Lord. It is not my place to judge, but you did a fantastic job.”

“You realize of course, I had a great length of time, and I made use of an enormous number of generations of beings to accomplish my end. However. It was a very logical procedure.”

Sumandra was left with no further comment.

X X X X X X

“That’s it, I quit.” Walter threw his cards down more in disgust than anger. “I haven’t won a hand all evening.”

Jim, always the gracious host of the Fathers-in-Law poker club, sympathized and gently chided him, “Sorry, it’s just that some of us are more talented than others.”

Walter laughed, “No it’s just that some of us are luckier than others at times.”

“Let’s do something different. Have another beer, get another plate of snacks, and tell us your view of the world situation. Why are we humans coming to an end of our history just now, Walter?”

“Why are we coming to an end? That might require more beers and snacks than you have. However, you are quite familiar with my views, Jim. I am an atheist because I know enough about the real world to know the universe came about by natural means, and there was no god required to make it happen. Therefore higher life forms must be reacting to a situation of a natural origin. I don’t know why this is happening, but I suspect it is because of a natural though perhaps unusual event in the universe. The prime suspect for me is this strange gravitational variation signal they have detected, however no one can figure out exactly what it is doing to us. I do not believe we will ever figure it out. What about you. What’s your opinion?”

“Me? Well I am sort of with you. We are in a natural universe, but we are far from knowing all its secrets. I don’t buy into all this fantasy stuff in the religions and all the obviously impossible ideas they espouse. It has not absorbed my interest at any time in my life. Sara of course, is fairly religious, but she says all the minister offers is that we should have faith that God knows what he is doing. I cannot conceive of there being a god, but if there is, I would say that it must be angry with us for some reason. Goodness knows when you look at all the bad stuff going on in the world it would have reason enough to be angry. Why would any reasonable entity put up with all this nonsense.”

“Good point, that’s a sensible argument. What about you, Bill. What do you make of this crisis situation?”

Bill Tyndale was silent and thoughtful for a moment, then began slowly. “As a child, I was taught there was a God, but as I grew up, I found a lot of problems in the whole idea and stopped paying attention. It did not affect my life, and I succeeded well in the journalism business. During the course of that work, of course, I ran into a lot of strange ideas. I do not know whether there is a god or not, but I would not entirely discount the possibility that there is a god. If that is the case, all I can think of is that it is disappointed with us for some reason. I can conceive of human life not going in the direction the god wanted it to go. It is obvious to me that if humankind used its intelligence instead of following every little emotion that comes along we would perhaps be better off.

“For instance, we would have realized long ago that the resources of the planet are limited, and we would have limited our population by some reasonable means. We do not need billions of people, and the world will not sustain billions of people. The overcrowding this causes leads to the conflicts which are so prevalent in the modern world, to say nothing of the drastic consumption of the natural resources. The problem is that we got smart enough to use all of the natural world for our own comfort and pleasure, and overlooked the inevitable result of our greed.

“A population of something well under a billion would be more sustainable, and we would all be better off, but that is not an option now. It is probably barely possible that if we had conserved the environment and let our population stabilize by reducing birth rates somehow we might have survived as the homo sapiens species.” He hesitated. “But I doubt it.”

The group grew silent each reflecting on their own take of the various ideas presented. Jim broke the spell with a pragmatic observation.

“Well, Sara will be home soon. I declare the evening over. Bill, I think you are the winner. What kind of beer are we going to have the next time?”

Bill smiled, “I can’t tell you now. It depends on what whim overwhelms me when I get to the beer aisle.”

X X X X X X

The International Initiative for Future Organization sponsored by the U.N. could claim a moderate amount of success. While no programmed meetings of adversaries were planned, there was significant interaction in the general meetings of the group.

Seating had been orchestrated so that adversaries were not adjacent, but also not too far away from each other, and cafeteria style meals resulted in some contacts between groups. Although there was a certain amount of tension, the presentations were not controversial, but in general they consisted of descriptions of what some countries had done already to plan and to generate facilities for the end of their world. Their reasonable actions highlighted the advantages of preparing for the end which resulted in a more tranquil life for themselves.

The hard fact of the end of human life could not be ignored, and the pettiness of some of the causes of war became clear. By the end of the conference, representatives of three sets of war weary combatants arranged meetings, and in the process had worked out cease fire arrangements, and in one case a peace treaty was the result. Others were at least talking and there was hope for future negotiations. All of the world populations showed they were tired of conflict. Moreover, they were apprehensive of the end of their existence.

X X X X X X

“It’s amazing.”

“What’s amazing?”

“We can look in all directions and see nothing but water.”

Tom and Anne were standing at the rail of the cruise ship and enjoying complete relaxation and not having to worry about their other life for a few days. Tom volunteered, “That’s why they call it the water planet. I thought you knew.”

“Who calls Earth the water planet?”

“All the other planets in the Universe call it the water planet. That’s because they envy it for all the water it has.”

“Oh silly, lots of planets have water. Are you this silly when you are doctoring, too?”

“Of course, It helps release the tension. Would you like me to release a little tension for you?”

Anne did not resist Tom’s embrace, and they enjoyed appearing as newlyweds for a few moments. Taking cruises was still a favorite form of vacationing, in fact there was a current rush on vacation travel because it was recognized travel would not be available indefinitely, but for the present it was still possible. People realized the opportunities for all kinds of vacation travel would be gradually decreasing because of aging equipment and fewer capable employees. In fact, Tom and Anne were lucky to find a space on The Fair Weather Ann which was scheduled for only two more seasons before being retired. Being the largest ship, it required a large crew, and it was becoming too expensive to operate. The recreation industry as all other sections of the economy would be slowly shrinking and going out of business in the near future.

“So, are you happy?”

“I’m always happy when I am with you.” Anne looked down and was silent.

“But?”

Anne looked up again into Tom’s eyes. “I wonder sometimes what it would have been like if we could have had children. I think it was all my fault. When I was born, God looked down and saw me and said, ‘This has got to stop’, so he stopped it.”

Tom embraced her again, “Now who’s being silly?” They stood quietly for a few moments, but were then interrupted by the dinner gong. “May I escort you to my special scrumptious dinner prepared just for you?”

“Of course, but only if you let me hold your arm.”

X X X X X X

Tim leaned back in his chair and felt very self satisfied. He had just returned to his office from having the House pass his bill which set up the mechanisms and resources for the elderly centers which were coming to be of prime importance to the whole nation. The vote was almost unanimous which showed most legislators were being practical about the end needs of the people.

The phone rang. "Hello. Congressman Gentry here. -- Oh Hi Donna. -- Well thanks very much. It's on the news already then? -- Well yes, and I want to thank you also for all your help on the insurance aspects of the plan. The statistical info on the projected number of doctors for instance was quite useful. -- No, no, I really mean it. You were quite helpful with the stuff I didn't understand. -- Well funding isn't going to be a problem, besides by then the money will be less important. It will be the materials and goods actually on hand and available which will be our wealth at that time." -- Tim laughed. -- "I see. Well if you ever get tired of Forever Yours Insurance, I can always use help here. -- Oh you know, sweeping the floor and carrying out the trash. That sort of thing. -- You are? When will that be? -- I don't think it's the greatest place to spend a vacation, but I would be glad to show you around and take you to dinner. -- Yes, I think that will work. Call me when you get in. -- Ok, Good talking with you, Donna. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

CHAPTER TEN

45 BOTE

Tom entered the Central City Hospice and walked down the main hall to the end of the west wing. The route had become very familiar to him over the past month. Walter's illness was as sudden as it was definite, and Tom's father had only a few months to live. The Sun broke through the clouds and bathed the bedroom in a warm glow as Tom entered.

"Hi Dad! How goes it today?"

"Not as well as yesterday, and I have stopped chasing the nurses."

Tom smiled, "Your humor is one of your greater assets, Dad. Keep up the good work."

"Well they encourage me to have a positive attitude, and you know I always follow the doctors' orders."

“I have heard reports which contradict that, but we’ll let the subject drop. I have some news you might like to hear.”

“Only if it is good news.”

“It is. The board of Parkman Hospital has decided to finally fill the vacancy, and as of next week I will be Director of Medical Services at Parkman Hospital.

“Well, that is great. Did you know your mother always said you should be more than just a physician? She said you had leadership potential because of the way you got along with almost anyone.”

There was a silence until Tom spoke, “Yes, I have missed Mom, She seemed to be more than a mother, because she was like a best friend also. She was always interested in what I was doing and supportive of my doing it. Of course you were also, Dad.”

“Well, we decided to have only one child so that we could invest all our efforts in you.” More silence followed until Walter added, “I realize as I face death what a really strange thing life is. Here we have a highly intelligent animal that cannot get beyond its primal senses and reactions to use its intelligence to make the world a better place. Those who try to do so face daunting resistance to change and improvement by the entrenched habits and emotions of the bulk of the population. I lay at least part of the blame for this at the feet of religion and the religious establishment.

“Religion is all about sin and punishment, and how to avoid such things, but I think religion itself promotes one of the greatest sins in the world. That sin is self-indulgence. To make themselves feel emotionally comfortable and safe, the followers of religions are willing to believe all manner of strange stories and unsubstantiated ideas. This is then followed up by the action of using this background when dealing with reality and trusting an unproven foundation rather than the reality basics. The results are wars, destruction of the environment, misery, death, and a generally uncooperative attitude among most groups.”

Tom nodded in agreement, “Your philosophy is certainly rational. Shelley would be proud of you.”

“I don’t know about Shelley, but I am satisfied myself that my thoughts are reasonable.”

“Dad, I just want you to know, I have always respected your ideas. I love you, and I could not have had a better father. Thank you.” Tom

embraced his father a moment before he needed to return to work.

As he left he added, “By the way, Anne will be in to see you again tomorrow also.”

“I’m always glad to see your lovely wife. I know you two are very busy though.”

“Yes, that’s the order of the day now. Everyone is busy with one thing or another. Take care, I’ll be back again soon.”

After Tom left, Walter relaxed into a pleasant nap.

X X X X X X

As they sat enjoying the garden, a sudden thought came to Sumandra, but then he wondered whether he should bother God with it. The idea seemed so trivial that he almost decided to forget it. But the idea nagged at him and he asked, “Lord, is it possible the experiment would have been more successful on a different planet? Was Earth the best place to do it?”

In His deliberate way, God considered Sumandra and after a few moments began to speak. “That is a very good question, Guru, and it is one that I would expect you to ask. When I started to think about this program of physical life for some spirits, there had been billions of planets which had come and gone already. Of the billions in existence at that time some were too large and some were too small, and, of course, they were of varying composition. The short answer to your question is ‘No.’ Because of the qualities required in the planet there were only a few million suitable ones available. Earth was chosen arbitrarily among those which were going to have the longest periods of existence to assure the maximum availability for their use. The others did evolve higher forms of life, but they did not get my blessing to proceed beyond a certain point of development.”

“If You ever do it again, would You proceed differently?”

“No, not in selecting a planet, but I would give serious consideration to changing some of the starting conditions. I Myself have learned some things from this exercise. These ideas would be useful in a future trial.”

While they spoke, a small angel entered cautiously, “Lord, could you ask Gabrielle to stop practicing now? We think he plays well enough.”

“Yes! Certainly! Tell him for me that if he doesn’t have it now he’ll never get it.” The angel slipped out again appearing very happy.

X X X X X X

Ed Jackson had been the director of the National Zoo for only three years, but he was thinking seriously about the future. As he sat in his office with the large window overlooking the huge elephant pen, his thoughts wandered. “Zoos have served a very useful purpose in preserving species and educating the public, but what should we do about the now seemingly inevitable end of our species? We can’t just die off and leave caged animals. Obviously we need to release them at some time in the future. Some will die naturally in captivity, some cannot be returned to the wild as they would not be able to survive, but a lot of the endangered species could be returned to the wild. Because of the reduced human population which does not impinge as much on their habitat now the species would be able to survive. Certainly most of the breeding programs should be suspended. All of this activity will be expensive and time consuming. Time is the one factor we have only in limited supply now. The National Zoo is well situated to take the lead in this, but we will need help. We could call the program Back To The Wild to gain support for it. I think I need to talk to someone.”

X X X X X X

Androv mused silently to himself as he rode to the airport with Inspector Smith. “So, It has come down to this. I have been cooperative with all the authorities, and I have won their respect while trying to follow the legal resources to avoid deportation. Now after months and years of appeals based on the danger to me if I return home, they have finally decided to send me off. How can I still get out of this?”

As they were dropped off at the front door, Androv felt the airport terminal looming large and ominous in front of them. Inspector Smith escorted Androv to the check-in desk where there was a long line. Smith spoke tersely, “You are ticketed on the next flight, Androv.”

They stood and waited, but there seemed to be no activity. After some minutes of waiting, the public address system announced, “Flight 99 is delayed due to a mechanical problem. Please wait in the lounge area until further information is available.”

They found two seats together and sat down to wait. Androv held his one suitcase on his lap and observed the surroundings, as there was nothing else to do. There was no conversation between the two men. After an hour the P.A. system came on again, “We are very sorry but we

need to fly in a replacement plane, and we will not be ready to board flight 99 for several hours. We apologize for the delay.” In recent years all aging travel equipment had been having problems with maintenance as the volume of travel decreased there was no incentive to replace the equipment and all of the transportation industry experienced delays, cancellations and generally deteriorating service.

As they sat, Androv noticed Inspector Smith was relaxing and closing his eyes. Waiting a few minutes to be sure his watchdog was asleep, Androv then firmly grasped his suitcase and rising gently started meandering to the exit, He moved slowly so as not to attract attention and easily gained the exit door. Once outside he increased his pace, and escaped into the countryside.

Androv had seen a little village off to the side of the main road to the airfield and headed for that. An hour’s worth of walking got him to the far side of the village where it spread out into a blanket of small farms, and he stopped to rest next to an abandoned corner store. There was a smaller building behind the store and he decided to look into it. In the fading light of day, he could see the building had not been occupied for a long time and was sparsely furnished with just a table and an old chair. As night was upon him, he decided to hole up there and wait for daylight.

X X X X X X

Elizabeth went to the phone and dialed a familiar number. When it was picked up, she immediately said, “Congratulations new boss person.” Before Anne could say anything. Elizabeth continued, “I am so happy for you. You will be a great Head Nurse. -- Yes, it was posted on the information board just before I left. -- Have you told Tom? -- Tell him he has to take you out to dinner to celebrate. -- I am sure Eli will be proud of you also. -- That’s nice. How is your dad anyway? -- I understand they still get together to play poker even though Tom’s dad is gone. -- Yes, it is. My dad says we should live for today because there will be no tomorrow now. That sounds Epicurean doesn’t it?” -- Well, whatever, have a good day. I’ll see you at work, bye.”

X X X X X X

Come in Mr. Jackson. What can I do for you?”

“Thank you for seeing me Mr. Congressman.”

Tim cringed a little whenever he heard that term. In his years in congress he had never quite gotten accustomed to the formality. “Just call me, Tim.”

“OK Tim, as you are aware I am the Director of the National Zoo, and I need help with a problem. With the oncoming demise of the human race, we need a plan to gradually release the zoo animals back into the wild and we cannot leave it as a last minute action. It will take time and money to introduce many of the species back into the wild world and a lot of ancillary activity such as transporting animals from all zoos including the smaller institutions and supervising the return of the animals to their natural habitat. Zoos have been losing income for years from declining attendance and from evaporating charitable funding, so we are in a poor position to tackle all this expense. I am here asking for some governmental help. Do you think you can do anything for us?”

“On the surface that sounds like something the government should get involved in simply from the safety standpoint. What exactly do you visualize?”

“Well, our existing zoological societies are well suited for identifying which animals should be returned and to where they should be returned, but we need a central planning and coordinating group, so that none of the existing transfer services get overwhelmed. Also, I see some efficiencies can be instituted in coordinating the moving of the same or related animals at the same time, but we do need some funding and an umbrella group to oversee all this.”

“Would you consider being the point person in this endeavor?”

“Well, the National Zoo is ideally situated to guide the program, and I am willing to do whatever is necessary to make it work.”

“Fine, let me schedule some time for my staff to meet with you. Together you and they can write a potential bill, and we’ll see where to go from there.”

“Thank you very much. This will be a very useful program, and I am pleased you understand this. I will do all I can to help the effort along. While I am here, I would like to mention another issue which is on my mind and which concerns me. If you have another few minutes may I explain?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I have studied this infertility issue quite a bit, and I have gone over the records of how it started. Being a zoologist this interested me from a

professional standpoint. Over time I learned that it began among the higher primates in Africa, from there it spread rapidly to the north over Europe then eastward over Asia and finally to the western United States. Within a month's time it spread worldwide. It was so unusual and so rapidly spreading that it was slow to be recognized until it was well established. I have a theory, that it is something entirely new. It may be something similar to a virus but even simpler than a virus. It is something which is fast acting in its effect and very light so it is carried on the air currents. I believe it has not been found because everyone has been looking for the wrong things. This is something new, perhaps even a complex, but benign looking molecule. I would like to recommend funding to search for this, also."

"You realize all such funding has been terminated some while ago. There are very few women left now of an age that could possible bear children. While your idea is intriguing, I think the bulk of public opinion is resigned to our fate, and any bill on the subject which I threw in the hopper would be dead on arrival. I don't believe anyone wants to consume our resources chasing Will-o-the-Wisps even on the chance they may be true. On this, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can help you."

"Well, I know it's a long shot, but I thought I would mention it. It is perhaps better just to accept our fate and live as well as we can until the end."

"Yes, it is a time for pragmatism. Unfortunate, but true."

X X X X X X

Androv had stayed in the small cabin for two days. During that time he had discovered an old but functional water well behind it, and farther off to the side toward some woods was an old fashioned outhouse, so he had all the comforts of home except for food as his traveling snacks were about gone. "Something must be done about that today." He spoke aloud.

The road continuing away from the village looked more interesting, so Androv started in that direction. Around a slight curve in the road appeared an apple orchard and the fence around it protected nothing. Two apples in his pocket for lunch and two more to eat for breakfast were enough to keep him comfortable and he continued heading farther out. As he walked and ate, he came to a field with a few goats grazing, and it reminded him of his childhood home. In his community there had always been goats around, and he remembered the difficulty of milking goats, but also he remembered the rich taste of the milk. As he watched, a slight woman came out of the barn and walked towards the house struggling with what was evidently a heavy pail.

With a sudden inspiration, he approached her, “Can I give you a hand with that ma’am?”

The woman stopped and set the pail on the ground as she gazed at the strong looking man who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. To herself she did a quick inventory and evaluation, “Swarthy, pleasant smile. strong appearance, must be accustomed to hard work,” and made an on-the-spot decision.

“As a matter of fact yes, I am looking for a helper. This is proving to be too much for me. Are you looking for full time work?”

“Full time, part time, it doesn’t matter. I just need enough to live on as long as I can work at my own speed. I came out here to get away from the bustle, problems and stress of the city, and I like the country.”

Pat sagged and almost burst into tears. “That’s wonderful. My aunt and I have been running this place, but she suddenly died last week, and I have been overwhelmed since then.” Pat then did break down and cry.

Androv stood awkwardly by and waited until she composed herself again, but offered, “I’m terribly sorry ma’am. That must be very difficult, and I will do whatever I can do to help.”

“That’s very kind of you. I will be glad to work something out in the way of pay, although I can’t pay much. My name is Pat Green. What is yours?”

Thinking quickly and recognizing his difficult situation, Androv knew he needed to remain unidentifiable. He blurted out. “It’s Ted. People just call me Ted.”

Well Ted, I have the goats, chickens and a small produce garden. Are those things that interest you? Can you help with any of that?”

“I did all those things as a child. It’s been a long time, but I think I can still milk a goat and the others are a snap.”

“Well, let’s give it a try. There are two goats in the barn yet to be milked. If you will milk them and bring the milk into the house, we’ll discuss everything else. You’ll see pails there and also a lavatory where you can wash your hands.”

Androv smiled. “Thank you ma’am. I’m sure I can pass the test, I’ll be in shortly.”

X X X X X X

In the year 50 BOTE, the biggest problems which commanded attention were the shrinking numbers of people and the distortions occurring because there were no additions of young people. It was becoming obvious that everyone would have to contribute as well as they were able even beyond retirement. Unfortunately, some population centers in the third world had been wiped out when a wave of diseases had overwhelmed both the available resources and the insufficient manpower of those who tried to help them.

The drastic reduction in the human population was having effects which were not even being noticed in the chaos of continual retrenchment. The atmospheric carbon dioxide levels had stabilized and were heading downward to more reasonable numbers, and other air pollution factors were clearing up. The momentum of measures instituted to reduce environmental pollution continued almost by habit, and the proper disposal of rubbish was still the order of the day in most communities. The Earth was actually becoming more livable now that a major species was disappearing.

Because of the decrease in population many parts of the culture were changing. As society concentrated on the basics of everyday life, fewer people needed to travel for business reasons. All modes of travel were constantly reviewing, decreasing and adjusting the number and size of airplanes, trains, busses and ships to accommodate the reduced demand. The use of private vehicles declined in favor of mass transit and biking or walking, particularly in the concentrated population centers as they became more local and self contained.

X X X X X X

Sumandra sat reflecting on the whole situation of life and the end of human life on Earth, and since he wanted to somehow express his concern and sorrow to God that the experiment had failed, he was moved to speak, “My Lord, may I offer my humble thoughts on my experience on Earth?”

“I am always open to your comments, Guru.”

“As I have admitted before, my atheist viewpoint was necessary to achieve a reasonable outlook on Earth, then dealing with the facts, I could reach a useful course of action. I would like to add that one must also be guided by the normally accepted codes of morals and ethics

which are recognized by most thoughtful people, of course. These codes have arisen over the years, even before religions, by the rule you instilled in early minds, that is, treat others the same as you wish to be treated. This rule became apparent to early humans as they needed to live together for protection. I realize that only by following that rule was I able to properly apply whatever intelligence I had to the problems which surrounded me. I say all this only to then amend an apology. Living a human life is not easy which I know from personal experience, and which I am aware you know from all the failed spirits which return here in disgrace. I make the plea that we should not be too hard on them.” Sumandra stopped abruptly, realizing he was stepping beyond the normal bounds.

God’s visage softened and He displayed a warm smile. “I know now why I value your opinions so highly, Guru. You are the epitome of intelligence modified by wisdom. As I have said before, your conversations with me are most useful.”

Silently, God and Sumandra returned to the pleasant contemplation of the beauty around them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

55 BOTE

Over the years, The Parkman Elderly Home became the main focal point for most activity in Central City. Because of the proximity of the home to the hospital, the home administrative offices became the clearinghouse for directing activities in the area and the source of information including local living accommodations. Both the home and hospital had been designed to provide not only the best handicap accessible features for elderly persons, but they were also constructed to be operated by elderly staff since that was all that would be available.

The Parkman Elderly Home and the Parkman Hospital were connected by a covered pedestrian passage which was located alongside the short roadway between the two institutions. Over the years Parkman Center had expanded to include apartment buildings, small shops, service businesses and a few small, but versatile manufacturing plants. These small facilities could make the needed equipment and supplies which were no longer available from the large suppliers which had gone out of business. With its outlying farms Parkman Center had become a mostly self sufficient community.

This was the typical arrangement around the world. Surviving populations concentrated in the most livable areas. Housing, medical and ancillary services were surrounded by food producing areas and small manufacturing plants as a matter of necessity. They could be operated and staffed by elderly persons to serve elderly persons.

When the directorship position of the Elderly Home opened up, the ruling body decided that because of her experience as Head Nurse at the hospital and her familiarity with organizational procedures at the hospital, Anne was an appropriate choice to become the new Director of the Elderly Home. The job required close cooperation of the Home with the Hospital as patients frequently needed to be shuttled back and forth between the two institutions. However, being the Director was a much larger responsibility involving not only supervising the operation of the Home, and the caring services involved, but also running the business of the ancillary housing units for those needing help but not severely incapacitated. It was felt Anne had the organizational skills to do both jobs well.

X X X X X X

Anne sat at the head of the conference table with all the senior staff for the routine weekly meeting. “Staff, we have a new initiative beginning this week. I will be appointing a person to be the leader of a new group we will call Future Planning. It will be the first responsibility of this group to itemize all our future needs for equipment and materials as well as we know them. Then they will plan on how much of everything we will need and how to get it.

“Would you all submit a list of supplies, equipment and anything else that comes to your mind for future needs. We will then combine the lists and begin work.”

“Are these to be just in our own area of operations, Anne?”

“No, you can let your mind roam. We need to be sure we think of everything as we will not have a second chance at this. We can easily eliminate duplications, and I’m sure we will have many of them, but we need to be confident we are thinking of all possibilities.”

“Should we suggest quantities, also?”

“That would be useful, but it will be up to the new group to establish those goals. I am sure there will be much thought and consultation going into the effort. My husband made a suggestion which I think will be our guideline. He proposed we plan carefully for all we could possibly need, then acquire twice as much. We must realize that some things just may not be available later on.”

X X X X X X

Ed Jackson was absorbed by his thoughts as he wandered around the mostly deserted grounds of the National Zoo. “Well, that went better than I had feared it would.” A large truck had just been loaded with the remaining African quadrupeds going to Port City to be transported home on one of the few remaining ocean cargo vessels. “All our local animals can be dealt with easily, and the zoo will be abandoned before long. So what is next for me? Probably one of the central living areas, but what can a zoologist do there? I may end up as a floor sweeper or a truck driver for my keep.”

X X X X X X

“Here’s the end of the road. We need to walk in the rest of the way.” Eli and Elizabeth were on a weekend vacation in the National Forest. Many groups of cabins had been established in the more remote areas surrounding Central City to provide vacation opportunities for those who liked to have a change from the settled areas and take a break from everyday routines to experience nature again.

Noticing several vehicles next to the entrance path, Elizabeth answered, “Yes, I see some of the others are here already.”

Their destination was a moderate sized camp which offered a rustic setting devoted to hiking and other outdoor activities, but not completely devoid of modern conveniences. The system was mostly do-it-yourself, but there was a small staff to maintain and control the facility. The couple slipped into their oversize back packs and set off down the trail. Scarcely a tenth of a mile along the path, a startled deer looked up and immediately disappeared into the woods.

“That’s one.” laughed Elizabeth.

A few minutes later, as they came over a rise, they could see a dozen cabins spread out over several acres of ground bordering a moderate sized pristine lake. They stopped to rest a minute and to spot the cabin they were headed for.

“Would you believe this used to be a camp exclusively for teenagers and was much larger?” Eli added. “The woods have encroached over the years and the playing fields are gone now, but there is still great swimming. It is a great example of the changes that have transpired as the population has declined over the years. Not only are the forests growing and taking over the land abandoned by farms and residential areas, but the animal life is thriving better than it has in a very long time. I understand that even the predators are doing better. Wolves and Mountain lions are becoming more common as all of the flora and fauna are flourishing.”

Elizabeth laughed, “Bet you can’t say that rapidly three times in a row.”

“Say what?”

“Flora and fauna are flourishing.”

“Can’t you be serious?”

“The only thing I will be serious about is doing nothing but just ‘communing with nature’ as the saying goes. A few days of not running up and down hospital halls will be fine, if I can also see a few deer or even a couple of skunks.”

Eli laughed, “I hope you find all that you prefer.”

X X X X X X

Anne was at the admissions desk training a newly assigned clerk, when the door opened and a small but muscular man entered. “Yes, may I help you?”

“Perhaps you can. I just brought my wife into the hospital. I’m afraid she is ill, and I want to be able to stay nearby. Do you have a small apartment or single room available? I’d need it only on the weekends, or perhaps occasionally during the week. We have a small farm and I need to spend most of my time out there.”

“Our lodging facilities are intended mostly for full time occupancy. We don’t normally do overnight.”

“Well, it may turn out to be permanent. She may be in the hospital and recovery for a while, so I’ll probably need your arrangements on long term care also. I may have to sell the farm and stop working myself. It’s more than I can do alone for very long.”

Anne replied, “That sounds more like a situation we can deal with if you take the room on a permanent basis. What is your name?”

“My name is Ted Androv, and I understand it would be best as you say to take what is available on a permanent basis. I need help, and It may be necessary just to sell the farm now and be done with it.”

While they were talking, another person had entered the office, and at this point, the new arrival spoke up. “Excuse me, I could not help but overhear what you said. I am looking for a place to stay, but I am also looking for work. I had planned to go to the Employment Office tomorrow to register. What kind of help do you need?”

Androv turned to look at the neatly dressed man and quickly answered, “You may not like it. I raise vegetables, chickens and goats. It’s just a small farm and pretty rough work. Have you ever milked a goat?”

“No,” He paused, “But I have milked a zebra. I suppose I could learn to milk goats.”

“A zebra?” Androv looked astounded. “Really?”

“Yes, I was a zoo director and once one of our zebras had a nursing problem with her foal. She had to be hand milked, but nobody else was able to do it so I did, and I learned on the spot.”

“That sounds interesting. Let me finish registering here, and I’ll show you the way to my farm. Perhaps we can work something out.”

Accepting the idea that sometimes fate is the most useful route to follow, Ed Jackson replied, “It sounds possible to me.”

X X X X X X

It was late in the afternoon when the newly trained clerk at the Parkman Elderly Home looked up as a mature but youthful looking energetic woman entered, “Yes, How may I help you?”

“My name is Louise Bromley, and my husband is quite a bit older than I am. He requires a lot of help, and I think we are about ready to use your services.”

“Is your husband in the hospital?”

“No, not right now but his care at home is more than I can do any more. We need extra help.”

“Would you fill in a request form and I will go over the types of arrangements we have.”

“Certainly.” Louise busied herself filling in the blanks, and spoke as she wrote. “We do have some income and are covered by a good insurance program, but we might need some extra assistance. I am still fairly active. Are there any opportunities for work?”

“Our institution is planned in such a manner that the members who wish to work part time can do so in any of the functional areas of the support activities to help cover the cost of their facilities, there are also some government programs available and, of course, volunteer assistants are always needed.”

“My training is in science rather than medicine, and I am not a very good nurse, so I’m not sure how much help I could be.”

“Well, we have more problems than just caring for patients, there are also the operation of the physical plant and maintenance of the facilities which are equally important.”

“That sounds more like my line. I have operated laboratories and power plants, so I might find something to do in your support systems.”

“Mention that in the comments area of our form and someone will contact you later.”

X X X X X X

“As we were talking earlier My Lord, I said it was not until I became an atheist that I was able to deal with facts and reality to make reasonable decisions. You were not particularly concerned at that time, but I was uncomfortable with admitting that I felt it was necessary to take an atheist viewpoint. You did not elaborate your thoughts then, but how do you feel about my declaring to be an atheist as a human?”

God looked at Sumandra with kindly eyes, then gazed down at the glowing blue jewel below them. After a moment of contemplation, he spoke. “If you were I, which would you prefer between the two positions of someone not believing in you compared to someone believing you were a narrow minded ogre and then using that idea to manipulate and dominate others by intimidating them with unreal stories of what you are like?”

“Certainly the former, My Lord.”

“Of course. That is reasonable. Moreover, there is no natural justification for my existence on Earth. The Earth exists because of the natural processes I put into use to accomplish the creation of the Universe. Natural processes by their very nature do not allow interaction with other extraneous phenomena that do not function in the natural world, hence there is no evidence of them or of Me in the natural world. So why should it upset Me that there are unbelievers? At least atheists are thinkers, which is what all humans should be.”

“That is assuredly a very rational position. I should have known there was an acceptable explanation of your reaction.”

“You are a very understanding person. Sumandra.” God added with a smile, “But I would not have you know everything.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

60 BOTE

The character of the business community had changed radically over the years. The large manufacturers gradually disappeared as the demand for their products evaporated and transportation became a problem. For ordinary household items including appliances, needs were

easily satisfied from the treasure trove found in abandoned houses in the no longer needed neighborhoods. This source provided a wealth of every imaginable product when replacements were needed. The fuel industry remained one of the largest enterprises, but it also experienced reduced demand which was usually supplied through existing pipelines. Life went on, but at a slower pace than previously. It seemed as though the entire world was unconsciously pulling back from the inevitable future, but at the same time all communities were very aware of the need to prepare for the end, which became the overriding concern of all planning.

X X X X X X

Anne looked around the conference table at the reduced staff. It had been necessary to reassign duties as individuals had to leave and replacements were not available. “Thank you all for being here this morning. I will keep this brief as I know you have plenty to do today. I am pleased with the progress we have made in the accumulation of future supplies, although there are a few areas where we need to do a better job. The abandoned warehouse we took over to store materials is a very solid structure, and it is serving our purposes quite well. We are looking at getting a second such warehouse and splitting the supplies between them to avoid a catastrophe in case there is a problem with one of them. We have identified such a warehouse and will be moving in that direction. In addition, we should plan on smaller, dispersed storage areas in both the home and the hospital to further protect ourselves, so please be considering that possibility.

“There is a change in the admissions policy. As of now, there is no longer any Needs Test for admission to the home. We have plenty of room and anyone who wishes to join us may do so. As you know, we have already exchanged the use of our facilities for goods or property in some instances. We now have the possession and the use of several small nearby farms which our staff manages and operates to grow food exclusively for our own consumption. The owners can no longer do the work on them, and they have exchanged their property for the benefit of our services and they have become residents here.”

“Why are we doing that, Anne?”

“Well, money is getting to be much less important. It’s food and supplies that are the items of value now. If there is nothing to buy, money is only paper and it cannot be converted into food and supplies. We will probably trend more toward a bartering trade culture in the future.”

“What if someone has nothing to trade for our services?”

“It’s my philosophy and the board agrees with me, that we exist to serve whoever is left of our civilization. Any supplies we have must be

shared with everyone to the end. With the size of the surrounding population we know about, there will always be enough of both food and supplies because we have planned carefully and anyone in need must be taken care of.”

“Yes, that is certainly the right thing to do, and it’s in our own best interest also. We will need all the helping hands we can get in the future.”

Anne replied, “That’s an excellent way of looking at it. We have to realize we are all in this together whatever happens.”

X X X X X X

“What will happen to all the humans left now, My Lord? How will the end come to them?”

God looked sadly at Sumandra. “They will be alright. They will live their lives and die their deaths just as infinitely many of living things have done over the Billennia of Earth years. That does not change.”

“I understand now, Lord, that the existence of this urge for self survival in Humans which is necessary, inevitably results in the desire for more of everything, more food to survive, more power over others to be suitably secure, more physical possessions in order to appear greater in importance and thus unassailable in ones position. Unfortunately these actions all go beyond the bounds of the necessary and become the excessive. The extreme use of the environment is the result which portended failure of the race. I saw much of that during my life, and it is an easy pattern to fall into. I was tempted also, but because of my respect for you I was able to avoid it.”

“My dear Guru, you have stated it very well. Would that you could have made more Humans understand, but you lived an excellent life, and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I appreciated it.”

“Yes, I enjoyed it, and it is doubly pleasant in retrospect knowing that I was useful to you. Thank you.”

The two beings turned to observe the Earth again.

X X X X X X

Anne was working at her desk when a familiar face appeared in her doorway. “Hi little sister. How’s the world treating you today?”

“Hi Tim, come on in and have a seat. How are you, and how is Donna? We haven’t seen you for a while”

“Oh we’re fine, but I have been busy trying to get unbusy.”

“Unbusy? I didn’t know that was a word.”

“I just made it up. It is what is happening to government now that the countries of the world and even large cities are becoming more insular. There are major disruptions as nations transform into isolated enclaves which by necessity must be self contained and self sufficient. Proximity of population centers to their supporting activity such as farms and small manufacturing of basic tools and supplies are the highest priority, and they become local because of the constraints of travel.

“The need for large government systems is disappearing and even local government will eventually disappear and be absorbed as part of the social organization of survival centers such as yours here. At this time, the purpose of government has mostly reduced to keeping the peace. There have been so many properties being abandoned, governments have given up trying to process them and they are even abandoned legally by being declared to be in the public domain. Crime is almost non existent as everyone who has survived this far sees the value of cooperating with others to insure their continued survival. All government is devolving down to the local level and into the concentrated population centers such as Central City, and I find myself mostly out of work. Do you need any help?”

Anne laughed, “I can always use help. What are you good at besides passing laws?”

“That about covers it, but I’m a fast learner.”

“Well, we have three major categories. They are care of people, maintaining services and equipment, or providing needed food and supplies. Take your pick.”

“Don’t you have anything involving just talking and planning?”

“No, that’s my job, sorry.”

“How about sales or education?”

“Not necessary. I think we are fairly well known in the community, and our retraining program works quite well. It has become mostly on-the-job training really. As people come to us from independent living, we train them in the areas in which they are qualified to work, so we have a continuing process of replacing people as necessary. They keep coming to us all the time, and probably everyone in our area will end up here eventually.”

“I certainly understand that. With all the combined elderly living and hospital centers in the country, government is becoming only a formality. Even the financial systems are becoming unnecessary. The living centers are quite capable of independently managing their affairs very well, as you so ably demonstrate.”

“OK, now that you have flattered me, how about food preparation? I know both you and Donna like to cook, and we always need help there.”

“That’s an idea. We’re not desperate yet, so let me talk to the boss and see what happens. But what are my chances for advancement?”

“If you can avoid poisoning the patients, you might make head chef someday. No guarantee though.”

“Good enough. I know we all will be living here some time in the future, but we are in no hurry just now. By the way, speaking of food, Donna asked me to invite you and Tom to dinner Sunday. Will that work?”

“I think so. Let me check with Tom and I’ll call Donna.”

As he rose to go, Tim became more serious. “Thanks for all you do, Anne. You have a great organization here and it’s doing a wonderful job.”

“You have certainly done your share also, Tim. There’s enough glory to go around.”

“Thanks, little sister. See you Sunday.”

X X X X X X

MEMO TO MS. ANNE ALTMAN, DIRECTOR

When I reported to the maintenance department where you assigned me, I learned Mr. William Starnes who had been in charge had been sent to the hospital the day before having suffered a stroke. It is dubious that he will return, but the staff showed me around the department, and oriented me to the duties and tasks they perform.

I learned there was a good deal of disarray. There was no priority list of tasks needing attention. There was likewise no list of the employees and volunteers showing their individual areas of expertise. Most importantly, although the plumbing functions were being overseen by a rather capable person and seem to be in fair order, the electrical department was something of a mess.

Accordingly I had a couple of staff members immediately make a master list of locations needing repair or attention, and I prioritized it. I then discovered there was either an insufficient or a non-existent reserve of needed supplies. A number of switches and outlets were inoperative and needed to be replaced but replacements were unavailable.

To correct this situation I took two volunteer electricians and made a tour of nearby vacant properties. I understand that most of the vacated properties have reverted to government ownership and the government has likewise abandoned them. Thus they are in the public domain, and I felt we had a right, on a needs basis, to remove electrical devices from the buildings. We were able to find sufficient switches, outlets and other electrical materials to fill our needs, and we are now proceeding on the repair projects as rapidly as we can.

I intend in the future to continue salvaging materials for all the maintenance functions as we can afford the time to do so. I am not sure we will be able to meet the goal of having twice as much as we can project that we will need, but I am certain we can generate an adequate supply to meet our needs until the last power plant goes off line at which time we will need to have plans in place to cope with that situation.

I believe we will be able to find and to provide storage space internally for all the maintenance supplies we will need for the foreseeable future. There is a very large, although finite, source for the materials we need in abandoned structures, and we will collect them as it is appropriate to do so. I also intend to review the more durable infrastructure to determine that it will last a sufficient period of time without further attention or replacement.

Louise Bromley: Maintenance Department

Anne smiled and leaned back in her chair with a little sigh of relief. “Finally we have a really good person in maintenance. And Louise is such a perky little old lady.”

X X X X X X

Doctor Mason looked very concerned as he dialed the telephone. “Ms. Altman - Doctor Mason here. I’m sorry to have to tell you your husband seems to have some sort of infection, and we have put him into the hospital. - He collapsed at his desk and we had to act immediately. - Yes, it seems to have come on very suddenly. - Of course. I’ll be here when you arrive.”

Breathlessly, Anne entered Doctor Mason’s office a few minutes later, “Where is Tom? What has happened?”

“So far we have determined it is systemic, and it is similar to a case we had here a few weeks ago, but we are not quite sure yet.”

“When will you know? What was that other case like, and may I see Tom now?”

“Well first, as a precaution, I would like you to have a blood test and take an antibiotic and, yes, you may see him, but he is in the isolation ward, and you must wear protective clothing and wash as you enter and leave.”

“I can certainly do that, but what about the other case? What happened?”

“It was a very elderly man and he was in poor health to begin with. Unfortunately, he did not pull through. The condition seems to be

resistant to our best antibiotics.”

“Is Tom going to be all right?”

“I don’t know. We will use the most potent antibiotics on him, but this organism is very unusual and I cannot predict the outcome. I’m sorry.”

Anne sat quietly for several minutes. Then solemnly rose to go. “I want to see him now.”

A short time later Anne was putting on the protective body suit and entering the double doors into the isolation ward. The surroundings were eerily quiet and stark. Tom was lying in a bright white bed with tubes connected to him and wired to humming monitors with blinking lights mindlessly recording data. Doctor Mason had warned Anne that Tom would be drowsy from the medicine and probably be asleep.

As she looked down at him it was difficult to imagine the still mound in the bed as the strong vibrant man she knew. She sat for a long time in the small bedside chair staring and thinking of all their past life and activities. Finally she rose. “I have to go now, Tomtom. There is much work I must do, but I will be back when I can. I love you.” She sadly turned toward the exit and left.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

65 BOTE

“Tim? - Anne here. How would you like to take a vacation from your cooking chores? - Yes, Donna could go also. - How did you know I wanted something?” - Anne laughed. “OK, here’s the deal. West Anderson has a surplus of ambulances they don’t need, but they have a current problem with their pipeline they can’t resolve for a while, and they are low on fuel. We have a good surplus of fuel, but our ambulances are in poor shape. I have negotiated an arrangement with them to exchange a truckload of fuel for one of their rather new ambulances. I need a tanker truck driver to take the fuel down and someone to bring the ambulance back. Are you willing? - Yes, I knew that was one of your many skills. That’s why I called you. Can Donna drive the ambulance, or do I need to get another driver? - I’ll wait.” As she held the phone Anne thought back

on Tim's earlier tumultuous life as a protestor before he became a mainstay in the legislative process. During that time he had many short term jobs including driving a semi rig. "Yes? - OK, you're on. I'll let them know you'll be down in a couple of days to make the switch. Come in and see me for the details. Thanks much, Tim."

X X X X X X

"Lord, now that the human experience is coming to an end, what will you do next, and how may I help?"

God's careworn face saddened a little further. "I have no grand plans for great projects at the present. We will be overwhelmed for a while in helping all the returning souls to adjust to the experiences of their Earthly sojourn and regain their proper situation here. Of course, many of them had beautiful adventures, but many others were caught up into circumstances they could not handle, and they will need extensive help to recapture their former identities. I will depend on you to organize all the contented returnees and encourage them to work with their distressed friends helping them to adjust and to understand their life they suffered on Earth and to help them put their bad memories into perspective. You, having lived a good life, are very qualified to do that for me. A lot of forgiveness will be required."

"I will devote my efforts to that end until we are all recovered, and it will be my pleasure to serve you in this way, My Lord."

X X X X X X

Anne looked over the current lists of supplies and resources and thought out loud as she reviewed them. "The population is dwindling at a predictable rate now. We seem to be able to keep a balance between those needing care and those able to do the caring work fairly well, and there will be sufficient resources available as long as necessary. I cannot yet conceive of what will happen when we are all old and ill. Tom's idea of accumulating twice as much as we predicted would need is working quite well." She broke down in tears. "Tomtom, how I miss you." She let go and rained a flood of tears on her desk. After a few moments she composed herself, took a deep breathe and continued her thoughts. "I must find the strength to go on though, I know you would expect me to do that. I can do it only because you have always believed in me and supported me at each step of the way." Anne took a few more minutes to compose herself then left to take her turn working as a volunteer in the extended care facility.

X X X X X X

Two persons were at work picking green beans in a small in-town garden. They moved along on hands and knees working opposite sides of the row of plants. They were intent on their chore and quietly proceeded toward the end of the row. Ted Androv worked automatically and lost himself in his thoughts as he moved along. “I am so glad we moved into the center. It has been so much better for Pat. And the work we need to do is much easier than our own farm had been. She had been so overwhelmed by running the farm, keeping a house and helping with marketing the produce that she suffered extreme exhaustion. Actually, we are both better off here, and we can feel secure in our future also. I sometimes wonder how it would be if I had not left my homeland.” He sat back on his heels for a moment and recalled his childhood in a far away place. There had been some good times in his early life, but in later years it was not very nice. “I consider myself very lucky to be where I am.” He smiled. “And doubly lucky to have met Pat.”

He turned to where Pat was picking a few feet behind him and spoke. “When we finish this row we will have four full baskets, that is all we should pick now, and we can take them in.”

“Great, I’ll be ready to quit then. I’m looking forward to an afternoon of reading.”

“You’re finishing a mystery, aren’t you? Do you know who did it yet?”

“Well, I have an idea, but I am usually wrong.”

Ted laughed, “You should rewrite it to fit your ideas.”

“No, I’ll leave that to the authors. I just want to read the stories.”

“Can you carry two of the baskets?”

“I can, if you give me the little baskets, and if you don’t run but let me go at my own speed.”

Ted laughed again. “I know. I’m notorious for hurrying. I will go at whatever pace you wish, and we can stop as often as you wish also.”

X X X X X X

“You are being very quiet, Tim. Is something bothering you?”

Tim and Eli were sitting in Eli’s modest but comfortable living room as Elizabeth and Donna enjoyed each other’s company in the kitchen while they generated an evening meal.

“Sometimes recently I have become absorbed with considering our future and our ultimate fate. Most people now live in concentrated communities such as ours here. We know that around the world all civilizations are concentrating their populations in mostly self sufficient communities which are gradually shrinking. I often get depressed thinking about the future. Even now there is very little travel, for instance. Also communications are becoming a problem for many places. A great number of population centers have resorted to keeping in communication with others by old time radio because it is relatively less complicated, and still possible to do.”

Eli considered Tim’s remarks for several minute before replying. “Yes, there have been significant and drastic changes in our lifetime, and we have a most unusual situation for our future. As you say everyone lives in some concentrated settlement now. Although I periodically hear of an independent person who lives outside the rest of the community in isolation and relies only on their own resources to survive. They will probably also die alone, but that is their choice. I prefer to be here in a group in which we can support each other. I can’t imagine being completely alone.”

“No, neither can I.” Tim laughed. “Although some people can be an annoyance at times.”

Eli nodded with a smile. “Yes, but mostly it is better both emotionally and physically to be around other people.”

“You’re right. I think we will see more merging of centers as time goes by. It was very astute of Anne to invite the Stateville Center to migrate up here and join us. They had inadequate facilities down there, while ours are large and in very good condition. In moving here they brought much in the way of supplies and there are many able workers who are contributing greatly to the combined organization.

Tim continued. “The most fascinating aspect for me is how government has become practically superfluous. All community services and controls have become centered in the end-of-life facilities. Anne for instance, is doing a fantastic job of running Parkman Center. Also, I believe all of us who are left are very focused on surviving, contributing what we can and helping to make the whole thing work however we can.”

“Yes, I get the sense from every one I know that we must do whatever we can to help and enjoy ourselves however possible. There

evidently is no other choice for us and we are resigned to it.”

“I have been thinking there is one other project we could work on.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“We ought to leave some sort of planned group of artifacts about our civilization just in case some other intelligent being evolves, or the proverbial aliens show up. We should leave some relics in a safe place so they could know something about us.”

Eli laughed. “Do you think that is really a possibility? It seems rather far out to me.”

“Well, it is, but if it should happen, wouldn’t it be better to leave something than not to leave anything?”

“Anything we leave will deteriorate or corrode or be destroyed by natural forces long before anyone shows up.”

“I think I will bring it up to Anne anyway. She always can put things into perspective and has good ideas. Besides, being the youngest person alive, she should have some input.”

X X X X X X

Sumandra was concerned while observing the events on Earth. The rapidly shrinking population of the humans, the gradual recovery of the ecosystem, and the new balances in the natural environment and all the living matter all raised questions in his mind. “Lord, what will happen as the population declines and there are only a few individuals left? Will someone be left all alone at the end? Will evolution again bring forth higher animals?”

“That is beyond what I can explain to you Guru. Let me just say it is all planned in a reasonable manner.”

“Yes. I should have realized it will all work out rationally as do all your works. I should not have questioned it at all.”

“The experiment is essentially a failure, but I was afraid of that from the beginning. At least we learn from the failure that this is not the right approach to provide the experience of being alive to the many souls who desire such an experience. Human minds cannot be responsive to the environment and at the same time be calm and rational in solving the problems of living together in a natural world. In the process of merely existing and using the advanced human brain to experience the Earthly resources, the environment will be destroyed and the result is a catastrophe.

“Having the many senses of highly evolved animals and the resulting awareness of the universe and their surroundings promotes the development of emotions that overwhelm the human mind. This is the flaw in the process. The intellectual capacity of the human brain did not have enough time to evolve the needed ability to cope beyond the primitive reactions.”

“Lord, I wish it had been otherwise. From my experience in the world I can attest there is certainly much about human life that is interesting, fun, exciting, satisfying, and useful in many ways, but for most persons, it is also difficult and degrading. I am pleased to have had a human life, although I am not sure I would want to repeat it. Living is a struggle, and the world is a much different milieu and a completely different atmosphere than here in this peaceful environment.”

“Your comments are appreciated Guru. As I said before you had a very useful life, and I appreciate all that you have done because you pursued it quite well, but that is now all finished. You will always be my indispensable consultant. Shall we go join the others?”

“Yes. I have missed the enjoyment of interaction with many of my companions.”

God paused in thought as He looked down at His blue and white jewel floating in the light of its star. “Perhaps if I had arranged for the emotional responses to fade to a more acceptable level with higher evolution and for the intellectual capability to increase at a faster rate, it would have worked. Perhaps next time I should try it on Vulcan, that is also a delightful little world.” He looked down at Earth for a long time.

It seemed the Earth glowed a little more brightly as the humans declined in number and influence. The flora and fauna began balancing out, and the natural checks and balances operated to the advantage of all. The Earth was once again becoming a vigorous environment which demonstrated the magnificent variety of life that can evolve in a well functioning system of complex organic organization.

God smiled and felt it had been worth the effort just to prove the point that all it takes is the proper physical systems and the appropriate physical laws to produce an amazing living organic system. Simply by allowing the evolution process enough opportunity through the passage of time, amazingly complex organic life can form. He took some pleasure in that thought while at the same time He grieved for the deleterious effect

it had on many of His good souls. Finally, after one last look, God slowly and determinedly turned back toward the garden and sighed, “Ah, well.”

THE END