

# THE WIRE DONKEY

Charlie Dickinson

Cetus Editions | Portland, Oregon USA | 2010

ALSO BY CHARLIE DICKINSON

*The Cat at Light's End (stories)*

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*Published in the United States by Cetus Editions, Portland, Oregon*

*Part of this book's first chapter appeared in different form as a short story "Talking Cabbage Heads" in the online literary publication Savoy.*

*Library of Congress Control Number: 2010902153*

*Publisher's Cataloguing-in-Publication*

*Dickinson, Charlie.*

*The Wire Donkey / Charlie Dickinson. 1st ed. – Portland, Or.:  
Cetus Editions, 2013.*

*p. ; cm.*

*ISBN: 9780982650103*

*1. Organ donors –Fiction. 2. Portland (Or.) -- Fiction. 3. Young men --  
Spiritual Life -- Fiction. 4. Altruism -- Fiction. 5. Bildungsromans.*

*I. Title.*

*PS3604.I289 W57 2010*

*2010902153*

*813.6-dc22*

*1008*

*Manufactured in the United States of America.*

*FIRST EDITION*

For Nancia

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Emma Zigzag (2001--2010)

CHAPTER ONE:  
BEAN SPROUT KID, TALKING CABBAGE HEADS, WIRE DONKEY

**W**hen I first make my way to Jen's new apartment, and soon after, her funky futon--fingers of her right hand spread behind my shaved head she'll pull closer to breathe in my ear, "C'mon, proud Ocean, let's fight"--I'll feel a happiness of the sort that maybe, at last, I'd finally crossed the personal Gobi desert my twentieth year had become, little more than a bleached skull or two and fossils lost for eons marking the sand-swept zigging and zagging I had to walk. Yes, I'll have lived for the rescue of that oasis, figuratively speaking, where cool water's gotta slake my thirst. Later, Jen and I will sip some puckery green tea, me ready to tell her yet another story of times before we met.

As I say, this will happen on Jen's futon--threadbare, orange-and-white Hawaiian hibiscus print--in her second-floor downtown studio apartment, just off Pershing Avenue, where all the other apartment houses seem to be banks of brick flophouses held together by the ironwork of building-high fire escapes, in Davenport, Iowa, which--despite the grime, the street gutter smells in sore need of the wash of a springtime thunderstorm, and the overall dreariness of Jen's cut-to-the-bone budget digs--is, after all, where the all-time power rockers, 'Possum, got going and that jazzman with the horn, Bix, did too, so we will clinch and finally join on seriously hallowed ground, so to speak.

After we make love, bathrobed Jen will stand by her stove waiting for water to boil. Her hair darker than squid ink in deep ocean trenches will be all the more unruly, bed-head fashion, styled that way on purpose so she doesn't look, she's said, like the generic Asian chick with

smooth, ebony locks.

She'll cut her hooded eyes from the tea kettle to me, sitting on the futon, arms locked around my knees, as if a supplicant for the pinhead gunpowder green tea Jen will brew for us, a few ounces of which I scored in a Chinese place in St. Louis before coming up here. Then, in the mystery of her gaze, those eyes in which I, with joy, found acceptance, I'll take a guess on the future, but knowing my Tao, I won't grasp: Jen's not the one I'd willingly lose.

For there I'll be, all of twenty-one years old and despite the squalor outside, beyond the feeble, curtained afternoon sunlight that leaks in the apartment, things could not be much better for me personally. I'll hope to make it that way for Jen too.

After AmeriCorps, the idea for her will be to finish up college, go to DC for law school at Georgetown, graduate, do public-interest law. Me, I hate lawyers and Oregon-boy me hates big East Coast cities. But as you might guess, I'll do anything for this woman.

I'll revere sex with this woman and will never feel more responsible to another human in my life about our lives together. Jen will bring out my yearning to father.

Just sitting there on the floor, drinking tea, the two of us sipping from what is Jen's pair of Japanese *yunomi* cups, I'll realize in the side light about us heaven will be here, in one small place, in Davenport, Iowa.

But all that will be, as one surfer girl I knew might've said, getting too far ahead of the wave's peeling curl.

It's a year earlier. Scene, Planet Foods, Portland, Oregon. Action. Mon, I'm your action. Who am I? Oh, call me Ocean in the future, call me Ocean in the past, but present tense? For eight months, maybe ten, I was calling myself Austin, this nominal, windmill tilt of a gesture to distance myself from my disintegrating family, to erase my birth name, to get away from that time warp of growing up with parents who had

pretty staunch hippie values and produced this bean sprout of a kid who wanted more substance than a name like Ocean.

So what's my game? Here you go, a few clues: Bok choy. Carrots, tops, no tops. Radicchio. Lettuces. Hey, lettuces I got. Crispy iceberg. Chewy romaine. Spunky Bibb. Something more continental? What do you say to an insalata mista of tossed greens: endive, dandelion, escarole, arugula? Okay, time's up for you, Sherlock.

You probably walked around me, my cart full of cabbage heads. That is, if you shop here at Planet Foods, so now's good as time as any for introductions. Austin, call me Austin. I'm your basic twenty-year-old American male, originally from Eugene, now resident up here in Portland because a produce driver I know through my dad thought Planet Foods was hiring.

Last summer, after a year of casual labor, Dad's farm included, I decided no college for me. Thought about AmeriCorps briefly. Very briefly, like, okay, I was reaching for something. I kinda felt I had to make changes in my life. Get away from Eugene and Dad's tiresome dirt farming--eight acres in corn, a back-to-the-land leftover from the Eighties Dad can't let go of, even though he lives in the city now.

Anywho, this working day shift in produce fit my plan to, one day, get the scoop on what all my life could be. First thing I did, though, I get to Portland, was change my name.

Got tired of being called Ocean, my birth name. That is so Seventies--years before I was born. It's like disco-dead and buried. So I told them here, "Make the checks out to Austin Gebthart." Great name, Austin, sounds enough like Ocean, it's only this partial identity change, see?

"Excuse me," this thin woman, fortyish and attractive, says. Her black hair's one of those Yuppie cuts probably costs more than I make in a week.

She dislodges one of the romaines in the bin that's half-empty, asks

if I'll check in back for some that's fresher. You know, a customer like this thinks for her business we'll do cartwheels. I'm about to unstack, then restack six, ten heavy boxes? Please, don't get me started.

"*Hmmm*. New delivery's in an hour," I lie. "You check back then, I'll have out the new romaine."

The woman thanks me. Makes me feel like such a loser, this misleading her. I mean, what delivery? The romaine I'll put out later is when I get to what we got in back.

Other than my small deception, this foxy woman must have it made. She's angling her cart to the apples, oranges. Husband, I bet, has a good job. She doesn't work, cruises in and out of here, shops at her leisure. What she gotta do? Keep that figure, get in an aerobics class few times a week, stay in shape. Then cross her fingers the old man doesn't go with any wayward urges. All the time, seems to happen.

Like I was saying, I change my name to Austin, my dad he comes around, accepts it. Jokes about it at first, natch. But my mom, forget it. She'll never stop calling me Ocean, says that's one change she can't handle. It's not me if I'm not Ocean, she says. Oh, sure, like me and Dad few years back had to accept she'd met the "love of her life" when she decides to move out, live with this lounge lizard across the river in Springfield. I tell you, more those wayward urges.

Whoa, it's already 10:30. Break time. I live for morning breaks.

"**S**o what's new with you, your girlfriend in Eugene?" Brianna from deli asks. She's joined me on break.

"Calls, says she's just back from Phoenix, gonna start community college there."

"Arizona?"

"Yeah. At first I thought that Phoenix down by Medford."

"Why'd she go out of state?"



"Probably same reason I'm here: Gotta try living away from home. And she says the weather."

"And what about, the two of you?"

"She didn't say."

**W**here was I? *Hmmm*. These icebergs. Gotta rotate. See, pull what's here in the bin. Check 'em out. Whip off those leaves going bad.

Okay, now the rebuild. New heads in back. Listen up, friend, this is your produce tip for the day: Go back, go down, that's the good stuff. Don't be afraid to dig it out if you gotta. There, now the old stuff goes on top.

So anyway I'm talking to Dad about Kezia, her Phoenix surprise. He goes to recycling his idea at me I should be in community college too. Which I understand. He teaches at Lane Community. You might say it's his real job to support that corn acreage.

But it's the same-old-same-old talk. Like last summer, I told him the last thing I wanted to do was go off to college undecided. Undecided is a fat waste, time and money.

At least I'm here. I could see, if it wasn't college, Dad snaring me into some endless hours of farm chores--let me be honest, disked dirt doesn't make my heart thump. Which is why I thought it best to get out of Eugene, get a job, and buy some time and space to think.

So now Kezia's done given me the slip. Fine. Neither one of us is gonna be around Eugene much anyhow.

There those are up. Let me show you the backroom.

**H**ere's Operations Central: We pull deliveries, organize boxes, get it all ready to take out and stock. See that chunker over there on the

dock? He's Dennison. Bossman. He looks this way.

"Austin."

"I'm listening."

"Get together with Shane before you take off 'bout bailing cardboard. I'm tired seeing it lying around in the morning."

"Sure, it's gotta be bail early, bail often."

"Another thing, he's telling me more than once you've left all the boxes for him to do--I don't know who of you's flaking--so you two work it out, okay?"

"Whatever it takes."

**T**hat Dennison's prime, isn't he? Likes to play Shane and me off against each other. Basic move from his jerkmeister manual.

Sometimes I just gotta put the distance between us. Which is why I grabbed these boxes of eggplant, threw 'em on the cart, and removed my person from that backroom.

I tell you, I feel at times like that whole salmon on ice over there in the deli case. Poor fish ever get what he was born for? Not in this go-round.

The Northwest used to be great salmon country. Salmon had the run of the rivers. Made for one of nature's beautiful cycles. Now it's all completely corrupted. Originally, you know, salmon came down the Columbia River and were in the Pacific Ocean in one week. Now, thanks to the dams, how about six weeks? Okay, they're endangered. Guess what that means? The politicians, in deep dough-dough, play badminton, until none are left.

I tell you what needs doing. I organize a Salmon Liberation Front, we commandeer a Cessna east of here, we fly up the Columbia Gorge, we enter the airspace right over Bonneville and then, doors open, shove,

push, out goes your basic A-bomb to the target below and hope to hell that Cessna would hold together once the Mother of All 'Shrooms comes up to greet us.

Haven't got the personal survival part down, but I'm working on it. Maybe it's woolgathering to pass the time while I get these eggplants replaced. Doesn't hurt, though. I figure out how to save the salmon, we all might make it on this planet. What goes 'round, comes 'round. I gotta believe that.

"Say, you throwing that eggplant out? I wanted to buy some." It's one of our regular customers, always in torn Levi's.

"Not to worry, mon," I say, unsure if he'll loosen his attitude. "I'm just culling what hasn't sold."

"Wow, that's a waste. One soft spot and--" Like an umpire, his thumb's past the stringy blond hair and he flashes me a needling grin. "Ever think about marking this down, putting it on sale?"

Why, of course. I'm thinking heaps of bananas gone black, buzzing fruit flies--all this at Planet Foods?! "*Hmmm*. Store image would be hurtin' we do that, the owners want fresh, fresh, fresh," I say, reluctant about getting into it with him.

"So that eggplant--" He points at what I've got. "You're saying I can't buy it full price and gotta wait, get it for free in the garbage?"

These culls are soft, no taut purple skins like what's below, unopened, in the boxes this guy hasn't noticed. I see the guy's buttons--figure of speech--get his act right away. He probably shops here because so much of our stuff's organic. On food matters, he's gotta be one elitist in torn Levi's. I mean, pesticides terrify him. Like he hit a patch of financial embarrassment, he'd settle for pulling our organic oranges, our organic cabbages out of the Dumpster. He'd tell himself by eating garbage he was extending the world food supply, letting starving people eat. Just gotta save that world. Could be he's a bit like me, my Cessna fixing to free the salmon. I just nod and grin, and ask him, "You

eat produce a lot?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

"I see. Here tell you what, let's get a boxboy-size sack. I'll give you all the bruised and dented stuff you want, nickel a pound, what do you say?"

"You can do that?"

"Watch this."

I take my handy-dandy grease pencil from my apron pocket and for checkout write on the sack, Surplus @ 5¢/lb SKU 9999, and initial it. Dennison has a mind to crucify me, selling what we throw out, I'll let everyone know. Razzing him would put my interest in this job at high tide for weeks.

"Say, dude, you should run this place."

"Not just yet," I say. I know when to move on's gotta come in its own sweet time.

I snap open that big brown sack so we can start shopping for what's ripe, bad, and ugly. Veg-Man's eyes widen--he's ready to gather in the cornucopia. "You big on romaine lettuce?" I ask, getting things underway.

**T**hat, over there, secured to the bike rack, is my blessed wire donkey. Takes me anywhere, anytime. Unapologetic British mechanical genius: a genuine Raleigh three-speed bicycle. Yeah, my righteous wire donkey. They went to design them in the Thirties, those Brits were dreaming hundred-year bicycle. All-steel frame, no carbon-fiber nonsense. Look at these fenders--plastic? Of course not. Real steel, many coats of enamel. Not for nothing these humble cruisers carried generations of college students and professors to class and back through all sorts of weather.

It's locked. People will steal anything, even this hopeless throwback. Get out my key ring, twist the little barrel key in the Kryptonite lock and unshackle my baby.

So why does a twenty-year-old like me have a bicycle for wheels? A long story, I'll tell you later, okay?

Though I might as well explain more the features this bike's got, while I'm standing around, not going anywhere. I'm waiting for Brianna--she had to talk with someone inside.

Check this, this is the genius part: an accept-no-substitutes Sturmey-Archer sealed--I stress sealed--gear hub. Waterproof, nothing's exposed. You pop open this oil cap every month or so, a few drops of machine oil, and these gears never, ever give you trouble. No chains falling off sprockets, no overshifting, no undershifting, and what do I have? Three-speed perfection. Believe it or not, the range of these gears, 1st through 3rd, is the same as a full-blown ten-speed, you just got big jumps between gears. You pop it into High--3rd--all I can say is you better have wind at your back or a dropping road ahead. High's not an easy gear to spin.

Looke here, this black-and-white, pin-striped beauty's got the academic credentials too. A *University of Wisconsin Bicycle Permit 1963-1964* decal. When I took the number stamped on the gear hub, it matched to a manufacturing date of 1961. My guess, it pretty much came straight from Nottingham, England, to a campus home in Madison, WI. At some point, the original owner, or the bike with a new owner, must've moved on. Here's remnants of a decal sticker for the City of Pullman, Washington, here on the frame downtube, below the seat, except most of it has been sloppily scraped away, and, shame, no date for that.

How this wire donkey ends up in Eugene, Oregon, is your dart toss. Not that it matters. Eventually, the bike gets stolen, ends up at police auction, where I put in the winning bid of \$25, which is also the minimum bid, everyone else seemed to have eyes for flashy, knobby-

tired mountain bikes.

I brought the bike home and the most it needed was a cleaning.

So anyway, the truth of my wire donkey is that already it's done forty-odd years and I don't think it would be a stretch for it to last another sixty years--my life, okay--so this baby's seeing me out. The paint's a little dull? Big deal.

This bike was designed in soggy old England, which is pretty much like soggy old Oregon. Those encased gears, the chain guard--don't see me leg-clipping my pants, and real fenders that catch tire spray.

On the downside, the bike weighs a ton, oh, easily 30 pounds. But that's why it's bullet-proof.

What else have I neglected to mention?

Oh, yes, lights. Have to have those lights. No lights, after dark, you're looking at a seventy-five dollar citation in the State of Oregon. Up front, your basic halogen headlight--though it eats batteries. And in back, I have my handy-dandy diode-flashing red light. Now, those batteries last and last.

The sun's sinking fast, I will switch them on in a min.

CHAPTER TWO:  
OPEN MATCHBOX & SHUT CASE, PILL HILL, FREEWAY PINBALL

**W**hoa, it's my bud, Brianna. Walking this way, she wears in true Planet-Foods fashion whatever she wants to wear. Today, it's some godawful red, baggy Farmer Johns and a white thermal underwear top and as she does her girlish tick-tock this way, carrying a sweatshirt in one hand, I'm wondering if here is yet one more example of how hip women who are into deconstructing the Barbie Doll sex object thing can lose it, tastewise. I'm not saying Brianna's hipness makes her look uncool, but what she wears is not Reason One I like her.

"Say, ol' Evie on your case again?" I ask. She fiddles with one arm of the sweatshirt, getting the fleece side reversed. Then she slips it on. YAKIMA LIFE INSURANCE? You get the idea, shops at Goodwill like me, but at least I try to pull together a look. This sweatshirt is ready-to-recycle chartreuse.

"Destiny's kickin' 'bout Brad's raise. She says where's hers and I'm goin' okay." Brianna says this matter-of-factly, oh, like she's picking up pliers. Now that is Reason One I like her. The world, one big clock works of people going about their business, needing only a minor adjustment here and there.

She stands in front of my bike, that I'm holding in place, a hand on the seat before we get underway. She's got a left nostril piercing, this emerald stud, kinda goes with her tawny hair--cut butch. Neither is Reason Two I like her.

"So, you ready?" I ask.

She nods.

I'm giving her a ride home because her car succumbs as we speak. The beater she bought for \$400. Does she know what checking oil, much less changing oil, is all about? Or why a mechanic says \$900 to get it running? So anyway, Brianna didn't have the buses wholly figured out and asked, Please, you live down past me, can I hitch a ride?

"Okay, here's what I want you to do," I say, sounding like some two-wheeled cab driver who does this daily. "You're going to sit here behind the handlebars--" I'm sitting on the bicycle seat, my right hand on the handlebar grip, grinning about what two-up-on-a-bicycle fools we'll look like with daylight mostly gone, and headlight blazing and rear flasher winking away and two-plus miles through neighborhood streets to go. "You sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah, I'm okay with this." She giggles with girlish restraint as she eases her bum on the frame, her back firm to my right arm before she clasps the middle of the handlebars.

"You gonna be uncomfortable, that bar is hard. I wouldn't sit like that, no way."

"Slim, I got padding." Her nose stud glints in the streetlight.

So with both arms around her, I push off and we start gliding down the sidewalk, headed for the driveway and out to the street, where, thank goodness, there is a bit of slant downhill, otherwise, I'd be huffing, puffing, I'm sure, never getting out of first gear. I leave it in middle gear, and we cruise along, my hope being we don't have to stop or turn suddenly.

"You know, you're nice to do this," she says. She giggles like it's a joke she knows better than I.

"Listen, you should forget cars, get a bike."

"You mind I ask something personal?" She turns her head sideways, away from the light of oncoming cars.

I'm keeping as close to the parked cars, and praying, really



praying, no peanuthead's gonna door us. If so, with this extra chartreuse-clad weight aboard, it's nothing but crash time, no room to maneuver, no sirree. And much as I hate the color of her sweatshirt, I admit it smells fresh as if it came out of the dryer minutes ago.

"Shoot, what you want to know?"

She again turns her head, dropping it slightly like this submissive sort of woman thing when they are really trying to get something out of a guy. "Well, all I ever seen is you on this bike. I was just wondering, you've a license to drive?"

"My driver's license? Haven't had one almost five years, they took it away. And I get caught, riding two-up like this, the bicycle-riding license probably goes too."

"Ha! Bicycle-riding license. You serious? So what happened, how'd you lose your license?" Her head swivels around. "If it's not gonna be too long."

"Oh, it is a long story," I say.

"Yeah, did you DUI like every other guy too old for a bicycle I seen riding around, kinda disguised? Ha, ha. They always wear shades. Huh, Austin?"

"Sure thing, that's me, but no sunglasses."

I don't know whether to get telling the story right now. The intersection ahead at Knott has stop signs on each corner and always cars pausing and moving through. I cannot run this intersection, as much as I'd like to--face it, Brianna is no parakeet, weight-wise.

She looks up at the champagne scimitar of a moon, and the back of her head bristles my chin. I decide to start anyway.

"It was in my pothead days," I say. I've already told her about my parents, about they're being original hippies and all, and how they still had friends in Lane County that maybe got themselves macrame-knotted into the Sixties.

"*Hmmm*. Like you trip bad, crash hard?" Brianna suddenly shifts, coming alive with the agitation of knowing she might get some gossip on me about my misspent youth. Her head's around, nose stud gleaming, and she feels more like a two-bushel potato bag perched on our top-heavy wheels in motion. We veer ever so slightly to the left, toward an oncoming car. I flinch and push the handlebars right and we dip toward a parked car.

"You watch it, buddy, we're gonna be roadkill the way you drive." She laughs like she knows this is the funnest ride home she's ever had.

"It's you. Don't move around."

"I was gonna hear 'bout losing your license."

"Let's cross the street first, okay?"

"Oh, you want me to shut up. Be that way."

I hate it when girls lay that guilt trip on me. Like they pretend you have this power, this power of conquest over them, and you, in your willy-nilly way, have tired of playing with them. Makes me have to start over, rewind, refresh the talk. But the thing is, they know it works. Hooks me every time.

I squeeze the brakes and the rubber-faced calipers start slowing the bike, the extra weight not giving in easily.

We're at the intersection, I'm standing out of the seat, my left foot down, and my eyes fasten on the headlights of the sole car at the intersection, an aging Volvo that lurches forward, then it's clear to cross the street.

I stay out of the seat and start pedalling standing up to put more weight into it and get us balanced with some speed and then, the other side of Knott, sit down again.

"Okay, this is all public record anyway, but you promise not to chat it up around the store?" I ask.

"My lips be sealed," she says. I gotta believe Brianna. This is one situation where I'd like Dennison keeping his nose busy elsewhere, given laws on the books about testing employees for drugs. Like he needs something else--even if it's historical and irrelevant--to hang on me. Funny thing is I bet half of who all works at Planet Foods wouldn't pass a UA. And we're in the business of selling this pure and unadulterated food to people. Go figure.

"You know you smoke weed how time gets funny, sort slows down to like an Oregon banana slug crossing the sidewalk," I say, trying to orient her to my situation back when I was going to South Eugene High and was only months into my learner's permit to drive the family car, the trusty three-banger Saab Dad had kept running forever. I push on the bridge of my glasses and keep pedalling, still grateful to be on the downslope.

"Yeah, tell me, sometimes I'm thinking like, I'm tripping up, I might not get back down." She laughs out loud. "And I ever get the munchies bad. Nearest freezer with Rocky Road is my friend." More laughs and her elbow gently nudges me.

"And also, you ever have problems seeing when you're stoned?" I ask.

"Austin, you got a story or what?"

"I was only checking what you knew."

"Listen," she says, finger tipping her nose in profile. "Got this stud, see. Weed fit my lifestyle choice. At one time." She chuckles.

"Okay. This is after a football game against Thurston. My friend Ira and I don't find any chicks interested in us."

"Poor babies." More chuckles.

"Yep, we're sitting in his pickup, figuring out what we're going to do. Ira shows me Plan B. His matchbox."

"Like it's that or go home?"

"Exactly. Before you know it, Ira's rolling a joint. Other kids, teachers even, walked by. Of course, our windows were so steamed, nobody could see anything, even if they tried."

We glide past the Everett Street Athletic Club on the left and people are inside, no doubt going for the burn. They should try pedalling Brianna.

"You tokin', right there?"

"No, we had to get away from the school grounds. We drove up the hill on 19th, across Willamette, to this neighborhood park."

"So you suck out the last of the red-eyed roachie. Ten long minutes later, what you doin'?" She's a card, her round shoulders gathered to my chest.

"I'm tripping. Ira is too. See it in his wild, bloodshot eyes. We listen to tunes on his radio. 'La Grange' by Z.Z. Top, you know that one. 'Huh, huh, huh, huh.' The one goes like that--"

"You space cadets party hard in the front seat, crash, wake up the next day?"

"No, Ira's mind gets stuck in this whole thing about my learner's permit. See, he's sixteen, doesn't need any adult with him. And he's going on and on and says I can drive the truck because I with him."

"No way."

"Yeah. But we're so stoned."

The trees whiz by overhead like night clouds. We're coasting now and the bicycle freewheel clicks away like cicadas in summertime.

Up ahead I see Brianna's place. The lighted stoop of Ankeny Court, three floors' worth of apartments.

Grabbing handfuls of brake, I stop at the curb, and she drops to her feet. I stay on the bicycle.

"C'mon, Austin, you lost your license, parking there stoned?"

"No, we were jabbering away not making any sense, I mean we were both talking at the same time not listening to each other for Christ's sake. Anyway, he says, Why don't you drive to your home, I'm a licensed adult. I say, Okay, and slide over to the driver seat once Ira gets out, he coming around to hunch in the passenger side."

"Then?"

"I start up the engine, check the gauges. Speedometer says I'm going no speed. That's good. Okay, my eyes are focussed like up close. Then out the window, *kablooey*, my eyes are on a stop sign, the end of the street. I've never tried driving stoned before. I can't believe it. My eyes are so seriously weird."

Brianna starts fishing in her itty-bitty purse. "Yeah, know what you mean, eyes go jerky on you," she says as if that's no news, and then holding up keys, grins, showing that killer overbite that is Reason Two I like Brianna.

"Like they're on rubber bands, first you see close, then, boom, far away, and nothing in between. So I put it in gear to drive home, but first I gotta make a U-turn to go back up the hill. I get about twenty feet, turn into this driveway and my eyes are focussing all over the place. Then, whack, I'm on the curb hard. Ira just says, You swung too wide, sleepy-voiced like he forgot I'm driving his truck."

"He leaves you driving?" she says, mouth open.

"That's right. So then I stick it in reverse and ease out the clutch to go real slow. Well, I'm going real slow for I don't know how long and then it's I'm going crunch. It's this trailer right behind us, across the street by the park. You know, that kind, mesh sides, the city uses to haul away leaves and twigs. Anyway, the trailer is now done in like some broken-down cardboard box."

"Then what? Police?" Brianna gives me the killer smile, I mean this woman's looks are on fire, easily capable of melting cold steel.

"Somebody calls. Bad scene goes badder. Two cop cars show up,

they're out waving flashlights and we're both too wasted to do anything 'cept freaking freeze."

"Betcha seeing nothing but cop guns, right?"

"Nah, all I saw were spots. Their megawatt flashlights half blinded us in the truck and Ira's open matchbox sat right there on the dashboard. They had us down to the station for UAs 'fore we could take another breath. And they wouldn't let up on us about City of Eugene property, that silly trailer. Those trailers cost three thousand, if you can believe that."

"Then you lose the license?"

"You bet, but no time in jail, really, though my parents should've paid for an attorney, instead of damages on that trailer. When I went before the judge, he claimed to be doing me a favor and threw the book at me: took away my driving privileges till I reached age eighteen and was financially responsible, whatever that was supposed to be."

"Yeah, DUI'ing a learner's permit, Austin, I don't know."

"Well, as it turns out, Eugene's a great bike town and I got to like riding so much, when I turned eighteen, I'd no interest in driving a car. None."

"Hey, you want to risk everything now, come in for a beer?"

"Sure, my legs earned that, but my taste buds will take the reward."

**W**e're in Brianna's kitchen--everything an unavoidably easy reach. This apartment she shares with her mom, who's working swing shift at St. Vincent's tonight. Brianna yanks open the purring fridge, begins to root about for that beer she promised.

Her mom, the nurse, wants Brianna in a better job than this deli clerking at Planet Foods, but that takes a motivation Brianna says she's yet to summon. A Tom Thumb of a TV by the toaster oven has

stammered away since we pushed back the front door. Brianna, apparently, will have no truck with coming home to an apartment where no one, obviously, is home and leaves the TV on when she's out. I gather she has no idea where her dad is and money has been no comfort to Brianna and her mom since he left that day, which must live on in infamy, ages ago.

"Here, wanna glass?" Brianna asks, putting a cold, dripping can of Oly in my hand.

"Nah, just one more glass to wash."

"No trouble, really, let me get a glass."

I pry back the pop-top, snap, take a icy, thirst-slaking swig."

"See, I'm already drinking from the can." I raise the can for Brianna's puzzled gaze, as if toasting my willingness to make do.

"Okay," she says. She's got a distracted, edgy smile, then glances away to the TV, whose volume knob she turns up. "You hear about this, it's awful," she says, gnawing her little finger.

*"Let's go live to our HealthLine reporter, Blaine Bartholomew, at Oregon Health Sciences University."*

*"Thanks, Jim. Yes, doctors here are warning the scarcity of available organ transplants--"*

"All this creeps me out," Brianna says, her gaze locked on the mandala of the stunted black-and-white image that's talking head Blaine B., your ersatz well-groomed Ken doll of a reporter.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

The TV interrupts before she can answer: *"Unless more Oregonians sign up for organ donation, there can only be more stories like Tracie Meddols, who's been waiting six months for a liver transplant."*

Tracie comes on camera. In bed in some hospital room up there on

Pill Hill, a gown drawn up around her neck, she looks like she has not a friend in the world, certainly not one with a spare liver, that's for sure.

"Can you imagine, knowing you're gonna die unless someone else dies first?" Brianna asks.

"I can and they better have my name written on their liver--"

*"Tracie, doctors are quick to point out, needs intensive care around the clock, all of which is being picked up by taxpayers. The message is simple, more organ donations, less time in the hospital, at taxpayer expense, for people like Tracie."*

I down the last of the Oly, grin at Brianna who sneaks a glance my way, waggle the empty can, confirm it's done for, and set it on the counter.

"Wanna another?" She has a crooked, worried smile.

I give a thumb's up. The TV camera mercifully pulls back from Tracie's face. A nurse moves about in the background.

*"Tracie's doctors say that with the waiting lists, she might have to wait yet another six months. And they say there's a fifty-fifty chance she won't get that liver transplant she needs--"*

Brianna hands me another Oly I must open immediately. Snap. "They should pass a law, someone dies," I say, pausing for a long swig.

I sleeve my mouth dry, see Brianna's devoted to the TV screen. "The body parts are up for grabs. You want to be buried intact, that's your problem, you've gotta opt out."

Brianna shifts her head slightly my way, but her eyes stay with the TV. "But people see this, why don't they do something?"

*"Okay, it's back to you, Jim, this has been Blaine Bartholomew, reporting live from OHSU for NewsFocus 3 at Six."*

"Fear. Pure fear," I say.

"Of what?"



"What can go wrong." I take a swallow. I swear Brianna's fridge has the coldest beer. And take another swallow to be sure. "Lookit, Brianna, you become an organ donor when you renew your driver's license--or in my case, your State of Oregon identification card--" Brianna chuckles: She now knows my police record. "And you have to be in one of those overcrowded DMV offices with five other things to do that morning and you've gotta get your license coded as an anatomical donor. So with this chirpy DMV clerk your witness are you gonna say, Yes, any part of me, you got it! No sirree, not in this lifetime. People don't do things like that on the fly. They start thinking, What can go wrong?"

*"In sports today, Blazer owner Paul Allen said--"*

"Austin, you're getting worked up." Brianna reaches over, turns the TV off. The picture expires to a white point.

"Actually, it's like this. You haven't even seen the chirpy clerk. What really happens is you've got this rolled, unrolled, and re-rolled paper stub in your hand. You've been sitting, waiting, and waiting for your number to be called. That's when you start thinking, What can go wrong? What can seriously go wrong once I agree to donate my slightly used parts if I leave the game early?"

"You save Tracie's life," she says. Her killer overbite smile returns.

I take another swallow of iced liquid enlightenment. "No, Brianna, the question is still, What about my life? Picture this, stay with me a min, okay? I've changed my mind about cars. Here I am, my driver's license restored, my driving privileges regained, my manhood reclaimed."

I set down the beer. With both hands, I grab my car steering wheel in air, wiggling it to go straight. "I'm out early some cold December Saturday morning and I'm scooting down the Interstate, say, heading south from Portland to Eugene. The sun shines like it's really Apollo's chariot in the sky and the car heater blows out toasty air and I got my favorite tunes on the player, say, something like U-2, I don't know.

Anyway, I'm pushing down the road, keeping it at a nice seventy-five, my radar detector checking for any speed-gun toting Do-Nut Barney idling in the median-divider blackberry bushes. No, sirree, I'm moving, just glad to be among the drivers of the world again."

"And why wouldn't you, after not driving for so long?" she says.

"Absolutely. Anyway, I'm below Wilsonville. Right where it curves after it crosses the Willamette, and up ahead, I don't see it, this black ice--oh, forgot to mention the temp is below freezing--don't see the black ice, and sure as shakin' like palsy I also don't know what's happening. *Bing, bang, blam*. I'm off playing pinball down the freeway, bouncing off cars in the other lanes, cars coming from behind, when *ooofff*, this semitrailer comes down on my miserable little Geo Metro--about all I can see myself ever affording--and a crapped-out, pre-owned Metro at that. And like that--" I snap my fingers, both hands. "My earthly coil instantly severed. Or so I think. I'm out like a light.

"State Police are there in a hot minute, car-bound people sit catawampus and dial 9-1-1 on their cells. The siren-screaming, strobe-topped ambulance fights through the pileup I took out with me, okay, but hopefully, no one other than me is hurtin' such that it matters. But I'm not really dead."

"You're such an optimist." She gnaws her little finger again.

"Yeah, I'm alive because they bundle me up, drop me on a stretcher--I'm a red mess, but I make it back to the emergency room. The paramedics give the doctor my wallet, which he opens. His eager eye discovers on my driver's license the D code for anatomical donor.

"So the big question, what I have to decide back in that time-lost hell sitting on that boulder of a chair at the DMV is, What's this emergency-room doctor gonna do?

"Does he start speculating about my future quality of life? Bad, he'll say, at least three months in intensive care and the guy has no insurance. Does he tell the nurse to clean me up, so I'm not this

unsightly red pulpy mess and make a mental note to check back in an hour or so, see if I'm still breathing? See what I mean? Maybe, just maybe, doing this anatomical donor thing, you might cause the doctor to unconsciously figure your odds wrong. And that is what people fear." I pick up the beer and gulp an overdue swallow.

Brianna's eyes widen like it's so much to think about.

"People don't have time," I continue, "to think through their fear when they're rushing to get their license renewed. That's all it is. I tell you I got my State ID marked so I'm an eye donor?"

"Why just your eyes?"

"They're not vital organs. I'm working up to adding more."

I limit out with the Oly, I've gotta pedal back to my place on one side of the road. She drops her hands and swings them a bit, takes my empty beer can. "Anyway, this current setup is hopeless. Who wants to think about a life-ending car crash when you get your license renewed? That's what organ donation is like now. Bad, bad associations. They've gotta make it less freaky."

"How?" Brianna asks.

"I'm not sure. But give people more ways to show they're donors. A separate card, legally binding, of course. They can carry it around in their wallet, purse, fanny pack, in their shoes, I don't care. Laminate it so rain won't get to it. That's all you need. That's all you have to do."

CHAPTER THREE:  
CELERY BUTTS, WALLET CARDS, BLACK NAIL POLISH

Once I left Brianna's and was pedalling home, legs loose as a marionette's, beer a-sloshin' in my empty stomach--relaxing my limbs, if nothing else--those TV images of Tracie Meddols waiting for a liver transplant that might never come began to haunt me. When I spiritlessly pulled up to my place on Hawthorne, Monte Vista Arms, locked up my bike in back, took the stairs to the second floor, and then opened the door to my sixteen-by-thirteen domicile--all of the Glad-To-Be-Home routine practiced countless times suddenly became a Sad-To-Be-Home happening. Not rushing in, I opened that front door and asked myself, What am I doing about this?

I was in an undeniable funk. That young woman Tracie needed a liver transplant, needed one in the absolute sense of no transplant, no tomorrows. How was I, knowing *that*, gonna just push it aside, get cynical with the thought the TV news directors deliberately seek out hot-button stories?

Whatever else I am, don't call me cynical.

No, the down blues had taken hold of me for the simple reason that here was one person whose suffering could end tomorrow, if only. And lurking, stalking me about my minuscule, but comfy bachelor pad, as I got ready to boil some water on the two-burner electric stove for the night's plate of spaghetti, was the thought, I *could* do something for Tracie.

As I watched the sink faucet fill the pot with water to boil, I gave up any idea I would eat, satisfy my sorry appetite, given the beer I'd had, and then later crash on the mattress, and wake up the next morning,

my head emptied of that plaintive image of a young woman half-expecting a visit from the Grim Reaper. For when I opened that door and got home, I was no more ready to fall back into my usual routine than I would've head-bounced down a flight of stairs.

May be I've got a stripe of empathy down my back like I could be a Siamese twin for half the people on the planet given the right setup. Anyway, I got to thinking as I listlessly slurped my pasta that, yes, I could upgrade my Oregon identification card, make myself an organ-and-tissue donor across the board. But good thought that that was, how would I directly benefit Tracie, even with a premature demise? I had to do more: The inescapable idea was, Get other people signed up with organ donation cards. Signing up new organ donors was the only way I could make sense of this personal funk that had settled in for a stay.

But things never resolve that simply. I needed a good works project about as much as a concrete life preserver around my neck in the middle of the frigid Columbia River. See it's this way, my dad has kept on me about getting into college, getting a good-paying job, and generally making something of myself, however the world-at-large might define that "something." He's kept warning me about being an idealist, but what do you expect, he being an ex-hippie parent? Like the proverbial kettle calling the pot black.

He's said too many idealists want a perfect world and when they discover it's not gonna happen, they quit and their idealism mutates into a convenient excuse for not having any ambition. I got the point; the Idealist Trap was most definitely now on my radar. But there was hapless Tracie and idealist me seeing our state's organ donation scheme as idiotic for lack of donors. I wanted to do something about it. Was that lack of ambition, that I would want to change that? Probably lack of a paying ambition.

My dad would say he's learned the hard way, it doesn't pay the rent to make these noble efforts. I knew this conversation with him would come up again in the next few weeks, so I'd just say it's a karma thing I

have to do.

So I went to bed that night, knowing in the back recesses of my mind, but gaining in priority, was this idea of kinda doing something for Tracie with organ donations.

My improving spirits, nurtured by this plan, took a big hit the next day. Planet Foods was the pits. When I showed up for work, Dennison introduced me to this Latino dude, Jaime, who was hired to work the same hours as me, to get the benefit of my training, so Dennison said. It wasn't as if we needed another produce guy during my hours, so my paranoid brain immediately seized on the idea I might be training my replacement. Jaime's English was, for sure, limited and I was no more gonna be able to smoke out from him what was going on than I would from Dennison. I got depressed all over again.

I dragged myself to work the next three days, dutifully supervising Jaime, who caught on alarmingly fast. It was as if he'd done this work before, a possible fact Dennison or Jaime would just as soon keep to themselves. I had no idea of what I'd done to tick off Dennison. Was it marking down, once, the eggplants for that vegetarian kid that's always coming in with torn jeans?

Friday, I had the day off, a break I sorely needed, to be honest, seeing my job suddenly up for grabs. During the week, besides sweating job insecurity, I'd been talking with Brianna on breaks about the organ donation card idea and she said count her in. She had a cousin in town, Ethan, who was a graphic artist and she was positive he could get the cards printed at no cost, or something close. But I knew we had to get smart on organ donations, so I spent my free Friday on the phone, calling OHSU to see if a doctor would talk to me.

To my surprise, I got the name of their emergency room manager, a Dr. Martone, who was willing to talk in a week. Fifteen or twenty minutes, his assistant, who came back on the phone, said. The doctor thought what I was doing sounded interesting. That boosted my depressed spirits. I couldn't wait to tell Brianna all of us, Ethan

included, needed to have a meeting.

But continuing on the bummer side of my emotional ledger, Friday I also got a postcard from Kezia in Phoenix. If any hope remained for us, she dashed that with a parting sentence, excuse my pun. First, she wrote studies were going great, she liked all her professors, had already changed her planned major twice, asked how I was doing. Then she closed with words to announce: *a new bf named Brad*. Last nail in the coffin of *Ocean + Kezia 4ever*, I suppose.

**T**wo weeks have passed and mercifully, I'm still at Planet Foods, working with Jaime, coaching him in the finer points of putting up celery. The guy catches on fast, faster than I did when I was new.

The bummer of the moment, though, is that Dennison's outta his cage, aka the Store Manager's Desk, and now stands before us while we trim, stack celery. A ludicrous sight, his porker frame a bit large for the navy blue Planet Foods apron, Dennison seems so out of place. He belongs in his cubicle, wedged into that squeaky, swivelly desk chair, shuffling papers, firing off e-mail to his heart's content.

But no, he's planted himself here, arms across his chest. A lollipop loop hangs from his mouth: Third time I personally know he's tried quitting the cancer sticks. And his eyes got an unpleasant look. As if ready with a gem of sarcasm. As if the bull's-eye is yours truly.

"What can I do you for?" I ask, slipping my produce knife back in its holster.

He takes out the lollipop, pinching it daintily. "You guys gotta take those down." He says this, nevermind we've put out two boxes, each celery hand-trimmed, glistening in misted perfection, nevermind we open in ten minutes and restacking celery now is not what we usually do next.

"Austin has a problem following directions," Dennison says, turning to Jaime, who keeps a poker face.

I flex, then straighten my right leg, rocking a bit on my feet. I elevate the bridge of my glasses like I'm gonna be a thoughtful listener for his supervisorial insights. Even if, nine minutes to go, Dennison knows he can play his mind games for best effect, given I'd rather be picking up wayward, clipped celery leaves on the floor, pushing Jaime's extra cart to the back, and balancing the icebergs a bit more. But Dennison's here, so I oblige him.

"This is how we've always stacked them," I say, knowing I've stacked celery butt-end out since September and he's never said a word.

"You first came here, I told you alternate, top, butt, top, butt, top to bottom, see, it stays even, so when you take one away--" With his free hand, he yanks a celery from the middle of the stack, spilling several to the floor. "It stays level, got that?" I'd like to take a celery stalk and start noisily chewing right in his face.

"Could be," I say, stooping to fetch the fallen celery. "You said you liked how Andy--he had this job before me--" I say, pausing to turn to Jaime, whose blank look now doesn't seem to register much in the way of interest for this side comment I'm offering him. "Did creative stacking--your words--wig-wagging cucumbers, remember? And you said he had his own way of doing celery, butt-end out, right?"

"You've a pretty selective memory. Austin, here," he says, addressing Jaime, our unwilling audience, who I gotta feel has no choice but to keep quiet as a church mouse, "never listens, but always has an answer for what he doesn't hear. Austin, the free spirit, floats up from Eugene, honors us all by working here, as if he needs to work at all. He can just drop anywhere and the world's gotta owe him a living."

"What's that got to do with celery stacking?" I say, in point of fact.

Melonhead Dennison reddens, like the guy imbibed last night; this telltale flush is, I bet, from a hangover that's got him even more aggressive this morning. "Jaime, I gotta talk with you in my office later, but first it's two of nine, guys. You restack the celeries, alternating."



I bite my tongue, let him say it. His power trip, his eruption. I'm rocking on my heels, standing back. This has to blow over when customers enter. Those are the rules. So why against my better judgement, do I ask, "How's the rest of produce we've put up? Your eye catch anything else needs redoing?"

Dennison glowers. As if I have any business trying to resuscitate myself after he's humiliated me in front of the guy I'm supposedly training. How can Jaime believe anything I tell him now, after this chunky boar has charged out for this mind-messing performance?

I don't know.

"You restack these by yourself. Get busy. Jaime and I are gonna talk now. I'll talk to you later. Get busy."

The lollipop goes back in his fat-lipped mouth, and Dennison pigeon-toes away with his sizey frame: the front-butt, the side-butts, the back-butt, all of it, and beckons for Jaime to follow. I pick an empty box, toss it on the cart and am looking at undoing and redoing probably till my morning break.

As I unstack the celeries, I get this hole-in-the-stomach feeling that, of course, the porkster's plan all along was to provoke this confrontation, to denigrate me in front of Jaime. I take the celeries down in a manic burst of energy, now convinced my Planet Foods gig has gone ugly for what reason God only knows.

**I** was still smarting forty-five minutes later when I joined Brianna in the breakroom. She, eating healthy, was spooning some yogurt, and for me it was gonna be communal coffee. I decided not to share with her the personal mountain of worry that was now mine to climb thanks to Dennison's scheming. Plus, being insecure jobwise, I didn't want someone overhearing us and relaying I was dissing the bossman, though lack of privacy had never inhibited where others took their breakroom talk.

Quick enough, we got to talking about how if she, her cousin Ethan, and I were going to do something with organ donations, we needed a name.

"What 'bout Oregon Organs?" she said while determinedly scraping a last spoonful of yogurt.

"Nah, tongue twister. We need an acronym." I wanted a name that would flow off the tongue, smooth as a high-style iced mocha, whose abandoned, watery cousin I was drinking.

"What?"

"First letters make a word, to remember the real name."

"Oh, gotcha, like AC/DC?"

I tapped the bridge of my glasses. Not for nothing the woman has black nail polish, that pierced nostril. "Exactly," I said, after a pause to roll a few syllabic pebbles around in my head. All I could think of was "oops" and that was so many burst water balloons on the creative fire I wasn't mustering.

"How's 'bout N-O-O-D-L-E?" Brianna said.

"What's that stand for?"

"Whaddaya mean, that's for you to figure." She stood up, trashed the yogurt container and spoon, quickly scoped how she looked in the purse-sized mirror somebody--understanding vanity has its place--had duct-taped to the breakroom refrigerator door. Brianna seemed okay with her looks and was leaving when it hit me.

"Wait," I said. "This is good. O-O-D-L. Oregon Organ Donors League, nice sound, Brianna, you're genius."

She came back, sat down. I stopped with the horrible coffee, took a memo book out, and pencilled how OODL was gonna happen. An action plan in five minutes.

Top of the sheet, below the punch holes, OODL, big letters.

Brianna said oodles. Great association, I replied. Dr. Martone at OHSU I'd seen last week. Brianna's cousin, Ethan, knew an attorney. He'd write out what the OODL card would say. Organization name. Legal language. Ethan could get the cards printed. Pro bono, Brianna said, at Rialto Design Team. Two weeks later, we'd meet, fine-tune. End of the month, we'd be ready for sign-ups.

**W**EEK and a half later, I'm at Brianna's front door. We're still co-workers. I'm anxious to break pizza with my bud, and, most of all, see what Cousin Ethan has in the way of OODL cards.

She leads me back toward the galley-sized kitchen and the breakfast nook. She fetches shakers of parmesan, oregano, and pepper flakes and asks what I'll be drinking. Ethan should be here in minutes she says, peering inside the glass door of the stove oven, one that's above the range top itself, at head-height. I didn't know they made these wall stoves anymore. Cool idea though. Squatting to look in an oven is punishing.

"You know, Austin, I wouldn't be doing this, weren't for you." I nearly blush, but Brianna cushions it with a wry smile that lets me off the hook of self-embarrassment.

Then the doorbell rings. Ethan. "Hey, guys," Ethan says in a characteristically loud voice I remember from when Brianna introduced us last week. Strictly high-energy, he puts in the insane hours downtown at Rialto because, as he describes it, he's a Whatever-It-Takes-But-Make-It-Over-the-Top Photoshop jock. He's gangly, way over six feet, wears his blonde hair heavy on top, close on the sides, has on a black Van Gogh autograph T-shirt and cargo-pocketed khaki shorts, which with fuzzy, spindly legs and long, narrow feet clad in river sandals makes it remarkable his heron-like frame actually hefts easily a box of cards that would collapse me halfway across the room. *Blam*, the box hits the counter. "I did the press check yesterday, picked up today, ten thousand cards."

"All I know's we sign up ten thousand," Brianna says, both of her hands smoothing her boyish haircut like she's looking at true challenge, "Oregon's gonna change forever."

"We sign ten thousand, we'll each get an autographed citation from the governor of Oregon," I say, wondering what Ethan was thinking.

"We better. My arm was hurtin' crazy, getting this back to the car, couldn't park close, and I was thinking, one sign-up at a time?" Ethan sniffs appreciatively as Brianna opens the oven for the pizza.

"Why didn't you print a hundred?" Brianna says, potholder in hand.

"Same cost, one hundred, ten thousand. I went optimistic."

We eat.

Then keep talking after we finish the pizza. The rest of the evening, until eleven, we go over details. What Martone told me, what the language of the card really says and then the real problem: how we implement our grand vision.

We decide we don't need publicity, this is all one-on-one contact, anyway. We'll just go where people gather and we decide a public place is best. I mean, who wants to hassle permissions for malls and stores and all that private property hoop-jumping?

Saturday Market, our town's premier arts-and-crafts happening weekends, is where we'll first set up. We're gonna plan on some eye-catching tabling action with Ethan ready to knock out a big poster that says, *OODL Wants You, Partly*. Something like that to wake people up.

I get into the ins and outs of what people might ask us, a lot of the Q & A info I got from Dr. Martone up on Pill Hill. No one, absolutely nobody in their right mind's gonna come up and say, Cool idea, sign me up. Well, we can't count on that. Persuasion, informational cajoling, or as Brianna puts it, seduce them so they'll give up part of themselves when they cash in their chips.

Then we get goofy with the euphemisms for dying. The Vegas angles: cashing in your chips, folding your cards. Checking out of Motel Earth. The Big Sleep. We decide to quit when Brianna comes up with, Gone Worm Farming.

We get serious again, line it up this way: Monday, we all go down to the County Court Building and get certified as notaries. We need to take picture IDs and witness people's signatures on the OODL cards. That makes the donation cards official on-the-spot--the whole point. OODL takes the matter of organ donation away from the tension and impatience and all-around bad vibe of crowded DMV offices and brings it out in the fresh air to the people.

We're ready to launch and the way we keep interacting, Brianna and Ethan, who've joined me in this obsession, the more optimistic I get that it'll work. We decide one more meeting to write out our Q & A's after we get notarized, or as Brianna says, we get our OODL notariety and that's it. We call it a wrap and Brianna says there's nothing to clean up from our pizza and pop and that decided, Ethan and I get ready to take off, leaving the OODL cards in Brianna's safekeeping.

Before I leave, Brianna reminds me she'll see me at work for the usual Saturday madhouse. "Payday," I say, then I'm speechless with sudden dreads.

All the good feelings I gathered up during the evening about OODL now geyser into the night sky like a broken water main: I realize tomorrow ends the month. I squeaked through one payday without Dennison firing me, but tomorrow's his next vampire hour. I've been told they always fire you on payday. It makes for less paperwork.

**W**ell, I was right about my worst fear. Saturday, Dennison let me go. Something about not hitting the normal benchmark assessments for my job classification. He brought out the bulldozer for that excuse. But truth be known, he probably wanted someone more under his thumb. More or less came out and admitted that, said Jamie

showed a more serious orientation about his job, is the way he put it. I wanted to gag.

And I suppose the chemistry between us was pretty lacking, even before that incident where I sold produce a nickel a pound to the long-haired elitist in torn Levi's. Now I gotta be sure that generous act got back to him, got him hyperventilating.

No, after that, I wasn't long for Planet Foods and the thing is, they can get people to work there, no problem. Around town, it's got a serious reputation among people that do that sort of work, whether it's doing deli, working the till, or, like me, stacking produce. Planet Foods has this image it consciously cultivates of being this worker-cooperative dedicated to responsible stewardship. ORGANIC and RECYCLE, REUSE, RENEW and WORKER EQUITY and EARTH-AWARE and NO GMO stickers and banners pasted and festooned everywhere for the total effect of what, at times, I thought was annoying political correctness. Still, I can't discount the benefits: All employees, even part-timers, get medical insurance, and profit-sharing and some other things I wasn't around long enough to figure out.

So my relationship with Planet Foods is ruptured, kaput, and mostly a bad memory. Here I am, the first Saturday morning in more than eight months I've slept in late. I'm just licking my wounds, a victim of corporate insensitivity at the hands of what I've been told was one of Portland's cooler places to work.

What do I do now? I'll make coffee and work out my options.

I've got to go file for unemployment. That's first. Then I've gotta figure out what I wanna do next. Tell you the truth, I don't think I'll try real hard for another job stacking produce. They'll say, Planet Foods? Oh, yes. And call over and talk to Dennison. I would rather waste my time in other ways.

I t's been a drizzly, gently raining day, and this evening, after the hours I've spent with want ads and phone, I'm standing on the sidewalk of Hawthorne Boulevard, here in Southeast, where passing car tires *whisssh, whisssh* and headlights are so many mobile cloud chambers tracking raindrops. Brianna's beside me.

We stand in line for tickets to the Bijou, this laid-back theatre, where you watch second-run movies, sitting at tables, eating pizza or burgers, drinking beer, whatever. I'm here because this afternoon, no doubt a wave of compassion hitting her about my job loss, Brianna calls me up and asks me out. She feels utterly free to do so, I suppose, after, without putting it in so many words, we both figured out we at best can only be "buds."

She looks up at me, the marquee lights glinting off her nose stud. "I had to leave the house tonight. I was so stressed with work when Claudia and Koneesha called in sick today. It wouldn't've been healthy I went home to be with myself." She flashes me the killer grin like I'm better company.

"Well, I'm tired of looking at the same want ads every day. I wonder if they ever fill those jobs."

"Some of those jobs are fake, you know, employment agencies gotta hook you to sign up with them." I don't know how Brianna knows this, but I'll assume it's true, it has a cynical bait-and-switch logic to it all. Brianna usually has this cynical take on life, but I wonder if it's also a way not to get her hopes up and generally avoid big disappointment.

At last, we get tickets and go in.

The carpet in the lobby is purple, black, and tan with a discernible path probably thousands have trod. The lobby lights are soft, lemony like they're low to conserve energy. We join the queue for pizza. All pizza is made to order, so inside, at our table, we put our light signaller at table edge. Like a traffic signal, three lamps, and our code's red, green, red.

"Oh, Brianna, what's this movie about, anyway?"

"You think I know?"

"Your idea to come here."

"Yeah, but I just wanted to be away from home, and what's better than seeing you and some pizza?"

"Don't start warming me up, hon." I say this more for the benefit of people around us; Brianna's cool with my joking.

"Austin, you know the store on Friday's insane."

"Well, can't be any worse than what I'm doing. I shouldn't have to stress at all, except I haven't figured out the independently wealthy part. I've got all the time in the world."

Brianna takes my hand. Squeezes it. "It's not right what Dennison did to you. Everyone's talking about him."

I want to hug this woman, if only because she cares. I turn her hand up, check the fingernails. The black polish is chipped away. "You need a manicure," I say.

"I need a man," she says.

"Thanks," I say.

"You *know*. My kinda guy. Don't be angry. I like you a lot."

There she goes again, laying the "This Bud's for you" business on me. "You need a new manicure and you need a new man," I say, idly rubbing the end of her fingertips, wondering where the electric spark might be that would flow out of them and arc over to my fingertips and somehow liven up the possibility we might be more than two uncoupled twenty-somethings just chatting the night away. I turn her hand over again, giving up on any aliveness that could ever make what Brianna and I have something more than "just friends" and know positively it's not there. I don't know, maybe Brianna has this lesbo side she's repressing. Maybe she's yet to find it. Maybe she has to "unfind" men.



Maybe that's where I fit into the scheme. Whoa. Our pizza arrives, as does the pitcher of Coke. Now, if I only knew what was coming on the big screen.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CANNABIS PSYCHIC, FOXY LADY, WRONG LIVELIHOOD

I'm down in Eugene, actually I'm the other side, the Springfield side, of the free-running Willamette, America's longest river that flows north. It's Saturday, before eleven, and on this street's a small ranch house with its dandelion-invaded lawn and I'm facing a scroll-braced aluminum screen door I open for a knock to see what Mom and boyfriend Gary are up to now. As *if* I have no idea.

Reason I'm down here, I'd been planning for a while to spend a weekend with Dad. And it's some momentary diversion from the inevitably tedious chore of sifting the Sunday paper's want ads. Besides, with OODL tabling coming up weekends, who knows when I'd get down here again.

I'd told Dad earlier on the phone about getting sacked at Planet Foods. Again, he said if I needed any help, meaning money, to let him know. I told I'd be okay with the unemployment checks for now.

I had no plans to see Mom, but Dad sorta insisted. He said, for his part, seeing her's no obligation whatsoever. In fact, he's kinda glad she moved this side of the river, away from his familiar orbit of home, stores, college, and whatever else. Now, he's happy to keep it to the unavoidable talk ex'es have on the phone. But me? That's another story.

I owe Mom for something I can't outgrow was how he put it. He chuckled like the professor who's ready with the answer while the student struggles with asking the question.

So here I am. I knock again. Inside, Mom yells, "Coming."

The door swings back and here, wet hair willy-nilly to her shoulders, bathrobed in violet terry cloth, smiling like she's tasted idiot's delight, is Mom. I hug her. The pungent, rope-burning smell of cannabis sativa teases my nostrils. I personally let go that stuff years back--got tired of feeling burnt--but you never forget the smell, what any toker, past or present, knows too well. And giveaway, those big pupils of her gray eyes seem stuck on something interesting, 'bout a mile past my shoulder.

Quick impression: Mom looks okay--her usual frumpy, no makeup, bags under the eyes from too little sleep, self. But this house has gone bad. A maid-service intervention is not out of the question. CDs on the floor, flipped out of their jewel cases, two spent wine bottles wait like mislaid bowling pins to trip you, a bag of spilled corn chips, bunched-up throw rugs, one ashtray in the midst of cigarette butts--I don't get it.

"You hungry?" Mom says. "Gary's getting the shower out."

I don't correct her. She's enjoying her weekend.

"Hey, go sit here." Mom, with both hands, plows a shovelful of newspapers off the sofa. I credit Mom and Gary for being readers, keeping up with the *Register-Guard*--when they're off the pipe. But today? I don't see how.

"Oh, thanks." I ease into the sofa, half-expecting a bong or similar paraphernalia lost in the cushions to goose me. The disorder in this room alone is mind-bending.

The shower, the other side of the wall, abruptly goes *thump*.

"Can I get anything?" she yells Gary's way. No response.

"Can't say I'm not asking." She sits on the other end of the long sofa, her bathrobe flaps open, reveals some thigh. I look away. Mom doesn't straighten her bathrobe, just stares uncomprehending at the bathroom door, like Gary will show any second. She can't let that go unnoticed.

To speed the wait, I ask, "How's the restaurant business?" meaning Mom's waitressing.

"He'll be out, any second now," Mom says, her unflinching gaze ready for Gary's clothed--I hope--entrance.

I yell, "You've got company, Gary."

She quits dog-staring for the bathroom door. Her eyes cut back to me. It's slightly unnerving.

Off-key, Gary starts to sing Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing." If I were to get the dry heaves, it'd be 'bout now.

"You see your Dad?" Pain flickers in Mom's otherwise stolid face, surprises me, but then all about us in this room is messy evidence for her life wreck coupla years ago with Dad. Betrayal? She'd say not. No, Gary bailed her out of a situation she could no longer stand. I've had to listen, when she was more centered than now to her saga of putting up with so much putting down, real or imagined, from Dad. That was the problem: He showed no respect. So the two flower children were married what, two decades ago, and now Dad teaches at Lane Community, Mom waitresses at Vegan With a Vengeance, the restaurant. Go figure.

Gary's giving himself quite the rubdown. Now he's crooning another Marvin Gaye classic, "Let's Get It On."

"That's right, staying with Dad. I'm here for the weekend," I say.

"How's, where did you say you're at?"

"Portland."

"Oh, yeah, Portland. That big city. Big boy, big city."

"Say, hey, who's talking out here." It's Lounge Lizard himself, wearing a black bathrobe, stencilled TAJ MAHAL CASINO across the back. I wonder on what Reno trip he packed that out. Gary's hair looks even weirder wet. Like it's sliding off his head. Thinned-out front and

top. Heavy, stringy wet locks plastered to the back of his neck.

"Gary, look who's giving us the stop of pleasuring by?" Mom's eyes cut over to Gary like he understands what she means, anyway.

Also now sporting a wisp of a goatee, Gary is my Mom's weird taste, all I can say.

"Ocean--" Like Mom, Gary calls me by my old name. "Can I get you anything? A Coke. Beer. Some primo Douglas County weed--grower himself handed it to me." Gary smirks at the reference to his part-time job.

"You got weed?" I ask. The stench alone will give me a contact high if I don't make it outside soon for some fresh air.

"Say, Gary, you know Ocean lost his job smoking weed?"

"Where you working now?" Gary says, ignoring Mom.

"I'm unemployed, no job, sacked," I say. It doesn't matter. They won't remember any of this tomorrow, much less this afternoon.

"Told you, told you," Mom says. "Lost his job."

"Mom, you're psychic."

"I tell you I predict--what is it, Gary?--yeah, I predict slot machines."

"So, why haven't you gone to Nevada and made a killing?" I ask, familiar with how Mom can b.s.

"Last time in Reno, I won three hundred dollars, 'cept one mistake, gave it all back." Her face goes glum. "I wasn't psychic anymore. Pot wore off. Got to keep smoking to stay psychic, see?"

"Yeah, we should take you sometime," Gary says. My back gets nervy like some tarantula's walking between my shoulders and I dare not move.

"Ocean, you got no job Monday to get to," Mom says, "we leave

tonight, whaddaya say?"

Sure, like I, no license, no designated driver options, willingly gonna let two potheads drive me out of state several hundred miles and Mom's gonna prove she's psychic. *Hmmm*. Could be now's the time to initiate a graceful exit.

"C'mon, Ocean, you got no job and I'm psychic. I'll make you rich in Reno."

"No, Mom, I gotta try something else."

Gary in his stolen bathrobe drops down between us on the sofa. "You know," Gary's balling his hands together like he's got an idea, "we might be about to set up in Portland. We got product, sells for a premium. I might get you a distributor gig. You interested?"

I almost burst out laughing, Gary wants me to deal drugs? Such a favor. I look away, over the sofa edge, trying not to think of what else must go through this guy's head.

"I don't drive," I finally say.

"Ocean don't drive," Mom says.

"I forgot that," Gary says, re-rolling the sleeves of his bathrobe. "Hey, it's only five, ten drops a day. You got your public transit in Portland. Take that light-rail MAX to get around and buses get you anywhere MAX don't go."

"Ocean lost his license," Mom says.

"I mostly ride my bicycle."

"Can do that too. Keep the inventory at your place and take it out in a backpack--everything presold--that's the beauty of it all."

"Ocean was smoking dope and got busted driving, Gary." Mom says this louder, as if she knows Gary sometimes doesn't listen. "Ocean can't be driving, got a court order says that."

I let it be the court order expired two years ago, when I turned

eighteen.

"I've got some other things to explore." I give Gary's putty face of middle-aged dissolution more of my serious side than he deserves. "I'm looking at hi-tech, pay's good."

"Yeah, we're more lo-tech. Plant our seeds in the good Mother Earth, let sun and rain do their thing, then harvest, go to market. All natural product people pay good money for and you got the medicinal benefits too." Gary, I gather has been a drug dealer for most of his life and has only been busted once, when the penalties weren't serious prison time like they always are now.

"Ocean, you tell Gary about that time you crashed into the City trailer, you and Ira tripping and the police showed up and took you downtown. Ocean can't drive 'til you're how old?" Mom turns to Gary like he really needs to know this if he's going to hire me. Sure, like when hell freezes over--the second time.

"Hey, you guys, it's been very, very cool seeing you this morning," I say, getting up from the sofa.

Despite Mom's insisting once more I must go with them to Reno tonight, we say goodbyes and I'm released to leave. Outside, the fresh air lets me forget, for a while, the cannabis smoking lounge, and yet another indelible memory of Mom.

**T**hat Saturday night, I again stayed over at Dad's, didn't mention much about seeing Mom and Gary, this duo who thinks they haven't sold out, who with their life examples are preserving everything that was profound, meritorious, and imitable from the Sixties. Give me a break: living in a trashed-out place and dealing drugs? That's not Countercultural Idealism; that's Self Indulgence from name your decade. As I said, made no mention of Mom to Dad, other than, They *seem* to be doing fine.

So with the familial rift plain revisited, I rode the big Greyhound

Scenicruiser north to Portland, the bus monotonously reeling away miles down the Interstate. Outside the seat window, small cars whizzed by in the fast lane. Across the freeway, early field plantings in the northern Willamette Valley seemed fragile, but plenty. I had no idea at age twenty, I'd be here surveying this cinder heap of a dysfunctional family I've got for the rest of my life.

Actually, give her credit, Charity, my only sibling, is still the same ol' great sister. She's got a classroom full of Air Force brats at a base up in Iceland. Five and a half years older, big Sis is out seeing the world, I suppose, so she hasn't been in the thick of it here locally like me. The emotional firefights that last year I was at South Eugene High were enough to give me a resident stiff neck. And now, in mere weeks, I've added personal problems to my won't-go-away family problems.

**S**o here I be, my own four walls, \$435 rent coming up in a week, and I've got, like, no job--just a miserably small unemployment check. Do I not pass *Go*, not collect the bucks, land where I gotta be taken in, Dad's? Nah. The weekend was enough, reminded me why my days of living in Eugene are over.

No, what I got to do right now is get busy on my plan of action. Write it up. A man without a plan is a man without a future. Someone famous once said that.

There, blank sheet. On the top, let's put, *Life Plan for Austin*.

Okay, the goals. Work's always a good starter. *Want job that pays well--no jerkmeister bosses*. First item. They wouldn't call it work if it was fun, so I gotta get paid well--I'm doing it for the green. And if you're doing honest work, why be treated like dirt? Seems kinda obvious.

What else? I need a goal for someone of the opposite sex. Not one more buddy like Brianna, of course, but a chick I can be *with*. How about *Want fine, foxy lady for funning around?* *Hmmm*. Good



alliteration.

And now for thirds. I'm gonna do OODL. This is easy: *Want to do things that help everybody*. A good works goal. Life's sometimes about the income you can't melt or burn.

I suppose I could add a few others, minor compared to these, and I could stick in some bad habits to drop too, but this'll do.

Okay, grab that tape, it's in this drawer somewhere. Take this action plan and stick it to the back of the front door. See, there, Martin Luther nails his theses to the church door. Every time I go out, I'll see my goals, keep my mind centered on what I need to do.

I did this once before when I was feeling the crazies that last year at South Eugene. I wrote down my goal: once I graduated, out of the house and self-sufficient by September 1st, following year. I made it, two weeks to spare. That's how powerful this simple technique can be. I don't know how this list will get my foxy lady to my side, but--why not?--she's worth adding too.

It's been so long since since Kezia took off, that the woman thing's kinda embarrassing. But I look around and see other guys no better off. Hungry eyes, trying to hustle, not getting anywhere. Some wit said women are easy to get, hard to get rid of, but I know it's the other way around. Especially nowadays. Women just wanna be independent and have fun. They will blow you off if they think you are going possessive on them. So you play their game, then they wanna talk commitment. Women are hard to understand.

But what do I know about chicks? Me, I grew up kinda with the fallout of the Sixties. I mean we're on Pacific Standard Time, but Eugene's a time warp: You had to set your watch back ten years, okay? So naturally I came to think of chicks with their long uncut tresses, always parted in the middle, as these nurturing Earth Moms to be. I figured they'd find a guy that liked them, they'd settle down to the fine fun of getting pregnant, and then go about raising kids and that would be that.

Then, something happened. I think the Eighties caught up with us in the Nineties. Everybody got obsessed with making money. Okay, my beloved hippie chicks didn't become Yuppie scum, but they became entrepreneurs. They opened up bead shops down at the Fifth Street Market. They were out for their share of the pie. They were going to go toe-to-toe with men. Believe me, they have, too.

Everything with women's changed. They're working their private agendas in a way just like men always have. Some love 'em and leave 'em as bad as any guy. Some, cold and calculating, size up a guy's pocketbook as fast as they figure out the rest of what's in his pants. What can I say, I'm looking for a chick that's kinda different than what's around--certainly not another Kezia, who drops me like cold leftovers once I didn't fit in with her "life plan." Hey, I have a life plan too. Fine, foxy lady, item two on my list. All I can say is I'll know her when I see her.

**I**f the action plan's in place, where's the action?

Here, possibly. Mute and still, my phone's parked at the table, receiver cradled, and I sit here, a perch view over the noisy stop-and-go of Hawthorne Boulevard. The phone, within sure reach, won't let me go watching car tops, appealing as that activity might be for the next hour. No, on the floor's the Sunday want ads. I even circled a few.

I pick up a section I folded to face the *T*'s up. Telemarketing jobs most of the page here and I assumed all some sort of scam, but this one had the faint look of promise. Small ad, no hype, just an eye-catching *\$500/wk*.

So let the fingers walk: *Beep, beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep, beep.*

"Netsome Telemarketing, how may I direct your call," this chipper female voice says.

"Hi, I'm calling about the *Oregonian* ad your company had for a

telemarketing associate--" I scan the small ad one more time for anything I missed. It's fine, no name to ask for, just this number to call.

"Sure, someone will be with you in a minute," Chipper Voice says, like she's got this stackup, ten incoming calls, to whittle away.

I'm on hold, listening to Wayne Shorter blow soprano sax. I might not get this job, but nudge my expectations forward a tad, figuring at Netsome Telemarketing one person, at least, might've chose this music, and delivered me, however briefly, from on-hold hell.

Then, "This is Pam, how may I help you?"

"I'm calling about the want ad."

"Which want ad?"

"Oh, the telemarketing associate position."

"Okay, I need some background information. First name?"

Next, I give her my middle initial, last name, Social Security number--which I think I've finally memorized--daytime phone number, evening and weekend phone number--all the same ten digits, which I cleverly wrote here on a phone label. I tap my toe, gaze ceiling-ward. Last in the data inquisition: mailing address, including Zip Plus Four, please. What gives with this woman? I called to learn about a job, not volunteer for a background check.

"Okay, that'll do for the app. Say, anyone ever say you've a very nice phone voice?" Pam asks, like a hot desert wind has favored Ms. Pam-A-Frost with the warmth needed to maintain life. "You might do well with us."

"What about the telemarketing position you advertised?" I say, seeing as how that was my point to the call.

"Best setup of its type in the city," Pam says cocksure. "You work completely from home. All you need is a touch-tone phone. You follow our directions and as I say, you set your hours, depending on your target

income. We ask, however, once a week, you come into our downtown office and pick up your new listings to call and then drop off transaction slips for whatever you've closed."

"Could you back up a bit, I'm really new to this, but what are you selling?"

"I'll answer that in a minute. First, let's talk pay." Pam pauses like I must be dumbstruck with anticipation that she'll reveal how I, too, can share this jackpot with no name. "Strictly commission. Our top producers average five hundred weekly, they work less than twenty hours. Does that interest you?"

I slump against the chair back. Let me get this right. Work at home, twice the pay, half the hours for what I had at Planet Foods. I bite my lower lip. This might be a scam, a low-key scam. "Sure, that compares to what I've been making," I say, leaning forward in the chair, wondering if Pam even cares what my job is, or with the latest update, *was*.

"Did I mention you don't have to quit your present job?" Pam seems to float with the idea for now I'm employed, that I'm not some financially desperate guy thrashing about to get on her lifeboat of a paying job.

"No."

"Yes, you'll probably call evenings, most of our representatives do. That's when you'll find your clients at home, anyway. After work."

"What's the catch?" I know whatever it is, pays well--a hundred bucks a night to make pesky phone interruptions at dinnertime?

"No catch. You think you'd like to come onboard?" Pam says this, no special enthusiasm, and I'm wondering, Did I miss a step in all this?

"Wait, you didn't say I got the job, did you?" My face flushes with instant gratification, but my stomach clinches at the takeaway possibility: They're a buncha scam artists.

"Yes. Absolutely. You have an incredibly nice voice. I think you will do fine with our sales effort during June. So you want to join us, don't you?" She asks in a breathy voice, that, for sure, away from her work environment would have me saying, Yes, yes, yes, Pam-A-Lust.

But I stay frosty cool. "I don't even know what the job is," I say wryly, though I think I've a valid complaint.

"Not to worry, Mr. Gebthart. Not to worry. You got something to write with?"

"Just a sec." I grab a pencil, take the folded newspaper, and with my elbow, nail it to the table, so I'm hunched over like a shackled, padlocked, and straitjacketed Harry Houdini ready to squirm for life, and then, "Okay, I'm ready, shoot."

"The phone number is 5-0-3-5-5-5-7-1-2-0. Got that?"

I repeat back to Pam's *uh-huh*'ing satisfaction.

"You call that number next. Then we want you to basically commit what you'll hear to memory. Change it, put it in your own words, if you prefer. This'll be your sales pitch, product, and livelihood all wrapped up in one tidy package. You call that number as soon as I leave you, okay?" she says breathily, again going Pam-A-Lust on me. Could be all part of the come-on scammy. My heart feels gone like a dropped brick.

"Then what, when do I start?"

"You come down as soon as you're ready, any day of the week, we're strictly twenty-four, seven around here. You come down anytime and you'll sign off some papers, but that's strictly for the tax man. You're now a Netsome telemarketing associate. Congratulations."

I pause, unsure what to think or say or do, except maybe to get off the phone with Pam and call that number.

I'm calling the number. What will my Cracker Jacks surprise of a job be? *Beep, beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep, beep.*

"Welcome," a recorded baritone voice intones. "Netsome Telemarketing offers the finest in time-shared condominium resort living. As a Netsome representative, you will be offering your potential clientele irresistible incentives to purchase their bit of heaven in such spectacular settings as Pioneer Valley near Klamath Falls, Oregon--"

I laugh. Clientele? Oh, sure. People who can't afford houses, buy condos. People who can't afford condos, go time-share. It's a good thing I wasn't drinking anything: This newspaper here on the table would've taken a spray. And Pioneer Valley? I thought that was to stay unspoiled. I want to slam the receiver home, but my arm freezes and I gotta keep listening.

"--Here's what you have for people." No more of that warm-up sonorous lazing, the man now rabbits along at a good clip. "--All based on focus-group testing. You have their immediate attention. You're offering free hotel accommodations, free nightly shows, and free airfare anywhere Cascade Airlines flies for two people round-trip to fabulous Reno, Nevada. That package value is more than \$500 and your clients need only listen to a short presentation by our Netsome associates in Reno at a special power breakfast." I'd almost like to call Mom and Gary, get them in on this. They love Reno. *Hmmm*. Second thought, these Netsome people might be drawing in the wrong crowd.

"--Here's what you say to get started. Hi, I'm Ted--insert your own first name here--and I'm calling on behalf of Netsome Enterprises, a Fortune 500 Company listed on the New York Stock Exchange. How are you this evening? Wait for an answer, but quickly say, Good, the reason I'm calling you tonight is--"

I don't know what more I can take. Do these condos exist? Nah. They'll first get enough people's money. The so-called resort comes later. Maybe.

The guy spiels on. I'm ready to hurl. I'm in the employ of Netsome

Telemarketing? For the last ten minutes? Do I break out the white buck shoes and practice the knuckle-popping handshake, even if I'm only working a phone, cajoling retirees, near-retirees, to strip out life savings, dump it in our Pioneer Valley resort? Is the *free* trip to Reno, En Vee, gonna get the cash to changing hands? Nah.

The receiver goes to its cradle. I can't listen. Personal integrity? Worth something for me. I take a sobering breath. I'm not doing any dirty work for greedheads. I need out of this.

But, how?

I've gotta call Pam, say something. That in the last ten minutes, a better job fell into my lap. Uh-huh.

Or that in the last ten minutes, my ex-girlfriend in Phoenix, Arizona, calls to say she wants me back, there. Uh-huh.

Or that I'm having second thoughts about the time commitment I can give Netsome--I gotta keep my evenings free for charitable work I'm organizing. *Hmmm*. Sounds better. No need to mention OODL--unless she asks--but, I'm an early riser--always get up at five, all those days living in the country--and I run out of gas in the evenings and I don't know if I can give Netsome my very best. *Hmmm*. Sounds like the makings of a line for Pam. I dial Netsome again, ask for Pam.

"Pam, this is Austin Gebhart, I talked to you fifteen minutes ago."

"Yes, you were about to listen to the recorded sales message."

"Sure did--"

"You're having second thoughts, aren't you?"

"You guessed right."

"No, statistics. Two out of three people we accept will not come to our office or they call back and say they can't do it. This work isn't for everyone, we know that, we run ads all the time. But I tell you, the ones that click, stick and they really do make the bucks."

"Well, I was thinking I need to keep my evenings free, I'm kinda an early riser--"

"Say no more, you're off our list. You have a nice afternoon, Mr. Gebthart." *Click*, dial tone.

Cold, cold Ms. Pam-A-Frost. But at least, no more worries for that job. So, what's next?



## CHAPTER FIVE: TABLING MAN, PEDALLING PEDDLER, WAVE CATCHER

The whole Netsome experience--get job, unget job--left me bummed. Oh, sure, I kept calling those telemarketing numbers from the ads. Got the usual rejecting, nothing-personal responses. Stopped for a late heat-em-up canned chili lunch. But after that, I couldn't call. I'd shot my wad for the day. My mouth tasted ashes from a job not worth having.

I figured Netsome at a notch above known racketeers on my scale for socially responsible employers. But then, Planet Foods sparkled responsibility and what did that get me? See, I could work for the known racketeers, take home money by the trash bag. Live on bread and water, donate the rest to Oxfam, and they feed the world's hungry people. Slide that scenario across the overall social angel/social bandit spectrum to where it belongs--see what I mean?

Such thoughts, though, don't get the job. So the rest of the week, I kept working that phone. I guess my thought tangle left me deciding I was out for the bucks. Let my good works with OODL offset the money grubbing, the future livelihood that was not Mother Teresa, okay? Went for a lot of sales jobs, *no experience needed, enthusiastic attitude mandatory*. Yes, I was out for the bucks if the company met my minimal sniff test: Anyone that would bulldoze pristine wilderness like Pioneer Valley was out.

Crazy thing though, OODL ended up getting me my current job, kinda.

In three weeks, Ethan and I were set to launch OODL at Saturday Market. Brianna would join the next day, being off Sundays. Still I had the idea to scout around for more locations. Ethan pooh-pooh'd shopping malls: too much trouble. Well, one afternoon, having ample free time, an involuntary member of the leisure class, I rode my wire donkey over to Holladay Center Mall to ask the facilities manager about OODL setting up a table inside. Were we registered with the state? she asked. No, I said. Then, \$300-a-month, she said. Later, I said.

On the way out, I stopped at a kiosk where a young woman chewed gum and read a paperback book. She made a desultory attempt to inform me she could sign me up for a cellphone. But maybe she smelled "unemployed." Soon her fingers toyed with the page corners of *Poisonwood Bible*. I didn't think she was paid to read, so I kept on about the Tesla Northwest banner above her display of iridescently skinned cellphones: so many fishmonger's rainbow trout on ice. She said the company had exploded, putting on employees daily. I asked, Who do I talk to? She gave me a name downtown.

And that, with some go-getter stepping afterwards, was how I finally triumphed over my recent setback from lollipop-sucking, lard-ass Dennison and became the first sales associate for Tesla Northwest doing residential sales on bicycle. Door-to-door's slow slogging, but I'm pumped about Tesla Northwest.

For two weeks now, I've pedalled and peddled wireless, broadband, and the like in telecom services. I've Saturdays off. Which brings us back to OODL. You see, today here I'm with Ethan tabling at--surprise--Saturday Market.

What, you ask, is Saturday Market? Oh, call it a Portland institution. Actually, by some measure I heard, the biggest arts and crafts sale in the country that goes year 'round. See, you come to the west end of the Burnside Bridge, and once down the stairway, you'll discover the underside of the bridge hides a weekend world of merchants: aisles of specialty booths serving up such wares as rawhide

string neckties, wooden bowls of spalted burlwood, serigraphs of cannily welcome subjects like "Cat At Rest" (framing optional), draped strands of beaded necklaces whose multicolor spangling plays up the booth's modest lighting facility, and fanny packs and other humbly utilitarian expressions of stitched waterproof nylon wear to outfit one as an unmistakable, outdoorsy Oregonian.

It happens, rain or shine, booth owners--craftsmen, hawkers, peddlers--erecting their commercial venues, complete with a MasterCard-VISA manual imprinter, every Saturday morning and reducing it to pack-out portability every Sunday evening. And success being what it is, even more booths flow out from the bridge--a retail overflow that in inclement weather blossoms forth some pretty elaborate Plasticine canopies.

People gather by the hordes because it's not only one place to buy a *unique* gift, but it's also great for catching street acts of jugglers, face painters, balloon-twisting funny-hat fabricators, all variety of struggling musicians including a fabulous air guitar artist, and generally, passing time watching people.

Then there's food. Every ethnic and American fast food you can think of, including the redoubtable Saturday Market special, elephant ears, flattened gobs of dough, deep-fried, well-sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. Kids love 'em.

Today's weather is gorgeous, a merciful fact for Ethan and me sitting out here in the open at the two card tables he scrounged, but I still want our launch of OODL to be more than an excuse to bake in the sun.

Someone's here at my table to quell my fear.

"Hi, you the people the state has to arrange organ donations?" The fellow surveys the OREGON ORGAN DONORS LEAGUE banner behind us, sipping from the commuter mug he holds. The tie-dyed T-shirt, streaky reds, purples, greens, and yellows suggests he's a booth craftsman taking a break. Or is he really a highly-compensated

computer programmer the rest of the week? You never really know. But beard, the bottle-blonde dreadlocks get my vote for starving artist.

Ethan leans back in his foldup chair, one hand in the cargo pocket of his shorts, and leaves me to pounce on the question like a cat to a mouse in the open. "We've nothing to do with the state," I say, calling on all the Q & A's the three of us practiced. "Ethan and I are volunteers and want to educate everybody about organ donation. We'd like you to have, of course, a notarized, legally-binding donation card for your wallet." My eyebrows go up. I'm on alert. I point to our card stack.

"Oh, I see," he says. "I thought that was done on driver's licenses."

"It is, sorta," I say. "But the numbers DMV gets are pathetic."

"*Hmmm*. I'm only thirty-one and haven't thought about what I'll do. I suppose I'll go cremation, baggie of ashes." He grins like someone who knows a cheap-o, eco-friendly exit from this planet.

"Great. Maybe we can help you leave more than dust." I grin too.

He picks up a card. Squares it between his fingers, turns it over, studying the back jammed with boxes to *X*. Dozens. An anatomical part list. A tissue catalog. The mug jiggles. "I didn't know there were so many choices," he says. Clears his throat. "I'm going to have to think about this." The words whiff past, a disconnect, what I fear will be the backpedalling phrase of the day.

"You've any questions, we'll be here," I say. My voice trails off, my eye catching someone at Ethan's table. Mr. Dreadlocked Tie-Dyed looks sideways to this chick who, besides the de rigueur uniform of blue jeans, black T-shirt, has this enormous bag on her shoulder. I mean this purse must have enough gear for an overnight camp-out on Mt. Hood. The purse pulls her left shoulder down not one millimeter, which goes to show the bag might be empty? *Hmmm*. This suggests something.

Hustler Ethan tells her he likes the purse. She looks away to people walking past, then back to Ethan, and says nothing. Then he gives Big Purse Chick the whole picture. The Who, the What, and the Why of

OODL. All that. And believe it or not, after Ethan goes for the full, non-skip, ninety-second spiel, the chick has one word: "Cool."

Whoa. Leave it to Ethan. He hands a card, flips it, explains options.

"I'm simple," she says. "I'll check *All*. Then I sign on the front?"

"Yeah, and I follow with a Handy Andy notarize," Ethan says.

I want to stand up and out of my chair. We're signing our first donor. What gives with this chick? Why doesn't she drag us through those Teutonically tortuous philosophical dialogues about how we can do this to our bodies? Kant, Liebnitz, Spinoza, damn them. The woman thinks it's cool to do OODL. How now. How Tao.

I check out this woman. She's answering for weeks of memory, that unsteady gray image of Tracie Meddols waiting for a liver transplant. This woman, oh, maybe early forties, no svelte chick anymore, natch, just sort of okay, a kindly look in her face, is OODL's first. I'll remember her forever. So now I know what is in that big purse that seemingly weighs nothing. The answer is Card One. I love this woman.

The rest of the day, tons of people walk by and we talk, talk, and talk. Especially the afternoon. This day's the day to be outside. We sign up people. We don't run out of wallet cards. Okay, maybe we sign up two handfuls of people. Okay, six, to be precise. But I guarantee you that is a lot more than DMV does in a week.

Okay, at this rate, maybe it'll take several lifetimes of weekend tabling to use up the 10,000 OODL cards Ethan got printed. But we started.

Puny results aside, the day was a blast. Ethan and I agree as to it's closing on dinner, it's time to knock down card tables. Tomorrow, we're back. Brianna's here too.

Sunday, as we packed up, the three of us agreed OODL was a reality. We'd signed up twenty-one people in two days, most on Sunday. Maybe it was the three of us being there the second day that helped.

But putting away the tables, whatnot in Ethan's car, I saw that cardboard box stuffed with twenty-one cards less than 10,000. The box seemed to mock our efforts, saying, You've spent a whole weekend and haven't made a dent.

I was a regular furrow-brow as we got in the car and closed doors. Ebullient Ethan was ready to drive us all home, our weekend mission complete. But I couldn't drop OODL like that until next weekend. My tortured mind kept hitting on another place, the next place, to do OODL tabling. Like out at the airport. Plenty of people walk by, not all of them sure they'll reach their destination whole, that gruesome worm of a thought always in their collective psyche--Wouldn't they be perfect for OODL? This I asked aloud.

Brianna hedged about, finally said Saturday Market was okay. But Ethan, fingers ready to twist the car ignition key, insisted we stick with Saturday Market. People would get used to seeing us. They'd come up maybe the second or third time they saw us, was how he put it. So I asked, What people go to Saturday Market every weekend? but then, outnumbered, I let it ride. This was, after all, a volunteer enterprise. No sense pissing off my colleagues this early on. And I could still scope for another place we might table in the future.

One place, though, I wouldn't hype for future OODL tabling is anywhere on this empty Yamhill Street in Southeast that I'm biking and walking, trying to shake loose some dollars for me and my fine employer, Tesla Northwest. No one's home. So it's Monday morning, I'm back at the so-called *real* work, going door-to-door. It takes more than the right intentions of OODL to put pizza on my dinner table. And the morning sun's brighter than a band of brass tubas. I climb enough of these doorsteps--like I am now--beads of perspiration on my

forehead, something might pop loose.

Under the porch overhang, I realize this place is nice. A boxy two-story Old Portland Style house: Mint-green clapboards, cream window trim. Recent house sale, the fresh-looking paint seems to say, to one more young family who can only afford the prices in Southeast. At the varnished wood door, I rap the knocker a few times.

Small feet scurry inside and then *whoooosh*, the door opens. This mom, her face flush like she's exercised by keeping up with kids, checks me out.

"Mommy," a boy, five-ish, huge brown eyes peering out beneath a bowly cut of dark hair, pulls at her thigh like it's the pillar to topple. Behind Mom, a younger sister, her aquamarine jumpsuit covered with yellow ducks, runs madly in circles about the wooden floor before a sofa.

"One minute," the woman says, her hand pushing at the boy's head as if that might defuse him.

"Good morning," I say, trying for the world to look like I'm a good guy. She studies me like I fell off the circus wagon, like I wasn't expected. Then she smiles out a welcome, though it's clear her attention's split with the two hyper kids. "My name's Austin and I'm from Tesla Northwest Broadband and Wireless. Have you heard of our services?" I ask, ready, if she says no, to launch the spiel.

"What are you selling?" she says, cocking her hip against the head of the five-year-old boy. What does the leech of a kid want? God only knows, maybe it's the key to his Game Boy that's been locked away for his own good. Or maybe the kid wants his mom to buy a different cereal.

The woman drills me a look, like I should know she's stretched for listening time. The daughter keeps running tight circles about the living room floor.

"Glad you asked," I say, on beat. I offer and she takes the leadoff

Tesla brochure. "Our services. We offer cellphones, convenient family plans. We offer two or more cellphones with up to a thousand free minutes a month--"

"My husband has a cellphone, the business pays for it," she says, idly waving the brochure, clingy son ignoring any body language from Mom to leave.

"I see, I see. You ever think of your own cellphone, Tesla Northwest's got great services at the best price. Always."

The daughter finally stops, clamors up on the sofa where on her back, she yells, "Mommy, the room spinning, Mommy."

The woman swings a glance back and then gives me an expectant look, like I might have more to say. I do. "You or your family have a computer?"

She nods.

"Okay, you probably have dial-up access or maybe cable or even DSL. Well, we offer something far better. Broadband. We put an eighteen-inch receiver on your roof, inconspicuous, and then you're linked up to our Tesla Northwest satellite network and the world's yours."

The woman smiles wanly, like lose the hype.

"Seriously," I say. "You have the fastest and best bandwidth access available for your computer, plus with our basic package, you'll get an incredible selection of TV channels."

"We already have cable," she says like I'll drop it.

"You and most people already have cable, true. But this is much better. You get a minimum of one thousand channels, I kid you not, the mind boggles at the selection."

"I don't want my kids watching too much TV."

"You can program it any way you want, limit their choices. And, of



course, as I said before you also get unparalleled computer access when you go out on the Web. Pages will load like that." I snap my fingers. "None of this slowing down you get with cable when too many people get on. Sounds like something of interest, huh?"

"We already have the computer hooked up to cable," she says.

"Well, why not upgrade? I can sign you up for broadband for less than forty a month, first two months free--"

The son, finally tired of being ignored, bolts away. The woman seems to relax, like now maybe she can talk and wind this up. "I think I want to hold out for a T-1 line," she says, a smirk suggested at the corners of her lips.

"You know about T-1 lines?" I ask.

"I know they're faster than broadband." Now, more openly a smirk.

Then *thump*, the daughter has rolled off the sofa onto the floor that fortunately has a rug there to soften the blow.

I'm starting to get the picture. The woman has a boy wandering through the house now. The daughter, apparently okay, sprawls out on the floor and this woman is jamming me with technical jargon that wasn't even covered in class. Certainly my message is beginning to get drowned out by this woman's need *to take care of kids*. But as they said in class, unless the building is burning and lives are to be saved, keep selling.

I push the bridge of my glasses. I'm just trying to make money so one day I can live in a house like this woman and possibly have a small family too. Until then I gotta keep selling.

I straighten up, trying to take command of the situation, a sales prospect that has me off-balance, more ways than one. I know I can make this woman a better deal than what she has with cable, but we're not selling T-1 lines. "While you wait for T-1, can I sign you up for one of these plans?" I have our three multi-colored glossy Tesla Northwest

brochures fanned out in my hand like all this woman has to do is pick a card, any card, and I'm a winner, getting my commissions right off the bat if she signs on that dotted line.

"So, you don't sell T-1?" the woman says, knowing she's got me and now looking back at the door to another room, evidently where the son is up to no good.

Oh, he's bringing out a cat. A black-and-white tuxedo cat that seems content to hang aloft between the boy's clutching hands.

"Davis, you put that cat down. Don't treat him that way. He's no rag doll. How many times have I told you that?" The woman's eyes cut back to me and she says, "I'm going to have to go now, but thanks for stopping by."

I'm about to say, Sorry we don't offer T-1 services, but I can check and see if we have plans for doing so in the future, but that's so iffy, it's not worth pulling the thought together, much less getting the words out of my mouth at this particular moment.

The son launches the cat overhead onto the sofa in a two-handed shot put and the mom stifles a shriek. I know she would've. The cat bolts out the room. "I've really got to go," she says, pushing the door halfway closed.

"Nice talking to you," I say automatically, seeing how my sales opportunity here has tanked. The door lock clicks and I turn to walk down the porch stairs, walk over to the next house, to ring what is likely to be an unanswered doorbell. Damn, and that was a house with someone home.

**I** sold like this for the next coupla weeks. Almost always bombing in the unlikely event I actually found someone home. But sometimes, someway--and this is what kept me going--and it wasn't every day, I'd make a sale.

*Ker-ching, ker-ching, ker-ching.* The sweet sounds of jackpot commission dollars reverbed through my talked-out head when a customer signed her--on occasion, his--name on the line by the *X*. My standard cut was two months' service. Right there, an ordinary cellphone package got me sixty bucks. Enough moola, I could quit for the day 'cept I knew from painful memory, dragging my spent bod about under the heavy summer sun, entire days might be sale-free. So I kept at it.

Several weeks later, though, I was doing okay. Sure, a week or two I might've been better off at Planet Foods, but in the main, I was making more, working a lot, lot harder. Some evenings, at first, it seemed my head rebelliously ached with the sales spiel looping nonstop through my cerebellum. I never wanted to press a doorbell the rest of my life. But I got over that. Also people at Tesla Northwest said I was doing fine.

In fact, I got off to a good enough start that I was invited to the Tesla Northwest sales retreat here at Seaside, Oregon, hard by the vastness of the gray Pacific Ocean. Just an overnight affair for the Portland sales reps, but still something to make me feel I'm really on the team.

Anyway, before our Tesla team brunch, I'm out here slogging across this beach sand, navigating between what waves and the high tide have left. Rotting seaweed and a driftwood pile ahead. I think I'll go around it, go up to the road here and walk by the parked cars. Cars are nosed in off the road, front tires in the sand, sporting roof racks, if not surfboards.

A few guys stand beside their cars, leaning on an opened front door, their eyes fixed on the waves out there to the right. They seem hypnotized by the rise and fall of the swells, as if looking for some code written on the water that it's time to put on a wetsuit and take the board off the roof and get down to the sea and paddle out to catch a ride.

As I say, it all looks interesting, but it's not something I ever got around to trying. Pretty much the same with skiing. I guess skiing was

too much the capitalist sport for me, given my family background, but surfing--*hmmm*--I think different. Lotta surfers have long hair, sort of a hippie, natural vibe. Could be surfing is something I might've tried, if I didn't live so far inland.

The beach arcs right before it's cut off by a craggy, conifer-topped bluff that marches down to the rage of the Pacific Ocean. Out in the water, a bunch of guys, wetsuited, sit on their boards and bob with the oncoming waves like so many ducks. I'm waiting for one to catch a ride.

Farthest away in line, I can tell is a girl, even from here, even in her black wetsuit. She sits bolt-upright on her board, arms folded across her chest. The small swells keep rolling toward her. Every now and then, her right hand, released quickly, presses down to make sure the board tips noseward over the swell.

Now she's changed to lying lengthwise on the board. She slowly trades off hand paddles, her head up, as if for a steady gaze outside.

A nice swell starts to climb, feathering white on its left flank.

She cranks the board around, points shoreward. The wave flips up the back of her board and somehow in one motion, she gets to her feet and manages to edge in a drop to the bottom of the wave. The wave face, smooth as drawn glass, is breaking down behind her, from left to right, and amazingly she's still on her feet as the board knifes sideways in the trough of the rising wave.

Then like a trapeze artist, she leans on her back foot and swings the board up to ride high in the wave, locked just ahead of the plume of white water that crashes behind. She slaps her left hand against the wave face and does something I'd never do, leaning forward and zipping down to the bottom of the wave, just as a whole section of the trailing wave folds over, white spray spewing skyward. I'd drown for sure, I try something like that.

But then, at bottom, she again does the trapeze move, stomping on

the tail of the board, climbing up the wave face, rising as fast as she fell, and sails airborne off the lip, the board nearly vertical. The nose of the board she grabs in midair, then she hits the water in a slap of fiberglass.

She does a slow paddle behind the spent white water of the collapsed wave like she's trying to get her wind back and a slow unbreaking swell nudges her forward as she comes in closer, paddling until she's in the shallows. She stands up. The board in hand, she steps up on the sand with this athletic, almost ballerina-erect posture and walks over to a parked silver van. She puts the board atop the van. She takes a key chain from her neck and opens the van door.

The surfer girl unzips the black wetsuit, it clumps on the ground, and she's got on a one-piece blue bathing suit. She leans on the van, both hands pushing a towel through her wet, dusky blonde hair, that's cut medium, off her shoulders. Takes the towel from her hair, bunches it, and cranelike stands on her left leg, one hand pushing against the van and rubs the towel on the bottom of her right foot. In the act of bending that right leg, I see the femur muscle on her upper leg define itself, ever so slightly. There is not an ounce of fat on this woman, whom I am staring at, surprised she hasn't cut a sullen look my way to stop me, but, no, she's quite absorbed in her routines of drying off. The surfboard with three fins now sits on the cradle of her roof rack and the rear window of the van has, as I get closer to read, a *Turista* sticker.

Her head rises, the eyes sweep quickly, and the head goes down to attend the foot, which has what, some tar on it? She knows I'm in her path, now that I'm about to walk by. I don't know what it is, this woman among so many guys surfing. Or is it that old Beach Boy song? Maybe that's it, the song come to life, maybe for the song's sake, I say, "You caught a good ride, that last one." From my lips, it sounds so hopelessly lame, so unconvincing coming from me, a dork who couldn't stand on a board if it were sitting in sand.

Okay, lame, but still a start. Surfer Girl, for whom I've stopped, puts down the bothersome foot and drops the hand with the towel to her

side and shoots me a smile. She's significantly older than I, now that I see her better. My guess is mid-thirties, but does she ever have an athletic body, powerful shoulders like a swimmer's, wider than her slim hips.

She stands a bit forward, her light eyes fixing on me, like I'm an object of study. "Oh, I try. So, you surf?" she asks, her smile flashing skepticism.

"No, I'm a Valley boy, born and grew up in Eugene. Don't get here much and the water's so cold, I don't know how you stand it." I'm guessing she's about fifteen years older, but I don't know what it is, there is something about her that draws me. I'm about to forget I was only going out for a thirty-minute walk before brunch with the rest of the Tesla gang. I want to hang out with this chick for a while. See what's up with her. For one thing, why is she by herself?

"This five-mil wetsuit helps." I see her California plate on the rear of the van has a dealer plate holder embossed HOFFMAN IMPORTS WEST L.A.

I stay a respectful distance away, give her space, so she doesn't think I'm some crazy dude. She unbunches the towel and pulls its length around her neck. Her face is tan, as are her hands, which makes for an odd look at first until I get used to it. It's not a dark Hawaiian tan, but definitely contrasts with the pale legs and arms covered by the wetsuit. "So you think I should give surfing a try?"

"Up to you. But if you do, stay away from here."

"Why?"

"This is the Point. Biggest left break on the West Coast. The waves are too powerful for a beginner." She says this gravely, like she knows some bad stories.

"So where then?" I ask.

"Oh, beach breaks are okay, get a feel for catching a ride in the

soup, then you can move on to more serious waves."

I study her features. She's spent a lot of time outdoors, has a healthy, attractive look. I sense I could spend a day easily with her, getting to know her. And yet she's so much older.

"So you from California?" I say, again noting that telltale license plate we Oregonians habitually check, possibly out of self-defense, I don't know.

"By way of California, before then I was back east. I first started coming up here almost ten years ago," she says with a slight melancholia in her face when it comes to rest, when her smile quits.

"You like Oregon, then," I say, sounding, I'm sure, somewhat lame again: She said she's been coming here ten years. I'm so clueless.

"I like uncrowded waves. But there are other reasons," she says, her mask of melancholia coming back as if she's looking down into a well and doesn't want to pull up any more of what's down there.

"So what got you out here?" she says abruptly, seeming to break away from whatever memory was causing her to seem lost in thought. Maybe she's had enough questions about *her*. She fixes me with a calculating look, like she's taking measure of me. But it could be my imagination.

"Oh, I was born and grew up in Eugene." I realize these are the exact words I said earlier.

"No, why are you out here walking? You like watching waves?"

"Sorta, but I'm here on business. Our company's Tesla Northwest," I say, wondering if she really wants to know I ride a bike and sell door-to-door. "We stayed overnight." I turn back, the direction of the hotel, and fingerpoint, realizing suddenly it's a long, long way back there. It'll probably take fifteen minutes to hike back for my brunch. I swivel up my wrist, half-convince myself I've time.

"So you're out for some fresh air to blow away last night's

cobwebs, huh?" She lifts her head and her laugh seems forced, sadness soon sweeping back into her face.

"No, I only had two beers, no way would I make a fool of myself in front of my boss."

"Don't let me keep you from getting back," she says, with a hint of, is it, interest in her voice?

"No, I got plenty of time. By the way, my name's Austin," I say, wanting badly now to have her name to remember.

"I'm called Cris," she says.

"That with a *C* or a *K*?"

"With a *C* and no *h*."

"My real name is Ocean. I changed it last year to Austin. Ocean was too hippie-sounding."

"No, Ocean is definitely cool," she says. But what else could she-- Surfer Girl--say?

"You can call me Ocean," I say.

We go on talking. She asks me questions and I begin to feel with her interest, maybe we could get something going. She's older, yet attractive.

She wants to know what I do for a living. I admit, yes, I sell cellphones and broadband services door-to-door, that I don't have a car, I ride my wire donkey everywhere. Is that something people need? she teases. She can say that, I suppose, seeing all that's behind the open van door, an open sleeping bag for starters, she must live out of the van, not have a phone at all. To her question, I say probably not, that it's my way of making money.

Then I launch into what we're doing with the Oregon Organ Donors League, how it's my good work to balance out my karma. At mention of *karma*, her face flashes fond recognition, like she knows my



dilemma.

I want to know what's with her. Is she a surf nomad? Does she get hassled about living out of the van? What does she do for money? But none of those questions seem right, for her face, between mercurial grins, slips back to its resignation, a gate thrown up against my asking her much more than her name, really. She seems content to put the questions to me, which is okay. And yet I've a nagging want to know what's with an older woman like this, if I'd ever have a chance with her.

Speculation, really, that's nowhere, for when we finally take leave of each other, we have nothing more than the other's name, the memory of a face. That's it. She goes back to studying the waves, this surfer girl who's fleeting as those few minutes of that Beach Boy song, but it's okay as I walk slowly back to the hotel for brunch, sure to rejoin the loud and boisterous sales folks I'd left, with whom I'll ride the bus back to Portland. I force myself not to look back, behind me, to see Cris one more time. That's too much like saying goodbye.

CHAPTER SIX:  
TOMATO FERRARI, TORTOISE-SHELL GLASSES, JONNY SHAKS

When I got back to the hotel, my small elation about this chance meeting was soon blunted by the Tesla sales crew merrily brunching and readying to bus home to Portland. A distracting hubbub that by the minute made Cris seem like surf washing back into the sea: irreversibly gone.

Still, a nomadic surfer girl, even if she was some years plus ten older than me, had intrigue. The daily routine of door-to-door selling that followed, however, caught me up in a monotony of pure effort. A few dreamy escapes would take me back to revisit that tang of salt air and her, but then those thoughts ceased too. Plus, the following week I met H.

I was in the Tesla office downtown, filing paperwork for my check Karman was about to authorize--next stop, the bank--when this pretty brash guy, dressed casual, but Saks Fifth Avenue casual, interrupts. Purply knit golf shirt, tan chinos, boating shoes, no socks. He shook his car keys at Karman, telling her he'd be back around three, in case anyone wanted to know.

Karman asked if I'd met H. That's right, no first name, only an initial. I thought she was trying to undo the intrusion by introducing us. Turns out H., his cockiness suggesting he had a personal corporate China Wall, was the son of the man who founded and still ran Tesla Northwest. H. was old enough to have dropped out of college, I gathered later, and kept busy at who knows what, generally managing the life of an insufferably rich kid. I was leaving the building to get my bike downstairs, and H. kept chatting. With no real reason to do

otherwise, we went down the stairs to the front sidewalk together.

We didn't really talk about much more than, How long you been selling? On a bike? That sort of thing, when H. paused and said, "Say, we should talk some more, maybe do a little clubbing." The guy was the big boss's son, what could I say, No?

**B***rmmmmmm. Burbbbbbbllll. Brmmmmmm. Burbbbbbbllll.* The windows in my apartment are up and hellacious exhaust notes from a car engine are vibrating off the whole side of Monte Vista Arms. Out there, a tomato-red convertible, a hunk of sculpture in sheet metal eases into a parking space. A Ferrari, what else? It's H. His stagey arrival. *Burbbbbbbllll, burbbbbbbllll*, he cuts the engine. I've never seen a Ferrari in person, at least not one in which I was about to ride. You gotta say they have presence. You know, That's a Ferrari. H.'s out the car, slams the door, bounds for the front door below.

I check my wallet. Two twenties better pay for my share of tonight's clubbing: any cover charges, few drinks. I'm not exactly rich.

A knock at the front door.

H. wears a black leather jacket, expensive, tailored. No silly number studded with cheap pot metal. Compared to him--my Goodwill Hawaiian print shirt, jeans--I might be dressed for less than the occasion. H.'s ready-to-rock eyes take in the apartment. "I knew someone once lived in this building, came by a few times, but I'm not sure if it was this apartment or one like it." He points across the room. "Had a bay window like that."

I take it he approves of my digs, but more likely it's whoever she was that lived in this building.

"We ready?" H. asks. Then we leave.

Outside, H. gets in the car, pushes open the passenger door.

We sit low, my legs pretty much straight out and we seem less than

a foot off the ground. H. keys the ignition and a rich, contained auditory assault gets going behind our heads. Funny, this car sounds much louder outside than inside.

"Twelve cylinders, mid-engine," H. says, guessing I'm impressed. "I know a place near the airport, why don't we start there?"

"I'm game," I say, not having the slightest idea what sort of bands play out that way. Everything I know is sort of downtown or near Eastside, but then H. is the guy with the Ferrari--gets around to more clubs than I ever will, riding my wire donkey. Not that I'd ever want one of these fantasies in tomato-red sheet metal. But, for now, it's trippy to be riding in one.

We race out Sandy Boulevard. The Ferrari, the way it moves, amazes. H. has his radar detector on the dash--steady glows of green and red diodes--and in town, not on the Interstate, we're close to speeding ticket action. After a stoplight, we shift lanes, scoot past the car in front, and *blam* we erase that distance to the next stoplight as effortlessly as trailing your finger through water. I guess we pop sixty-five in a thirty-five doing this a few times, and from the sidewalk, we must be some reddish blur. Think rocket on wheels, and getting pinned in the seat. What a rush.

*Whoooooom, whoooooom, whoooooom.* H. slams a few downshifts through the gears, and turns right, where our tires scrunch to a gravelly stop in the parking lot of what a neon sign announces: DALLAS DEBBY'S--A GENTLEMEN'S CLUB. Whoa. "Near the airport"--is that what H. said? Lonely businessmen, airport-close hotels. *Hmmm.* Once again, I get the picture--as always, after the fact. The exterior--what there is--is funky boring: an aluminum-sided one-story building painted milky white. Nothing stands out except, of course, the neon sign.

"Your idea of clubbing's not like mine," I say.

"What, should I've warned you?" H. hesitates, leaves the engine in its loopy idle and for a freeze-frame second, seems about to reconsider.

"I'm not exactly starving for this, but no big deal, okay?" I glance at the sorry, squat building, wondering how much really goes on inside anyway.

"They've got great steaks in here," H. finally says. "Prime Kansas City beef, melts in your mouth." He cuts off the engine, puts up the top.

A solitary, unremarkable door is where we enter, and I mean, dark, like you wouldn't believe, inside. There's that and rock music spilling out. "Show starts fifteen minutes, five bucks each," this looming figure says. He must be a combination bouncer and money taker, the roll of bills in one hand.

Actually, I can see my hand in front of my face. I fish out one twenty, take the change and see that if I had any steak dinner, pass on that, I'm tapped out from the start.

"Let's get a table up front," H. says. I say nothing. I'd rather hold up the wall at a corner table in back, but, hey, this is the big boss's son. Onward we go, snaking between these other guys, and find chairs at a table practically kissing the stage. The back of my neck winces nervy like any second now, I expect someone to yell, "Austin," recognizing me in this hole. But then the question would be, What are you doing here? I slump in the chair. "So you come here often?" I ask.

Above the din, H. gets a look in his face that's a mix of furrowed brow and half-hearted smile. "I used to be a regular here, but I've found some other places I kinda like too. It sorta depends on where new girls are dancing," he says matter-of-factly.

I can't help but notice the other guys sitting at the tables scattered about the room, and know right away not one woman in this place paid to get in. Any woman here, works here, like the waitress headed our way.

"What can I get you guys at the bar?" she says.

"I'll start off easy," H. says. "Apple juice." He smirks, as if it's my move.

The waitress stares my way like the pencil's gotta move and truth be told, her body says she might've danced here at one time. "An O'Doul's" I say, knowing that's the non-alcoholic beer everyone has, even this dive. She's over and out, back to the bar, order pad in hand, scanning the room. New arrivals are pulling out chairs to sit at the remaining table by the stage.

Away from the stage, everything's dark, a contrast with the cheesy red, white, and blue-lit platform. The walls are covered with signs like the first six feet of a staple-rich telephone pole. A stolen town sign: INTERCOURSE PENNSYLVANIA, crazy signs, that sort of thing. Posters from has-been rock bands in Portland. Everything to serve up a warm, nostalgic feeling about being here, something made to order for a twelve-year-old boy's bedroom walls.

The music stops and recorded drum roll, some sort of buildup and H. says, "Here we go, fasten your seat belt and be sure your seat is in the forward and upright locked position."

Quickly, a guy bounds on stage. "Welcome, welcome," he says, retro pompadour, sallow face that probably's not seen natural sunlight in five years. He holds the cordless mike high like he's got customers in the rafters. "Gentlemen, Dallas Debby's show tonight is one I'm sure you won't forget, so get ready to have fun. But before I introduce you to our first dancer, a stunning young woman, nineteen, Central High grad, let me remind you of the rules. No touching the girls. Remember that. No touching the girls. Did I say it a third time? Okay, no touching the girls. That's it for our rules, so let's bring out this teenage beauty, Ms. *Colleen*."

The music cranks up humping rhythms--*boom, boom, boom*--Ms. Colleen steps up on stage, the red, white, blue lights giving her a chameleon-like body that's confirming a fantasy or two I've had about high-school cheerleaders. She's tall, she's long-legged, she's strutting in Nikes and shaking some pompons, jiggling this halter top with fringe fitfully swinging from some major silicone build-outs. And below the

halter top, a gorgeous flat stomach and then nothing more than a thong bottom with a fringed triangle to match.

H. seems intense about this, head forward, shoulders rounded, one hand clasping his drink. "Not bad," he says, keeping his attention on Colleen.

*Boom, boom, boom.* Colleen struts, trying to get us all into it. Strawberry blonde hair piled up high, tied in place with a red ribbon, she floats her elbows out to the side as she slowly, slowly undoes the first button of the halter top.

A few bounce steps in those Nikes, she turns to face our table. Even in the darkness surrounding the stage, I know she sees us. Her eyes, big and brown fix on me, like something about me connects. She smiles quickly, a smile that's there and then gone like a snuffed candle. I know what's in her eyes is fake, of course. Chicks like her at South Eugene High treated me like so much dog dirt to tiptoe past in their white, clean Nikes. But I'd like to know how this one got here from Central High. Was it a free choice? Brutal men? Smack? She seems happy, but how would I know?

*Boom, boom, boom.* Colleen prances over the whole stage, hands still up for work on those halter buttons. *Boom, boom, boom.* She undoes the last of her halter buttons and, success, swings unencumbered. Oh, full-sized breasts with rose blush nipples. Endowed and proud. *Boom, boom, boom.* She works her way to the side, tosses the halter offstage.

She swings truly free and works her hands and elbows and rotates the hips with that thong bottom, teasing the guys for whistles and pleas. One guy's about to climb his table. *Boom, boom, boom.* Up go her hands to the red ribbon and voila!, one falling motion, the long hair streams down. Straight, honey-crimson hair and as she spins in the air-soled running shoes, wisps of hair spider-web her melons.

H. sips his juice and with narrowed eyes, studies Colleen's prancing. Then the waitress surprises us, here again for drink orders. I

say nothing, hold up my palm. I'm nursing my beer, nursing my money. H. asks for more apple juice.

She leaves and I suppose I'll eventually find out what I owe for the beer.

Then, all of a sudden, a bounce or two, those running shoes, on the stage, are inches away from our table. I look up, see sweat the underside of Colleen's jiggy front and she's trying me with a smile, her eyes won't let go and then butt out, wagging, she drops to her knees, reaches over, long vampy fingernails and her hands, each side of my head, like she's asking permission almost, gently remove my glasses. Now I know why we should've sat in the back, but what can I do 'cept be a good sport.

Slowly, she stands up and lets everyone check out the tortoise-shell, somewhat clunky, glasses. Then changing hands on the temples, she has the lenses facing her chest, scoping out her right nipple, like I'm the one up there, glasses on, taking it in. Sure. People guffaw.

She goes on this way for a few minutes, pinching each temple of my glasses frame, wiggling the lenses up and down across various features of her anatomy, as if it's really bespectacled me catching a side view of her left breast, moving on to scope the pit of the arm she half raises. The audience yucks at that. And then the glasses go down, down, down, and in a circular motion, I--that is, my glasses study her belly button, a tight little in-sey. And then--what's this?--she's done with me. She folds the glasses flat, closes the temples against the lenses. With thumb and index finger, she holds the collapsed glasses out for the audience one more time. She's about to give them back, so I get up.

She gives me a wicked smile. And she plunges, really, I'm not joking, she plunges the glasses straight down, flat into her snatch, I mean it's down there, behind that cloth triangle fronting her thong bottom. I collapse back on the chair, feeling had. Guffaws, yucks, whistles, table-pounding. Then she arches backwards, her hands go up, leaving behind the glasses whose unmistakable outline asserts itself beneath her purple silk triangle. Laughter in abundance, like the glasses



are getting an eyeful now. I could get on hands and knees, crawl out of here, right now.

Then ever so slowly, the music still pounding, she keeps her back arched and one hand reaches around to somewhere near that thong in her crack. She reaches in low, real low, concentration plain in her face, and pulls and eases my glasses around her Cape of Good & Horny. She gets a look of satisfaction. She manages to extract my glasses. And holds them up to the light, to an applauding audience, that has witnessed what? The rape of my glasses? And they're my only pair.

Colleen brings the glasses up to her mouth and makes a big show of blowing on them. Fogs them over--*huff, huff*--and then brings them front and center to her can't-settle-down, restless breasts and rotates them in the air before her stiff nipples. As if she's cleaning them off. More guffaws from the audience. And then like she really cares, she folds out the temples and *boom, boom, boom*, sashays over my way, to our table, where H. sits, his jaw seemingly unhinged at what's happened to my personal property. All this craziness has been sorta blurry anyway and I'd like my glasses back despite their visit to Colleen's nether regions.

She's right here, leans toward me, the breasts and flat stomach glisten with exertion, but she again has this wicked smile. Am I some good sport that made her workday more memorable? She holds the glasses out with the temples facing me and it's almost as if she weren't on stage she might kiss me, but instead she slides the glasses on my ears and no one really cares if I want to be somewhere else: Guys cheer Colleen like, Me next!

She gets back to her feet, does a few jaunty steps to center stage and goes back to humping away to the music, grinding away to a big finish.

I, for my part, sit with my glasses perched on my nose, not knowing what to do, paralyzed with the idea, for some cheap-o joke, I've really been had.

"Are you crazy?" H. asks. "You're gonna be blind. Where've those glasses been? Clap City, man." My heart stammers its beats and immediately, I take the glasses off. H. laughs like he's pulling my leg. Hell, I don't know. I probably skipped the Sex Ed class on VD.

I go to wiping them on my shirt. H. smirks. "Be sure and soak them in hydrogen peroxide, you get home." He adds that this is new, that it made the night.

I feel humiliated and want to leave right now. But no can do, even if I'm hyperventilating to hit the exit door for some fresh air. Truth is, H. and I might be buddies now, maybe this is the entry fee to get close to the big boss's son.

But I don't want to get too close.

Especially these gentlemen's clubs. Sure, even if letting Colleen borrow my glasses for a prop got the audience on her side, I still feel sorry for her. This, night after night, to make money for food and rent. Exploitation is how I see it, all these drunken morons, laughing at poor chicks and they're too sloshed to even get it up. Freaky perving both ways, what women are about, what men are about.

*Boom, boom, boom*, Colleen leaves the stage and the rock music fills in while we wait for another dancer. I know H. won't leave until he's seen more, so I've got to sit and endure before we bail.

**I**t was more than H., the gentlemen's club habit, his dragging me to Dallas Debby's, that I hated. Afterwards, my poor glasses on my face, I couldn't shake that humiliating memory. Don't misunderstand me. I like women.

But I wanna think it might've been possible, a different day, coupla years ago, I'd've caught Colleen's eye, say, when she stood by her locker in a corridor at South Eugene High. Instead, I first see her at Dallas Debby's. My glasses--which now I can't afford to toss out--are unclean in a way the eye doesn't see. And it's because the most obvious, outside

reasons men are attracted to women was shown to be so easily corrupted. For days, I've been depressed. Sorta like the one afternoon Mom moved out and I was left with a blank sheet of paper, so to speak, but it had a big rip, right down the middle.

But life goes on, as they say, and with the weekend coming up, I got busy with what we're gonna do about OODL tabling. Ethan and I disagreed. The Rose Festival, Portland's famous June bash, was upon us. I'd been planning to set up a table in the carny Fun Zone, where there would be huge crowds with the rides and all. Ethan wanted to stay at the Saturday Market spot, where OODL had been established now for four weekends in a row.

So we split our forces and decided to table both places. Ethan and his new recruit, Sal, whom he knew from work, would be at Saturday Market. And I--who wanted the Fun Zone--am here teaming with Brianna at the south end of a passage of motley carnival rides, food and drink booths. Gray skies above, thousands of people will reduce to mud whatever grass grew here in Waterfront Park, alongside the Willamette River that lazes by downtown Portland.

Yep, the Rose Festival. Time was, it went on for about ten days, but that's been stretched with other events to where now it's more like a month. The big deal, of course, is the Rose Parade next Saturday. Crowds go *ooohh* and *aaahh* at all the beautiful floats. It sure as hell makes more sense for a Rose Parade here than that one down south on New Year's Day, but I suppose that's Hollywood for you: Get people believing roses bloom in the dead of winter.

But not everyone wants to look at flower-bedecked floats. Not everyone beelines to rose show competitions to stoop over and inhale heaven's scent. Instead, they come here, the Fun Zone. The U.S. Navy ties up a small flotilla of ships along the waterfront--that humongous, horizon-blocking expanse of gray over there is a destroyer. While sailors do give people tours of the ships, mostly the men in brilliant whites are here to go off-duty and get out and mingle. It's one big party

and the Fun Zone is Action Central for a certain crowd that does not do roses.

Anyway, we're sitting here, the south end of the Fun Zone, where all this week it was sorta a thrill knowing OODL would participate.

"What's wrong?" Brianna asks, elbows up, fingers plowing her short hair.

I've been here with Brianna for two hours. We've had one person stop by and ask what's OODL, when clearly the sign behind us says, OREGON ORGAN DONORS LEAGUE. That's it. One idly curious woman. With our reception so far, we might as well be sitting on ice blocks. I can hear Ethan now reminding me, in case I'd forgotten, how he knew this would be a waste.

"You know the problem," I say to Brianna, who idly taps a pen on the table, a pen no one's grabbing to sign a fresh, blank OODL wallet card. I point over to the bank of Jonny-Shaks, those essential orange fiberglass outhouses modern civilization could not do without whenever thousands of drinking citizens congregate in the modern urban landscape, no grass to burn.

"Yeah, that's kinda gross. People, they're seeing us as stinky too."

"And they're looking for immediate relief."

"You said we're lucky to be here," she says, resigned to irony of my battle to get us space here, and only for one weekend at that.

"Excuse me, sir," I yell out to this fellow who seems to be walking our way, looking at nothing in particular. "Can we tell you about organ donation?"

"No, just stretching my legs, wife's taking a break." He points to the bank of orange private retreats.

"I think we've lost the battle with the need to pee," I whisper to Brianna.

The whole day's been threatening to rain, so we have our clear plastic tarp ready for the table. Why, I'm not sure. Okay, we're not quite desperate to break out the cards, shuffle, and start dealing, but watching people turn on their heel, head back into the carnival action after coming within fifty feet of our humble table sorta loses motivation.

Oh, then a few others I yell at, give them an invite to learn more about OODL, but the response, if any, is the same. They point to the Jonny-Shaks, they're evidently waiting for someone and then walk away, not wanting to hear anymore. I'm as hopeless as a beached whale, the tide out too.

So there are crowds. They're just avoiding us, that's all. Now if the Jonny-Shaks were in back of us--*hmmm*--but it's too late for that.

Brianna looks at her hands, her fingers spread wide, like she's checking the black fingernail polish, thinking about changing color, I don't know. "How long we do this?" she asks.

"Oh, you know, if you need to leave, don't let me keep you. But I was thinking of getting past noon."

"What, three?"

"I think maybe not."

It did not get better. It stayed worse than we could imagine. Brianna and I knew we would always be about fifty steps beyond the turning point for everybody who wasn't hitting the facilities for a quick leak.

We got stares that came to nothing more than turned backs walking away. We got smiles that came to nothing more than some imagined question like, Why are you guys stuck over there? We got mostly people looking anywhere else but us, as if our little lost corner of the supposed Fun Zone were invisible and had some repulsive force that kept people from crossing the fifty feet of deserted space before our table.

At one, we bagged it, saving our regrets for later. Folded up the

table and packed out our materials to the car Brianna borrowed for the day. I told Brianna not to worry, we'd do better next time we set up away from Saturday Market. We'd learned our lesson. We'd get a better location. No more suffering the peculiar isolation of being hard by the Jonny-Shaks. Brianna agreed that as boring as the day was, we might've gotten something out of it. Did we have a single sign-up to show for the day? No. Brianna shrugged about the day and slammed the hatchback down on the car and got in. I did too.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: RUSSIAN PARTS, BOTTLE CAPS, NEWS HOUND

It's three weekends since the Fun Zone fiasco. The last two, Brianna and I helped Ethan and Sal, who've kept signing up gobs at Saturday Market. Ethan, to his credit, spared me the I-told-you-so about the Fun Zone, possibly because he and Sal are in such a groove.

In fact, when I said I wanted to take OODL to Waterfront Park for yet another festival, Ethan let it go, saying it was Brianna's and my time, he and Sal were doing fine. So, different Sunday, with the perfect summer weather that invites the hordes, we're back at Waterfront, tabling at the annual Portland MicroBrew Fest. No carnival rides to thrill, just dedicated, adventurous quaffing. At booth after booth, the best Northwest ales, beers, stouts, and lagers.

And observable fact, we're nearly halfway on the concourse, and plainly not stuck in the repulsive hell of a neat row of orange Jonny-Shaks. And we're proactive. Getting people's attention. Brianna's cool idea was the boombox, kinda jump into the partying vibe in the air. Oh, she started off playing a lot of her music, mostly techno-pop, but I said that wasn't getting it.

"This more to your liking?" she asks, showing me a CD by Tony DiMuzio.

"Who is this guy?"

"I was saving this for later." She giggles, then slips the disc on the boombox spinner. "Kinda appropriate, huh?"

*"Take it all, take away ev'ry bit of me."* I don't believe these lyrics.

Did whoever wrote this think one day the words could mean this? More and more, the strolling passersby look our way and smile. "*Nothin's left, 'cept this now broken heart for me.*" Our sign: OREGON ORGAN DONORS LEAGUE. Gotta connect. We have a theme song. So early in the day. I'm already flush with pride.

I turn the boombox volume up, and, sure enough, more heads turn and two guys amble--one guy unsteadily--our way, stopping here at the table.

These guys' faces show the animation of possibly a few brews. One guy says, "Hey, OODL, noodle, what's this about?"

"It's a donor program," I say. "Legally, you can give away your organs when you die."

"Hey, why not take all of me?" the other guy sings off-key to Tony DiMuzio's tenor. He's got this shit-faced grin, like not just a few beers. This guy must be downing the glasses of microbrew like he's out to keep a dishwasher busy. "What I do?"

"We've got these cards for you to sign. Brianna and I--" I smile at her. "--witness, then laminate it nice and neat for your wallet."

"*Nothin's left, 'cept this now broken heart for me.*" The really sloshed guy snaps his fingers, bobs his head. "Where I sign?" he says. His buddy has his arm around him, like they're in this together.

I hand him a card from our stack and follow with a pen.

He takes the pen and wouldn't you know. Slip: a straight line of ink right up the face of the card.

"No problem," I say, picking up the card. "We have others."

He does better, holding the pen like he'll squeeze blood from its plastic barrel. In crabbed handwriting, he scrawls a signature. I have no idea what it is. "What's your name, what'd you just sign there?"

"Greg," he says.



"You got a last name too?"

"I gotta a last name?" Greg asks, turning to his drunken buddy like he has no idea where I got such a foolish question.

His buddy nods and waves one of our blank OODL cards in his hand like he's ready to sign too.

"Do I have the last name?" Greg bellows back at me, practically spitting in my face. "Don't know, do you?"

"You're asking me? I only want you to write your last name," I say, ready to wait on anybody putting pen to dotted line.

"Oh, you didn't say so. That's easy, Kimball. See, Kimball." He's scrawled his last name beside the balled-up writing that is supposedly *Greg*.

"Your buddy want to sign up?" I ask Greg, figuring the guy grabbed a blank card for a reason.

I nudge Brianna and she's on it with Greg's buddy. Greg pulls out a wallet and with no little effort, he manages to show me his driver's license, so I've got a picture ID. A voter's registration card even tumbles out on the table. Cool. We're all set with Greg except he has to check his choices on the back of the card.

"*Take it all, take away ev'ry bit of me.*" "Make it, everything," Greg says, finger popping to the music.

It might be my imagination, but I think Greg's buddy, whom I hear Brianna call Cal, handles alcohol better than Greg. Brianna zipped along with him and now waits for me to laminate Greg's card so she can do Cal's.

I give Greg his new OODL card, tell him to keep it tucked in his wallet or some safe place, and to tell his family about his decision, an idea he waves off, saying, "Nope, I'm divorced, and Cal's here in a mess of a transition hisself." Greg winks, as if Cal were out of hearing range.

Standing behind Greg and Cal are two guys and two chicks, I'm not sure if they're in their teens, but, for sure, they're Russians, new to the area. Can spot them a block away. You know those old black-and-white documentaries, where they show teenagers in the Fifties, like doing bebop on *American Bandstand*, something like that. It's not like these chicks have on twenty petticoats or anything like that, but, hey, they do have ponytails, and like now, one of the two chicks has on a long black skirt they seem to favor. And the guys, always, they've got bad, *short* haircuts. I mean even if these guys have sorta modern clothes, they're wearing nylon warmup suits, it's kinda the Slavic features, but it's more the hair and just the way they stand.

Cal laughs hysterically at something Greg evidently has said and holds up his new OODL card. "Her attorney can have this too, the bloodsucker," he says and slaps Greg's back. The four Russians pause, eyeing Greg and Cal shuffling away, then step right up.

The taller guy, the one with blonde hair and steady blue eyes, speaks first. "Ooooh dee ell. What this about, you got here?"

I'm smiling undiluted excitement at how we're getting people nonstop, but before I can say a word, Brianna launches into the whole spiel. Oregon Organ Donors League. We help people that need organ transplants so they can live a more normal life, or even live at all. The Russians, I see, are both straining at what Brianna is rattling off, but also genuinely pleased she is telling them so much. "So are you guys age eighteen or older?" she finally asks.

To a one they nod. One says he's twenty.

"Any questions, guys?" she asks.

The tall guy says, "Yeah, we sign up, how?"

Music to our ears. Brianna takes a card off the stack and explains how they sign their full name on the front, we witness, and they check on the back and that's it.

Brianna done with the spiel, I flip up the music. Hey, "*Take it all*,

*take away ev'ry bit of me.*" gets more people looking, walking our way. Here comes three more.

Unbelievably all four Russians want to sign up, so between Brianna and me, we try making short work of it and like that, four new OODL members, packing Russian parts, walk away from our table.

It went that way for hours. At one point, I thought we might run out of cards, I had only brought along one hundred or so. But things seemed to slow in the afternoon. Perhaps it was the same people walking back and forth, maybe the beer getting to them. Possibly they had no more speech left in them other than, Give me another, thanks.

In any case, we signed up eighty-six, which beat our Saturday Market one-day total. Brianna helped loads, being pretty aggro with people to sign up. Perhaps it was her feminine wiles, I don't know. I couldn't wait to ask Ethan what our total sign-ups for the day, both sites, had hit.

When five o'clock rolled around, we reluctantly killed the boombox, which must've played Tony DiMuzio about eighty-six times, easily. It seemed like every time we played it, we signed someone up. Put all our materials into our cardboard file cabinet and folded up the card table. That was it. We were out of there and unfortunately, it was a one-day event. Next Sunday, we were back with Ethan and Sal at Saturday Market.

**M**onday night. *Vroooooom*. Again, I'm in H.'s Ferrari. We're at a stoplight on 82nd Street, out for different action. I told H. I found Dallas Debby's tedious when he called yesterday to see about us getting some laughs. He wanted to know if I really thought nude girls were tedious and I said, What's with just look, don't touch? He said, Whatever. What was I up to? he asked. I said live music, anytime. H. knew a place off 82nd. So I'm keeping on with, despite earlier misgivings, the career-building at Tesla Northwest, hanging out with the big boss's son.

"Whoa, check out that number," H. says as we pull away from the stoplight. Across the intersection, on the sidewalk to our right, a leggy babe in heels, short shorts, a halter top. She has *hooker* written all over her.

H. shoots a glance in the rearview mirror to check if anyone's on our tail, then noses the Ferrari for a driveway about ten yards ahead. I'm suddenly limp as string, wondering, Why? Ms. Long Legs *clap, clap, claps* our way.

H. taps his fingers on the top of the steering wheel like the next move he knows. Just where in all this do I fit?.

Suddenly, this babe, no makeup other than pink lipstick, her head with short black hair is inches from my face, hands on the window sill, her shapely butt out there, the long, long legs jacking it up.

I'm absolutely mum and try, really try, to look straight ahead. Oh, a glance at her, but only to be polite.

"You wanna give me a ride?" she asks in a voice anything but tired of waiting for a bus.

"Sure, I'll call a cab for my friend here." H. smiles at me, then at Ms. Long Legs. I clench my teeth. Unbelievable. Last time I sacrificed my glasses. Now, I'll be out on the street once he puts in an order from this drive-up menu of sexual favors?

"How long the ride?" she asks. "I got, y'know, a schedule."

"Sure, but it's kinda privilege ride around in a fine car like this. Just ask my friend here." H. throws me a deathly grin and I'm ready to get the hell out 'cept I'm trapped, this pink-lipsticked broad practically leaning on my shoulder. "I'd think you'd see it the same way, a thrill of a ride, one of a kind."

"Hey, dude," she says in this surprisingly commanding voice that's still soft. "It's gonna cost. No rides are free, understand?" There's menace to the words, like she might just have some pimp packing heat

in that car parked the other side of the street, watching every move. I could grind my teeth about H. being in deeper waters than he realizes. But I can't tell him to back off. He's enjoying himself.

"Do tell," H. answers. "I thought the way you walked back there-- cheap, cheap, cheap, what I said to myself. I thought you'd ride for bottle caps." He laughs and a blush colors her face, a vein stands up this side of her neck. If I could disappear physically in the leather seat, I would.

But like that she's away from the window, stepping back a few feet, and then defiantly squatting, staring down H. "Tell me about it, comic boy, this car, who'd you suck off?"

H. drops his hand off the steering wheel, fishes jerkily in the cup holder. I feel trapped, like standing up in the wrong part of the archery range. He leans to my window, hyperventilating. "Here--go buy-- yourself--a rocking-horse ride." H. tosses her a coin that rolls beside her on the sidewalk. She ignores it.

She's unfazed and giving him the stink eye now. "Don't you sit there, mouth wide-open, comic boy. You got broken teeth from sucking ol' Mr. Steel Cock." She laughs and stands up.

"Fuck you," H. screams. I know he's hurting. Ms. Long Legs has, in her own intuitive way, drawn blood, sherlocking that a guy in his early twenties can't come up with the jack to pay for a car that costs a quarter million or more. He sits there for the day's longest minute, not quite ready to do anything except stare ahead down the striped asphalt of 82nd, perhaps, trying to remember where we were going in the first place.

Ms. Long Legs clops up the sidewalk like nothing happened.

H. glances in the rearview mirror, sees it clear, and floors the throttle and lays about fifty feet of smoking, pungent rubber. We're launched.

We didn't go clubbing that night, didn't go to any bar, just cruised

up to the end of 82nd, where it tees into Killingsworth and turned around. Finally, H. said he was feeling bummed. Could we call it a night? I wasn't about to hold out for a second scene, so that was that. He dropped me off at my place.

**W**ell, after a few days, memories faded of that fiasco with H. tossing coins at the whore on 82nd, and I kept busy earning shekels, my way.

My weeks of late became almost predictable. Mondays through Fridays, I sold. Saturdays, I did whatever. And Sundays, Brianna and I tabled for OODL.

How is OODL doing you ask? Well, after nine weekends, we have signed up about three hundred people, give or take a few. The Microbrew Fest was huge: We signed up those eighty-six people. I thought we'd run out of cards.

The only weird thing--and what I'd forgotten about until this TV business came up--was when one dude came around to our table and standing there, says what we're doing with organ donations was prohibited in the Bible. Did I want to face the wrath of God for that?

"This saves lives," I said, laughing, "your God still gonna strike me dead?"

He stood there, dumbstruck, black Sunday suit, a tie, white shirt. What was he doing at the MicroBrew Fest on a Sunday, you ask? I'm sure he was out to find a lost soul or two. But he was not going to tell me I couldn't save lives by making organ donations easier.

His face was screwed up like he had something to say but he couldn't get the words right. "What you're doing dishonors the dead," he blurted out.

"How so?" I asked. "These cards, they sign--" I hold one up. "-- means they give away their organs when they die. That's honoring

wishes of the dead, right?" Check and his move.

"You're wrong there, completely wrong," he said, eyes squinting like he was free to ignore what I'd just said. "Our body is not ours to give away, it's God's temple, all of it."

"Okay, what about using pig heart valves to save people's lives?"

"That's unclean Frankenstein nonsense, our church won't have any of that--"

"Tell you what, sir," I interrupt. "I'd like to talk more, but I gotta get to other people." People were pausing, seeing I was busy, and moving on, which infuriated me.

"Oh, don't want to answer me, do you?"

"Not today. What if we came to your church, told your people what OODL is about and they could decide for themselves?"

"We don't invite devil worshippers to our church. We're not Satanists that rip out hearts, and rip out eyes, and rip out livers, and rip out gall bladders, yes, you hear me? We're *not* Satanists that hold these vital organs and lick them clean of blood. And you think we invite your ilk to our holy temple?"

What he said was not without hilarious effect. My eyes must've seemed wide as pie tins. "I have one thing to tell you, sir. If you're ever in a situation where you're certain to die without an organ transplant, I hope you then think about why you're saying this--"

"I'm warning you, we'll see that you're stopped," he screamed. That startled passersby into a double-take.

"That a threat?" I said, openly laughing at this bellicose nut.

"I'll say no more. You've been warned." He undid the collar button on his white shirt, his face by now reddening with anger. The knot of his tie stayed tied and fell off in his hand, one of those cheesy clip-ons.

"That's okay by me. Here, have a brochure. Know your enemy, if

that's how you feel."

Amazingly, he took not one but several, maybe even six brochures and said, "Some of our other parishioners should see this. They'll be very interested in finding out more about what you're up to."

And with brochures in hand, he left. He was the first, hopefully our last, fanatical anti-organ donation nut. Or so I thought. The next week, a television station called and wanted to interview me on camera for the nightly news. If I had only known.

So Tuesday after the MicroBrew Fest, I got this call, Blaine Bartholomew, KVUE News, same guy that did the Tracie Meddols story. Phone on my ear, I about dropped a load, wondering what we'd done to get TV coverage. I mean, we were helping the situation, but that much?

"Your organization, OODL, was at the MicroBrew Fest, right?" Blaine Bartholomew said quickly, like he's got another twenty-nine questions.

"Sure, we were there, we were also at Saturday Market, just getting our message out to folks," I said, ready to spiel forth what we did.

"Reason I'm calling, I'm working a story about the transplant situation in the State and wanna see how OODL fits into the overall picture." Sounded like our big break, so when next he said, "I've got a crew ready to drop by your place. I'll interview you as the spokesperson for OODL, can we do that, say, in the next hour?" all I could think was free publicity.

Thirty minutes later, there we were. I stood on the sidewalk, my back to the apartment building, the videocam guy on the curb, and reporter Blaine Bartholomew, hygienically groomed like on TV, but ten-percent overweight in-person, handing a mike.

First, Blaine faced the camera. "Hi, today we're meeting with Austin Gebthart, founder of the Oregon Organ Donors League, OODL for short. Mr. Gebthart got OODL going to answer the organ donation



crisis. Certainly a noble goal, most would agree. However, the KVUE Investigative News Team has information OODL might have stepped over the line in its zeal to sign up new people."

A hollow in my stomach, cave-sized, opened up. Zeal?

"Yes," mousse-head Blaine Bartholomew went on, "later, we'll talk with a group that opposes organ donations for religious reasons, but today it's Mr. Gebhart's turn--"

My heart hammered. I knew why that fanatic in the black Sunday suit harangued me at the festival.

Blaine Bartholomew then swiveled on his heels and had the mike up. The videocam whirred away.

"Okay, Austin, the charge is OODL stepped over the line. Let me get specific. It is true, isn't it, OODL signed up people at the MicroBrew Fest who were clearly intoxicated, isn't that true?" All of a sudden Blaine Bartholomew's face had a snarl, like he'd found red meat, even if all I could smell were the breath mints he must've been sucking on.

"Well," I said, the dead air of that whirry videocam about to take words out of me. "Yes, people were drinking at the MicroBrew Fest, beer was the refreshment people generally were favoring."

"Refreshment people were favoring? No, Austin, we're talking organ donation here. You agree, surely, someone shouldn't donate when they're intoxicated?"

I didn't know what to say. "It's not like we got people to drink and drive," I said, irked about being grilled.

"No, Austin, of course, people shouldn't drive after drinking. The issue is OODL had intoxicated people stopping by your table, you gave them donor cards even when they could barely sign their names, and you were playing on your boombox, over and over, we are told, the song, 'Take It All.'"

"That song--got people in the mood. It was a joke really," I said

mously. I didn't know how to avoid looking like a grade-A chump.

Suddenly, Blaine Bartholomew turned back to the camera. "There you have it, here live on Hawthorne Boulevard, speaking with Austin Gebthart, founder of OODL, a group that this past weekend, according to KVUE sources, actively solicited intoxicated people to sign organ donor cards, and in Austin's words, played 'Take It All' to get people in the mood.

"But there's more to it," I stammered at his back.

Well, Blaine did his thing at eleven and OODL got gutted. That close-up of me, looking like my public hanging was to follow, probably prejudiced anyone who would see us out at Saturday Market, if we dared show up. But ace reporter Blaine Bartholomew had more up his sleeve, something he never told me: a video clip from a guy in the Oregon Attorney General's office saying they might look into instances of impaired consent, as he termed it, which would invalidate any OODL card signed as a minimum and could carry with it, if the situation warranted, a possible cease-and-desist order against OODL.

Then I knew OODL was dead meat and like getting stinky black and necrotic. But I couldn't think about that much: I still had to earn a living.

**C**rossing the porch of this Thirty-ish two-story bungalow, I ring the doorbell. A nice porch, it wraps the front corners of the house. To the right, sit a stack of four plastic chairs, this being the perfect summer setting for iced tea, taking in the street scene. Steps inside, but no answer yet.

Suddenly, the steps inside quicken. Sounds like a woman coming to the door. I get a deep breath, ready to utter the first words of my spiel. Glance aimlessly at the four stacked plastic chairs, seemingly forlorn on this porch I've crossed to this first doorbell of the day.

*Whoosh*, the door's back and it's this woman, sweatshirt, jeans,

unblinking eyes. "You're him," she stammers.

I smile, not sure if I'm the new messiah. "Top of the morning to you, I'm Austin Gebthart with Tesla Northwest and I'm--"

"Sorry, can't talk. You were on TV last night, you're doing bad things."

"Doing bad things?" I say.

"Sure, you're the one that's in all that trouble about organ donation," she says, nailing me--I can't disown that OODL was my gift to the State of Oregon.

It hits me like my bicycle and I have this untimely introduction to a Mack truck. Damn, that Blaine Bartholomew. Now he's screwed me two ways: first, he killed off OODL, then it's my job.

"Well, that looked bad on TV," I say, sounding like some Humble Hank. "But this is different. You've heard of Tesla Northwest, reputable company?"

Her face seems poised between hesitancy and outright rejection. "Yes, I've heard their ads, but I just can't--the State investigation and all--it's like a bad reference--I'm sorry." She slams the door, not waiting for another word.

I know I'm history here.

To the next house. Nobody home. Then six more like that.

Finally, a door opens. Again, the surprised look greets me, but this woman's got an absolutely mute stare.

When I go ahead and introduce myself, the first words from my mouth seem to activate her. *Blaaaaam*, closed door and it's two for two in the Recognize-This-Televised-Creep? contest.

It's the third refusal, though that convinces me. The woman talks only long enough to tell me she isn't interested in any broadband or wireless. So, innocently, I ask if she watched KVUE TV news last

night. She says, No, why do you ask? I say, I was on a feature. She asks me what and I say, Something I used to do. I almost add, Sorta like this Tesla Northwest could be something I used to do too.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: SUSHI TRAIN, CELIBATE SOLDIERS, BONES HEAVEN

I really didn't know what to do next. Let it blow over? Find another job? Truth be known, my puny sales ego went dead at having doors slammed in my face once people recognized me. I decided the day deserved a quit, possibly the next few too.

Saturday, I had yet to figure out my Plan B. As I often do when I don't know what to do, I jumped on my wire donkey and pedalled downtown to get lost looking around for some sign of my next move. No, if you're wondering, I didn't expect a flying pigeon to land on my shoulder and tell me in perfect English, *Relax, get a City job. Clean up the parks*. No, I headed over to Powell's on Burnside. City block of a million books, plus or minus. Who knows, my answer might nestle there, spine-upright, sandwiched between brethren, on a shelf in a used book.

Not that I'm bookish, but I wanted to check out a few things, see if anything would catch my eye.

Maybe a book on fairness in media. I could've written that book, I decided as I pedalled the last block. I locked my bike to a parking-meter pole and was ready to go inside.

People stream in, stream out the front portal of this book paradise. A few folks--parasitical to my way of thinking--always are lingering out front, clipboards in hand. "Not today," I say to the inevitable guy who asks, "Excuse me, sir, are you registered to vote in Multnomah County?" I avoid these guys like religious nuts: Most are getting

signatures as a gig and could care less what the petition says. What is especially annoying are the ones from out of state. Their accents give them away.

Inside, it's not dodging petition gatherers; it's weaving past people lining up at the cash registers, people crowding close to the info desk, people scanning displays of new books. I make for the back of the store.

I want the Red Room. Not that the Red Room is actually painted red, mind you. That's only the color code on the map handouts you get up front. This bookstore's big enough to need its own map.

Here we are, theology books to the left, the travel section, big atlases straight ahead. First, I'm after a book that talks about this lake in the Cascades Dad wants to camp and fish later this year. He knows it's outta Bend, he gave me the name, but I want to know how it fishes with dry flies. I tell you there is nothing for dinner by a starlit forest better than pan-fried trout you just caught and cleaned hours before. It must bring out my caveman side.

Anyway, up this aisle, they must have Oregon books. Here's Idaho, scads of California. I must be geographically warm, maybe this next aisle.

The aisle has two women doing stand-up reads, nose to book. Wait. The one right. I've seen her before. Just can't place her. The sun-bleached locks, the tan face, the rugby jersey, the jeans, the sneaks.

*Hmmm*, it'll come to me. Back to matters at hand. Let's see, Oregon cities, Portland, heaps of Portland books, each book spine neatly faced out on the wooden shelves.

*Snap*. The woman left closes the book, replaces it on the shelf, leaves.

Just this woman remains on the right, fifteen feet away. I know I know her. Christ on crutches.

Oregon Coast, more Oregon Coast. Here, the Cascades. This,

*Recreation in the High Cascades*, might be the ticket. I open the book's back cover, scan the index. Nothing under fishing.

*Hmmm.* If she ever got her nose out of that book, she might recognize me, first. Now that would be sweet. Or she's trying hard to ignore me, not that I blame her.

Nope, that book's a bust. I need something more like fishing spots in the Cascades.

I move closer and see my book--wouldn't you know, right there beneath her book-holding hand, at rest on the shelf--*Lake Fishing in the Oregon Cascades*.

She's five feet away, positively absorbed in that book, and just the way she stands, I've seen this woman before.

"Scuse me," I say, knowing I'll have to get so close for this book and people have a thing about what's acceptably close. She's pretty much lost to the book and hasn't looked up once. I mean catching her eye to see if she recognizes me has been as likely as levitation on the first try.

"Excuse me," I say, a bit louder. "I need to get this book, right here." As if she knew me in her peripheral vision all along, she nonchalantly steps back, doesn't look up, and I make a stabbing grab for the book.

Suddenly, she does look away from the book, flashes a smile--bright teeth, tan face. The smile--it's that surfer girl. I should have known, but her name, her name.

"I know you, Ocean, right?" she says, closing book against index finger. "Seaside, several weeks ago, remember?"

It's all come back. The chat beside her van. Being out, the morning walk away from that Tesla Northwest sales retreat crowd, huge ocean swells exploding into so much white foam at the Point there. Just talking about surfing and other things I don't remember.

"This is bad, I seem to have forgotten your name." I sense some ripe flush of embarrassment close by: We did, after all, talk for about half an hour or so, enough time I should have kept her name.

"Cris." She holds up the book. "I'm on my way to Eastern Oregon. I was reading about a place called Fossil, you ever hear of it?"

"Nope, never have. If it's not on the way to any place major, I probably missed it. So, why you going there?"

"I wanna be inland for a few days and away from crowds."

It's all clear now about Cris. That edgy, athletic quickness in how she holds her body. This incredible sense that the muscular strength is held in check, like she could move very suddenly and very fast. Her body has a fluidity that's gotta come from something heavily physical like surfing. Something more than what I get from pedalling my wire donkey. Anyway, seeing her reminds me--at this, I smile--that underneath the big-stripes jersey that catlike body I last saw was in a one-piece blue swimsuit.

"I need to escape the city too, my life, the last few days, it's been ugly. Most of the town seems against me." I say this with no irony intended, knowing I must sound like some paranoid who skipped his meds.

"Really? What happened? You being chased out of town?"

"Don't laugh. I was on TV and they made me out as this horrible person."

"You're serious, you really are."

"You want to know? This is no snappy anecdote to relate," I say. No way can I explain the OODL fiasco in a quick minute.

"Try me."

So I start by telling her how I got the idea of OODL and what the acronym stands for. Her face shows content resignation, but I also see



how she's shifting on her feet--this might not be the best place to tell a complicated story, so I ask if she wants to go someplace nearby, get a cup of coffee.

"Sure, but first"--her hand holds up the book she's been reading--"might as well buy this book, take it with me, it's only two dollars." The resignation in her face vanishes, her thin lips seizing on a smile.

**D**espite a noon sun overhead, I felt like the day had restarted, dawn and all. Less than an hour earlier, I, this near repentant loser, snake-belly low, pedalled crosstown. Then Fortune spun its wheel, surprised me.

Namely, I left Powell's with Cris.

Outside, dutifully, we ignored petition gatherers and Cris gave her wide shoulders--the surfing, no doubt--a little shrug in the white-collar, white-cuffed, green and gray jersey. She admitted to being in the mood for something more substantial than coffee. What did she like to eat? Mostly rice. She blamed it on time she spent in Japan.

Something about her tanned face seemed knowing, a face that had done a year in Japan, that had weathered *her* twenties, the decade yawning with abysmal treachery before me. She, however, was in luck. An interesting, perhaps not great, sushi place was but blocks away. We plugged her parking meter, dropped her book in the van, and got to walking.

**W**alking over here, I warned Cris this place was different, like puts the big D in different. *Clickety, clickety, clickety, clickety.* Outside, Sushi Takahashi's a humble storefront, but, inside, the room goes *way* back. The terra-cotta walls got a few Japanese prints of samurai days. And here we are, sitting at this long oval sushi bar: white Formica countertop and on the inside edge, three-rail train tracks. You

heard right, train tracks. The other side of the counter, two *gaijin*--Cris's Japanese for these guys who are anything but Asian--slice raw fish, then assemble the sushi with small mounds of rice and once the train stops, new plates of sushi go on the train. I'm not kidding, toy train, you know, like a Lionel Lines train set for Christmas. The train runs--*clickety, clack*--'round, right past our noses, all the flatbed cars loaded with sushi, ninety-nine cents a plate and up.

Cris puckers a blow over her bowl of miso soup. "So you were saying something about your life on pause?"

"Well, for a while, I thought I was okay making money, selling wireless and broadband door-to-door, plenty of fresh air. I pretty much ignored what a compromised, money-grubbing gig it all was--"

"Paychecks help if you eat," she says. "I know I can't live off savings forever."

*Hmmm.* Savings? The van, the way she gets around, I was thinking trust-fund hippie. I smile at the idea she's more than a surf bum. "Yeah, but the job was kinda guilt-inducing, selling people gadgetry they could do without, but, hey, it's not my call what they spend money on."

"So that caused you grief?"

"No, not the job, not at all. It was a trap of my own devising. As I said, I started this organization called OODL."

At this point, I take my OODL card from my wallet, and drop it on the table.

"So anyway, a few friends and I were signing up people with these handy-dandy wallet cards. Then our big mistake. We went to the MicroBrew Fest--"

We're done with the miso soup and--*clackety, clack*--the sushi train cranks our way. It's here under our noses, moving slowly enough to give us a few seconds to check out each plate. I take one. Raw, orangey salmon slices capping rice mounds. Cris takes one that's a mystery to

me. And the sushi train rolls away to tempt other diners down the line. We get busy with the chopsticks, stirring pinches of wasabi into soy sauce.

"You were saying?"

"At first, I thought we did great. We signed up people by the dozens. Then later, turns out the last people you expect at a beer festival, okay, these religious nuts, who were, I suppose, moppin' their brows about organ donation, went to a TV station and claimed people we signed up were half-sloshed."

"You were, weren't you?"

"Of course, but I figured they sobered up, they could always tear up the card. What's the big deal?"

"Yeah. What happened next?"

"The TV station interviewed me. They made me out for this blood-sucking Dracula. Then without telling me, the reporter dragged in the State Attorney General's Office, which--ta-dah--felt obligated to check us out."

"Serious wipeout."

"More than that. When I went to sell the next day, people recognized me, they wanted to close the door on my nose. Then my picture was in the paper. I was the guy whose organization was about to be investigated. I don't know, I might have to move back to Eugene, stay with my dad, so much for establishing myself up here."

"Sounds like getting away from this town wouldn't hurt."

"I think you're right," I say. "This place reminds me of my problems."

"Oh, people've short memories, this might blow over in a week. As if it never happened." She grins mischievously, then takes her sushi, dips it in soy sauce, and delicately bites off half, putting the remainder

back on the plate with the chopsticks. She rests the chopsticks, taking time to savor her food. Living in a van, I half expected her to wolf down food, as if she hadn't eaten in days, but no, instead she eats with undeniable refinement.

"Could happen," I say. "I hope so. But the State Attorney General's office--everything, complete with my mug shot, could resurface in a month and where am I then?"

"Where you are now." She smiles. "Ready for a change. When I was like you, twenty, I flunked out of college back east. Didn't know what to do next."

"How'd you know I was twenty?" I laugh that she guessed right.

"Oh, you have that look of a two-ought-crisis. You leave home, you go to college, job, whatever, trying to set up an adult life and then *blam*, you hit the first big, really big obstacle and you have decisions to make." Her eyes go wide, suggesting there's a lot more to her story than some misspent college time.

"So why'd you flunk out?" I ask, sensing she has a story she wants to tell, one with some hard-earned wisdom.

"Oh, I flunked out for the cruelest of reasons: I was learning.

"You see I was going to this exclusive two-year woman's college back east, the name doesn't really matter, what matters is it was what my parents wanted. I was feeling kinda cloistered, like out of touch with the real world, and then I got going on finding a topic for a research paper and I was in this almost nunnish mood about where I was. The Shakers came to mind."

"I know those guys: no sex, no children--they kinda died out, didn't they?"

"They were celibate, true, and they ran out of kids to adopt. But more than that, what I found interesting, they'd this incredible sense of aesthetics. Shaker furniture especially."

"I saw some of that, on TV once," I say.

"Sure, that's what they're famous for. Anyway, I started doing research, went out to Pittsfield, in western Massachusetts and looked at the Shaker village there. One thing led to another and I got this idea I couldn't let go of that the Shaker sensibility was reflected in, believe it or not, the U.S. Armed Forces. That was my research topic. I compared and showed the similarities of the Shakers and the military. It was crazy, but crazy in a way that made sense."

"Are you serious, religion, the military, sounds kinda contradictory. One's devoted to killing people and the other to what, saving their souls?" *Clickety, clack*. The sushi train heads this way and I'm ready for the next plate.

"It's weird, I know, maybe it's how a circle always joins itself. Anyway, I started seeing correspondences everywhere. I took pictures of Shaker buildings and then compared them to those Quonset huts the military invented. In both cases, the underlying design imperative was to minimize extra adornment. That plainness actually made their designs heavily functional. You know, form follows function. You get that with the Shakers and the military. Absolutely."

"So how'd your paper turn out?" I ask, curious as to how this great stuff caused her to flunk out of college.

"Well, that was partly the problem, I might have bit off more than what I really needed for a research paper. I just got carried away, I was going into this Army-Navy surplus store in Boston and photographing Navy pea coats, that I convincingly wrote were pure Shaker in their inspiration, things like that, I was travelling everywhere, getting on to navy bases down by Newport in Rhode Island, Narragansett Bay, just racking up miles doing field research like nobody had ever done before. Then I got in big trouble."

"How so?"

"I'd been letting everything else slide while I was enjoying myself

with this research and suddenly I was, you know, out of time and couldn't catch up. I basically blew off four classes because I did nothing else except work on a research paper I would never finish. So I flunked out. I was *finito*. No future. What could I do?"

"Sort of like me now?"

"Exactly. At age twenty, I moved to California, then I spent time in Japan, and now I'm just following waves."

"No waves in Fossil--" I say.

"It's just a break, a few days."

"But why, what's out there, 'sides empty land?"

"Sure, but that book I got at Powell's says the place has more fossilized bone remains than anywhere else in North America. All those departed souls, I figure it has to be kinda spiritual, just being there."

Cris is surfer high-energy, so this spiritual side she reveals, takes me back a bit. I fan fingers out on the countertop, sensing if I'm getting this right. "I feel some of that wonder, that pull on the spirit when I go into the Cascades and camp, if that's what you mean."

"Yeah, even sitting out on my surfboard, waiting for waves to build, can be contemplative too. But I saw this name Fossil on a map--so many associations--I had to go there. You interested?"

"Me? You sure you know me?"

"Oh, I'm pretty lucky so far, scoping out people with first impressions--I thought you were okay when we talked at Seaside. Who was it said, Only superficial people don't trust first impressions?" She laughs.

I feel like it might be bad to refuse this lady, this time. She sips water and has a smile at her eyes, her lips not moving, like she knows I cannot resist.

"We'd be back Monday?" I ask.

"Oh, easily," she says.

"Okay, I'm ready as soon as I stop by my place and pick up a toothbrush."

To speed things up, the bike's lashed to the surf racks on Cris's van and we're off crosstown. How we small-talk for the fifteen-minute ride to my place convinces me it's a favorable nod from the gods that put me here beside Cris, who's edging the van forward to the next block of this jammed side street by Monte Vista Arms for what's a telltale gap of a parking spot.

This morning, my sorry self would acknowledge nothing more than its obliteration by the devilish blade of the Cosmic coffee grinder. But hours later, all's changed and some familiar, untamed feelings seem once more to have come a-knockin'.

Sure, one gulf of an age difference separates the two of us. Cris, thirties--that's middle-aged, almost, so how could our spending the weekend together get combustible, I ask you.

Dunno. Except this giddy feeling hangs on between us: Her words--as she squares the van in this parking space--get staccato like something's in motion. And I find myself rabbiting on too. Or is it one glance that lingered, that seemed to say, What's next to figure out?

Again, dunno, 'cept I'm in the best of all possible worlds. Kinda enjoying the buzz of being with a chick for the first time, but with that chasm of years between us kinda a safety valve, paradoxically, too. See, I'm not sweating, Will she shut me down?, and Why? or How did I blow it this time? I mean, anyone got expectations? The way I see it, I'll ride the wave the way she wants to break--Cris said that earlier about her surfing style, but it could apply to the current situation too.

We unbungee sop toothpaste, toothbrush, a bar of soap, deodorant, and sunblock in a plastic produce bag. I'll skip the razor, go the weekend shaveless, and put what I have and a flannel shirt--for the cool

desert nights--in a brown sack and a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom, the plan being to rough it. I hold the sack up for Cris to see. "My suitcase." Oh, that and several extra twenties out of a jar I keep in the kitchen cupboard.

"There, that does it, I'm ready."

We trundle down the stairs, and back in the van, Cris fetches a map from the glove box, runs her finger over the path of the Columbia River and we agree driving the Interstate to Hood River and then cutting inland is going to be a heap faster than two-lane blacktop and a mountain pass over Mt. Hood.

"You wanna share the driving?" she asks.

"I lost my license," I say, feeling like some leechy freeloader, but I can't help it. "DUI. But I want to pay for gas, okay?"

"DUI?" She laughs. "I bet that's another long story," she says, starting to see nothing's simple for much of anything about me.

So I tell the whole story about Ira and me and how I took out a municipal maintenance trailer and was judicially emasculated, I felt at the time, by having my driving privileges suspended for what seemed the better part of my life. She laughs at the dear price I paid. I tell her the upside was I got to like two-wheelers, now pedalling my way everywhere.

The drive out to Fossil is hours. Fortunately, we left early afternoon, so we'll make it by eight or so. As we drive inland, the big river basin below us at our backs, the cars thin out and we pass time by telling stories and such.

Cris insists Fossil is a spiritual power point, as she puts it, because no one lives there among the bony remains of what millions of years ago was a teeming inland ocean. Nothing manmade, only the real life that hums in the earth. I say it sounds New Agey, but she says it's not, it's age-old nature worship. Besides, she left that New-Ager stuff years ago in California.



For a long time in California, she admits she was wrapped up in Eastern religion. She was practically a fixture at the Bodhi Tree Bookstore in Hollywood. At some point, though, especially after coming back from Kyoto, she gave the Western religious tradition another chance. Now she thinks she's sort of on the fence, stuck between the two worlds and in any case, being out in the natural landscape helps keeps her grounded, gets her priorities right.

The sun drops below the Cascades ridge in the west with a fast flameout. A star or two winks on. I don't know how much longer we have, before we stop and camp, but tomorrow--sitting around with no place to be, lost to the world-at-large with Cris here in the desolate eastern reaches of Oregon, where the dry landscape will sop up and make indifferent whatever dissatisfactions I had with my life in the big city before today--is a day ripe with promise. Stay tuned.

CHAPTER NINE:  
RIVER ANESTHESIA, JURASSIC GINGKO, HELPFUL *NIHONJIN*

**N**ext morning, when I awoke, a red sun lay out to the east and wanted to fire up my eyelids like flashbulbs popping nonstop. I pulled the top flap of Cris's sleeping bag over my head. But new day that it was, birds twittered across crisp air open to the next county and water babbled in the John Day River below the bank on which I rested in said sleeping bag. Sun, birds, river--this song of daylight was my private pleasure. I was pretty sure Cris still slept in the van.

We had camped beside the river, just inside the Wheeler County line, mostly as an agreeable place to get off the miles-from-nowhere, two-lane blacktop road that had succumbed to darkness. And Cris liked the sound of running water.

For a few minutes, I sat stiffly and surveyed the landscape. Away from the riverway of grassy banks and scattered cottonwoods, the sandy soil and pocks of sagebrush went to the horizon. I stood up, rubbing my sleepy, sun-shocked eyes. Where were the fossils? Were they underground, ready for digging? I kicked at the capricious sand, what the wind could take this way, that, but stared in vain for one fossilized bone to anchor my consciousness. I shrugged at this diversion I'd got myself into and went to pushing the sleeping bag back in its stuff sack.

**B**lunk, the van door slides open. Cris gets out, wearing jeans, a white Billabong T-shirt, a green-and-black Pendleton. She reaches inside the van and drops a pair of go-aheads to the ground. She toes each sandal with a ballet point, slips them on her bare feet.

She looks at me, this transfixing stare, something I don't expect, especially this early in the morning. "I don't know if you're ready to eat like I do," she says, like she's used to making more of food than just taking care of the hungries. "We had sushi yesterday, but I bet you wanted something with, well, more red meat, like a cheeseburger." She laughs, but almost immediately shoots back that same challenging look.

I don't say anything and she turns, goes back to unstacking stuff in the van. She works deliberately. Everything seems to have its own place in her scheme.

I'd been expecting we'd get in the van, get moving, and drop into a cafe half an hour away in that little burg of Fossil, where regulars probably kill time over coffee refills and would ogle us as strangers to their town. But safe guess is Cris has some other plan running in her head. Oh, she might be one of those food freaks I ran into during my Planet Foods days: You know, the folks think they've got answers and are out to find religion in what they eat.

But as she moves about, I again sense the coiled energy of those powerful shoulders the flannel shirt hides. Whatever she eats, I have to admit, it gives her endless energy.

"I'll give it try," I finally say, willing to forgo any lumberjack breakfast in Fossil, with who knows what sort of punk, overperked coffee. "What you got?"

"Here, what I have everyday."

With that she brings out a jug of water, a sack of rice. Then she sets up a camp stove and starts to boil water. "Sorry about the wait, but I've got to do this about every three days, make the rice."

"You eat the same rice three days in a row?" I ask, wondering if Cris is taking me down that same path again, the one strewn with fossilized bones.

"Yeah, long as it's white rice. Some people insist on brown rice, making rice balls with the idea of eating them later, but the brown

outside layer has oils that can go rancid. Grows mold. Doesn't happen with this." She holds up the sack, some Asian lettering on it.

"I thought brown rice was better." I have, after all, worked at Planet Foods and was used to dishing out nutritional advice with the rest of those clowns.

"No, too many people equate effort to virtue. Brown rice is harder to cook, harder to digest, and harder to store, plus the stuff spoils way faster than white rice. People evolve ways to food, not without reason. Who eats brown rice? I know the Japanese don't. They're pragmatic, they're not about to eat brown rice for any what--health benefits? So I think of them, you see, when I'm eating sticky rice. Takes me back to Kyoto every day."

She's got the water boiling, she puts in the rice, and now we wait. Chat a bit about my Planet Food days, and finally she tosses in some seaweed for a bit of flavor, for the minerals, she says. I ask if this is all she eats and she says pretty much. She adds some fish occasionally to get protein, but for the most part it's rice and seaweed. And the green tea.

"But," she says, "if we had a hook and line, we could pull a nice fish out of this river. Slice up some fresh trout." She grins, as if she expects me to call her on this bogus backcountry sushi idea, as if I know--which I do--having a fly-fishing nut of a dad, that uncooked freshwater fish fabulously harbors infectious parasites. But I'm too hungry to talk anymore about food. I smile weakly and get on to one strange breakfast, unlike any I've ever eaten in my life. And yet, I must admit it's satisfying, in a way. Fills me up. The rice and seaweed, a subtle sweetness, but not cloying, taste. And the green tea, with its puckery aftertaste, is the perfect finish.

So that's breakfast and we're sitting on this log that could've dropped off some truck. I don't know. It makes for a bench to share.

"I thought out here I'd see fossils," I say, looking over at Cris, an ascetic I've decided, who sips the last of her green tea. "I'm ready to

forget about organ donations, forget about door-to-door sales, but here I am, and no fossils."

She studies the river like it's some mandala. "Fossils stay away from humans," she says, not quitting her gaze down to where the water boils gently around a few boulders in the riverbed.

"Why's that? They're scooped up for souvenirs?" I'm thinking of paintball-happy Portland weekend warriors dressed in camouflage fatigues, bouncing along in jacked-up, off-road trucks over the sands out here, wanting so badly to score a fossil to set up on the den TV.

"Yep, that and civilization has a way of burying all in its path."

"You know, out here, even out here, I can't get my mind to leave that mess back in Portland, I don't know what I'll do Monday," I say, not trying to sound dramatic, but waking up to the fact I have to do something about my big problem after life gave me a two-fisted knockout with OODL and the job.

Cris cuts her gaze from the river to me. In fact, it's a look that lingers. "Well, life happens despite us," she says, suggesting only deluded fools captain their destiny. She smiles as if she doesn't want to say more about that and goes back to checking out the river. "You know, this morning, I was reading the guidebook I bought yesterday and the oldest fossils in the state were found about twenty, thirty miles south of here. Some horsetail plant, see over there, the edge of the river, those green reedy plants with the black tips, a plant like that goes back to the Pennsylvania era, two hundred fifty million years ago."

"Whoa, a quarter billion years. That's time-travelling, we should go." I'm a bit antsy, I admit, to see fossils, but coming this far, I expected a complete bone yard. Now, I'd settle for any fossil, even if it were only fifteen years old.

"That's not easy, you and I, we're no paleontologists. As I said, where humans are concerned, fossils stay away."

"Then why are we out here, if not to see fossils?"

"It's enough for me to know fossils are near."

She flashes a wry smile like unless I get out a shovel--which I don't have--forget the fossils this trip. All, it would appear, is okay with Cris. I wish I could be that content. With not one sad fossil to distract me here, I keep thinking of that mess I left. "Monday, I look for another job," I say.

"Somewhere in that open sky." She waves her hand upward. "Riding on the wind, there goes your next job, your right livelihood." She chuckles, then somberly studies the sluggish river. "Say, that river looks so clear. You want to go in?"

"Looks to me like clear snowmelt off the mountains. I don't want any ice-cream headache."

"This is August, Ocean, c'mon."

"I left my swimsuit home."

"Well, you can be like me. I skinny-dip any chance I get," she says, a smirk at her lips.

My heartbeat quickens, the usual hard-wired arousal. She is going to let me see her au natural? What am I supposed to do? I don't want to walk home.

"I hardly know you." I say this not really sure if, say for example, I might get this embarrassing erection in the midst of seeing Cris nude. I'm thinking about nothing more than this.

"I'll turn my back, if that's easier for you, until you're in the river up to your neck, okay?" Cris laughs and her telepathic grasp of my thinking leaves me without any choice except to start taking off my shoes. I next look up and she's standing over there, shimmering in the early morning sunlight, a splendid example of the female of the species.

I've got my pants, boxers off and I am, thank God, staying flaccid, as I watch her descend the riverbank. I see in the sacral cavity of her back how her hips shift with each step in the noblest of gaits, as if as a

kid she studied ballet. Her upper back is tight with the hint of muscles from all that paddling she must do out on the water. And, as she lifts her right foot for another step, I now see she wears a thin, silver anklet bracelet.

"Just a min," I yell down to her, pulling my stubborn shirt overhead, which I wrap about my glasses before I set them both down. She holds her arms tight across her chest, as she first edges feet, then--with small splashes--shins, then legs into the river and then finally turns to face me, a teasing glimpse of untanned bosom and--big splash--she falls backwards, submerging, then her head, its skullcap of wet hair, reappears, bobs at the surface. Smiling, she either likes what she sees or more likely wants to see how I handle the frigid water.

"You must be used to cold water--I'm not," I plead.

"It's not bad. Here, over here's a warm current."

"Oh, sure, like Gulf Stream waters, a foot wide."

She laughs.

"No, seriously, it's warmer here. Right next to me. C'mon, I'll move over, I'll make room."

My arms stiffen; I don't know what to make of her. Here's this woman I've seen only once in my entire life before yesterday and now the two of us, nude, are standing in a snowmelt river in the middle of nowhere and she's asking me to get closer to her?

Cris goes under, then reappears, blinking her eyes. She smiles my way like she knows she doesn't have to say anymore. I lean into the numbing current that would sweep me away if I pulled my feet up from the mossy river bottom and before my teeth go to chattering, I gotta believe she's right about it being warmer over there. "Okay, I'm coming over." I take it a treacherous, slimy round rock at a time, staying exquisitely careful. Cris slides fingers through her wet hair, then shakes her head. Although her face seems utterly without expectations, Cris keeps her eyes on me, as if doing so keeps me from slipping, draws me

closer to her.

I feel I'm stepping on a big rock that's higher than the rest and I balance my right foot on it. "Almost there," I say. This water certainly has taken any physical expression of desire out of me, my nuts feel tight as two walnuts, they are so cold and my cock shrivels too.

Then, suddenly, my right foot's slipped. A sharp sensation shoots through the outside edge of my foot.

"Oh," I say, my foot so cold, I'm not sure what, if anything, happened.

"Are you okay?" Cris asks, a concern in her voice I hadn't heard before.

"My foot, I think it's cut. I've got to get out."

"Wait, let me first get a towel for you." Her arms flail water as she goes past.

"Watch it, don't you cut your foot too," I yell after her. She scrambles up the river bank, looking odd as an ostrich: Not everyday do you see a nude person run in a panic.

The van door slams open, slams closed, and minutes later, she's back and lays out a towel at water's edge for me to step on. I drag my chilled carcass the last few yards and look down and to my horror see the right side of my foot bleeds red.

"Careful, don't get dirt in it," Cris says and part of me wants to laugh about taking medical advice from this topless, bottomless nurse, but it suits me fine in my present state.

"If the water weren't so cold, I'd be bleeding puddles."

"Yeah, well, wash it off best you can and then we'll take this T-shirt--it's pretty clean--and wrap it until we can get something better for a bandage."

She rips the T-shirt into strips. So much for BILLABONG



SURFBOARDS on that shirt.

I wash the foot and it's odd putting it back in the cold water, it bleeds so slightly, a wisp of red joins the river. "I'm ready," I say, pogoing on my left foot over to the towel and with the heel of my right foot fixed to the towel, bend my knees and drop bare-assed, any novelty about our unclothed freedom now history.

Cris takes the cloth strips, winds them about my foot. "Tell me if this is too tight. It can't be too tight or too loose."

"Feels fine," I say.

She wraps about five layers around my foot and after the first two show blood, the last ones stay white, so the bleeding seems over.

"Just stay here, and keep that foot a little bit up, I'm going back to dress."

She comes back and I'm sitting there, naked as a peeled persimmon, now knowing I face a tough task getting my clothes on.

"This is Saturday, I think if we go into town, we should find a place with some first-aid supplies," she says.

She offers me my clothes that were lying back by the log.

"I bet it was a broken bottle," I say. "Cut like a surgeon's knife."

"You didn't feel anything?"

"Hardly, this river water's like anesthesia. Just this sensation my foot was being split open."

"It looks really bad. I wonder if we should drive and find you a doctor."

"If the bleeding doesn't start again, I'm okay until we get back to Portland."

We left the campsite and Cris drove to Fossil for what we prayed was any store with sterile bandages. I sat shotgun, my right foot festooned with the cloth strips that shared one big reddish-brown spot. I felt relieved: The foot was one less reason to pedal and walk my sales route for Tesla Northwest Monday. My psyche also enjoyed the sweet balm of being fussed over by a woman, especially one I'd earlier seen nude.

Fossil? A village of shade trees and modest frame homes with one country general store, two gas pumps--one diesel--out front. Cris bought a jug of drinking water, gauze, tape, and Mercurochrome.

"Guy inside says there's a campground at Clarno Digs, and we can see all the fossils we like," Cris said. She knew the way: a backtrack, not quite to the river.

At the campground, Cris parked the van in a dirt lot in the palm of hills. We got out and I hobbled over to a rock scree and picked up a flint-gray stone, amazed at my luck. An obvious leaf fossil, one with deep triangular lobes.

Cris brought her guidebook. "Here it is," she said enthused. "A ginkgo, Jurassic era, one hundred seventy-five million years old."

"Waiting all these years for me to take home," I said as a joke.

Cris smiled, pointed her thumb at a prohibitory sign: *Removal of any ....*

I handed Cris the fossil, she studied it, and she said the ginkgo leaf reminded her how often she had to pick them up in Kyoto. That observation led to a long story.

We're the only ones in this canyon boxed in by the hills and it's a bit light out, but late enough that Cris has put out some steaming bowls of rice and seaweed that will be our dinner, not unlike what we had for breakfast. I think I've lost a coupla pounds already to this food

and that's not counting blood lost from my cut foot.

I bend over and smell the salty seaweed mixed with the not-to-be-missed plumped goodness of the white grains of rice. Honestly, it's not something I readily resist--despite her ascetic ways, I think this woman with a camp stove could make beans taste like steak--and like her, I take my fork and dive in.

On the table, I've set the ginkgo fossil, temporarily on loan from the rock pile. "So you were telling me about ginkgoes in Kyoto," I say. I pick up the flint-gray fossil, turning it to guess how the too-old-to-think-about impression was revealed on its smooth side, where the rest is nothing but an accretion of nothing-special weathered rock.

"Yeah, I stayed there six months, got to know ginkgoes too well, those seeds give you stains, they're terrible."

"What were you doing there?" I ask this, sure she was, that far away, doing something else besides shaking seed pods out of trees.

Cris smooths the top of her rice with her fork, like she's trying to decide the short-version answer. "Oh, you know, big question stuff. I was reading a lot about Buddhism, hanging out at the Bodhi Tree in West Hollywood, that sort of thing. I'd quit Western religion--I'm from a family of Episcopalians--so I suppose I was ready for something new."

"Seemed to me you're interested in religion, all that research about Quakers you said you did in college."

"Exactly. I flunked out of Pine Manor, never finished that paper. That whole sorry episode has always bugged me as so much unfinished business. Going to Kyoto, studying Buddhism was a way, I suppose, to finish more of what I wanted for an education."

"Still Japan's a long way to travel."

"That's where my interest was. I was sopping up every book I could get about Buddhism and I wanted the experience firsthand. I wanted to go to Asia--later that narrowed to Kyoto--and get something

more than words on paper. I wanted to experience Buddhism through my five senses every hour of every day until I finally felt different."

Cris begins to clean out the bottom of her rice bowl and, in fact, goes back to the pot where there is maybe half a serving each left, which she offers. I love the stuff, but worry I can't eat enough of it to have a full feeling. I take my share, and she takes the rest.

"Whoa, you must've saved for that trip," I say.

"Yeah, I was twenty-seven and had a job working in an antiques store in Santa Monica, Ancestral Art, with good commissions. Even with the north of Wilshire apartment, I saved. And I had a boyfriend at the time too--to complicate things."

"Aha, you didn't go to Japan being bummed out by a relationship, did you?"

She gives me a startled look, a look that seems to say I've touched a sensitivity. "No," she says in a weary voice, "but it probably affected the timing."

"How so?" I ask, unsure I'm not coming across as an intrusive pest.

"Well, I met Vince because he was a surfer too, but he was also an actuary, you know a mathematician for an insurance company. And though we'd been together almost a year, I didn't see anything good playing out. I mean, possibly we might've gotten married, but then I didn't know, I didn't feel like waiting around years for just one guy to make up his mind."

"The old commitment trap, eh?" I raise my eyebrows parroting the common complaint of women her age, so I've heard. I'm really wondering what broke up things between her and Vince, what my curiosity always wants to know when relationships sour. What made her leave? If nothing else, I always feel I can benefit from someone else's experience, maybe sidestep that difficulty myself.

"No," Cris says, taking the last of her rice and then setting the pot

of water to boil on the camp stove, so we can finish with some green tea. "It was these exams he kept taking to be some thirteenth-level actuary, I don't know. He'd disappear, weeks at a time with an exam coming up."

"Oh, c'mon, you dumped this guy because he studied hard?"

"Could be. Every time he'd pass an exam, he seemed to become more of a suit, that yuppie vibe, you know, and less the surfer boy I first met. I saw big conflicts in the making with my free-spirit ways, so I kept saving money and finally decided to do my thing."

"And so, adios, you were off to Japan?"

"Yeah, it took a few months to arrange." Cris beams now with what is evidently fond remembrance. It's as if the tentativeness with which she admitted to leaving Vince is replaced with the certainty of what finally happened. "But I got a cheap, one-way ticket standby and left with my backpack and passport and not much else except, of course, my entire savings in travelers checks that might've seen me through six months and a return ticket, though I knew Japan was so expensive. Plan B, which I didn't want to think about, would be to call my parents, ask them to wire money to get home."

"So what was Japan like?"

"Incredible nonsense. I loved it." Suddenly the water boils and Cris stops and pours in the two cups with the green tea leaves. "Absolutely loved it, I was like Alice down the rabbit hole. I mean nothing meant anything to me. Almost all the signs were in this kanji writing, all of which I took in with blissful ignorance."

"You have trouble getting around?" I take the warm cup between my palms, rock it on the raised-grain boards of the picnic table, and study the floating tea leaves reconstituting themselves.

"Sorta, though at the airport, the train station, there were information counters, every one staffed by a crisp twenty-something woman speaking perfect English, so I got from the airport outside

Osaka to Kyoto, no problem."

"But outside, on the street, what'd you do?"

"Again, no problem. Surprised me how eager the Japanese are to help strangers. Even if they can't speak English well, they want to practice. So I'd just open my guidebook, look around, and within minutes a well-mannered *nihonjin* was at my side, 'May I you help?'"

"Cool." The sun's dropped now and past Cris's shoulder off in the low dark horizon, I see what's gotta be Venus making its claim in the night sky. Cris reaches for her cup of tea to bring to her lips, fixed with an irrepressible smile.

"And even better, once I got to the youth hostel, that first night, I ran into all sorts of folks. Aussies, Germans, Brits, Americans, you name it. They all spoke English and got me oriented that first week I spent in the hostel."

"So you went to Japan ready for Buddhism firsthand, you're sky-high with expectations. How long did it take for that to change?"

Cris laughs. "About a week."

CHAPTER TEN:  
DEAD NEEDLES, SQUIRREL SAMADHI, HOTARU STREAKER

She holds her tea cup two-handed, like she's also summoning memories. "Yeah, I played tourist, oh, a few days, then I got busy trying to find a monastery to take me in. I figured if Kyoto really had the two thousand temples and shrines, one of those might help a *gaijin* who sincerely wanted to meditate."

"Where'd you look? Not the Yellow Pages, not under Meditation Instructors." I raise my eyebrows.

"No, I asked around. This Toyoku-ji kept coming up. It was even near where I was staying. They did meditation retreats almost every weekend and you could stay longer, a month, six months, but it would cost plenty of yen. I went over there and talked to the head monk and after about ten minutes of his fractured English, I got that idea."

"How much money he have in mind?" I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

"Oh, the suggested donation sounded like a semester of college. Six months came out like eighty thousand yen. I think that was five thousand dollars or more. The tip-off, though, was the monk asked if my family might be able to help my spiritual search. I nearly laughed. Good thing I didn't. It's rude to laugh in someone's face over there. He'd stopped there and wouldn't have helped me."

"How so? The guy's taking advantage of you. He practically picks your pocket."

"Well, I told him right away I couldn't do Toyoku-ji. But, I had to

find a temple. I begged. I said despite the meager savings from my job, which was true, that's all I had, I really wanted to learn the Buddhist lifeway. Did he, please, have any idea where I might go?"

"And Sticky Fingers helped you?"

"Sure, he got out what looked like a Rolodex, though of course it was some Japanese contraption and started flipping cards and finally said, 'Aha! Here, just the place for you.'

"He said Kyoto had many temples, all different. Some well-maintained and attractive, the big tourist attractions; also some abandoned and in danger of collapsing. Kakoku-ji was more like the about-to-collapse variety."

"Really?"

"Yeah, the place no longer was near a paved road. It was off in the east hills of Kyoto at the end of this dirt path. I guess, decades ago, the road originally there washed out. He said I'd have to hike in. Then he got busy drawing a map with kanji all over it. He said any passerby could read the map and point me in the right direction.

"Apparently, one important benefactor kept Kakoku-ji open, but for what reason the monk didn't know. That particular sect, Nagiri Buddhism had lost too many members. Active members, he said, were really what kept a temple going. Toyoku-ji was different. He beamed. His sect had big membership, millions, so no problems for long, long time. Then he handed me the little drawing for Kakoku-ji."

Cris fires up the camp stove to boil water. The story she's telling demands more tea.

"So I went to Kakoku-ji to plead my case and talked to the head man there, the roshi himself, Hatsumi-san. My idea to learn Buddhism at the source came down to that drizzly February afternoon, that old bald man's small button eyes searching out mine where we sat on tatami mats in a chilly room, its unpainted plaster walls, its knee-high table between us, its charcoal heater underneath radiating warmth only so far.



Compared to Toyoku-ji, I might as well have arrived at a rubble heap of Buddhist worship."

"Did you feel like turning back?" I ask.

"Sorta, but I pressed on, explained why I was in Japan. I just wanted to learn the basics: meditation and the Buddhist lifeway.

"The roshi nodded and then finally after I ended my plea with, 'I don't have much money,' he said, 'Your interest most sincere. That you don't have much money is like many spiritual seeker, many here stay.' He said this with a twinkle in his eye, as if he understood I wasn't holding out on him, that I really had little savings. I smiled and noticed the chill in the room was gone.

"He pointed out the doorway to the temple grounds, overgrown, choked with weeds, and said, 'We'd like this temple to look good as other temples in Kyoto, garden at first sight pleasing, no?'"

"He had to be kidding," I say, taking the hot water Cris pours in my cup.

"No, he went on, he had a job for me. I would be gardener, *ichiban* gardener. He laughed, his eyes nearly disappearing in the folds of his face. In exchange, I would get a private room, which later turned out to be not much more than closet-size, enough for two tatami mats and a storage compartment for the futon, and I would get to eat with the monks, two meals a day.

"It seemed like a pretty good deal for them, that closet room was going unused and what does rice for one more mouth cost, anyway? I wondered what was in it for me.

"'I came over to learn Buddhist meditation,' I said. 'I didn't come over only for honorable work.'

"The roshi nodded. 'Work, doing, is sacred, yes? Meditation, many years, hard work to learn, not like working outside under sky with trees, water in pond, gentle breeze, but that mediation too, you see? You work

outside, make plants look beautiful again, for a while that you do, and then later, meditation we talk, okay?'

"So right away, the roshi put me off. Still, that was pretty much how I came to stay in Kyoto for six months.

"So the next morning, I was out working. The roshi had found something like this baggy white judo outfit with a red belt. He wanted me in it for my temple uniform. Apparently, he couldn't see me working in blue jeans. So I dressed Asian."

"You must have felt initiated," I say.

"I certainly felt different. Anyway, we then walked over to a group of pine trees, each one had an elaborate frame, all sorts of wires pulling the limbs this way, that, forcing each tree into a squat shape.

"Next, the roshi had me on this ladder, by this tree no more than eight feet high, but about twelve feet wide, you see? He wanted me to pick out all the dead needles, the brown ones. He said something about Kyoto air pollution, then said dead needles, no life anymore, they needed to be taken off. I felt letdown, the crazy idea of his I should go through four trees pulling off dead needles."

"Too many needles, too many haystacks," I say.

"Sure, I thought it was ridiculous, I'd never finish, but the first day I finished one tree and started on a second.

"That and everything else in the weeks after that was plain hard work. I basically worked once the sun went up and kept drinking lots of water."

"Well, if you were working so hard," I say, "what did the monks do? Were they slackers?"

"No, hardly. But outside meals, I didn't see much of them as I'd've liked. Lots of chanting, lots of meditation. Did they ever start early. Someone rang the gong at four in the morning. They'd be meditating four-thirty to five-thirty. At first, I woke up with all that, but eventually

my work-weary body was able to sleep through it. I'd join them for breakfast at six."

"Which was?" I ask.

"You know, miso, rice, fish, and green tea."

"Sounds familiar, what else the monks do?"

"Oh, odd chores like sweep, cook, wash clothes, but mostly they went outside the temple to the city streets a few miles away and begged. As I said, the place was teetering. They'd bring back donations after hours spent standing motionless somewhere, wearing a brown robe, a red sash, a peaked-wide-brimmed hat sitting low enough to hide their face when they held out a bowl for people to drop in money."

"How'd you know they looked like that?"

"I saw them." Cris laughs. "I actually had a day off each week to go where I wanted. Yeah, in town, I'd peel off some of my remaining money for a meal splurge."

The shadow of night has arrived in our private scrub oak canyon. With darkness now at this picnic table, Cris's story about indentured servitude the other side of the planet seems as behind-the-times as the fossils supposedly packed in these hills. And my mind catches at the idea she willingly did this for what, room and board? "Did this roshi guy keep putting you off about the meditation?"

"Yeah, at first, but after about a month, Hatsumi-san must've seen my interest was sincere. He said we'd meet the hour before dinner *mokuyobi*, that's Thursdays."

"How'd that go?"

"I said again I wanted to try meditation. He grinned back and said, 'What about some new while-you-work meditating?' I said, 'Sure, what's that?'"

"Aha! The guy's not gonna let you put down that hoe."

"True, but he did have something for me to occupy my mind. A Buddhist koan, sorta like a riddle, these monks spend months, if not years, trying to solve them, and if you get the answer supposedly you plunge into a new awareness."

"So yours was?"

"So simple, a famous question: What was your original face before your parents were born?"

"You're joking. You had *that* to figure out?"

"Yeah, and kinda disappointing: It was a koan I recognized from a book I'd gotten at that West Hollywood bookstore. So it wasn't new and special for me. But if it was well-known, I was sure if I solved it, the roshi would know instantly I had the right answer. Somehow I pictured him with a cheat sheet listing out koans and answers, which I later learned was not how roshis looked at this stuff at all."

"So you're back at work, burning up your cerebral bearings with that koan?"

"I tried, though every time I got close to grasping it, it slipped away. I was always distracted by something. Like I'd see this squirrel that was, you know how they are, skittish like a Mexican jumping bean, always busy, more or less in the area where I'd been working.

"I didn't know for sure at first if it were the same squirrel, then I recognized a distinctive cowlick of its fur on its head between the ears. What I noticed about this squirrel, it was forever burying and unburying acorns. It seemed to pick the exact bed I'd been working on."

"So the squirrel's taking advantage of your hard work loosening up the soil."

"Exactly, along would come the squirrel after I'd leave and it would just go in and dig up these little piles of dirt.

"One day, I was out weeding away the hours, the squirrel was bounding about, an acorn firmly clasped between its front paws, when I

heard noise behind me. I turned around.

"It was the monk Masaaki, a twig broom in his hands, sweeping up the flag stone path through the garden. This was what Masaaki did each morning once chanting was over and I looked forward to our exchange of good morning--*o-hayo*--and a few words. I liked Masaaki, he was about my age and had somewhat a casual attitude about being a monk. Earlier, he had told me he came from a farm on the big island of Shikoku, where he and his family decided he should try being a monk. He wasn't studious enough for university, and already his older brothers did what farming there was."

"*Hmmm*. Some of that sounds familiar," I say.

"Anyway, he stood there leaning on the broom, shaved head, white robes, and wooden getas on his feet, and he said, Roshi-san and I talked. He said our Narigi-style Buddhism would soon face many challenges. Masaaki said this with dark, doleful eyes like our temple might not make it through another year.

"Of course, this wasn't exactly news. The guy over at Toyoku-ji had said this temple and the Nagiri sect had been lurching towards oblivion for years. But Masaaki knew more firsthand, so I asked, 'What do you think will happen to Nagiri?'

"He held both hands atop the broom handle and his eyes looked away, as if, in a small way, he didn't want to make an admission to me directly. 'Maybe another sect we join, maybe not,' he said.

"'Oh, Masaaki-san,' I said, trying to sound upbeat. 'When you become a priest, people will come to Nagiri because of you.'

"Masaaki then said, 'No, Cris-san, I think not. I don't know, somehow in our country, people that are too religious not thought of so well. People in Japan take religion very lightly.'

"That Masaaki openly said Japanese were not religious was a small shock. I suppose those lost hours reading about Buddhism got me to thinking Japan was a land where enlightened spiritual warriors were as

common as bamboo. So I just said, trying again to sound upbeat, 'Well, at least *nihonjin* aren't adding more to the world's population of religious fanatics.'

"Masaaki smiled weakly, then said, 'Yes, but also everyday many followers we lose. It seems so sad.' And with that he picked up the broom and went away, once more sweeping the path.

"Before I could give much thought to Masaaki's depressing admission, the squirrel was back in an azalea bed next to where I was working, still busy with acorns. Seeing that squirrel reminded me to bring it up with Hatsumi-san the next time we met."

"You were gonna talk to the roshi about a squirrel?" I ask, not sure the connection to Cris's spiritual quest.

"Definitely. I said the squirrel was making a pest of itself."

"Let me guess. He said, 'I've been waiting for you to bring up our temple squirrel.'" I chuckle and sip my smoky green tea.

"No," Cris says. "He beamed, then in the bare-bones English I'd come to love, 'What's for this squirrel? Why squirrel? What you think?' Did he want me to justify the existence of a squirrel? I bit my lip. By now I had the sense that if the roshi seemed joky, he was very, very serious."

"But listen," I say, "you start off figuring out why a squirrel exists, then why not the same for everything." Cris's roshi-talk was getting too deep for me.

"Precisely. I told him, 'I don't know, that's like asking why the big oak tree over there exists.' I pointed to a solitary oak across the temple grounds, whose dropped acorns were an obvious reason the squirrel kept busy darting about. I said, 'Don't know about squirrels, but generally people feel oak trees are good, we use the wood.'

"Oak tree useful,' he said. 'What about squirrel, what he do? You think this little squirrel we keep?' Hatsumi-san looked stern like he was

not going to let me off easy.

"Aha!" I said. 'That squirrel really serves a larger purpose. He buries acorns and half the time he forgets where--' The roshi nodded. 'And because he forgets, he helps grow more oak trees,' I added.

"But little squirrel, his only purpose not move seed about, no?" Roshi sat impassively, one palm atop the other hand on the table, serious look in the plump-jowled face under his shaved head.

"Sure,' I said, 'the squirrel also has to eat to stay alive, not to mention avoid predators that would have it for lunch and then find a mate to make baby squirrels. I guess that's the purpose, preserve and propagate the species of squirrels.'"

"Tough to argue against preserve and propagate," I say, savoring the last of my green tea. Cris has been talking so much, her cup is nearly full.

"Well, Roshi must have thought so too. He unclasped his hands, balled them up, and knocked them together. 'You and I, we no different are we? We, as you say, also preserve, propagate species--well, maybe for us monks, not this propagate thing.' Roshi laughs at the small joke, his cheeks gathering in folds.

"But man not like squirrel, you see,' he continued. 'Squirrel probably don't know purpose what he does, he just does it. Man different, he thinks what he does should be for purpose and with no purpose, man not happy, so he thinks he should talk to man who has answer, so he makes this special relationship with someone he doesn't see, Mr. God. You understand?'

"But Buddhism has no god,' I reminded roshi.

"He replied, 'No god, yes. Buddha nature everywhere, even in squirrel, especially in squirrel. Answer to all your questions about life with that squirrel. When you work, be like hardworking squirrel, think less about purpose. Does squirrel know purpose? Squirrel happy? Squirrel unhappy? Squirrel just in your garden, busy. Man make big

mistake when he want to be with Mr. God, master of universe, he should want to be with small squirrel on ground, keeping busy.'

"Roshi smiled broadly, then added, 'How are you doing with koan, we not talk about that a few weeks, no?'"

"I said I was still working on it, I hadn't given up. I left it at that. We were finished for the day, I could tell. Roshi stood up and we bowed to each other and I went back to my room to wait for dinner."

"You ever solve that koan?" I ask, knowing I would've quit, not given it a second thought.

"Yeah, a few months later. An August night, I can see it now."

"Like this one here?" I say, noting it's August here too, though I'd venture Kyoto nights are not exactly like what we've now got here in the desolate reaches of Oregon: a sky strewn with a flood of stars.

"No, it was dark and muggy like it was gonna rain. My day off and I was out for a walk at the bottom of the hill, sort of by the downtown area, walking a path beside a canal, it's called the Philosopher's Path and runs between Ginkakuji and Eikan-do, two famous Buddhist temples."

Cris drops her head slightly, eyeing a miscellany of eating utensils on the table, but as if she's picturing all this somewhere in that spiritual mecca of Kyoto. "Were you alone?" I ask.

"Hardly, this had to be one of the most popular places in town to walk. And without air-conditioning, it was kinda oppressive being inside, so even more people were out on this path, which is methodically lined with cherry trees, a special fondness of the Japanese, you probably know. The blossoms were long gone, but still the trees, in the dark were comforting shapes.

"I was thinking about my koan," Cris says, giving me a confessional look. "I was walking along, taking in the night calm and then I saw something, made me catch my breath."



"Yeah what?" I say, wondering what it could've been.

"Something I had not seen since Rhode Island." Cris looks up from the table, her eyes cutting to mine. "Fireflies." She grins as if it's the surprise answer. It is. I'd've never guessed. "Fireflies here, there, along the canal lit up, giving off these streaks of orange light.

"For seconds, a point of orangeness and then nothing. And then somewhere else, another orange point would come on, a glowing arc and then it, too, was gone."

"Fireflies must be an east coast thing. I've never seen one out here."

"Well, they have them in Japan. And it was so dark, how many fireflies there were--I had no idea. Just these magical orange flashes. I stopped walking, I had to take it all in."

She smiles, her eyes wider as if travelling that far from home had paid off.

"I took a deep breath and there on a bridge across the canal, looked at the water rushing by.

"Another point of orangeness hovered above the gurgling water and then it went dark. Suddenly, the answer to my koan snuck wordlessly into my head. It was an image, after all, with the answer. My face, really, was no more than that orange light.

"My face was temporary," Cris says, giving me a look that, while not crazed, does suggest a way of thinking that certainly is not gonna fly in your everyday court of law.

"My face was no more me," Cris says, her eyes dancing now, "than that light was the firefly." Cris combs her fingers back through her hair. "I knew the answer to my koan, my face before I was born was, you know, I couldn't wait to tell Roshi-san, for what the koan made me realize was my face, or my self here, really, was here today, gone tomorrow just like the firefly's glow."

"So what was your face before you were born?" I ask, the impatience getting to me.

"Simple, don't you see, my face before I was born was the dark firefly in the night, when that little *hotaru*, Japanese incidentally for firefly, was not flashing its light."

"So you couldn't wait to tell Roshi-san all this?"

"Well, I had to wait until *mokuyobi* to see Hatsumi-san, my weekly meeting wasn't for days," Cris says, eyes downcast. "But when I saw him, you know the first thing he asked?"

"What?"

"My koan. How was that going? He had not mentioned the koan in months, so, taking a deep breath, feeling I had at last solved it, I got a *woo-woo* shiver about his asking that then."

"Maybe you looked eager," I say.

Cris shrugs her shoulders. "Who knows? I was always eager to talk with Hatsumi-san. Anyway, he smiled as I began telling him about walking along the Philosopher's Path at night, seeing fireflies by the canal.

"Ah, then you think your koan you solved?' he asked.

"I got that spooky feeling again and said, yes, I thought I had.

"Sitting at our low table, Roshi-san took both hands from his knees, clasped them as if at this meeting, I'd really surprise him. 'You see now, don't you, question is not really original face before your parents were born, question is your face now, no?'

"I told him I'd learned from Masaaki-san these glowing insects that clumsily fly about, making strollers happy night after night, live all of two months.

"Ah, *hotaru*, little firefly on earth for fast visit,' Roshi-san said, a twinkle in his eye as if he could guess what I'd already figured out for

an answer to my koan."

Cris looks up from the table, from faraway remembrance, seemingly checks how I'm taking all this. "You know, these koans have no one answer, I later found out. Your answer's okay if your roshi agrees it's a *right* answer."

"But you thought you had it," I say. "What'd Roshi-san say?"

Cris tugs a forelock of hair along its length as if she wants to remember the dialogue exactly. "I told him as much as I always wanted to see myself having more permanence than lowly insects, in fact, like them, I was only around for a while.

"In summer night air, *hotaru* so brightly glows, then to darkness lost,' Roshi-san said, spontaneously composing a haiku in English, I realized later.

"Yes,' I told him. 'This self,' I said, pressing my hand to my sternum like this, 'This face,' I said, then putting fingers to my temple like this, 'none of it's more than a flash in the night of history.' Roshi-san beamed and his hooded eyes narrowed in obvious inner joy. And I said, 'My face before my parents were born is my only permanent face, something greater, something invisible, something like big Buddha nature everywhere.'

"Roshi-san slapped his hand to the table. 'Okay! Your koan, you solve.'

"I was speechless, thinking how everything I was to learn about Buddhism from Roshi-san came down to a pesky squirrel and fireflies by a canal.

"What else am I to teach you here?' Roshi-san boomed. 'Next, you do sitting meditation, zazen. I teach you, a few minutes, you spend rest of life learning, okay?'

"I laughed. It was obvious Hatsumi-san knew I had learned what I had come to Kyoto to find out.

"I left the temple after a few weeks, my savings about run out, so everything had gone according to some plan I figured, seeing how it ended so right. Without saying more, Hatsumi-san accepted my spiritual pilgrimage as over, that I had to get back to America. We parted in the boundless language of smiles."

"So did you go on to meditate," I ask.

"I did," Cris says, giving me a look of utter contentment. "For a while. But I realized Buddhism, Nagiri brand, whatever, had no lock on the right approach. Take *The Cloud of Unknowing* from the Middle Ages. Read that as a Buddhist text, if you want. It's by an anonymous Christian mystic. Amazing. I find inspiration everywhere now."

"All this from Kyoto?"

"All because of what I saw on the Philosopher's Path." Cris laughs.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: ROAD'S END, SILK SKIN, PLASTIC STAPLES

The next morning, we were on our way back to Portland, rolling away from what was not my privilege to see: more fossils than anywhere else in North America. Still, I had the company of one interesting chick, she steady-palming the van across the open desert for Oregon's looming mountainous spine, where we'd take Highway 26 through the pass to the south side of snow-topped Mt. Hood.

When we made it to my apartment building and parked there on Hawthorne, Cris left the motor running. Much as I'd've liked to invite her upstairs to talk more, I knew that was out. It was her van after all, and on the way into Portland, she talked at length about the final leg of her two months of adventure. Then it was back to the Bay Area for temp work and saving again for the next journey.

When she said "next journey," her face went to glowing satisfaction, like she was some adroit monkey who had mastered the art of jumping in and jumping out of the rat race that making a living inevitably becomes. When I saw that satisfied look, I was ready to trade anything for her freedom.

Miserable me had to look forward to the multipart whammy of my foot being crippled, a trip to the doctor for that, a door-to-door job that was all about walking, not hobbling, and a face that was poison for sales in this town. My job satisfaction ratings were miserable and in a way, I wanted to keep travelling with Cris, but I could not.

Instead, I had to say goodbye, take my brown sack of belongings, hop out, and watch her drive away. Well, it was a bit more drawn out

than that, but not much.

I wished her well on the trip to Vancouver Island and Tofino, a small town at road's end on the west coast that has the only surfing in Western Canada, she said. Another surfer told her about Tofino when she lived in L.A. The place has outrageously good surf and during the winter, being not far from the storms in the Gulf of Alaska, the waves can only close out--too big to surf, just monsters that fold and drop. But summertime, like August, it's surfer heaven, some freakish ocean current keeping it warmer, she said with a fast grin, than Oregon.

Anyway, I slipped out the passenger side and stood, favoring my left leg, on a hard city sidewalk for the first time in days. Tires humming, motors whining, brake squeals--the morning traffic distracted me from what out the corner of my eye I saw to be a heaven full of blue sky. Having spent the last two and a half days with this surfer girl, I wanted to say more than, "Take care."

She leaned her bare forearms on the steering wheel and gazed my way, the sun-tipped blonde hair I'll always think of as being wet more often than dry, a thin-lipped meditative smile, eyes steady like she would coolly let go. I knew there was no more. No handshake. No hug. I suppose doing so would've trivialized the openness that had gone before. Bare bodies in the river said enough about that before I slit my foot, her care for same, the whole story about her spiritual journey back into a could-be medieval monastery, except it was a few years ago.

Sure, I laid out a few of my problems, but it was her giving me perspective about freedom to do what you want. And I had a deep hunger after hearing her story to experience that freedom. It started resonating with something truer and deeper inside me. Cris was authentic, if nothing else.

So, she said, "See ya," and her gaze jumped to the outside mirror to size up passing traffic. As I saw the van roll down Hawthorne, surfboard cradled in the roof rack, the California license plate, I had the stinking realization I would never see her again. The future odds of our

finding each other, anywhere, anytime, were about the same as flying nonstop around the world, twice. And that was as it should be. She was a surfer girl. I'd been her wave, you might say, up here on land, a companion she aptly renamed Ocean the last few days, and now with her van taken in traffic, the time had come for Cris to rejoin the coastal strip of the Pacific and search out a new wave.

**I**'m in the Eastland Urgent Care Facility on Division in Southeast. When I called, they agreed to see me about my foot and it's covered by my Tesla insurance. Cool.

The foot looked pretty bad this morning as I unwrapped. It's in this scabby, funny oozing stage and I think it's infected. It's gotten puffy. So I'm to see a doctor they say, but I wouldn't bet much of my lunch money on when.

"Austin Gebthart," a nurse calls out, everyone of us alert and ready to rise from the sofas and chuck this idle scanning of magazines.

"Here," I say and hobble to her. Debbi, or so her name tag claims, is a no-nonsense, starched-whites kinda nurse with a clippy New York accent that wins me over with an implied refusal to slow down for laid-back Portland ways. When it's my foot that's hurtin', I love efficiency and Debbi.

"Right this way." She points to the hallway past the open door. "First we need your weight and temp."

That done, she ushers me to an examining room. Has me sit on a paper-covered bench. Takes my blood pressure, then asks what's the problem. I thought it obvious from how I walk. So I go into the whole thing about wading in a river, barefoot, and slicing my foot open. The water was ice, didn't hurt, I say.

"And probably slowed the bleeding," Debbi says. "But this doesn't look good. You might have an infection."

We talk a bit more and then she leaves, dropping her clipboard in the plastic wall bin outside the door.

I sit here, time to kill, windowless walls for company. Before me, a huge multicolor diagram of the heart, sections, layers, more details about the ins and outs of aortas and vessels and chambers than I ever want to know. When this visual aid is used by a doctor, the patient sitting here on this papered bench probably feels pretty damn low. Something like a quadruple bypass, forget any other options.

I suppose, the idea, fleeting, others will sit here, facing long odds, leaves me content with my simple flesh tear. I mean I don't feel happy about these future room occupants, but I take some gratitude knowing I'm better off.

So other than its infected look, my foot's mostly a stubborn reminder I spent the weekend with Cris. I keep running, over and over, this mental video of our skinny-dipping in the river and then that potential of one moment, never to be, when she told me to come closer. I didn't feel sexually charged exactly, the frigid waters had, for practical purposes, contained that desire. And yet it was the most refined desire I've ever had for a woman. Oh, you know, sorta how they say the fly fishing my dad and I do is a refined blood sport--only one drop of blood is spilled. That was the moment when, vulnerable in our nakedness, we might've written a different play for us to act out.

But then, well, you know the rest. I slashed my foot and hobbled off the stage, to the sandy beach.

So I've been looping this video of the weekend through my head since the goodbye and no more of Cris to hold in sweet anticipation. We run into each other again, it will be a miracle. Oh, sure, I might get distracted with the plan I have to go out selling tomorrow, but before too many thoughts pass, the looping video, starring Cris and me replays.

I'm sure this experience will play itself out, go belly up, and Cris, the memory, will slide away into cold storage. But I've been thinking about her so much I gave myself the task of intentional distraction. I



thought of every girlfriend I've ever had. Girlfriend Kezia, now resident in Arizona was first up. Considering her weaselly ways in ending what was more than a mere fling, I can't say I could get too involved in recalling the memories of our time together. I just went back to the prior girlfriend, Azzie, my junior year at South Eugene. Azzie, actually her name was Azalea, the second "a" broad and long to give it a more high-style sound, was basically a one-night stand after an Axemen football game, details you can imagine. But I still counted her in the list of women from Austin Gebthart's life for she was a bona fide seduction, a conquest, which is after all what the male game is all about, is it not?

I kept working my way back through time, yesterday after Cris drove away. I was sitting on a bench over at Laurelhurst Park, where I parked my wire donkey. Drinking from my water bottle, watching ducks gang up for bread chunks some mom had her kid throw out, though the posted signs said clearly: *Don't feed the ducks, they need a healthy diet, and feeding ruins the water quality*. Sure, like it was okay, her daughter can't read.

Anyway, the Cris video kept coming back, but would go away when I thought about another girlfriend.

I got down to my last card. Fifth grade. One day, from nowhere, new girl showed up. Marsha Yamashita. She was Japanese, but Japanese-American. Her folks had moved up from California. Her dad was a researcher at U of O, or something like that. Right off, Marsha fired up a taste for the exotic in me. Absolutely jet-black hair fell straight to her shoulders. But what set her apart were the matching jet-black almond eyes. Oh, on the playground, guys would be joking about her eyes. You know, push index fingers up the corners of their eyes and snigger. Someone said those slanty eyes helped Asians survive in a lot more snow than Oregon and the tighter those eyelids, the better they could see in snowstorms. Thank God, nobody laid that on Marsha. Or maybe they did, these *were* fifth-grade boys.

But I saw Marsha and her diminutive eyes as just something

different I wanted to get to know. I'd wonder what the world looked like through her eyes. That probably drew me to her. On the playground, every chance I got, I talked with her. And when I noticed she walked home my street after school, I was out early on the sidewalk peeping for Marsha.

Usually she walked with other girls, but once I saw her with just Lettie. I took off running. I was gonna go past them. But they both turned to look at me. I myself stopped and took to teasing them, Are you avoiding me?, that sort of thing.

Then Lettie went her own way down a side street and that was fine with me. I had Marsha to myself until wherever she lived. She kept asking where my place was. I wouldn't say. I had already overshot about six blocks, so I said I wasn't there yet and let it go.

She lived in a better neighborhood. It wasn't that far away, but much neater. The Yamashitas had this two-story cottage, you find a lot near the University and Marsha thanked me for the walk home. She was like that, always correct. I said something like maybe we could walk home together again. She just smiled. I was in my own first-girlfriend heaven and musta floated home, unable to wait until school was out the next day.

That's when I saw her by the playground gate. Halfway across the playground, I knew those purple ribbon bows in the jet-black hair. Osh'Kosh overalls, faded blue. White T-shirt. And in her dangling arms, a notebook and a book or two. I remembered the day before, being alone with her and saw now three other girls from class. She was most likely walking home with one, or all, of them. I didn't like playing tag-along.

For a minute, I froze. What to do? I couldn't walk toward the gate and say, Hi, Marsha, like I wanted nothing. That was a sure loss. I wanted to be talking to her after school, like she had sorta promised.

Well, she didn't promise, it was just she smiled when I suggested it.

I stood there wanting things to be different, like Marsha's girlfriends gone.

Then my heart got gallops, no sooner did I think it, the girlfriends got going sideways past the gate, leaving Marsha, her back towards me, saying goodbye.

Abruptly, Marsha turned and, books clasped to her side, was coming my way, but ignoring me. I felt elated sorta but didn't know what was up.

"Marsha," I called. She glanced at me--no smile.

"I can't talk. I left my pen in class."

"Can I help?"

"I was back there and *omigod* my rollerball pen's gone." She tapped the pocket on the front of her overalls.

I saw my chance to be helpful and went with her into the classroom, to where she remembered using the pen, to her assigned desk. Sure enough, in the long channel at the top of the desk, her rollerball pen.

Marsha took a deep breath. She was relieved. It had been a birthday present. Her dad brought it back from a trip to Japan to visit some relatives on the anniversary of her grandfather's death. Although I did nothing, I felt great to be with her.

For one thing, she felt kindly toward me. I'd leave nothing to chance and without even asking about walking home, I stayed with her. I was her shadow as we went back outside, across the playground, and out the gate and headed down the sidewalk toward home.

What were we talking about?

Just stuff about that pen, her dad, his trips to Japan for ocean research. Just chat, just getting to know more about this cute girl beside me. Her dark eyes, when they squinted at me with that small, but broad

nose and that black, black hair, made the skin on her face seem so clean and fresh and perfect. I couldn't take my eyes off her and started to feel self-conscious I was staring, but then I noticed Marsha was doing the same. She was looking at me as if she were happy.

We were about halfway to her house, when I did something I hadn't planned, believe me. But it seemed right. She had shifted her notebook to her other hand and her right hand next to me was free. She probably did it, her right hand getting tired, okay? I smiled briefly as she told me at Easter vacation she and her family would be going down to California to visit their extended family. San Francisco, cable cars. She couldn't wait.

As she told me all this, I just reached down and took her right hand in my left hand. Actually, I just kinda grabbed it between my thumb and fingers, and I might've actually been holding part of her wrist. This was obviously not mutual hand-holding.

A fine thrill went through my hand as I touched her skin, which, of course, up to this point, I had only seen, and admired for its cleanness.

Her skin was soft. It was smooth. Nothing like my coarse skin. I have since learned, personal experience and discussions with guys who should know, this about Asian women. Okay, a sailor who was mouthing off, an authority on women of more than one continent, he said. Asian women were different. The skin of Asian women can be much more inviting than Western women. Like silk in one hand, cotton in the other. He laughed. And with women, he said, no effort to stifle a devilish grin, "Skin's the thing."

Marsha shot me a surprised, but not unhappy look. She didn't pull away. She moved her fingers and wrapped them properly around my fingers, so we held hands as we were meant to.

This took my breath away. This knowing she wanted to hold hands as much as I did. I felt wanted. But I also knew, hey, we might be kinda of messing around, trying out this boyfriend, girlfriend thing.

We kept walking that way, holding hands, and talking about nothing in particular, just seemingly energized by the current of feeling flowing back and forth with our hands touching. We said anything that crossed our minds, like, Look at that strange cloud. Yes, I see a horse standing up there. No, that's a bear. Those sorts of things and the weird thing was anything she said or anything I said seemed to make sense, have real meaning. It was like those joined hands meant we cared enough to really listen. But most of all, once our hands joined that became the meaning behind what words tumbled from our lips.

When we were a block from her home, Marsha said her arm was tired with the notebook, she wanted to switch hands. As if she would have a neighbor or possibly even her mother asking what was with holding hands with that boy. Marsha had that discreetness, a fact I later learned when I decided to try for a kiss. What I was ready to move onto. Hand-holding was easy compared to a kiss. Let me just say, first we had to be some place where absolutely no one could see us or suddenly walk in like that favored spot for stolen kisses, the coat closet at school. It turned out a tree in the park on the way home was okay with Marsha. But she said she didn't want to give in easily, she wanted me to say pretty words. I did my best.

***K****nock.* Suddenly, the closed door opens. Prongs of a stethoscope jut out a pocket of the white coat. It's the doctor.

Dr. Gosney is a clean-shaven, trim, middle-aged man with blonde hair and a receding hairline.

"So, Austin," he says, studying the clipboard he must've grabbed outside the door, then glancing to my sandaled feet hanging off this bench. "I take it the foot with the sock is the one you cut." He asks this with a time-is-money kinda inflection. I'm sure he looked over my whole chart outside the door so he could hustle right through this and get to his next patient. I mean, how else does he make the six-figure income, drive a Mercedes to the golf course, if he's not Dr. Rack-Up-the-Fees?

"Yes, so simple, stepped on broken glass in a river in Eastern Oregon." Obviously, I could supply more detail, namely the absence, at the time, of clothing for me or my companion, but I hold back, for that would only be a roadblock to Dr. Gosney rolling through this patient consultation.

"You swallow any water, remember getting some in your mouth?"

"Nope, kept my head above water, all times." I chuckle, remembering what it was I was seeing.

"That's good, we don't want giardiasis, pretty common in wild waters. So we can eliminate that." He scribbles notes on the clipboard.

"Now, let's see the foot. You'll need to remove your sandal and sock."

He lifts my right leg, turning it slightly to see the ugliness the outer edge of my foot. His ruddy cheeks make me think he knows something about staying healthy, but then maybe it's too much running between rooms. He presses just above the cut. I wince. "Tender?"

"A bit."

"You've got a low-grade infection here. I'll put you on an antibiotic after we clean this out." He lets go my leg, unclips the form on the clipboard, peruses the other side. "You say you've never had a reaction to any medication."

"None I know about, or remember."

It's his professional responsibility to warn me--like he's doing--a few people are allergic to penicillin-type drugs. If I start to feel funny or get itchy, I'm to call the clinic immediately.

"Now, the foot," he says. "This needs cleaning. Let's just keep you sitting up." He presses a lever on the bench and up comes this small wing of a padded flap, also covered in paper to support my feet. "There, your foot stays so."

At the small sink in the corner, he washes his hands, soaping them liberally. And then a few paper towels tugged from the dispenser, dries

them off with a flourish.

He scoots back beside me on this rolled stool and holds my foot up again. "This might sting." He reaches over to the counter beside him and opens and shakes a brown plastic bottle against a small gauze patch and begins padding the wound. Instant white fizzle. Good ol' hydrogen peroxide.

"This will take a while to heal, so I want you, twice a day, to bathe it with hydrogen pyroxide like this, then coat it with Neosporin to stop any more infection, okay?"

More peroxide, he keeps cleaning the cut until it no longer fizzes and all that remains is the gaping tear with a pink crevice. "There that's clean. This next part sounds worse than it is. But we don't use stitches any more, we just staple it together, plastic staples we'll take out in a week."

From a cabinet drawer, he takes out this small staple gun and brings its muzzle down to my foot. He pinches the tear together, and *blam*, not feeling a thing, there's a small gray staple in my foot. He shoots in three more, then tapes over the whole foot.

"So what sort of work are you doing?" he asks, tidying up and going to wash his hands again.

"Oh, I'm at a pretty unproductive part of my life," I say, my shoulders slumping. "I sell wireless door-to-door. Pays the rent, but nothing I'm proud of for a career, if you know what I mean. I was also busy with an organization I started. You might've heard of it."

"What's that?"

"The Oregon Organ Donors League--we got to calling it OODL."

"Oh, yes, I heard something about this. You guys help with the organ and tissue donation crisis. Great work you're doing." He says this like he knows the desperate crisis organ donations have fallen into, but also he's busy enough not to catch TV investigative reports to the effect

we were signing up the pie-eyed.

"Except we had some setbacks and kinda disbanded a few weeks ago," I say, wondering what luck gave me a doctor that knows the good we were trying to do and nothing about the reckless charges put to us.

"That's too bad. You know, I'd like to talk to you more about organ donation sometime when I'm not so jammed." His saying this makes me think if only I could mess with the hands of time and Dr. Gosney would be the real live doctor on OODL's advisory board.

"I wish we could've kept going, I got a lot of satisfaction from that work."

"Know what you mean. Reminds me when I was your age," he glances at the clipboard again, "maybe a little older, I joined VISTA, worked on an Indian reservation in Arizona, did that before going to medical school, I got a lot out of it. You might look into it--I guess it's now part of AmeriCorps. You know, those government agencies--always reorganizing."

*Hmmm.* That cheap shot about him cruising out to the golf course in a Mercedes is something I might consider taking back.

"Now you mention it, I thought of AmeriCorps once, briefly. Maybe I should give it a closer look." And if he's game to talk OODL with me, then maybe I can then quiz him about AmeriCorps--the man's actually done the program.

"You might like it." He smiles and taps the side of his clipboard, like he's ready to move on to his next appointment. "Let me get your prescription, I'll be back in a minute."

Out the door he goes and I sit here looking at my stapled and rebandaged foot. Who'd've thought? I misread the good doctor as some one-trick pony out for the green stuff. Too often, I suppose, people like him, superficially boring, they surprise you with applaudable complexity. I really would like to sit down sometime and kick it around with the good doctor. I slowly ease my sock on and that diagram of the



heart nags at me in the corner of my eye, but I don't care. My lucky draw is having the shorter-term challenge of how to earn a living.

In minutes, he's back and almost in one motion hands me the prescription. "Take this twice a day and call if you have any problems, okay? See you in a week, we'll take those staples out."

And *whoooosh*, out the door, he's gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE:  
BLUE BLOCKERS, TOFU SCRAMBLE, O-SENCHA

I had to get back to work. I'd already skipped a few days at Tesla, missing daily sales reports easily explained by my injured foot. I couldn't hop door-to-door, selling wireless and broadband. My boss had to understand that. Still, the foot was pretty much healed, and even with Dr. Gosney's plastic staples in it, I could put on a sock and wear my black Spaldings.

I left the city with too many people knowing me as poster boy for those butchers from OODL, or how else they saw us. From now on, no more business as usual. I had to be creative to make my job work.

I got over to the costume place up on Belmont right when they opened. Said I was looking for a beard, a well-trimmed beard that would look natural and match my brown hair. Not a problem the kindly older woman said. She must have been the owner, the way she went to the back room and returned with some six or so beards, all rolled very nicely in small Plasticine tubes.

"You're not planning to rob a bank?" she asked.

"No."

"Good, I can't be selling disguises for criminal intent-- it's illegal."

I almost told her I felt like a criminal when I called on people as myself.

We quickly agreed one was a great match for my hair after I'd held each one to my face, looking into this enormous oval mirror mounted on swivels, as she stood beside me like some grandmotherly advisor.

Next was the matter of, as she said, affixing the beard. She could have said, Here's a tube of glue, put it on yourself. But, no, she opened some glue she had behind the counter and showed me exactly how much to put on the beard backing and then we stuck it on my face and got it just so. It wasn't half bad--something I might have grown myself.

"What about my beard growing underneath? That a problem?"

"You're planning to take this off and on, aren't you? You can always shave."

"Sure."

"That case, you'll need a tube of cement. Once you take it off, you can always reglue it like I showed you." She smiled.

"Of course." Then I asked her if she had nonprescription sunglasses, maybe those Blue Blockers they sell out of vans in parking lots.

"Sure thing," she said.

**T**his is Moment of Truth. Can I still sell Tesla Northwest Broadband and Wireless? Do I have what it takes to come back from my public mauling by rabid journalists? Mindful about the bad effects of personal hunger, will I plead with Ms. Housewife to sign on the dotted line?

All these questions perk in my gourd. I lock the bike to this pole that holds aloft a no-parking sign.

Houses climb Kelly Street here in Southeast. Each an opportunity for rejection, but today nobody's gonna spot me as the scoundrel on TV that's behind OODL.

Although my face itches with the beard ruglet, I'm okay. And the morning sun skips dimly over houses, left and right, before the power of my Blue Blockers.

At the first house, lucky me sees a form inside move. Ring

doorbell. Wait. Door opens.

"Good day, ma'am," I say to the woman whose face registers something I'd say is panic. "I'm Austin Gebthart with Tesla Northwest, you have a minute?"

Eyes open like she's enjoying a 220-volt surprise. Maybe she believes this beard is fake-o, a number bank robbers wear, but I smile anyway. Or is this the smirk of your neighborhood rapist making house calls? I'm feeling so self-conscious. I reach to my left temple, swing off the Blue Blockers, happy-facing all the harder. She steps back, clapping the door edge like she has fingerprints to embed in the wood itself.

"There's something on the s-s-stove. Sorry." And the door slams. *Click. Click.* A dead-bolt for me, I'm standing like tipped-over garbage on her front porch. I feel that welcome.

I shuffle back to the sidewalk and what else can I do, 'cept try the next house? So it's on to the neighbor, who I fear has had a call from Ms. Shock-Eyes: Don't answer your door, pretend you're not home.

And nobody answers. Maybe nobody was home. Search me.

But I keep at it. I've walked two blocks the north side of the street and three women answered the door, starting with Ms. Shock-Eyes. All three, door slammers. Okay, maybe they can't place me, this beard, the Blue Blockers. Maybe they don't recognize the infamous operator who wanted people to donate their body in the name of organ transplants, who was exposed by ace reporter and shameless backstabber, Blaine Bartholomew.

The trouble, it appears, is they do recognize me as a candidate for an FBI poster in the East Portland Post Office over on Seventh, behind glass in the display of the FBI's most wanted: Austin Gebthart, consider extremely dangerous, a known rapist, posing frequently as a door-to-door salesman. The black-and-white composite sketch of me, for I have never been actually photographed by law enforcement, shows this shaggy dude wearing sunglasses and a badly fitting beard. That's me,

but it also could be hundreds of other guys, practically any average looking guy who sticks a costume beard on his face and slips on the Blue Blockers.

This disguise, in short, loses.

I rip off the beard and the pain feels like half my face came off too. Doesn't matter. I toss the twenty-dollars-for-nothing beard in the gutter. The Blue Blockers are next and there on the ground, a heel grind. There, I'm real again. But what am I going to do?

My bike's back there. Two blocks away. I start walking.

Looking at house after house, left and right, all these unchased opportunities. These people will never know about the beauties of broadband and wireless, certainly not as divulged by me. Okay, they're probably better off. I just think this all probably had to happen if I were to overcome my temporary delusion of being okay with door-to-door sales, thinking it was financing my good works with OODL. But now no OODL, maybe no Tesla. Makes sense to me.

At least all this craziness about jump-starting my Tesla career stopped my thinking about Cris for a while. She must be in Tofino now, the remote western coast of Vancouver Island.

I see her, wearing that jet black wetsuit under a cloudy day, the swells rocking in across the Pacific toward the shore and she's out on this thin sliver of a surf board, catching up with a proud swell. God, I wish I could be there, sitting on the sandy beach, hugging my knees against my chest, watching her drop down the face of a gathering wave, so she could again just dance on water. That would be pure beauty. Oh, that would.

Okay, it's Saturday, I'm sitting in this comfy seat on a Greyhound bus southbound for Eugene, watching the farmland of the north valley whiz past my window beside this river of cars around us. I know come Monday, any reckoning is over. I have to be in Tesla offices and

say what's what with this particular sales rep in their employ.

So I haven't been working, haven't been throwing myself out for the ridicule of housewives in shock about me looking like me, or me in disguise--either way, sales weren't happening.

So why am I on the bus, you ask? Pretty simple. I felt it was time to put in a visit to the parents--both of them--and keep dialoguing. It's been months since I've gone down there and part of me kinda misses the place--for sure, the memories that go way, way back.

**I** saw Dad. Mostly we talked about our flyfishing plans for sometime this fall. I told him a bit about how OODL had tanked. But said nothing about how my job had become a hopeless mess. Woke up this Sunday morning, convinced I'd put off telling Dad about my job until things were more settled, until possibly I had a new job. Anyway, I soon hustled over to see Mom, getting to her place about ten. The Lounge Lizard answered, said someone called in sick so Mom's at the restaurant. I was about to ask LL if Mom had forgot I was coming by, then thought better of it: The answer was self-evident. I left, didn't feel I owed LL any extra time, much less time *alone* with him.

Vegan With A Vengeance over by the University is kinda an up-and-coming institution. I mean, it's on a mission for folks who want to eat right, or some would say, self-righteously. Mom brags they tip well. A beat-up storefront between a store of used books and a recycled vinyl, tape, CD place. Weekends, the place is about brunch and like now the wait's out here on sidewalk benches, people mostly reading *Limbs*, the free alternative weekly.

You enter through a yellow wooden door, which is kinda weird with each side of the door frame having tall windows top-to-bottom, it's like you're opening this door in the middle of a glass window. Everyone, it seems, can see me come into the restaurant, but not Mom. Her back to me, she's walking away to a table, her brown, graying hair pulled back in a ponytail, the way she always wears it when she's on the

job.

She's a pair of coffees in one hand that can be honey-sweetened (apparently honeybees are such small animals they fly under the radar of the resident vegan overseers) and soy milk lightened or drunk black. After setting down the coffees, scribbling up the order, she turns, and seeing me here, walks this way. As ever, she has shadows under her eyes like she never gets enough sleep.

"What you doing here?" she says, slapping her order form against her black-aproned hip, heading this way toward the kitchen.

I step in beside her. "Don't you remember? I called Friday, told you I was gonna be here this morning, Gary sent me over."

"Why'd Gary do that? I never told him I was expecting you."

I clutch my forehead. Mom *did* space the fact I was coming down.

She tears off the new order and puts it on the kitchen pass-through and takes two heaping plates of what must be steaming tofu scrambles from the cook with the bandana-wrapped head, an eyebrow piercing and I'm outta her way as she goes back to the customers.

"Gary seems to remember me calling," I say.

"When did you say you called about coming?" she says to me over her shoulder.

"Friday."

"Maybe you should've called a second time. Don't remember you calling."

Mom shoots past me before I have a chance to answer. She snags two glasses of water off a tray by the coffee service and hustles past me, in a huff to the tofu slurpers, who evidently are having some problem with water being self-service here.

I follow her to another table where she starts taking a new order. Again, she walks past me toward the kitchen. I fall in step. "Must've

been cross-wires," she says, "something like that. You see I'm working now. Why don't you go back and hang with Gary. I'll see you at the place later."

I've about as much intention of spending extra time with that sponge brain as volunteering for a root canal. I spy an empty spot at the counter. "What if I sit down and have something to eat and then catch my bus?"

"Suit yourself. Sorry you wasted the trip down here, Ocean."

It goes like this for the next forty-five minutes. Enough time for me to get through one fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice, a tempeh scramble with brown rice and nutritional yeast gravy, a slice of mixed-grain bread baked under this roof, some marionberry jam, and two cups of green tea--an organic green tea from Brazil, of all places. Whenever I look up, Mom's dodging my way during her delivery of yet another two, three, even four plates. I know she has to do this. Gary has not, to my knowledge, earned any money legally in years.

Each time she comes by, I accept her restaurant smile even if she repetitively reminds me to confirm my plans with her next time. I wonder what that means. Do I ask her to write it down on a piece of paper when I talk to her on the phone, not knowing where on the spaced-out meter she might register with the Zig Zag Man roll'em-ups she and Gary habitually burn through?

This visit was a fiasco, I know, but I suppose I'll get used to meeting Mom where she is, in more ways than one. When I say goodbye and walk out on the sidewalk, I look back at Vegan with a Vengeance, wondering if like in some crazy movie Mom will run out the restaurant toward me, telling me, yes, she now remembers my call and knows once again I'm a dutiful son coming down from Portland to see her. She should never have agreed to pinch-hit for whomever called in sick. How was I to know? She runs up to me and grabs me like I'm her little Ocean, even if she's half a head shorter.

But no. Vegan with a Vengeance sits unmoved at the middle of the



block, no Mom in sight, so I turn on my heel and keep walking to catch a city bus back to the Greyhound station. This will have to be it for my Eugene sojourn. Yes, maybe play some video game at the station, kill an hour or so, then get back to P-Town and think about tomorrow down at the Tesla office. Steel myself for one more little chore.

**I**t's Monday morning. I'm downtown, ready to talk with Tom, ready to give him my resignation.

Tom's on the phone, so I'm stuck in the outer office, where the other side of the room, Karman's desk is empty: She's evidently on break. I'm anything but relaxed on the reception area couch, flipping through the latest ish of *Wireless World*, certainly not my first choice for reading material, especially when I'm hellbent to snip forever my Tesla ties.

Not too soon, Tom's off the phone and I'm in his office, sitting the other side of his heaped desk.

"I've been meaning to talk with you," Tom says with a faint scowl.

"Well, I was too. Here's something for you." I whip over my handwritten letter of resignation, folded in thirds, no envelope, something for him to read and know it's true, once I'm out of here, I've hung up my Tesla clipboard.

"What's this?" Tom's scowl deepens as he unfolds the paper. "What?" It's not like there are paragraphs to read. Just one sentence: *I've enjoyed working for Tesla Northwest Broadband and Wireless and regret to inform you that as of today, I am resigning my position as Field Representative.*

"I've quit," I say, wondering if Tom's stalling for an elaboration.

"Why? I was about to tell you your services are no longer needed," he says and slowly refolds my letter of resignation.

My jaw hangs open like I'm a witless fool, for I had no warning, no

idea. And didn't H. have me in tight with his dad, Tom's big boss?

"Your production's down and that eastside area needs a hustler to keep growing this company's presence over there."

Spare me, this sounds like whining: What have you done for me lately? Sorry, Tom, but I'm getting the hell out. Well, I'd like to tell him that, but he has more nonsense to drone.

"Yeah, you had a good week or two after you got going, but then it's been sinking, sinking, and sinking." Tom glares.

What? I should apologize?

"Well, it looks like I saved you the trouble of sacking me," I say, trying to get Tom centered in the here and now, with me about to walk.

"No, you didn't, we'd already started the process, so you can take this back." He slides my refolded resignation letter over the heap of his desk. He tugs open his desk drawer. "See, I even have your last commission check in here, plus another check for vacation time--all seven hours of it--that you earned."

I thought once I quit they'd just mail the checks and I've a mind to tell Tom to do just that, except hammering those hot checks once I get out of here and down the street to their bank is an irresistibly quick way to close out our association.

"You were about to be escorted out the door, Austin, no need to resign. You keep that letter, don't be dramatic." He flips a few pages on his desk calendar. "You haven't signed any contracts since the fifteenth, have you?"

"No."

"Good, then we don't need to mail you a check. I'll make a note you have no pending contracts."

He gives me two checks I slip inside the fold of my quit letter.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out," I say, an eye to the exit on my left. "I

just think it's best to try something else. Probably never would've settled on selling as my big ambition in life."

"Neither have I, that's why I try and get guys like you to do the work." Tom narrows his eyes. "I took a chance on you. I didn't know if you were hungry enough. I mean, first impression, mind you, but riding a bicycle around town doesn't tell me you're particularly ambitious." He gives me a cruel smile that cuts to the bone.

I entertain a fantasy: Ram these checks in hand down Tom's venomous throat, but I need the hard-nosed fucker for a possible job reference. I smile wanly. "Sorry couldn't contribute more," I say. "Might be for the best." I stand up, smile falling off my face, shake his hand in what we both know is a pointless gesture. Then I do get the hell out of Tom's stink hole.

**S**o there I was, no job, nothing more than those to-be-cashed one-time checks keeping me from joining the hoboes camping in Forest Park. After the bank, and after I spent an hour or so at the Oregon Department of Employment--knowing that place well, thanks to Planet Foods--I had a mind to go home and start on a beer, assuming I had any such liquid refreshment in the fridge, which I didn't.

I was pedalling back from downtown to my digs and even momentarily thought about finagling a bum outside a QuickBuy to get me--for a fee--a pack of six-way meditation in twelve-ounce cans. But I thought that was bowing down too fast to defeat, to Tom's calculated humiliation once he refused my resignation letter. So I kept pedalling the slight incline of the side street and at the apartment house was locking the wire donkey to the railing in back, when I remembered Cris. Just like that, the scene, us in the river, pops in my head. I hadn't thought about her all day, I realized, like I had obsessively done for more than a week. So boom, she was gone and boom, she was back.

It got strange once I walked around front to the stairs, and inside the lobby, banks of mailboxes, and I saw through the peephole in my

mailbox I had something.

I pulled out the envelope. Canadian stamp. Return address, "Cris, General Delivery, Tofino, BC, Canada." I practically dropped the letter. An eerie feeling ripened on the back of my neck. I relived a memory of her in the river and then she was giving me this letter? My hand clamped the letter and trembled. The other hand keyed the mailbox closed. I fought the urge to open the white, unremarkable envelope. Okay, I wanted to be sure nobody, but nobody, would interrupt my reading.

I rushed to my room, sprinting the stairs, dropped down in my easy chair, panting hard, holding this amazing message. First, I needed a drink of water.

Back to the letter, I sank into the chair again and held the letter up to the outside light. No sneak preview. But it felt like more than one sheet of paper.

With care, with deliberation, I tore a strip from the envelope end and tapped out the letter.

I unfolded the two pages and she was with me, or at least that form of her that was her handwriting, which I'd never seen before, but instantly liked, a harmony to the letters, no flash, but also not plain. My eyes sunk into her words:

*Dear Ocean,*

*You probably never expected to hear from me again. Maybe that's one reason I decided to write...*

*No problem getting here. Great waves & some other pleasant surfing pilgrims for company. But I've thought of you often and felt I left kinda abruptly, that we should have talked more...but you hurt your foot and it was important to get back to Portland ASAP and then--I just took off. Sorry I'm bad about that--always this need to keep moving.*

*Anyway, that Sunday night, we drinking tea, talking about my stay in Kyoto and such spiritual things that were running through my head. I'm afraid I didn't let you talk enough, for me to see where your heart was. For that I apologize.*

*I thought of something I wanted to add. Remember when I said, We're all actors in a very ancient and well-worn script & that we must regard ourselves casually? You said it sounded Shakespeare--maybe so, maybe that's how I thought it up.*

*Why regard our "selves" casually? Well, in a sense, the Buddhists, Nigari Buddhists too, are right, there is no real self. We just go along with the fiction there is a self. I know this sounds kinda weird, saying no self, but that is what spiritual leaders finally tell us. That's why those fabled lilies of the field are such a picture of contentment. They just are.*

*You see, everything connects to everything else in the universe and to think we can say any part of it is separate is finally foolish. That foolishness about being separate includes the self too. So the great religions try to pull us back on this path the mystics of the East and the West have figured out. That's really why I say regard ourselves casually, for there is really in the long run no self to regard, anyway. Get it?*

*You're probably saying, Sure, she runs around carefree from place to place, not tied down to a mortgage, much less a family. What does it mean if she says she believes in no self? Her life is pretty selfish as it is. I can see how you might think that & I've given it much thought. But the truth is I'm still lost in the forest trying to find what needs doing in my life.*

*I expect in a few years I'll quit these wanderings. I'll settle down to some real life's work I know will mean service to others because that is what I know will be my right livelihood. Something serving others.*

*I know all the above might leave the impression I am trying to give you advice. Please don't take it that way. I don't know if our paths will ever cross again. But in any case, I want you to know that you have a place in my heart and that if we were to meet again, I'd hope you'd*

*regard me as a friend.*

*Keep surfin'*

*Cris*

Wow. I sit here almost unable to breathe. My heart races.

I flop one leg over the arm of the chair, holding the letter out at arm's length. What is it about this woman?

The sun streams sideways through the window that looks out on busy Hawthorne Boulevard below. The sun reveals motes swimming in the air between here, where I hold Cris's letter and the open bay window where a symphonic *errrrrrrrrr-uhnnnnnn-uhnnnnnn* of traffic comes up and agitates the air.

A car drives by on the street, it makes noise, the noise rises like smoke to my windows and it disturbs the motes adrift like micro-sized hot-air balloons and they spin about. What does it mean?

Everything connects to everything else. And this letter, the same. It goes back to the days I spent with Cris, not really desiring her physically, but having this gift of keen acceptance by her.

Anyway, she'd brewed up this pot of special green tea and was pouring a small cup of it for me. A little bitter with a wallop of a puckery aftertaste. By the third swallow, I was hooked. I felt so relaxed drinking the tea and talking to Cris about fireflies, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and whatever else.

I felt at one point we had this closeness, the mental distance between us had started to go away. I was even thinking about breathing the air she had breathed out only moments before, the feeling got that close. As I said, not a physical thing, but this opening to each other, as if when we looked at each other with our eyes staying steady and still, the fire glow in our faces, somehow our souls' secrets slipped back and forth between us.

I know this doesn't make much sense, but when I was there it all made a kinda sense. Nothing to put in words, just a feeling of completeness and contentment, being with her. I'd give anything for that feeling again, but alas, Cris is in my life no more.

But then I could go buy some of that green tea and have it right here.

And that's what I'll do.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:  
O-CHA, ASEXUAL THING, AMERICORPS RECONSIDERED

I'm at Okayama Imports. I must've been by this little store, red banners outside, a hundred times, never had an excuse to come in. But now, green tea on my mind, I do.

This is no Planet Foods store. Inside, a row of white ceramic cats--splashed with red, black, and gold--line a shelf, each one sitting up, every left paw raised in greeting.

Stacked below the greeter cats are economy sacks of rice, twenty, fifty-pounders--back that car up to the front door. The store's everything Japanese. On the right, the kanji-title videos, the kanji-cover books, and many kanji-headline magazines. Shoji screens float up high on the wall over shelves of ceramic bowls--you get the idea. Food's the rest of the store. I could probably lose some time checking it all out, but I need green tea. And in this rabbit warren, some directions.

I'd ask the guy at the checkout, but Japanese-American teenager, gelled flattop haircut a la Bart Simpson, he's busy. Like Japanese-Americans I've known, he's neat to a fault. I wait, pretending to be interested in Portland postcards on this carousel rack.

He places this older woman's purchases in a blue plastic bag--she's Japanese-American too. He ties off the bag loops, presenting it with both hands as if it were a present. I half expect him to bow, to show respect for her age.

Another woman, a basket to check out, now waits and I drop the idea of getting attention. A woman works in the aisle ahead. I walk her



way.

"Excuse me," I say to this thin, older woman with faded jeans, an apron, red with yellow lettering, OKAYAMA IMPORTS, a taffy, collarless long sleeve shirt. "I'm looking for green tea."

"Oh, yes, green tea, let me show you now." She takes off, shuffling a few stutter steps. Her white tennis shoes seem big, too clunky for her slight frame. I follow.

We pass the refrigeration aisle, pass the canned goods aisle, down to and up the aisle of treats: rice candy, chewing gum, sugar-dusted gummy candies, rice wine, and sake.

"Here, plenty of choices, see?" She studies me, her dark eyes owlsh behind the reading glasses. "You've drunk *o-cha* before?" she asks, throwing out a language curveball, what must be Japanese for tea.

"O-what?" I say.

She sweeps her bony hand over boxes, tins, and packages of tea bags, tea in bulk, all of it presumably green tea. "See, all this Japanese tea, what they call *o-cha*. You've had some, no?"

"Yes, Sunday before last, for the first time. This friend, she lived in Kyoto for six months, made good green tea."

"Yes, Kyoto has many good *sen-cha*, green teas. You want tea in bags or bulk?"

"Bulk, definitely," I say, the memory of Cris measuring out spoonfuls of tea leaves into her little ceramic teapot. "That reminds me, I also need a teapot."

"Okay, I show you that next." She takes a finger to her thin lips, as if choosing. "I think this might be like your friend's tea." She hands me a green-and-white foil package, *Product of Japan* it says on back. "This excellent *sen-cha* from the Uji district in Kyoto, many tea plantations are there. Good price at three fifty-nine."

I'm not sure Cris's tea came in a package, but this woman, who I've decided is the mom in what's obviously a mom-and-pop store, seems so sincere. "I'll try this. Now the teapot, where are those?"

My Kyoto *sen-cha* in hand, I follow my store guide's tennies again, stutter stepping, retracing our steps back to the gift section, to this aisle full of delicate cups, mugs, dishes, sake cups and sake decanters.

By the teapots is a small sign, YOU DROP IT, YOU BOUGHT IT. "These are what my friend had," I say. "Little ceramic pot with a handle. The strainer's in the spout, isn't it?"

She picks one up, raises the lid, showing me, yes, a wire-mesh strainer covers the neck of the spout. "*Kyushu*. These little porcelain teapots everyone in Japan uses to brew tea. You drink tea in *yunomi*." She points to several small, handleless mugs. "You like any?"

"Oh, I kinda like this, sorta like what my friend had," I say of an indigo blue-and-white teapot with flowers. "So I can buy a teapot and one cup?"

"Yes, they're sold separately."

I turn the teapot over. Fifteen dollars. Whoa, but this is imported goods. And when you're trying to summon Cris, MADE IN JAPAN is worth extra expense. I tell her I'll take the matching cup too. She's suddenly flustered that I have three things and two hands and after asking what else, she carries the teapot and cup to checkout and our Asian Bart Simpson.

I almost feel like bowing after her, so quick is she back to the shelf-facing.

The total is more than twenty dollars and I've yet to drink one cup of tea. It's okay. I'm closer to that spirit of Cris.

After Bart takes most of my money, he proceeds to wrap and wrap. The teapot lid gets extra attention. Which is good. Going home, I'll hand-carry the tied-off plastic bag he now gives me. The basket on my

wire donkey can get bumpy.

I'm back at my place.

Hot water splashes away in the sink. I soaped the teapot good, sponging its inner recesses, wiping the outside every which way. The same for the mug. You never know who really handled these before I happened along. Calls for lots of water for a soap-free shine. Then set them aside.

Now the green tea. I scissor the top of the foil package and let loose the dry leafy contents in an empty jar. *Hmmm*. Will this bring back the spirit of Cris? But as she said, everything relates to everything else, even these green, crushed, lifeless leaves in a glass jar. They've something of Cris in them, and something from everything else, everywhere in the cosmos.

I spoon a teaspoon into the side-handled teapot, and the leafy fragments rest on the shiny, ceramic bottom.

The teakettle boils and off the burner, I let it sit a few seconds, let it come off the boil. This has to be right.

I sit the *yunomi* mug, three inches high, mouth somewhat narrower, by the teapot.

A pour of the teakettle into the teapot and the leaves come alive, swirling up, swimming in a mad circle as the steaming water climbs for the teapot lip.

I clink home the lid.

Then the wait, three minutes. I think about Cris. What that letter meant. What did she mean, no self to regard? Regard ourselves casually? Is that why she had this utterly cool way of showing her

physical self to me? That we found each other on this spiritual plane and the physical attraction, if any, was a sideshow? I think that's what it was with her and she knew I was with her on the quest. I told her all about what I was trying to do with OODL and she said I had a noble spirit. That is what she said. She said I had a noble spirit that was fighting to get out.

Oh, the tea's done.

I ever so slowly pour clear tea into the cup. It takes on a yellow-green cast, sliding toward the color of straw. I sip. *Ahhh*. Cris is back.

Whoever came up with the idea of green tea knew contentment. The warm tea slides into my mouth, past my teeth and spreads across my tongue that brings my taste buds alive with no bitterness, no tangy sting, just this warm essence that creeps up on cat feet, this little Japanese *neko* ready to pounce when you say, Is this all there is to green tea? Finally, you leave that question pending and swallow, the liquid rushing to the back of your mouth, sliding off the sides of your tongue, channelling to your throat when it happens.

The explosion, an aftertaste, a puckery sensation in your mouth, on your tongue, in your throat that leaves your tongue eagerly moving about asking, Is there more? And you give in, taking another sip. But this time you let the aftertaste die away naturally on its own and you sense in its diminishing titillations this is what contentment really is. Isn't this why the Japanese could spend three hours in a tea ceremony? Isn't this taste worth it?

And Cris is back.

Yes, she is. I'm drinking this tea and I understand why it was we could sit there and discuss the most arcane philosophical and religious meanings, and just sip this tea, without another thought in our minds, other than linking up to those pin points of light overhead, starry truths in a sea of blackness. We were so close to finding some cosmic insignificance for ourselves, for our petty selves to be subsumed under that black mantle of desert night sky. And I think the thing that kept us

grounded in the present moment out there was drinking this tea.

It tastes exactly the same as what she brewed. Now that I think about it, she did have a green-and-white foil package. Several, in fact. Stuffed in that cardboard box of food in the van. How was it then, I was down at Okayama this afternoon, that shopkeeper picked it out? It was from Uji, she said. It was like my friend's tea. I close my eyes, another sip.

The puckery taste does content and, soon, I will get up for Cris's letter and read it once more.

A guy could go crazy thinking about a woman who never returns. But our thing doesn't need physical presence anyway, I know. Cris touched me, left me this presence in my heart and I'm in her heart, she says. Every time I drink this green tea, I'll invite her spirit to be with me again. And that is not such a bad thing. I just have to figure out how to consolidate all this in my life.

The telephone rings.

I put down my tea and answer the phone.

It's H.

**W**e're here at LocoMotion and I have a pragmatic reason for another outing with H. Even went along with the idea of this new gentlemen's club he discovered. He is the one person at Tesla for whom I have the slightest interest in keeping a connection alive.

On the low stage before our table, dark-haired, Gothly white-skinned Candis dances--supposedly eighteen the emcee said. Could be, but her long legs are obviously learning on the job. H. laughs at the sluggish moves. I shake my glass of ice tea once, take a sip, nursing along my expensive drink. His attitude toward women is so miserable.

I figured, though, if I saw H. tonight I'd sound him out about Tom. If the guy's putting out bad information about me, I can forget Tom for a

job reference. And H., being on the Tesla payroll--though I don't know what he does other than shoot around town in that tomato-red Ferrari, running a few errands for his old man--could be my Tesla reference. Kinda far-fetched, but why not?

The sound system pumps out that song by 'Possum I like, gets reverb in this place like the walls are swinging along with Candis. Standing before us, her boots going nowhere, her hips break side to side, and sweat gathers under her breasts.

I suppose months ago, I might've fantasized, my fingertips reaching out to that glistening flesh, but not now. It's something about Cris back in Fossil. About wanting something that's not the cheap tease, not an easy thrill. H., though, studies Candis's moves.

"You ever get tired of coming to places like this?" I say. Maybe I'm trying to provoke. H. scrunches down and looks smug and content in his gray fleece pullover.

H. shakes his glass of juice, coaxing out a bit of ice to suck. "Why'd you ask? Don't you like seeing girls?"

H. gives me a smartass look, like with the Tommy Hilfinger duds, he's the young man about town on some diversionary interlude between scoring. I don't have a comeback, except I know it would have to do with that perfect, okay, emotional intimacy Cris and I had and I don't want to get into that with H. "Not this way," I say. "I might as well be some thirsty man watching a drinking fountain behind bars." I surprise myself that this apt analogy popped in my head.

"Well, a little window shopping never hurt," he says, toying with an ice chip in his mouth, conceding nothing.

"Window shopping," I say, "doesn't do much for me." I mean it too--I've found it's works better to get to know women as real persons from the inside out, not as some meaty externals.

"Yeah, but I keep hoping I'll see the one," H. says, his cocksure tone betrayed by a note of uncertainty.

"The one what?" I'm suddenly curious as that camel nosing under a tent.

"The one gets me hard."

"Gentlemen, give Candis a big hand," the emcee booms. I look past H., unsure I heard right. "She'll be back in just a few minutes once she changes into something new. So drink up and enjoy the intermission between what's always live dancing here at LocoMotion."

Candis minces off stage and I imagine the other side of that door some bruiser of a guy, who might be her pimp, waits to tell her what to do, I don't know. All I know is whoever has the hooks in her must be ruining her life.

I look back at H. He drinks the last of the apple juice. Did he really say that? He must've. That's what he said before Candis left and gave us this double-yawn intermission time. "Huh?" I say.

"You know, aroused."

"But you're here all the time. Maybe you overdosed."

"You don't understand," H. says, more uncertainty in his voice.

"Understand what?"

H. shakes his glass, emptied of color, slides a few unmelted ice chips in his mouth. "They call it being asexual," he says as if he were talking about a diagnosis for someone else. "My shrink says it's why I've never been aroused."

"Never?"

"Waiting for the first time."

"In your whole life?"

H. nods.

My gut feels nauseated, like I suddenly figured out I ate bad potato salad. Here I thought H. some silly dweeb of a rich kid hounding after

tits and ass for laughs. I lean back my head, take in the ceiling--it's uncomplicated. Life without sex? I don't know what to say. Never aroused, so he can't even be gay.

I look back at H. and his face has an odd calm, nothing like my unblinking surprise. And never aroused? *Hmmm*, can't lose what you never had. So H. probably accepts his situation more than the guys who go impotent. But they're always treating impotence. "Can't you take something for that. Hormone shots?"

"No, they say it's all here." H. angles his index finger at the side of his head.

"Bummer," I say. Across the way, the emcee skirts the stage, evidently ready for Candis's return. He holds the portable microphone like some metallic phallus. Honest.

H. glances across stage too and the emcee climbs up. "See, I thought this might be a cheap fix."

"Gentlemen, let's give Candis another hand," the emcee says. He could use another hand with that dildo thing he's clapping his free hand against. *Boom, boom, boom*, the music cranks up. The emcee scoots. Candis reappears: white sailor outfit, short skirt, white sailor cap jauntily perched on her black pageboy locks.

"What you gonna do?" I ask.

It's pretty obvious to me what Candis is gonna do for ten minutes. The sailor cap will fly into the audience. The short white, chevroned jacket will fall to the floor, later joined by the short skirt. I'm not exactly in suspense. I worry instead about H.

"Probably go back east," he says. "A clinic in Ohio, stay there for three months, at first."

In my mind, I picture a serene campus, one-story buildings. Surrounded by lawns and trees. Discreet sign out front, something uninformative like The Walker Institute. And all the local residents



*know* the place as an exclusive refuge for people who come from the world over. Say, if that Tesla Northwest fortune can buy H. one thing besides killer toys that go zoom.

Candis starts to move now, having dropped articles of clothing every corner of the stage. She wears nothing but a string bikini bottom. Music booms. "Man, I hope it works," I yell to H.

He leans close. "Hey, if it doesn't, would I ever know what I missed?" He snickers, a sign that reassures me he is not consumed by the self-pity I sure as hell would have.

Candis gives the guys some bounces and swings that weren't in her first act. A guy at a front table across the way clasps the sailor cap she tossed. His to take home, to sleep with on his pillow.

H. stares at our water-stained table. "Believe it or not, I want to have a family someday."

I'm speechless. All I can think is, I'd be willing to stay celibate for a long time, *if* H., when he goes back east, finally gets one of those liftoff moments that help us keep chug-chugging along through life.

**H.** telling me he can't get it up, he's never gotten it up, leaves my mind reeling. I mean my opinion of him changed one-eighty. You know, for some time, I took the easy opinion about the guy: spoiled rich kid, his dad too willing to fork out bucks for a Ferrari toy to keep the kid busy. But now?

Hey, think of the other reality: Crocodile capitalist dad manipulates, controls, intimidates everybody in his path. Why not his own son, warping him so that his body protests, or one part specifically? Forever flaccid. What a waste. I truly hope that clinic back east is on the up-and-up, figuratively speaking.

But the more I thought about the bad hand Fate dealt H., for whatever reason, the more I've decided a lot of this asexual thing, as his

shrink calls it, is kinda relative.

I mean, you could parade one hundred naked ladies through my apartment here and I--ready to greet the day once I get out of bed--would not have a single one get a rise out of me. How's that? Well, every one would have to be butt-ugly, I grant you, but see my point? When a guy's gangplank jumps up and out involuntarily, there's gotta be some attraction out there on the dock to engage his mechanicals, you bet. Which says there's a little of H.'s problem in all of us. None of us is gonna go creamy-dreamy for every woman on earth, even if we're down to the last one.

But H.'s problem doesn't sound like he's *so* discriminating he's waiting for that one woman, who might only exist on another planet, to fall to earth and turn him on. No, it must be, as he says, some wiring problem in his head.

But this shocker about H. got me thinking about how I'm still processing Cris from two weeks ago. When I was with her, I seemed to be on the tipping point of desire, and yet it was contained. How was that?

Okay, being in that river when I saw her, I might as well've been taking a cold shower, the water was snowmelt anyway. But it was something else. Fact remains, despite the fabulous body, Cris is significantly older. She obviously, in years gone by, has won and has lost at the game of love and it's not hard to imagine her attraction for men, say, ten years ago.

But life's more than that amusing game: It's played for keeps whether you know it or not. That's why every now and then I was seeing a look in her eyes. I can't exactly describe it. It seemed to be sad resignation. It's like the smiley surfer girl mask came off and I saw the real side of Cris she wanted me to know about. And that's how the desire for Cris was contained. No fantasies, see?

I couldn't imagine her as other than what she really was, what she was letting me in on. It's like she was saying with that look, hey, life's

pushed me around a bit, and you're about to go through the same problems. Here's some life questions I've been working on, okay? And Kyoto was part of the search for those answers. And by saying she had gone down this path I still had before me, assuming I was the kindred spirit she thought I was and which I think I am, it kinda brought us together spiritually, but kept us apart physically, if you get my drift.

In a way, Cris said my time would come soon enough to get that same sad resignation in my face too. So I should enjoy, for now, being twenty and accept I was too young for her. Well, I knew from the start I was younger. When I saw her again over at Powell's. When we had sushi and she said, How about going off with me this weekend? Only after she was gone, did I really know *why* I was too young for her. And that's some difference.

And speaking of people older than I am, I remember what I'm doing today. Had this flashbulb thought when I woke up this morning, just before I had to sort out H. again.

It was that Dr. Gosney who saw me about my foot. First to staple it, then to take out the four staples, last week. He liked what I was trying to do with OODL. He understood my feeling that I wanted to do something constructive with my life, not just fritter it away spending paycheck to paycheck. Do something to help society as a whole.

Anyway, Gosney said he'd been in VISTA, which got folded into AmeriCorps not that long ago, and he'd done this before medical school. He said more than once it helped him mature and that I, with my wanting to make a social difference, might look into it.

Well, tell you the truth, I just filed away his comments from the two times I saw him. I was too distracted by that screwed-up job at Tesla. I dropped it.

Until I opened my eyes this morning and that flashbulb pops in my head.

Consider, AmeriCorps would not be such a bad thing. Really. If it

is good enough for a medical doctor, then it's got *that* credibility. And once I get out, what I decide to do for college will be so much more focussed, I'm sure, and deciding what college will do for me now is a big hang-up, as you know.

Face it, the Tesla experience of selling convinced me outright there's painfully little money-grubbing instinct left in me. I want to do something like what I was doing with OODL--help people. But OODL was too much. I didn't have the energy, the people, the time, any of that, to pull it off right.

Now if I could work for the government and help people, why not? And security: never a worry about a heartless Tom or a mistaken Dennison ready to fire me.

I gotta, at least, get paperwork moving. That's what I'll do, get out of bed, get dressed, get out the bike and ride downtown to the Federal Building, get some info, yes, even get an application package.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN:  
BLIND LUST, FISH EYES, FEATHER DUSTER

The bike's locked to the rack in front of the Federal Building and I go inside. Past metal detectors, past the security guard, to the bank of elevators. No directory here. Back to the man in uniform.

"Floor twelve," he says.

The elevator doors roll apart on *12*, and a wall sign opposite the elevator says, *Federal Job Information Center*. I follow that arrow.

Pushing open the glass door, I see a woman sits behind the counter, staring into space, her eyes unfocussed, empty.

I'm not sure what to say: She's obviously blind, which seems quite a shame. Other than the empty eyes, the rest of her is alright, even attractive. She has a nice, long neck. I scope out the pamphlets everywhere, searching for something with AMERICORPS on it.

"Hi, what can I do for you?" she says. Her voice, earnest, surprises.

I turn back toward her, like that makes a difference, right? though I suppose with her sense of hearing, she knows I'm facing her. "Yes, I'm looking for AmeriCorps applications." On this table is a sea of government brochures. I don't know how Molly--that's her desk nameplate--keeps tabs on any of it.

"AmeriCorps applications, far table against the wall, behind you." I get this quiver in my back. The woman knows what direction I'm facing now? She knows there is a table behind me? "The rack holder on the left, in the top slots. See them?"

"Yes," I say. I take one of the AmeriCorps brochures, an application too. Then I take a second application. "Okay I take a couple copies? I'm afraid I'll make mistakes the first time."

"Go ahead. The government ran out of paper, I wouldn't have a job." I glance over, hear her chuckle and see pleasure stealing across her face despite the expression that's missing in her eyes. Now those empty eyes fasten on me, but I'm sure she sees absolutely nothing. I feel badly. She might be stuck here, public contact and all, only to be a government exhibit for equal opportunity. Then a better idea crosses my mind: She might've requested to work here, to let people know, as she ably shows, a sightless person can handle this job.

"You'll also need an SF 85," Molly says.

"Another form?"

"Yes, I have them here."

I walk to the counter, now certain she senses my every step. "Right here," she says, pointing left of where I stand. "If you have questions about the form, call me. Here's my number." She hands me a business card.

I'm feeling fond about Molly. There are so many people, no doubt like Molly in this world, who are basically nice and I worry they are underappreciated. I feel getting this application into AmeriCorps is even more the right thing to do.

"Well, I've never applied for a government job, I might take you up on it."

"A young man like you--" Molly says. I get slightly weirded, how does she have any idea how old I am? "--will find public service offers rewards you can't find anywhere else."

"Oh, that wouldn't be government PR, huh?"

"No, it's your voice. You're kind, you get satisfaction helping other people."

"Really, that's amazing. All from my voice?" I study Molly's face, to be sure she really can't see out of those empty eyes and, of course, she cannot. Maybe tell day from night. Maybe. "You know, your intuition's clicking. You wouldn't have any way of knowing, but some friends and I started Oregon Organ Donors League to get people to donate their kidneys, livers, that sort of thing, if they died." I purposely don't mention eyes, although that popped in my head first.

"Don't think I've heard of that group, but, yes, you sound like the sort of person AmeriCorps wants."

"I hope you're right," I say, getting ready to leave. "One more question, when I get this all filled out, I bring them back here, or mail them?"

"Either way's okay. If you bring them back, we can check that your application is complete and in any case, like I said before, if you have any questions, call me."

"I'll do that."

"If you don't have any questions, call me."

"If I don't have any questions, huh?" I laugh.

"Well, things pick up during the lunch hour, but as you can see, most of the time, it's pretty slow."

"I'll keep that in mind."

I don't know what comes over me, but looking at Molly I start to get ideas about being here with her, alone. She's helpless, in a way. This little cubby-hole office just has the one door in and out. It's walled-off from everything else. Oh, I'm leaving, but if I asked a question loudly, walking away, could I, say, turn the deadbolt on the door, keep up the chatter, come back to her? My chest bangs away like a steam engine.

Why am I thinking this?

"You can call me anytime, Monday through Friday, I'm always

here," she says with a giggle. Teasing, maybe. Or an invitation?

I want to say bye, but my throat's too tight to speak.

I gotta leave.

I gotta get out of here.

I staggered out the Federal Building, absolutely distracted by those haunting empty eyes, twelve floors up. I was shocked that arousal hit me out of nowhere. I was so jumpy and my fingers so stiff with the rush, I had to cajole the lock to open and free my bike.

I escaped on the wire donkey, the AmeriCorps stuff in the basket, and pretty soon I was on the Hawthorne Bridge, at last feeling calmer, the Willamette River waters lazing far below. I got off the bike and stared and tried to make sense of it all.

Those emotions about Cris had a life of their own. Even if I had thought of her, for all those reasons I've gone into, so nonsexually. But that's like blocking a river, it only comes out somewhere else. Then I ran into Molly, not a woman, physically, who normally would attract me. No way, Renee. Possibly even a bit pathetic, first impression, but she comes on to me.

Yes, absolutely she *was* coming on. And maybe this was because I hadn't been with a woman in a while, my hungry libido got jumpy. As if I'm having thoughts about empty-eyes Molly. Like I was going to lock that door. But that idea was so repulsive, I almost gagged and had to get out.

I had to get out, didn't even say bye, just shoved the door back.

But, for sure, this thing with Cris has left me confused about women. It might be time for me to have another talk with my bud Brianna.



I phoned Brianna to see when she wasn't busy. True, she was free from hours in the service of OODL, but that's been, I suppose, just more time to run with girlfriends, clubbing, dancing to early hours. It had been a month since we and her cousin Ethan decided to fold OODL after our public skewering by the TV station. Since then Brianna and I had talked on the phone once. That time Brianna was especially cheery after I admitted being out in Eastern Oregon with an older woman, but as I teased her, "not that much older." I said a little about Cris, just a little. "Still sorting it out," I said.

So this time I call, Brianna had the earlier phone call in mind, she wanted the scoop: "What's up with you?"

"Can I come by, bring some Chinese takeout? Make some green tea afterwards?"

"Be here," she said.

We've finished the takeout, slipped off the bar stools at the breakfast nook by the small kitchen of the apartment Brianna shares with her mom. I've only seen Brianna's mom once or twice because she's a night nurse at St. Vincent's and always seems away.

Before we finished the last sliver of bok choy in the chow mein, I'd told Brianna the essentials of my long weekend with Cris, including the skinny-dipping, though I sorta skipped lightly over the Kyoto monastery story. Too involved. I knew Brianna's eyes might glaze over--that business with Buddhist koans, especially.

Brianna rinses dishes and I go to getting water boiling in a small pan for tea.

"You know the first thing I did after she drove away?" I say.

She towels off a plate. "You found a pencil, wrote down her license number."

"No, serious. See this." I point to the small bubbles forming in the

water on the bottom of the pan. "That's called 'fish eyes.' Water's the perfect temperature for a fine green tea like what we've got here." I take the pan off the burner, measure a teaspoon of *sen-cha* into the porcelain *kyushu* I brought over, and Brianna studies me as I delicately pour water into the teapot. The green leaves come swimming to life.

"Once Cris left, first thing I did was go out and buy stuff to make green tea like this."

"I bet green tea reminds you of her--" Brianna glances away, lips parted and that fabulous overbite suggesting she's on idle with plenty more to say.

"Every time." My tea brewer's eye is hawkish on the wristwatch for the two minutes. "You have any small mugs?" I ask. Brianna opens the cupboard, brings down a pair of small, narrow, straight-sided cups. "Those'll do. I tell you, I've been thinking of Cris so much, wondering if I let her slip away."

She holds a cup cocked in each hand like she's ready to juggle if I waste too much time on my brewing ritual. She sets one on the counter, presumably mine. Then her face goes serious, rare for the Brianna I know. "But you said she was too old for you."

"So I thought, but what I didn't know was she'd get this hold on me after she left." I gotta stop before I tell Brianna about how that video in my head with us wading in the river played over and over those first days she was gone. Two minutes are up and I pour a half cupful of tea into the first cup and, my little *kyushu* in hand, motion for her to set down the second cup. A second pour, half a cup.

Brianna gingerly takes a sip.

"What do you think?" I'm savoring the flavor of this *sen-cha* that seems to taste even more delicate than what I made back at my place.

"Probably has nothing to do with sex," Brianna says.

"I thought we're tasting tea." And despite my recent uncool fantasy

about Molly--a flash of sexual repression for a few panicked minutes--I think Brianna's right: Cris's hold on me's not sex.

"Oh, that too." She raises her cup. "I was just thinking you and Cris talked religion a lot."

"Her stay in the monastery, stuff she'd read."

"Monastery's pretty far from sex." Brianna shoots me, between sips, one of those I-rest-my-case looks. "Not bad," she says, her index finger tapping the rim of the cup.

"So you think it's that I want to talk with her again?"

"Could be," she says. "More likely, she got you seeing a the world all new."

"What do you mean *new*? My parents were these hippies, this Dawning-of-the-Age-of-Aquarius stuff was everywhere."

"Maybe you needed someone else to hear it from."

"Could be." I empty my cup of its last sip and see Brianna's not quite ready for another shot of what's left before I try a second steeping of these tea leaves.

"It's like she showed you what you've wanted to do. Drink green tea, be kinda light."

I smile. It was much more than that. "You know I did figure out something, what I want to do next," I say.

"What's that?"

"I'm filling out an application to join AmeriCorps. I'll be joining the American tradition of service," I say, repeating a phrase I read in one of the brochures. Then I remember Molly and know, for sure, I'll mail, not drop off, the application.

**A**fter visiting my bud Brianna, flashbulbs got to popping in my head all the time: My world, suddenly, had possibilities. No longer was I an out-of-work, disgraced tabling man, longing after a woman impossible to love. I had roots now.

See, I'm Ocean again. I was into one of those forms in that AmeriCorps app where they say they run everything past the FBI. All those first-name blanks. "Austin" or "Ocean"? That was the question, staying with "Austin," then another question about aliases. I remembered Cris liked "Ocean." I made the easy choice, put down "Ocean."

Oh, Brianna got me right about Cris. Cris unlocked the me that hated Tesla and reintroduced the real Ocean, the one who'd join up, serve in AmeriCorps. I buzzed through that app. I sipped green tea. I obsessed about Cris no more.

And from that moment on, I expected to get into AmeriCorps. Why not act like this person I wanted to be? Why not act like I was in AmeriCorps? More flashbulbs popping, the change was happening right then, right there, from the inside out.

The app done, except for one minor unfinished detail--probably months of AmeriCorps bureaucratic silence stretched out before me. I needed a job now.

So back to Reality Land, I sucked it up and inched through the familiar want ads. I was thinking humble. Nothing special, just a job. Bike messenger, good. Meter reader, good. Janitor, good, no, excellent. They sleep in late.

I called a slug of janitor positions. Answering machines, then my message, then "thankyouverymuch." Finally, a live woman's voice. She asked if I'd come by at four-thirty. I got the directions.

**I**t's four thirty-five and in a basement, windowless room with dingy, white walls and hums and buzzes of fluorescent lights overhead, I'm

sitting on the one unused chair in this room surprisingly not piled high with paper. Across from me, at a desk layered with more papers than anyone could make sense of in a year, is the hapless wife of the owner of GoClean Janitorial Services, Mrs. Glazynko. She looks vaguely peasantry, as does Mr. Glazynko, who's talking on the phone, loudly, in an inner office no bigger than a phone booth. His door is open.

I was early and the last thing I expected in a downtown office after the comfortable digs of Tesla Northwest was to be sardined with these two people amid enough papers to fill banks of filing cabinets that unfortunately would never fit in this room.

*Kerchunk, kerchunk, kerchunk.* Mrs. Glazynko hits adding machine keys, totalling numbers from one paper she holds.

If I'd known I was in for a claustrophobic challenge, I might not have showed up ten minutes early.

But it's okay. I can watch Mrs. Glazynko *kerchunk* until her man gets off the horn. All I hope is that if I'm hired, she makes out the paycheck with a bit more dispatch when it's for Ocean Gebthart. And with all these papers, who knows, it might still get lost.

The *kerchunking* stops. Mr. Glazynko, off the phone, stands in the doorway, looming like a stocky refugee from a Ukrainian collective farm, but for all I know he could've drove taxis in Moscow. Steps over to me, now that I'm standing, and puts out a hand.

"Boris Glazynko and you are?"

"Ocean Gebthart."

"You met Ludmilla, it's her making this business hum." Mrs. Glazynko colors and fusses with papers. "So you want job?" he booms. He looks me up and down, as if making sure I have no defects that would keep me from performing what must be pretty physical work. And smiles I'm not saddled with a short leg or anything, I suppose. I don't have a clue what's in his mind, other than he seems like a pretty basic guy, not given to any subtle nuancing of the situation. He gives a

pained look around the room and turns back to me. "What you say we go up to the first floor, to the coffee shop there, and talk?"

"Sure," I say, as if I have a choice, right? This is the interview coming up and present surroundings seem little more than a hangout for paper shuffling and phone calls.

We leave, walk in the yellowy light of the low-ceilinged corridor to the exit marked STAIRS. Boris, who seems mid-thirties, chatters on about the office being temporary and how he wants to get an office elsewhere in the building, with windows, but is on a wait list.

At the coffee shop, Boris pays the cashier, gets two cups and we do self-serve from the pump pots and sit down at a small two-chaired table.

"So what makes you think you want to do janitorial?" Boris asks.

"I've always been a neat person," I say, giving him what he obviously wants to hear. "And cleaning offices at night, I could get some other job during the day." I add this last remark, certain Boris is a recent Russian emigre, hellbent on materialistic success in the land of opportunity and I'm his kinda guy.

"Admirable goal you have, yes, this would be a good job for you that way. For me, I don't know yet." He frowns and I'm sure he's putting me on, teasing me to see if I really want the job or if I'll be here a week and gone after a quick hit of money. "I used to have lot of Russian boys working for me, but they all got other jobs, wanted more money than I pay. They liked me at first because I give them jobs, they not have to speak the English that well, okay? But they go away too soon, leaving me to find more people, dependable, loyal people. Are you dependable, are you loyal?"

Of course the verifiable answer would be for me to tell him, Ask my last two employers, but I know they're no recommendation. And God help me if he were to ask for a DMV search and turn up the DUI. So I realize this is man-to-man, that I need to just give him my word and cross my fingers. "If I'm not dependable and loyal, then don't pay

me, okay?" I reach my hand over to him, like he's going to go for it.

He doesn't. He gets this puzzled look.

I pull back my hand.

"I appreciate you want to do good on the job, but I worry about where you be six months. Will the job be too little for you? Do you have higher ambitions, this I don't know."

Well, neither do I, to be perfectly honest, I want to tell him. All I can say is GoClean Janitorial Services seems like the right humble job for me now. "I'm only twenty," I say. "And I don't have plans for college yet. Maybe in a few years, I don't know. My dad teaches college in Eugene and he wants me to go."

Boris's eyes sparkle. "Your dad is a professor, no? You must come from a very good family. What does he teach?"

"Several things, but mostly Geography."

"Yes, it must be good to come from so intellectual a family. I worry now you be bored on the job."

If he's thinking my family is intellectual, he should meet my mom. "I've an active interior life," I say. "I won't be bored on the job."

"Active interior life, what is this?"

"You know, I like to day-dream."

"Yes, day-dream, good thing for this job. But make it night-dream." He laughs. "No work when sun is out, only when it goes down."

My nerves seem springy, so I pick up my cup of coffee with both hands. Not Boris. He leans back in his chair, one-handing his cup. This feels like one of those interviews where the guy is trying to read his gut feeling on you. He doesn't ask any of those stale "Where do you see yourself in five years?" questions interviewers must get out of a handbook. No, Boris is a by-the-seat-of-his-pants kinda guy. And I have

no idea how I come across. College professor's son pushing a wet mop-- what's wrong with this picture?

"Tell you what," Boris continues. "You way too smart stick in this job for years. This I know. But I also sense you're an honest person, that you want this job for now. I make you an offer, okay?"

"Sure, what's that?"

"You agree work six months?"

"Oh, easily," I say, seeing six months of not having to look for another job as a great change from being let go twice in less time than that.

"See, I'm tired of people leave after two months, three months. You make it through the first week, I'm sure you can get through six months, okay?" He puts down his cup of coffee and shoots his big hand over the table at me. We shake hands. The deal is done.

"You won't regret this, Mr. G. Thanks," I say.

"What's with Mr. G? Call me Boris, okay?"

"Sure, Boris."

**O**kay, I'm three months into janitorialing for GoClean. It's already November.

When I first started, all mustachioed Nando, our team leader, would let me do was vacuum hallway carpet. I've moved on. Here's my humongous trash bag-lined garbage can on wheels. This and the vacuum I push office to office. Strapped to the garbage can is one big, pocket-lined yellow plastic apron. Everything for any cleaning situation I'm likely to come across. I mean spray bottle of Kwik Klean glass cleaner, a puffy pink acrylic fiber duster, a spray can of Pledge for wood furniture, Ajax and a sponge, some Twinkle stainless steel polish, the essential Vanguard Graffiti and Mark Remover Gel, Soft Touch Cream Cleanser, a loose towel or two and plenty of replacement garbage bucket plastic liners.



Tall, happy-go-lucky Pele goes by, pushing a cart loaded with Jonny Mops, toilet paper rolls, paper towel bundles, and a mop and bucket he just filled with water. He's the bathroom detail man. That's all he does for any of these buildings. The other guy on the team, Ricardo, vacuums halls, taking over my first job. Now Nando and I vacuum inside offices, empty trash cans, and generally cake things out so it looks like, you know, another professional GoClean visit during the night. We each have our things to do and without complications, like a spilled drink on the carpet, we'll have this two-story building done in about forty-five minutes and we'll be on to our next building. It's moving, but I like it; the time goes by faster.

I'm finishing this office, feather dusting, when Pele's outside the door. The guy looks like anything but a janitor. Unlike Nando who wears his hair in a tidy crewcut, Pele's locks shine with hair oil in an Elvis-style pompadour.

"Hey, man, I need your help."

"Oh, let me get out of here," I say, a few last, perfunctory swipes to the front of the desk.

"Just for a minute." Pele's voice hints surprise about something that takes more than one person to clean up.

I follow him to the bathroom and see immediately the problem. Something like five hundred paper towels all over the floor. Something you sorta expect from a guy whose heart is not one-hundred percent in the job. Fortunately, he hadn't started to mop. They're all dry.

"See, man, we gotta pick all these up and put them into that metal holder. Otherwise, I won't have enough for the rest of the bathrooms."

What a drag. We get down on our knees and pick every last one of them up. It seems to take forever, getting them all lined up. Finally, Pele and I have about four different piles of the paper towels and he opens the towel dispenser again and carefully we fit all of them in. Of course, these folded paper towels don't overlap so one towel pulls out the next,

but that's not our problem. We don't have extra paper towels. And getting all those towels repacked so they overlapped would have taken all night.

"Some things not good to hurry," Pele says. He grins. "I open this too fast.

This is the way it goes, night after night.

Yeah, three months working with this team of amiable night owls have gone by and still I haven't heard anything about the AmeriCorps application.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: GORILLA MAN, DINOSAUR DIESEL, SNOOT HOUSE

I'm starting to worry my application will go nowhere in the holiday shuffle. Tomorrow's already Thanksgiving. I bet I'll still be waiting after New Year's. Maybe make good on the promise to work six months I gave Boris.

Anyway, tomorrow it's the earliest Greyhound south for Eugene. Gonna spend Turkey Day with Dad and--for real--his second family. I want to see what that's like.

See, after Mom moved in with Sponge Brain, Dad was in pretty bad shape. If he were honest about the situation, he would have admitted he needed to live with a woman. Some guys back to save themselves. Dad's not one of those. He most certainly is lost without a woman to look after him.

Fortunately, whether he knew it or not, Dad wasn't hopeless for the singles scene. Late forties, he's not bad-looking. He hasn't let himself go like a lot of guys his age. Beer guzzling doesn't figure in his daily habits. I was sure he'd be reasonably attractive to the right woman. One looking to hook up with a professor type. One who'd have an appreciation for something more than the lowbrow pursuits Mom finally embraced without apology.

Anyway, two years after Mom left, Irene has moved in. I haven't seen this woman. I'm curious. And the same for the two kids from her prior: Emily, Hudson, sister, brother, ten and eight, respectively. Oh, what joy when we merge and make a new family that's not quite what

we intended all along.

Dad lives several blocks south of the Greyhound station in Eugene--very convenient. So I walk. Not many steps, really, but they add up to one small hike for a Thanksgiving dinner appetite. Cool morning, gray skies, they wanna send you indoors. It rained overnight and it's gotta rain again today. The wet, fallen leaves are plastered everywhere.

Before I'm up the front stoop of the funky bungalow, Dad pulls the door open. Grizzled Dad with his ponytail is built like a small bear of a man. He's kept his collegiate wrestler's physique from when he was first-string in the welterweights, though that fighting spirit never carried over to any desire to go to Vietnam. His struggle to stay in college was not grades, he's always said, but with the draft board's designs on his future. Cheshire-cat smile, his teeth have the perfect alignment of an orthodontist's "after photo." In fact, it was braces on his teeth through his early twenties that kept Dad out of the Army. Worked better than shooting himself in the foot, he's always joked.

This is great. No longer in this house by himself, Dad's the picture of a reborn man, wearing a burgundy cardigan--a color I've never seen him wear before--one with that "gift from new life partner" aura. Inside, the thing I notice besides Dad's new ebullience, is *improvements*. Like the living room no longer suffers the neglect of an inhabitant who's mending a broken heart.

"Let me take your coat," Dad says. We shake hands like it's been too long since I've been down here. I slough off my parka, which he hangs on the coat tree, and ready to introduce me to everyone else, he says they're, at this minute, all over the house. I look twice at the sofa on the right that, for decades, was distinctively tattered. It's now covered in a bright print slipcover. Man, this place is picked up, passes my first janitorial test.

"You must be Ocean." Irene's at the kitchen door, wooden spoon in one hand, wearing a cook's apron. Her solid body suggests a mom

who's nurtured children well, the latter evidently upstairs keeping themselves entertained. Irene's voice I recognize from a little chit-chat on the phone the times I've called Dad. I decide Dad's done well for himself when I see that jokester's twinkle in Irene's eyes as she tells us dinner will be ready about three--plenty of time to hang out.

From Mom to Irene, what a change for Dad. I suppose it's time passing. I'd like to think Irene, now back in the kitchen, and Dad, whom I'm following up the stairs to find the kids, could also have found each other in a Seventies commune, instead of Lane Community College, where they both teach. It's her perennially optimistic rosy complexion--I could see a younger Irene one hippie chick, possibly pregnant, wearing ankle-length, ethnic print dresses, her blonde hair falling well below her shoulders. Could've been or not, in any case, Irene's moved on, unlike Mom, who's still thinking Seventies forever.

On the second floor, we find Emily and younger brother Hudson absorbed in TV cartoon mayhem that leaves buzz-cut carrot-top, freckled-faced step-brother howling and flopped on the shag carpeting below a new barroom-sized wall TV that's also newly moved in. Demure Emily, toying with a braid, sits on the den couch, not cracking a smile at her brother's active enjoyment of Gorilla Man, who goes through ordinary life, I gather, as a gorilla. But when disaster threatens, he changes into his human disguise with super gorilla powers. *Eeeeowwww*. On the screen, life-sized color, Gorilla Man, the human version in white shirt and tie, pounds fists on his chest in the middle of a high-jacked subway car. Hudson *skooches* forward on his butt as if to see better. The view must look like the TV screen is about to topple into his wide eyes.

Obviously, with the Gorilla Man cartoon running open-throttle, Dad's being halfway through the doorway counts for zilch.

"Look who's here," Dad announces. "Ocean's down from Portland for that dinner your Mom is working so hard on."

Emily, who slouches on the sofa in her cashmere sweater and pedal

pushers, and artfully jiggles a clog on the foot of her crossed-over leg, rolls her eyes. "We *can* be like other people and go out for dinner."

Hudson, flat on the floor, flops his arms, not bothering to look at either Dad or myself. "I don't want turkey, I want mashed potatoes and gravy and fried chicken." He clenches his fists like he's serious.

Emily again rolls her eyes. "If we go out, I don't want fast-food." She scowls at Hudson, who now absorbed in Gorilla Man's swinging from a cable between office buildings, seems to have spaced his sister.

Dad turns to me, nods in the direction of the kids, says, "They seem pretty busy, what do you say we go out for a walk? It's a nice brisk day."

"Catch you later, guys," I yell to the step-siblings and we turn and walk back downstairs.

I follow Dad, his head with gray, swinging ponytail, down the steps and like him, take each muffled footfall deliberately.

"Dad, these stairs, what's with the carpeting?"

Dad stops, turns. "Irene had this done last week, she thinks it'll be quieter," he says with an enthusiasm, true, but a light enthusiasm, as if Irene paid for it from her income, which I'm afraid is every bit the equal of Dad's. What a change from Mom, whose best job, pay-wise, has been waitressing.

In fact, as Dad takes the last few steps to the landing, as he looks through the kitchen door, as he tells Irene we're going outside to walk, as her cheery voice urges us to "Have fun," my face feels frownfully heavy with the idea I *am* seeing this right. Wide-screen TV, professionally installed carpeting--and now that Dad and I are out on the front stoop--even the idea of that second car--Irene's Acura--at the curb. A lot's changing for Dad.

Maybe it was Mom never bringing home a second income got me in the habit of buying clothes at Goodwill. Dad and Mom, in their

frugal, hippie ways, would always be joking, Why buy new?

I slide my hands in my parka pockets, fall in step beside Dad on the sidewalk. We shuffle over wet leaves. Gray skies seemingly loom closer through bare-branched trees, threatening our walk with rain. "So, Dad, that *enormoso* TV, have you gone corporate dream consumer on me? Whatever happened to the hippie dad I grew up with?"

Dad's not exactly overdressed, peacoat, the wool hiking pants he tends to favor for inclement weather, and some no-name scuffed-up running shoes, so the accusation doesn't really fit this gray ponytailed professorial type I'm with. His face admits a grin, like he's thought about the changes for his life with Irene too. "I'm still here, I'm still the same, everyone else has changed, that's all."

Dad's right. I know he's not about to blow off his past values and slide into self-indulgence, but I'm sure being father now to Emily and Hudson will not be the back-to-nature, TV-free, home-schooled (at times) commune family experiment my sister Charity and I enjoyed. I mean, obviously growing up had its pluses and minuses, but the good parts were very cool.

"I know you haven't changed, Dad," I say, sure his relationship with Irene is still taking shape and I'd best leave off the questioning. Still, if I ever come down to see Dad again, and the ponytail is gone, then I don't know. And that could happen--women make those sorts of demands.

We don't talk for a while. We're at the end of the block, stepping off the curb and booting through piles of raked leaves. The streets, for now, have a football-on-TV spooky quiet: Everyone's inside, except for us.

"So you're thinking of joining AmeriCorps," Dad says in an encouraging tone, but still changing the subject, which I was about to do anyway.

"I filled out forms. Now I'm waiting to hear. It's been months and

there's no place I know of to call." I get a gnawing twinge in my stomach, the idea my application, my future got lost on the wrong desk somewhere. It's a worry I deal with by telling myself, If it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen.

"I always figured you might end up doing public service of some sort."

I bend over and pick up a nice stick, not a walking stick, but a skinny poking stick. I flip the stick around to its top and snap off the branches, making the stick a more sensible pointer. "How's that?" I ask, marvelling at the stick now, guessing it to be probably mankind's first tool--but what was it used for?

"You were all of what--four years old?" Dad says. He momentarily slows his steps, recollecting. "We lived over at Kearney Road, the house before we joined the commune. Anyway, that year we had terrible hot weather in August. I mean one-hundred degrees, two weeks straight."

I flex the stick against the sidewalk, its light scraping leading me to guess even now in some aboriginal societies, these sticks are used to probe anthills, something like that. "So?"

"Well, everyone was complaining about the heat and we had all the windows open, no air conditioning. Mom got the idea she'd mix up lemonade for you two kids and we put all the ice cubes and frozen lemonade in this big pitcher and stirred it up and poured everyone a glass. I thought that was the end of it."

"You remember something that far back?"

"Sure. Listen, you hadn't drunk but three or four swallows, when you started talking about our next-door neighbor, Mr. Bemis, how hot he must be."

I idly toss the stick, leave it. "So what happened next?"

"You kept saying, over and over, we had to take lemonade to Mr. Bemis. Finally, I gave in and walked you over there with the pitcher."



"And that you decided was how a public servant acts?"

"A good one. You weren't satisfied drinking lemonade, you had to wonder how other people were doing in the hot weather." Dad casts me a foxy grin, like he mighta seen my AmeriCorps plans before I did.

"I'll remember, twisted by nature toward public service as a mere lad." We both laugh. Up ahead of us, there's nothing but dark sky to the west and scud clouds shoot overhead. "Maybe we should turn around, head back for shelter," I say.

"I think you're right," Dad says, stopping and giving the storm clouds a hard look. "Which brings up another of life's lessons."

"Which is?" I ask. We turn and start back for the house.

"Wherever you go in life--"

"There you are," I say.

"That too. No, you gotta eventually come back the same way. Keep that in mind and you'll always be okay."

It's Dad's professorial bent that leads him, I know, to utter such self-evident platitudes. Nice homilies like, Don't do anything you'll regret. You end up paying for it over and over in the future. He's telling this to the guy busted for DUI?

"Guess what," I say. "I'm going to be able to legally drink in less than four months."

"Hey, if you do, better stay away from the wheel of a car." He winks.

"Not a chance. I get along fine without one. Cars are a necessary nuisance for other people. My wire donkey's all I need."

"If you ever change your mind, let me know. We can find you a good used car," Dad says. The possibility of seeking out wheels to buy on the cheap seems to momentarily engage the money-scrounging dad I've always known, the one who's got no Joneses to keep up with, who

only wants to get by. My shoulders go slack and I let go the thought there are any big changes ahead in Dad. He's the same Dad, and like he said, he's old wine in a new bottle, that's all.

We're back at the bungalow. Dad pushes open the front door and we go inside ready to ask how dinner's doing.

**W**e're five at the dining room table now. Faces glow in the candlelight and whiffs of steaming aromas promise good eating. Emily, across from me, has changed into a slinky gray dress and put on lipstick, like she *could* be somewhere else. Hudson, next to me seems exhausted from the 'toons. He's not squirmy and tells anyone who cares what he's planning to eat and what he'll refuse from the bounty of turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, string beans, cranberry sauce, creamed corn put up by dint of Dad's agrarian labor this year, fresh dinner rolls warm enough to melt butter. For myself, I'll keep my fork when I'm done. I peeked in the kitchen: A sweet potato pie's cooling on the counter.

Irene, at the table end nearest the kitchen door, dips a nod Dad's way, on my right. "Irene, why don't you say grace," he says. I'm sure this was arranged. There's been no grace given in this household for years, not after our commune broke up. No matter, Emily and Hudson's eyes close like it's a daily thing.

"Oh, Great Oversoul," Irene says, "the mind that guides us through our days, we give thanks to the men and women who worked to make this meal possible." No pre-feminist mossback, Irene. "To the farmer who rode a tractor across dusty fields to turn the soil that grew our vegetables. To the truck driver who brought our turkey to the market. We give thanks to those men and women who stocked the shelves of the grocery store. We thank the sun that made our food grow. We thank the rain too."

The phone rings. My eyes open.

Dad scoots his chair and is on his tiptoeing way to the kitchen to pick it up.

Irene frowns but continues to offer thanks for the hapless dinosaurs that gave their all to become diesel fuel to power the food trucks to market. Certainly, she is not teaching Emily and Hudson to take anything for granted. Dad mumbles in the kitchen.

Having given more thanks than I imagined possible, Irene utters the action word: Amen, which I readily second.

Then Dad's leaning through the kitchen door with the wall phone in hand. "It's Charity, she's calling from Iceland." My twenty-six-year-old sis teaches Air Force brats at the base in Keflavik. She loves it, according to what Dad's said, but having been there going on a year, she might have a different story now.

Irene gets up and moves around the table with Hudson's plate, confirming what he'll eat. She doesn't seem visibly upset about the interruption, though the timing after her hours in the kitchen is terrible.

Dad's back with us. "Ocean, you talk with your sister. She called to say hi. She knows we've sat down to dinner." Dad seems a bit flustered, uncharacteristically so, and I suspect it's the two-family merger, even Charity's here, telephonically, so traditional meal and all, he wants to get it right.

I go in the kitchen, pick up the receiver. "Hi, Sis," I say, the sound of her familiar voice has a holiday rightness, like who else, if not relatives, tie up your phone on Thanksgiving?

She seems to like Iceland and I ask her about the food, keeping an eye on the dining room scene where I'm the empty chair. Sis tells me to keep her posted on what I'm doing, something I've been woefully remiss about. Oh, not that we're really close, but once Mom moved out, everything has been kinda an emotional mess I've been keeping to myself.

She says Dad has her address. I tell her I'll write when I get, cross

my toes, exciting news from AmeriCorps. Sis says I'm a natural for the domestic Peace Corps. I say I can't think of anything better for my life now. I throw my head back, knowing what you want and getting it: two different beasts to hunt down.

We wind up, say goodbyes. I'm about to again sit down at the table, to be with Irene, Dad, Emily, and Hudson, when this *deja vu* feeling, something from talking to Charity, a little mind shudder, really, catches up with me.

Behind my obligatory smile, I realize this has happened before. Unrelated families, at a meal, trying to be a family. Yes, the Spring Creek Commune. Charity's voice on the phone brought it all back.

We eat seriously through a few rounds of the plates and the eats are capped by that sweet potato pie, as perfect a finish to great home cooking until next I see Dad and Irene. The afternoon hours have just slipped away--it's already five. It's time to say goodbye, time to get back on the bus.

Dad drives me to the station, to be sure I get an early bus out. Aboard the bus, I slump in the seat, wave to Dad below. He raises a hand in salute and has the slightest curve of a smile on his mouth that's also tight-lipped, stoically sad. I realize the rushed hours today were hugely shaped by memories.

On the Interstate, northbound, the farmland zips by in the deepening dusk and I let my mind drift to those years of Dad's original family. Charity, me, Mom, and Dad.

When I was about five or so, we lived in a huge farm house, must've had at least five bedrooms upstairs. It wasn't a working farm as such, just fields of weeds, blackberries beyond belief, and some oaks near the creek we'd play around and climb.

This was the Spring Creek Commune, as Dad called it. Two other families and this single guy all lived there too. What was there? Twelve people total. Out of this one house, people coming and going all the

time, but the one thing everyone agreed on was we'd try to have our nightly meal together.

We'd all show up for dinner, freshly scrubbed, and that alone had everyone in an up mood, it seemed. Sure, at times people disagreed, someone forgetting to buy milk or butter at the store, not having the money, I don't know. Pretty silly stuff. But most times, when we sat down at the table, everyone was smiling, ready for this meal one or more of the women would have spent much of the afternoon making.

Maybe seeing these women, perspiring and flush-faced, so much effort for our food, we had to give thanks, but our ritual anyway was to say grace. We took turns based on the first letter of our name. I was the only "O," and sort of in the middle, but like an adult, I got to say a prayer or anything else I wanted, and when I was finished, everyone said "Amen," or "Good job, Ocean." Something like that. And then we'd start eating. Spicy chili, hot cornbread or lentil stew and fresh-baked bread--always something tasty. We'd all talk and now that I think about it, the parents were really interested in hearing what us kids had to say and would get us talking about school or what else we'd done that day, which as kids we liked to do, being away from the adults a lot of the time.

Actually, being away from the adults most of the day changed the next year when the parents decided the three kids old enough for school would be better off home-schooled. They tried. Bought us McGuffey readers, but that only lasted several months. Home-schooling was too much work on top of all the other chores. We ended up returning to Applegate Elementary, catching the school bus in the morning. We even had the same classes we'd left months before. The other kids were jealous I'd had that much time out of school.

It seemed like the first year or so, everyone was into the commune. The way they kept talking at the dinner table through the evening. It was like they'd figured out pooling resources, everyone could get along okay without having to earn all that much money. Dad was going back

to school and had a part-time job I recall, and I think one guy worked full-time. But mostly a slacker attitude about paid work, as we say today.

But I will say the women worked hard in that farmhouse. It seemed they were always washing clothes, hanging them up to dry in back and this got pretty tough in the winter, though believe it or not, you can really dry clothes outside in cold weather, if it's not raining. Wind evaporates.

And then there was the daily cooking.

I don't remember any one thing, but after a year or so, things seemed to get quarrelsome. People complaining about not enough money for this or that. But that wasn't what really brought things to a halt. It was after a while, those happy faces stopped showing up for dinner. I don't know, it was first this couple, then another. Had to go to friends for dinner, or just wanted to eat somewhere else for a change of routine. Then the woman who was stuck with the cooking complained she didn't know what to cook anymore, people changing dinner plans at the last possible moment.

That's when I sensed things were not doing well. It was like everybody got tired of having the others as their permanent family so they started looking for excuses to get away.

After three years, tough-talking Mandy, her two kids and her man moved out and that left eight of us. The place seemed so much quieter. Then Jerome, the lone wolf, found a woman and moved off too. He'd never been the talker, so we didn't notice him gone much.

So two families left and I don't know what happened, but Dad said we could do better and we rented another place, which we ended up buying. That's also where Dad's corn field is. Then coupla years later we moved into town and rented out the farmhouse.

Anyway, it was like the whole optimistic and loving sense of being a communal family came apart. And there didn't seem to be any one

cause, no big argument, just people started looking for something else.

It was probably inevitable the Spring Creek Commune would belly up. Still, I'll always remember how it worked at first. I was part of this huge family that got along, something nobody else at school had. They just had normal families, but I was special. I had twelve people in my family and there was always something, never a dull moment.

And just like the Spring Creek Commune came unglued, so has my family these last few years. Now Irene's moved in, and with Emily and Hudson, Dad's got his new role and the family I came from doesn't really exist anymore, but it's still the family I belong to, no matter how much I find Mom and her Gary irksome. I suppose the kinda family I came from goes back to Mom and Dad and what they were trying to do with the others in the hippie commune.

I suppose a lot of what we tried to do might seem laughable now. But the silly unworkable ideas like learning from raggedy McGuffey readers weren't what was important. It's more we knew not everyone's gotta settle for the three-car ranch-style snout house in the 'burbs.

I really think that hippie lifestyle gave me a lot of values that made me what I am today. Back then the sign of commitment to the "movement," to the counterculture, was long hair. Now, I'm thinking hair's gonna be my signifier too, besides hanging on to my hippie birth name, 'cept I'm not thinking long hair. I'm thinking more monasteries in Kyoto.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:  
LEECHES EXTRA, *CARNAL DE BRONZE*, FROZEN PAMPERS

I'm feeling beach-sand-between-my-toes happy about the decision. Oh, it's Friday morning after Thanksgiving and some of this traffic on MLK's gotta be mall crusaders out for early Christmas shopping. Not I. Slept 'til nine, then launched my day, no special hurry, with some green tea. Next, I biked here, the foot of the Morrison Bridge, the whole time pumpin' those pedals, meditatively sucking on a clove, thinking beach balls, dimply golf balls, bouncing basketballs, rolling bowling balls. Yep, naked as a cue ball.

The clove's spent. I spit it out and lock the trusty Raleigh to this parking meter. An ever-changing mechanical bestiary crawls and lunges in the street. I turn my back on the prideful SUVs, the cocky, jacked-up trucks, and the humble, forgettable sedans and read the store window sign, one I've seen enough times: *\$5 & Shorn*.

I go in.

I decided the locks--that's hirsutely speaking--have got to go.

The many times I've ridden my bike past *\$5 & Shorn*, the sign for this place caught my eye. An emphatic summary of the whole enterprise in a mere eight characters, not counting spaces. What I had in mind, a monk's special shave, wasn't going to generate any complaints from me: Either they take it all off or they don't, no room for error there.

So how would I describe this place inside? A coat-and-hat rack for my parka, and against the wall, a line of tubular steel chairs with skimpy vinyl-covered seat pads. At eleven in the morning--I work



nights, remember?--the place is not crowded. One guy is getting his hair cut by the solo barber, who sports a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt under a blue barber apron. Shaggy forearms up chest-high, he delicately maneuvers comb and buzzing clippers through his client's thinning dark hair. I gotta believe this is one close-cropped barber who will enjoy shaving it all off for me.

I have my choice of uncomfortable chairs, magazines splattering each one. Titles like *Guns & Ammo*, *Sport Fishing*, and *Baseball Sporting News*. This is most definitely a traditional barber shop, serving a traditional male clientele--whatever that is. You see up until I made my decision, I probably would not have been caught dead in this place. Why you ask?

I suppose it all goes back to that "Beautify America, Get a Haircut" campaign the Eugene barbers had when I was growing up. They'd have a poster with that slogan in the window, right under the revolving red-white-and-blue barber pole that looks patriotic and American as all get out, but really goes back to the bloodletting days, when barbers would stick some blood-sucking leeches on you as a sideline. Anyway, the barbers' campaign was anti-longhair and anti-youth.

The whole campaign was a howling failure. Not only were barbers telling us not to wear long hair--which more and more guys were doing--they also were admitting, by implication, they didn't know how to cut long hair. One toe stubber of a move that left the barbers behind the times. Guys with long hair started patronizing unisex hair salons, if they had it cut at all.

So being in here's something I gotta deal with for all those reasons, but I can't argue with five dollars to remove every millimeter of this hair.

I think this barber, if he is the owner, and I don't see why not, must have worked greener pastures elsewhere. Up on the walls, he has any number of autographed pictures of recognizable major league baseball players. One's Darryl Strawberry. I can't picture those guys making a

stop in a dive like this, plus Portland, Oregon, biggest city in Oregon--whoopee! Still not major enough for a major league baseball team. Probably never will be. So big deduction, this barber is from somewhere back east.

The guy in the barber chair is about finished. The barber unwraps the paper collar and with a brush, whisks off stray cut hairs from the guy's neck. Then, one motion, whirls out the gown from the guy. Stepping on a pedal, he lowers the chair, and the customer pushes himself up, and standing, reaches to his back pocket for his wallet.

"Next," the barber calls my way. I step up, sit down. The barber takes the customer's money and comes back.

"How do you want it?" he asks.

"Take it all off. Naked as a cue ball will be fine."

"I think that we can do. Gonna take five minutes, if we slow down to make it look like we're earning our money."

"Slow, please. I don't want any cuts." I laugh. The barber does too.

I walk out the door, candy cane sign overhead, fifteen minutes later, five dollars lighter, thinking this barber's made a start on redeeming himself for the past sins of his electric-clipper toting brethren.

A world of difference atop my head. I rub both my palms over the stubble that's left. I can't believe the difference. I've never felt so much air moving around until now. I see why bald men wear caps to keep those bare pates out of the weather. Still, I kinda like the sensate reality of it all, at least for a while.

I walk quickly up the sidewalk to the bike. On my right, storefront windows, newly washed, glint in the sunshine. I turn, and in one window, I see bespectacled, bald-headed me, clean as a cue ball. The top of my head needs a bit of sun to darken it up. It's so nasty white. I rub the top of my head again. Great decision.

This head shave's sorta like a snake shedding its dead skin for a new one. A radical move, true, but gotta dump the baggage slowing me down. It's all coming together. Oh, I yearn to see Cris again, to let her know about these changes I'm going through.

I keep standing here, mesmerized. This son of ex-hippies, looking like some monastic devotee straight outta a Kyoto Zen monastery. Definitely not a janitor, though that's what I'll be doing this evening. Who knows what the gang at work will make of it.

**N**obody's here and it's cold enough for me to fish-lip out a smoke ring with nothing more than steamy breath. The dusky hour's here under a celestial blue-black dome and I'm waiting, everything's waiting. Even the air has the fresh smell of snow on the way.

It just better not snow before we're done tonight; otherwise, it'll be slow going home on my wire donkey now secured to the bike rack across the sidewalk. Me, I'm holding up the wall of this four-story building, the Patterson Building on Morrison, our first job tonight. That is whenever Nando gets here, parks the van in the commercial vehicle zone at the curb in front of my bike, whenever Nando unlocks the building, and whenever Pele and Ricardo straggle up from the bus mall. I always show early, even on meat-locker days like this.

*Brrrrr.* My parka'd back sponging heat off the brick facade of this building, my arms folded tight to my chest, gloved hands in my armpits, and a sailor's watch cap pulled low on my shaved head.

*Beeeeeep.*

The horn belongs to the GoClean van Nando steers to the curb. Pele and Ricardo are with him--Nando must've seen them walking up Morrison.

He heads the van straight into the parking space, the front wheel jumping the low curb, then quick turn, back on the street for a no-fuss parking maneuver. The engine quits like a dropped snowball. Three

doors swing open, everyone jumps out, three doors slam.

I unslouch, ease off the wall, and nod. Lanky Pele and Ricardo shove their hands in their pockets to ward off the freezing temps. Pele wears a bomber jacket with the fur collar turned up and nothing on his pompadour locks. Ricardo's got on a black nylon ski parka that's about four sizes too large, the wide horizontal ribs ballooning out Michelin Man proud. The hair of his rat's tail hangs out the back of his neck below a snugged-down cap like mine. Nando seems impervious to the cold for he's wearing the thin, bad-ass L.A. Raiders jacket as always and no cap.

Short, brainy leader Nando with his trimmed, thin mustache fusses with a key ring, more keys than a rosary has beads. Down a block, hidden high in the dark, a church steeple bell peals. Six o'clock, time to work.

"Ah, *hombres*, inside we work *rapidamente*," Nando says, searching out the right key in the anemic overhead light. "We warm, okay?" Finally, he keys open the building's front door, a brass-framed, thick-as-a-fist glass door, and gold-leaf script lettered. We file past Nando; he gives me a hard blink, his calculating dark eyes guessing something's up with this watch cap still on my head, what I'd ordinarily stuff in my parka first chance I get. Who's to say I couldn't work with this cap on all night?

Like we've done countless times, we hustle down the stairs to the basement, where we keep our vacuum cleaners, supplies, and cleaning carts. The air inside is cool, but not cold--no way can I keep on my watch cap.

Ricardo, singing to himself some Spanish song, grabs the industrial-strength vacuum we use for the hallways and rolls it enthusiastically across the bare concrete floor on the way out for the elevator, having first tossed his parka on one of the wall hooks facing me. Nando flips through the maintenance log, hanging from a cord on the wall, checking for special problems the client wants cleaned up.

I have no intention of wearing this itchy, wool watch cap while I work despite what these guys might say. My arms, reluctant as sludge, don't want to shrug off this parka, put it on the coat hook next to Ricardo's baggy garment, but I do. Then, the cap I stuff in the parka pocket.

Pele steers the bathroom supply cart toward me and his jaw hangs like a cut clothes line. I slip past Pele and grab my office-cleaning cart by the plastic handle and am about to wheel this ultra-specialized caddy of garbage can, light-duty vacuum, and the yellow plastic apron of cleaning supplies for the hall when I hear Pele yell something down the hall I don't understand.

"*Mande?*" Ricardo replies.

"I said," Pele says, turning toward me, "check out Ocean here, he's some bad '*chuco*, man, his head shaved bald." Pele leers at me like I've set myself up for a flurry of teasing. Nando drops the maintenance log, letting it swing by its cord, looks at the top of my head, and whatever he thinks, he decides not to say, walking past me for his cart.

Ricardo's beside Pele in the hall now, the two of them beaming. I feel naked, or at least part of me feels naked.

"He's no short-pants '*chuco*, Pele. *Carnal de bronze*, no, man," Ricardo laughs.

Crewcut Nando, paused with his cart beside me, chuckles.

"You guys," I say, "I don't know whether this Spanish you're saying is good or bad, but it's something I had to do, understand?" I take a deep breath and feel bad there's not the time nor much point in telling them the truth about Cris and the monastery story about the Kyoto monks with shaved heads and my plans to get in AmeriCorps and do my service thing and the likelihood I'll be bailing on these guys in a few months, if not a few weeks, and how all that has to do with my new look. I'll miss them.

"You look sharp, Ocean," Pele says with an unquittable grin. "We

just can't place your style, man."

"You no brown brother, *carnal de bronze*, so maybe you like one of those Anglos in WWF, nobody grabs your hair," Ricardo says.

"No, Ocean's a *padre*," Nando says, finally. "He quit the world, quit the women, study his Bible, that's shaved-head priest, right? Now, *hombres*, we work."

I do a double take on Nando as he pushes his cart beside me to the elevator, wondering how his joke gets so close to what I'm up to with my voluntary baldness. Some bald *padre*, friar, priest--something like that, how did it all begin?

What I do know, now that Nando and I are waiting for Pele and Ricardo to ascend to the first floor in the elevator--the car only takes two of us with our gear at a time--is that these guys are basically good-hearted. Despite the ribbing, they really were not saying I looked ridiculous, which they very well could've. No, they were simply trying to place my "look," as if the idea anybody can try a new look is okay, and that is very cool.

**T**he thing about janitorial service is, after you've done it a while, you kinda take the work home with you. Namely, I never used to be what I consider *anal*. Now, however, I'm paid to clean and tidy up. Like I got permission now. Which can annoy people in certain circumstances.

Definitely when I'm over someone's place for dinner, oh, like being down to see Dad and Irene at Thanksgiving, I could've checked for dust on the window casements. But what would I do? Ask for a feather duster? Irene is, of course, on the neatnik side of the spectrum as folks go, but she's not a professional like I am--that's my point.

Thank God for grocery stores, though. At my Safeway, I can indulge my janitorial eye for caked-out, tidy displays as I please. I'm the guy in aisle 5A, making sure the cans of whole tomatoes all face out,

for identical portraits of those dew-covered contents. Okay, grocery store detailing is pretty harmless. The store people, if they catch me doing this, probably both laugh and welcome my fussiness.

But what do you do when see a serious challenge to your janitorial sensibilities? I mean a Mount Everest of trashy offense that apparently has overwhelmed countless people with its visual assault, forcing them to look the other way. For me, this was a vacant lot four blocks from where I live. Every time I went downtown, I had to bike past it.

Actually, it's not a vacant lot, just this ten, twelve-car parking lot for what at one time must've been doctor offices in back. A plywood sign on the building reads FOR LEASE and that's no change since I started riding past who knows when.

Garbage blankets this parking lot and I am talking everything. An eyesore. The City should condemn the lot and take it away from the owner. It's bad.

So I ride past this place to work and got to thinking about the good folks standing at the bus stop by this parking lot. Well, sometimes, they sat on the bus bench. I didn't see why they had this eyesore to experience every time they waited to catch a TriMet bus. Each of them *could* drive a polluting car. Instead, they were taking the bus.

So thinking of these bus riders and how their getting with the program of using public transit was probably helping my lungs when I rode by on my wire donkey, I made a decision.

I was going to clean up that unsightly lot at their bus stop.

First, I needed janitorial supplies. Gloves I borrowed from work. Then I bought a box of forty-gallon Hefty trash bags and rode my bike over here, this fine, sunny December Tuesday matching my intentions. But cold, it must be in the twenties.

I flap open a trash bag. In goes a paper clamshell for a Big Mac. An orange-and-blue plastic bag empty of Dorritos. A twenty-ounce plastic bottle of Squirt squashed on one end. A seriously soaked copy of

*People*, opened to an article about Brad Pitt, the magazine now in icy rigor mortis. The trash bag, in my left hand, now swings with perceptible heft.

Wind has blown a lot of the trash east, against the vacated, could-be-doctor offices. I head over there.

Into the bag, a six-pack plastic yoke for pop cans, not exactly biodegradable. A yellow-and-green paper wrapper for a consumed Subway sandwich. A Big Tanker 60-ounce cup with a straw through the plastic lid. Sifting a pile of dry leaves, I see a clump of white. What else? Used Pampers, stiff as a board in this cold. Goes in the bag and another reason for leather gloves. The real reason, though, is, "sharps." Those used hypodermic needles junkies thoughtfully toss in the bushes, as if that will keep people from stepping on them. Just to make stepping on them more accidental, of course. Thanks loads.

But no sharps yet. Just the usual evidence for widespread sugar addiction. A flattened paper box of Ike & Mike's candy. Baby Ruth wrapper.

At the bus stop, ten yards away, two people wait. When I started here, not a soul. A bus must be expected. They give me furtive glances and I wonder if they think I'm some act-of-random-kindness nut gone wild, picking up garbage here?

But I look their way, and they promptly resume that baleful stare of bus riders everywhere. They peer up the street hoping to catch *the* large vehicle looming in the distance. One woman steps into the street and squints, to be sure.

I'm back at it and this bag is full. I tie off and drop the full bag against the front of the building. One dead soldier and I don't know how many left to go.

Back to the bike and from the basket on the front handlebars, I take my box of Hefty bags. Extract one, flap it open. Then it's the garbage huddled by the office entrance. A Godfather's pizza box, lid flapped



open. A broken Henry Weinhard's long neck glass bottle. I'm kneeling, picking up glass shards. All in the bag. Three unbroken Henry Weinhard bottles in the bag.

I'm on a roll, breathing hard the cool, invigorating air. Sports section of the *Oregonian*. Lay's potato chips bag. Wrapper for Taco Bell burrito. Plastic, uncapped bottle of Classic Coke, twenty-ounces. Butterfinger wrapper. A Newport Menthol cigarette pack, empty. All this I'm stuffing in the bag with abandon. A smashed carrier holder for four takeout coffee cups--thank you, Starbucks. Nearby, an empty Starbucks coffee cup with its commuter lid still in place. An errant clear plastic straw. An opaque white wrapper with no obvious origin.

Now the hard part. A row of hedges sit on the other side of the parking lot and stops right next to the bus bench and shelter. The number of riders waiting expectantly has swelled to three. The latest addition is a guy, wearing an overcoat, dressed in a suit, and wearing a wool porkpie hat.

I squat down and begin fishing out what's wedged in the lower reaches of this small hedge. An empty one-pint chocolate milk carton. An empty box pack of American Spirit cigarettes, crumpled. A pair of ear muffs. A slice of half-eaten, frozen pizza.

The well-dressed new arrival walks over to inspect what I'm doing.

"So are you," he says in this curious, but well-meaning voice, "the owner of this property?"

I hold up my Hefty bag, smiling and say, "No, I'm just helping out."

The bus rider returns an encouraging smile, then hastens back to the curb. I go back to rooting around the hedge. Hey, if he noticed me and said something, the others probably like the new look too.

Finally, the bus arrives, the riders leave, and I keep picking up. In minutes, new bus riders will congregate, ready for the next bus. These riders, many must be regulars, will see this lot and start wondering if

something changed.

Well, I'm on Bag Five and the others against the wall of that building look like prisoners of war. My guess is the owner will have as much to do with their proper disposition as he was concerned about this mess in the first place.

I'll come back later and grab a bag at a time for our garbage pickup by the Dumpster at my place.

I keep doing this for another thirty minutes and tying up Bag Nine, I scope the lot and see a real change. Compared to the eyesore when I got here, a vision of loveliness. I wonder how long it'll stay this nice.

I awoke this Wednesday morning, feeling like some rodeo bronc rider raring to bust out of the chute. Another sunny day, I couldn't wait to get out, pedal by my clean-up project, see if the bus riders now seemed a bit more dignified waiting on the next bus, the immediate surroundings no longer strewn with trash. My guess, though, as I now bumpily coast an unasphalted, cobblestone stretch on this side street over from Hawthorne, is the first blossoms of trash grace the lot's blacktop.

Then maybe not. Maybe that was trash from last summer--when the hot days simmer people's brains lazy and tossing trash, not walking the extra block to a trash can, seems okay. I mean, being tidy is such a *winter* thing. Then maybe not. Some of that *Oregonian* appeared kinda recent.

*Boooooom.* I lift my eyes from a bicyclist's habitual search for tire-puncturing road hazards and ahead, end of the block, by the bus stop, a sepia cloud of dust gathers in the morning blue. My throat tightens and the street itself feels like upset Jello. The fury of motor whine grows insistent, louder as skyward an outsized *crane* towers fifty feet and raises a wrecking ball. Bus riders? Nowhere to be seen. The parking lot I worked on so hard, I see now, is upended asphalt chunks and

splintered board remainders of a collapsed building. What the hell?

*Boooooom.* The ball's down and safely across the street, straddling my bike, I see a fresh Cyclone fence, ten feet in the street, cordons the property under attack. Oh, yes, the could-be-doctor-offices building is pretty flat. Just a clear view of trees next street over.

I sit up straight on the bike seat, surveying the scene like any appointed sidewalk supervisor, arms folded to my chest, a sigh of relief about a cluster of bus riders in the next block under a *Temporary Bus Stop* sign wired to a streetlight standard. And I'm also relieved about those nine Hefty trash bags I don't have to ferry back to my apartment house Dumpster.

The far end of the lot, a gargantuan, yellow Caterpillar backhoe raises its mechanical arm with a maw of chisellike teeth that hammers away, repeatedly splitting up the asphalt parking lot into edible chunks for a bulldozer. In between the backhoe, the crane tower, a bulldozer scoops and scuttles to a couple of parked dump trucks getting heavy with asphalt chunks and building splinters. The truck engines idle insistently, ready to drive away.

As I said, no more concerns about the disposal of my Hefty trash bags.

I shake my head about it all. A day after the work I put in. I know, I know, if I waited a day, I could've saved myself much work.

But the back of my neck shivers: Something else could be going on. These guys, across the street, working like ants, tearing it down. As yet, no project sign on the fence, but I know one will appear soon. I'm in an unblinking stare about the joke of it all. That property was being let go. The owner knew this demolition was coming up. Still, I'd like to think my janitorial contribution yesterday set in motion this chain of events. Who really knows? Probably it's self-centered to say that. But then ....

I take a deep breath, not from pride, but humbleness for my small

part getting this place over there ready for a new project. I think the gods have a sense of humor--how else can I stay sane?--and were trying to show by getting me over here early that no matter what good I do in the world, the world is too vast and so much larger than I, that it kept on its merry way before, during, and after I finished my good deed, dispensing good back to me and everyone else, here, now in the guise of that anthill of workmen and heavy machinery across the street. I'm in awe.

*Boooooom.* Again, the wrecking ball comes down. The ground shudders.

The bus riders up the street seem okay with their dislocation. Hey, now they have to deal with a construction project, but it at least has promise, which the trashy eyesore did not.

Once more, the boom swings the wrecking ball into the last wall of the building, taking out as much in one second as a crew of twelve with crowbars could do in maybe one morning. Another cloud of dust rises above the new landscape of my cleanup project and though I'm curious about this transformation, I gotta get rolling for some groceries.

**T**he following week, I find out what's with the demolition. A new three-story building is going in. Out front, on the portable chain-link fence, an artist's painting of what it's gonna be. The two topmost floors will feature condominiums, starting at the royal sum of \$180,000 and the first floor will be storefronts, featuring "prime retail space."

I admit I see all this with a peculiarly small sense of pride. In a way, I'd hoped my cleanup meant this space could be more than a trash heap. Now, of course, it's going to be something spanking new. Of course, I wasn't really the first cause of what followed. But, perhaps, and I'm convinced of this, the gods felt the place needed tidying up before the demolition crew started. I was sent in on a secret mission, see, one even I didn't know about, and I did that job.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: PRONOID DELUSION, EYEBROW DORMERS, CRAWFISH MEMORIES

**H**., whom I think of so often when I feel *I* have problems, called this afternoon. I was about to shove off for work. I wanted, at first, to keep it short, to tell H., Call back tomorrow morning, late.

And when he mentioned talking with Karman, administrative assistant to that heartless, calculating ex-boss at Tesla, Tom, I was set to cradle the phone. My interest in Tesla had long evaporated. I'd new horizons to explore.

Then H. babbled something about Karman saying because of the three-hour time difference, she had Tom call first thing eight this morning to get back to this AmeriCorps guy in D.C. Bingo: I could have sat there, finished out the day, taking every word in. Seriously.

Something with AmeriCorps was afoot. Checking references, checking employment history, H. guessed. Anyway, he heard from Karman that Tom was incredibly cool, gave me an awesome reference. He told her I was best suited for that sorta work. This the same Tom who shafted me?

Pleasantly stunned, I toyed with the phone cord. "You're my man, H.," I said. "You don't know how much I needed to hear this." My AmeriCorps application was moving. After the months of nothing, I had a hook of hope a decision was on its way.

And to think I might get into AmeriCorps because of ol' snaky Tom. That he would do good on my behalf reminded me a few years back someone came up with the reverse definition of paranoia. Called it *pronoia*. Just talking to H., I had to believe in pronoia--a conspiracy in

the universe to do me good.

I felt so grateful H. phoned, I asked about his going back east, what was with that?--the sorta personal question I'd normally shy from. H. opened up like I coulda been the first to ask or care about his male frigidity problem. He said early January, in a few weeks, he was flying to Ohio. He'd heard success stories with others, same age, and he was sure he'd be another testimonial for sexual success. He'd stopped the dance clubs. "I'm ready for real local motion." He laughed.

I thanked H. again for calling, having to run, job promptness actually mattering to me.

But no sooner I get off the phone with H., the phone rang again. Mom.

"**W**e're moving," she says.

"How far away," I ask, guessing the days of visiting Dad one side of the river, Mom the other side are numbered, and a low number at that.

"Out of state. Reno. Gary's in a new business venture there."

I wanna laugh, so I straight-arm out the phone. Just some more-into-it nefarious activity, you ask me. "So this my farewell call, Mom?" I finally say, returning the phone to my ear.

"No, I'd like you to come down Saturday, if you will. We're renting a twenty-foot U-Haul and wanna load up while it's some light out."

"Reno, Nevada, eh?"

"Yeah, got that desert air. My allergies go away in that sorta climate."

"So you need me Saturday?"

"Can you come early?"

"Oh, I'll catch the early bus at six, that okay?"

"Great," she says.

I tell Mom I gotta run--the gist of the conversation is complete--Mom's moving on and I'm about to be late.

Saturday, when I get to Mom's, it's like she and Gary have been waiting for me to show up: Then *we'll* start loading the truck. They don't come out and say as much, they're sorta preoccupied, though, fussing over boxes, Mom taking a Magic Marker to them like they'll end up in a house hopefully similar to where they are now. Mom *looks* like she's willing to work, wearing baggy blue jeans, her favorite Led Zep T-shirt, and a recycled pink Goodwill cardigan.

But Gary is simply talking, pacing, sipping coffee, smoking a cigarette.

"What about a cup?" He lifts his coffee mug. "Put springs in your shoes, huh?" He laughs like he made that up.

The percolator pops away on the bare countertop and now that I have the green tea habit in the morning, the coffee smell wafting out to what was the dining slash living area might as well be boiling motor oil. I confess, morning beverages, I've become a snob. "I'll stick with water for now," I say.

Fringy blond locks Gary opens the front door, stubs out the cigarette on his boot and thoughtfully flicks it into the front yard. Then he comes back to the kitchen, looks the counter over, pulls open a cupboard door showing empty shelves. "Gotta be a clean cup here, somewhere,"

"That's alright. Thanks, anyway."

"You sure?" Gary looks at me, like, well this could be our last, best

chance to what, bond over a cuppa joe?

"Maybe later," I say, sure that sweating, moving those boxes in the truck will give me enough Gary to last ages.

I just want to get on with it and fill up the cavern inside that big orange-and-white truck in the street. But first Gary needs to put down that mug. "You know the first thing going in that truck," I say, intending to give him a nudge about why we're all here.

"Course, we gotta system. We load bedroom stuff first."

"Really?"

"Yeah, do it by rooms, that's why we're labelling." He pistol-points his index finger, raised thumb at a stack-topping box that says BEDROOM. "Kitchen's last."

"Well, that Amana fridge gotta go in first."

"Says who? You?"

"Says the instructions inside the back doors of all U-Haul trucks." I know this for fact: I helped Ethan move a month ago. "Place heavy objects like refrigerators at the front of the truck bed. Forget the exact words."

"This son of yours something, he can read through steel doors," Gary says to Mom, who pauses with her marker and beams my way. Then he turns to me. "Show me."

"Okay let's pull out that loading ramp while we're at it."

We hustle to the truck, where I let Gary in on the Fear-This warning about heavy refrigerators front and center. His response? "Okay, here's the hand truck," he says, pointing at one lying on the floor. "I paid ten dollars extra for that. Only good for moving one thing. C'mon, I help you strap it up."

Back to the kitchen and we rock the two-door Amana back for the hand truck lip, strap and cinch it tight, and Gary's the extra eyes guiding



the load through the house. We ease down the front steps and at the truck ramp, turn around. I drag it up, Gary below pushes for what he's worth. He surely doesn't want to lose any contest with that Amana and gravity.

The rest--mostly boxes--goes in easier, if not faster. No surprise, I'm the one humping boxes up the ramp for Gary to shift into place. Gary's older and also a cigarette-smoking, beer-swilling, boo-toking physical specimen. What did I expect? I'm the young blood mule.

By one-thirty, we're at the back of the truck, Gary working as hard as I've seen him work all day, moving things up and back for more room. I know we might be close to leave-it-behind? decisions.

Inside, I find ten more boxes and that's all. "Mom, don't worry," I say. "Everything will fit in the truck. Except for a few you're gonna carry on your lap."

"Which ones?" she says, literal as a change counter.

Actually, we get the rest in the truck and the house is bare-wall clean. It's time for lunch. Gary jumps down from his truck perch and he volunteers to take the car and get us subs for lunch.

Waiting, Mom and I rest on the front stoop. As ever, Mom looks like she's suffering terminal insomnia. The only luggages not going in the truck stay under her eyes. She lights up a cigarette, takes a few long draws, then taps the spent ash with the index finger of her free hand. Her brown hair, pulled back in a ponytail, shows more gray every time I see her.

The U-Haul truck sits curbside, ten yards of dandelioned lawn between here and there. I realize Mom and Gary's belongings are in that truck, compact in space. All of it will be moved. A coiled spring of sadness seemingly pops loose inside me. They seem, well, pretty vulnerable. Gathering it all up and moving somewhere things might not work out. That soft underbelly--What might go wrong?--for every tempting promise we want to believe lets us get on about a fresh start in

life.

"I hope he remembers I don't eat bell peppers." Mom looks beat and I suppose had no choice on this move. "I didn't remind him, spaced it," she says.

She got one new beginning in life, she thought, by leaving Dad and taking up with Gary. And she's been semi-blessed, I suppose, not realizing that mistake. Is she making another mistake going to Nevada? For sure, she'll be rid of her allergies. That's gotta count for something.

This evening, Mom phoned from Reno. Said they made it there fine, they've put up in a motel--the U-Haul accruing daily charges in the parking lot--and they spent the day looking for a place to rent. She felt tomorrow they'd get lucky. Then she got kinda philosophical in her voice, which Mom can do, but still it surprised me. She said it was heaven to--at last--be in a clean, uncluttered deserty place like Reno. She was ready for her new life, without the memories around her. That's all she said. But it was enough. I mean what else could that mean?

It's pretty clear moving across the river to Springfield was not far enough from Dad for Mom. Not that their paths crossed except in the most accidental ways, but I'm sure many places like Skinner's Butte (though Mom and Gary were no picnickers), or Fifth Street Market, or even our favorite Texaco station on Willamette could set off the memory flash floods.

Mom moves out of state. Just a few more major limbs chain-sawed off what used to be something like our family tree. Five years ago, it was Sis who left. Now she's in Iceland, a pretty far reach. Then last year, I moved here. And I don't know where I'll be if now-bubbling AmeriCorps decides I'm one for their team. I could be anywhere in the USA, Alaska and Hawaii included. What's left of Gebhart timber in Eugene but Dad? Stumps don't lie.

Since Saturday, I've kept thinking about how I'm going to have a

big production visiting Mom now. I mean, from Portland, it's the bus twelve hours, whatever, to Reno, stay a few days, come back. And as I'm hoping, I might not even be in Portland next month. Then seeing Dad becomes a problem too, depending on AmeriCorps's plans for me.

I guess I'm really a family-obligations guy, despite all I say about Mom and Gary. Our family was pretty tight when I was growing up and that's something to honor, I suppose. Still when I think of Mom and Dad splitting up, Mom hundreds of miles away, I get lightheaded at the arithmetic of it all. Keeping the connections. Becoming an orphan would've been simpler, but then what was past would be really past: no confusion about this starting new lives *and* not burning bridges.

**M**om called a few days later, said they'd found an apartment. Apartment? Sounds like Gary's new business might, at first, be a bit slow. Anyway, it was good news, hearing that they've moved in, that they won't be returning to Springfield, Eugene, or even Portland, saying things didn't work out in Reno. And with winter almost upon us, I'm glad they've got a place to stay. Nothing like a roof of your own overhead to get through a storm.

Last night we had the first snow of the season in Portland. Something like three inches and it stuck. But things in the street are mushy enough that getting around on the bike is okay. Despite the inclement weather, I wanted to get outside before any cabin fever hit. I feel especially susceptible on Sundays.

I'm winding through the side streets, watching for icy spots. It's still below freezing and I'm working my way toward Belmont, major east-west thoroughfare north of Hawthorne. My wire donkey *tick, tick, ticks* away as I coast, one hand checking the earbuds for my old Walkman are tight. I'm listening to classical.

It's four-thirty and my Sunday supper awaits. I can smell the steaming aroma now. Oh, once a week I eat at a Chinese place over on Belmont I like. Beijing Diner. They've great hot pots, which are

welcome fire in the belly, a cold day like this.

Last night's storm was a blower and now not a cloud blots the sky, blue as I've seen it in months. White blankets the roofs of houses. Mostly bungalow style, many with dormers on the second floor that look out on the street. The dormer windows on that place over there--half-ellipses--I call them eyebrow dormers.

Huge maples march down both sides of the street, giving a spidery canopy of lacy branches above. The sun is not for long, its dying light shooting sideways between houses.

Photographer's light. This is what it is.

My wire donkey crunches forward and everything--houses and snow-encrusted shrubs, yards, and sidewalks--moves in and out of shadow and dappled light. Poking its head out of the snow, a lowly nandina--heavenly bamboo--shows off its fall colors, bushy red leaves in the cold of late afternoon.

Jan Sibelius's *Karelian Suite* streams like a lively brook through the Walkman earbuds.

Suddenly, the whole street scene seems different. The light still streams in sideways from the west, but now in the last minute or so, through the dust motes floating in the sidelight, an orangy glow has suffused everything, snow included. Even that little nandina shrub has celestial fire on its autumnal red leaves.

Without realizing it, I've stopped. One foot rests on the lower pedal of the bicycle crank. The sun finds and illumines everything with cosmic fire below the large maples. The *Karelian Suite* cascades forth, yet everything else seems to pause for a surrender to the coming darkness.

Getting to the Beijing Diner seems a lot less urgent. How anything ends is as plain as the cold orange light on the air. How anything will endure is also as plain as that same brickish light.

Seems it doesn't matter anymore if I make it to the end of the block, if I make it anywhere. No, it doesn't matter if I make it to the end of this block because everything here is, well, so complete. People here work day in, day out, to live in and keep these white-mantled bungalows handsome. And it's not only people living on this street. No, it's everyone who's ever lived here in past years, who also worked hard to bring us here this far along the celestial journey, for this is what it is.

We're all stewards, really, of something like this with our course to stay, our baton to hand off.

I can no longer ignore my cheeks are wet with warm tears. I cry for all of this, what's here, what used to be here, what will come. And it will always be this complete.

The trees grew for countless years and the houses stood firm next to them.

Tears for what was here, which I'm lucky to witness. Perfect beauty, here everyday, and that's why it's perfect beauty. This is what it is.

And as I watch this, the orange light finally, suddenly dims.

The next yard up, yellow flowers of a tall witch hazel go dull against the gray stalks. Nearby, the waxy leaves of a camellia bush lose their shine.

A glance back to the West Hills, I see the sun is setting.

The light has left the ground, climbs higher into the upper reaches of a bristly conifer down the block.

The cosmic fire is gone. Gray snow is everywhere. I've no reason now to linger here in this cold twilight.

In my Walkman earbuds, the *Karelian Suite* goes uptempo, shedding its melody of aquatic grace, which seemingly sinks below the surface, never to be heard again. I start to warily pedal away, following car tire channels in the snow. I can never come back to this street block,

this moment again. I won't forget, though, what was here for but a glimpse.

The tears have stopped. And dusk has certainly fallen. I stop again. I flick on the Cat's Eye halogen upfront and the blinking red diodes in back. A seventy-five dollar fine in the State of Oregon, you don't have lights on after dark, on a bicycle, remember? I don't want to be first around here for that citation. I've run the risk more than once, though, going through headlight batteries the way I do.

Ahead Belmont beckons, headlights crossing the intersection. Up there, around the corner, I know a welcome hot pot dinner steams for me, something for which tonight I'll be all the more grateful, especially after this ride through slush.

**M**onday morning, the frosty bay window in my apartment again looked out on snow and gray slush. That hadn't changed much from Saturday's storm. I turned away from the evidence outside of why my living space was chilly, got to breakfasting on toast, kippers, and green tea. Then the phone rang.

AmeriCorps was calling. My kinda interruption. After all the months of knowing nothing, I was talking to a woman in Volunteer Recruitment Services. The Denver office, she said. She wanted to set up a phone interview. "Why not now?" I said. I was ready. But she said the woman who interviewed, who had the app, the reference checks, the background info, would call from another office anyway. That was Ms. Smithers. So next day, ten a.m., an interview lasting at least forty-five minutes.

Tuesday, at ten--give or take a sec of atomic time--Wanda Smithers called. AmeriCorps was close to a decision, she said. My heart hopped wildly in my hollow chest. She congratulated me: Not everyone who applied was phone-interviewed. More heart hops. After we talked, a decision--yes or no--would be mailed in days. I felt like a balloon in a dart gallery.

I dreaded the idea I might answer a question and lame out, and the more I tried to explain away, the more bone-headed I'd come across. In other words, interview meltdown.

Fortunately, Wanda got things rolling with something I could talk about: OODL. I was too happy to oblige. I described how Brianna, her cousin Ethan, and I got the organization functioning, how we signed up loads of people and then as I was talking to her, I imagined Wanda asking the logical follow-up, Why did you stop? I'd twisted the phone cord within a turn of snapping, almost went speechless.

And when I finished describing Saturday Market tabling, she did ask how OODL was doing. I rubbed my forehead. Ahem. But to my surprise, I didn't freak. I knew, of course, if I said TV news reporter, I could forget AmeriCorps. "We were too few people," I said. "My new job took too much of my free time. So we let it go. We had signed up organ donors by the hundreds anyway."

From there, it was cake. The hardest question: Why do think you'll do well in AmeriCorps? "I like helping other people," I said, "more than I like making a lot of money." That answer seemed right for the AmeriCorps way. Ms. Smithers said I'd be getting a letter, the tone of her voice almost saying I was "in." Okay, but I wasn't betting my life until my Twitchy-Richie hands unfolded that acceptance letter.

**J**ake's in Portland is a century-old seafood establishment "famous for crawfish," even if seasonal availability is but two weeks a year and then for, say, the first ten customers of the day. The crawfish habitat long ago fell victim to the urban spillway. But the real reason people come to Jake's is not reverence for crawfish memories. No, the draw here is that if tradition, attentive service, and great food have much to do with a classy dining experience, this is where diners willingly spend the bucks and smile.

My guest, Brianna, and I sit in a booth table, surrounded by walnut-panelled walls, 19th-Century oil paintings of historic Oregon,

and a crisp white tablecloth beneath chandeliered incandescence. My idea was to spend some savings I won't be needing. We're here to celebrate that I won't be able to afford a place like this for a year or so, based on my future living allowance. So I'm with my bud Brianna, Wanda Smithers having done right by me. The AmeriCorps acceptance letter came through yesterday. Tears o' joy, then I called Brianna.

"I hate goodbyes," I say. Tonight, she's dressed up, wearing her standard-issue nose piercing, but also this wild thrift shop shawl. Too retro. A basic black number with pink stripes. She has the neck, the shoulders, uncluttered by locks of hair, to show it off. Underneath the shawl, it's usual Brianna: long-sleeve T-shirt and jeans, but the shawl and its drama seems to have an ironic appropriateness for classy Jake's.

"Yeah, and you might never come back to Portland. I'll miss you." Brianna lifts her glass, takes a long swallow of water, and acts pretty casual about my leaving. Although when I called her on the phone to tell her we should go out and celebrate, she did have a hitch in her voice like she was having a bit of trouble accepting it at first. Now she seems like what else is life about, except moving on. "I wish I could get out of Portland, I feel like I'll die here. But I'm not sure if I want to go into AmeriCorps for a ticket out."

"What do you mean? I'm joining up." I take my glass of water and swirl the ice cubes and take a sip that slakes my thirst, but not my hunger.

"Oh, it's just what would I do once I finished? I got this vague idea to design stuff, you know, like this glass, but I've no idea where to start, except at an art school. I can't afford that. I'm doomed."

"Why do you say that," I say. "Maybe you can get a job somewhere and they'll pay your tuition."

"*Sure*, how'll they get work out of me they send me off to school?"

"Good question, maybe they'll let you take off summers."

I don't know what's up with the waiter. They don't seem to be that



busy. I search around for our waiter. He is carrying several plates of food to a table, and now walks this way. I raise my finger and he's over here in an instant.

"Your order will be up shortly, can I get you anything?" he says, almost precognizant of what I might say.

"Actually, yes," I say. "For some reason, I'm really thirsty and we'll need some more water, if you get a chance."

"Be back shortly." And he leaves.

"I bet you know what you'll do afterwards." Brianna says.

"I take the road as it comes, a day at a time. I have no idea where I'm even going. All I know is somewhere in the U.S."

"Hawaii?"

"Probably no Hawaii, probably no surfboards," I say, a pang of longing shooting through me at the thought of Cris, whose memory, I suppose, has finally released me.

"You'll send a postcard?" Brianna twists her cloth napkin around her hand in a distracted way, almost as if she wants to shake it free of her hand, which she does. "I want to know how you're doin' wherever you go, okay?"

"Yeah, a postcard is not too much, maybe a letter I get any extra time."

The waiter brings the pitcher of ice water, fills glasses, and says he'll be back with our food.

"I'll miss you, Ocean. But you gotta move on." She smiles. "I don't think you've ever been quite settled once Kezia left Eugene, right?"

"Could be. You know, I'd been with her for a year and figured we'd just keep on. I never gave much thought to how I fit in her plans."

"So now, see, you've got your plans too."

"I got some things sorted out before my big two-one." I grin because Brianna knows all of it, about my lonely year plus on my own in Portland, losing a girlfriend, confused by a weekend with an older woman, and generally bouncing around, trying to keep body and soul together.

Oh, Brianna knows me so well. I've thought about her many times. Attractive with her own quirky style. Still, only this buddy of mine. I don't know what it takes to make that connection between a guy and a chick, but somehow it's not quite the two of us. And that, too, is okay. We enjoy each other's company and sometimes, believe me, that's enough. That is entirely enough. Black shawl, pink stripes, killer overbite smile, nose stud. How will I ever forget Brianna?

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: BED-HEAD HAIR, SUBTERRANEAN HOTEL, TURTLE MAN

I went on to tell Brianna the acceptance letter said the next step was a meeting for us new recruits to get our assignments. We'd be downtown in the U.S. Courthouse with some regional representative of AmeriCorps. I had no idea how many other recruits would be there. I just knew the meeting was three weeks off, in January, past the holidays, and a good time for fresh starts.

That single date and time of Tuesday, January 6th, 3 p.m., seemed to organize my life. A great calm rolled into my daily routine. My future was black-and-white, yes-no, chiselled in stone. All that crazy strife, the uncertainties, the past year in Portland, no more.

Week later, I got down to Eugene to see Dad and family for Christmas Day. The usual exchange of gifts, a great supper by Irene, and lots of talk about me and AmeriCorps. Once again, when I saw Emily and Hudson root through their Christmas haul, I knew Dad was being tugged off into a fatherhood experience quite different from Charity and me. I'd lay odds carrot-top Hudson never volunteers to join AmeriCorps.

Anyway, saying goodbye was somewhat sad. It would be a long, lonesome while before I'd see them again. Probably no sooner than a year. Believe it or not, when I shook Dad's hand, doing so seemed to make going into AmeriCorps even more a done deal than opening that acceptance letter.

The Mark O. Hatfield U.S. Courthouse, a granite megalith, swallows you up with air-conditioning once you're past the airlock doors, the metal detector archway, and the steely-eyed look from uniformed security. I tell the guard I'm here for the AmeriCorps meeting on the fifteenth floor, to reassure her, maybe, I have real business here, though with white shirt, dark pants, and tidy shaved head, I'm anything but disreputable, and carrying a composition notebook, pencil clipped to its cover, I sure look like the meeting-going type.

She nods to the elevator banks, says the ones on right go to floors ten and above. I'm early, quite a bit early. The meeting is twenty-five minutes away, but I figured better early, given what's at stake.

Only I get in the elevator car that opens. The others waiting must be headed for lower ground.

I punch *15*, full of ripe expectation I'm about to truly launch my life. I mean there is no turning back. I worked my last day for GoClean, I gave my notice on the apartment, I've said goodbyes to Brianna, Ethan, one or two other friends I made during my five seasons or so in the grand old city of roses. I tell you, though, I will miss Portland. Especially summer. Here, you don't have to wear cologne. You open a window, a June day, a smell of roses wafts in and sticks to you. You feel new as the soft breeze.

Overhead, the numeral *15* lights, a bell rings, the doors open. I step out on a carpeted hall, ready to search for *1546*. Left, so a wall sign says. The doors in the long florescent-lit hall, one after another, are closed. Then a door ahead opens, a rotund woman in black jacket and black-and-white slacks, comes out, large purse in hand, bound for a cigarette break or, I suppose, the can.

She walks this way, looks intently in her open purse. I don't find any *1546*. Then the hall turns ninety degrees, left. I do too.

Another long, tunnelly hall, lots of doors. More than halfway, a single person leans against a wall, this young woman with a rucksack tipped up beside her. A burnt-orange down parka clumped at her feet.

She reads a book.

I check each door I pass, taking swift note of suite numbers and each door only seems to keep pointing to that door precisely beside the book-reading woman, who I now see is a young Asian-American, perhaps my age and, oh, about five-seven or so. Nice height, thin.

The jet black, got-out-of-bed hair falls short of her relaxed shoulders. What does this future AmeriCorps worker wear? On that slight chest, a ribbed, maroon long-sleeve T-shirt--ribbing, I'd add, with minor, not major deflections. On those spidery legs, pegged jeans. And those feet, go-anywhere hiking boots. No jewelry, no piercings: a no-nonsense chick. She glances up at my approach, smiles like she's been expecting a few others, if not me.

"Hi, you here for the AmeriCorps meeting?" I ask.

Her face, the skin, some sort of soft, smooth Shiseido perfection and the cheeks, well-shaped and the nose, somewhat of a delicate aquiline surprise and her mouth--nice full lower lip with the thinner upper giving her smile interest. All fine features that set off well her eyes, those Asian opals of mirthful mystery: This woman is happier more often than she is not.

She folds a page corner in the paperback, snaps it shut, glances at her wristwatch. "Sure, another twenty minutes. I'm always early for afternoon appointments, late for the morning ones." She shrugs it off, self-acceptance, it would seem.

"Me too, maybe I'm not a morning person--I janitor nights," I say, settling to the wall facing her.

"Will you feel badly, giving that up to serve your country?" she asks, her eyes twinkly with irony.

"Not in the least. What about yourself? By the way, my name's Ocean."

"Oh, really, very clever name Ocean. I'm called Jen, or friends say

Jennie, it's all okay. Your question, what was it now?"

"Oh, just curious about what you're leaving to join AmeriCorps, you don't mind my asking."

"No, not at all, I'm taking off a year from UP. Afterward, I'll have three more semesters there, then hopefully law school. That's three years."

"So you needed a break?"

She looks down, turns, stoops, slips the paperback in the rucksack. A rift of skin appears between the top of her jeans and T-shirt and for the moment, before she stands up again, in my voyeur heart, I know promise.

"Yeah, that and I want to build some real world people skills away from college. Someday, I plan to practice public interest law." She gives me a studious gaze like I better believe she'll accomplish this.

"Really? One reason I'm here, my doctor, he served two years with the old VISTA before med school, sorta like your plan. Your idea, mixing real world experience with college, it's interesting. Something I've been struggling with myself."

"How so?"

"Well, my dad, he's a professor down in Eugene." She nods approvingly, as I'd expect: She's planning to invest seven years of her life in college. "He wants me in college, natch, but I tell him, Why? I don't know what I want to do yet."

"So you're not like me, start and stop college. You're just stopped and might want to start." Her eyes go twinkly again with the idea of a professor's son reluctant to try college, I suppose.

"You bet, an AmeriCorps year might get me going on college."

"Oh, you look like the sorta guy who would join AmeriCorps for its own sake."

"Absolutely, but you know, I'd like to talk with you more about how you expect to put college together with AmeriCorps. Maybe later, when you have some time. Can I call you?"

Her jet-black eyes flash brief surprise, then go twinkly with possibilities I'd certainly like to know more about.

"Sure, give me a call at the UP Bookstore, I'm there to the end of the month." She gazes at my notebook like she needs something to write on. I oblige, opening it to a blank page and hand it to her with the pencil. "If that doesn't work," she says, writing away, "call my cell." She hands back the notebook, the pencil. Her eyes dancing, but her mouth, unsmiling, serious.

I'm not above smiling, though. Not when Jen here is woman of interest in my life now, like what competition for the honor, okay? But I also don't want to make too much of it. We are, after all, here for a meeting. My wristwatch has ten minutes to and there's still only us. My forehead wrinkles: We might be at the wrong place.

"You sure this is the place? Why isn't there anyone else here?"

"The letter said room 1546," Jen says, then squats down, opening that rucksack, again revealed skin riding atop her jeans. I'm in some heaven of anticipation, I can't help it. She unfolds the letter. "Yeah, 1546. Isn't that what you had too?"

Before I can reply, from nowhere, striding down the corridor, this suit-and-tie guy. "You here for AmeriCorps?" he asks.

"Yes," we both reply.

"Good, the others are probably trying to park. Let's go in."

We watch him unkey the door, flick on the lights. "There will only be about six more coming, so please sit in front."

The room, the desk chairs in orderly rows look schoolroom.

The next week or so, Jen and I saw each other daily. I'd go over to North Portland and UP, catch her the end of the bookstore shift, we'd grab dinner in the Student Commons, and then walk and talk until time for me to bus back to my place.

I don't know if it was love at first sight, the fact neither of us had been with anybody for a while, or we were going off to the "front" with AmeriCorps so soon, it was easy to become fast friends.

Hey, when I first saw Jen, I wanted to get my hands on her so badly, to know for myself, that soft, smooth skin, but after a few times together, it was obvious she had one interesting story to tell. She claimed, however, my growing up with hippie parents was pretty cool too.

Typical Vietnamese-American success story: Jen's parents, who didn't know each other at the time, escaped as boat people when Saigon fell in 1975. They found each other in Beaumont, Texas, by the Gulf of Mexico where many Vietnamese found the humid climate in East Texas and nearby Louisiana like the home country. Jen's parents married in 1980 and Jen's the oldest of three kids.

How did Jen end up at University of Portland? Simple: Her family's Catholic and she has an aunt and uncle in town. Basic Asian decision-making, she says.

Maybe it's luck, but our assignments will allow us to keep seeing each other.

She leaves first week in February for Davenport, Iowa, and the Upper Iowa Flood Relief Project there. I take off in five days for East St. Louis, Illinois, where I'm at the Mason Inner-City Uplift Project. I've only the sketchiest of what's involved. What I do know is Jen and I will be but hours away from each other there on the Mississippi River. That and phone bills, I suppose. Jen, though, wants me to learn e-mail. She says we'll have computers at work, anyway.

I pretty much cleaned out the apartment, can pack what I'm



keeping in minutes, took apart and boxed the wire donkey for shipping. All's left is to get my Greyhound ticket for points east. It seems easy, so inevitable when I've my arm on Jen's shoulder and those opal eyes meet mine and she says going off to Davenport, she won't feel alone.

Saturday morning, Greyhound Station, I'm leaving and Jen's here too. We're waiting to exchange my voucher. A wait I give no thought because beside me's my babe with the bed-head hair, the smooth ivory skin, the lively eyes taking it all in: people in transit temporarily on hold, pacing the terminal floor, sitting at benches, listening to CD players, watching TV, reading newspapers, playing video games. For me, though, I don't need to kill time. Once the bus leaves, then it's no more Jen for I know not how many weeks.

"So your bike, you probably let that go to the last minute like getting your ticket?" Jen's thumbs hang on the pocket slashes of her orange parka like today she's the carefree one, the one who doesn't have life's possessions stashed in a backpack at our feet.

"No, it's boxed up, on its way. Ethan helped me yesterday."

I bump my backpack forward. We move up in line.

"Oh, I knew you'd take care of that," she says, gazing at the floor, then her head goes back, flash of a grin like last chance to kid me for a while. Her eyes cut sideways to the ticket counter. "Hey, your turn."

I heft the backpack toward the counter. The woman, gaunt, gray-streaked hair, stands ready, ballpoint in hand. "How can I help you?"

"I have this U.S. Government voucher for a ticket." She unfolds it for a quick scan.

"Where you going?"

"East St. Louis."

"This is made out to Ocean Gebthart. That you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay, I need two pieces of ID, including a picture ID. You got a driver's license?"

"No, but I've an Oregon ID card." I hand her what I have in place of my revoked learner's permit so many years ago. Jen smiles knowingly. I've told her the sad tale about my destruction of City of Eugene property and lost driving privileges.

The woman takes the card and copies a number down on the voucher. "Okay, a second ID. Voter's registration card, anything."

I pull out my wallet, fan through it. "I don't have any credit cards, anything like that. Social Security card do?"

"Yes, this works."

She gives me my cards and goes to making out the ticket. "One-way, right. You don't want round-trip, cause if you do, you have to pay the difference."

"No, it's one-way. Where I'm going, I'm staying a while."

She runs the ticket slips through an imprinter, takes the voucher, writes a number on it, hands me the ticket. Jen stands here, anything but bored, hands in parka, hip cocked, eyes shifting from the ticket agent to me, back again.

"Okay, one-way to East St. Louis, Illinois, you're leaving from Gate 7 in thirty-four minutes. You change in Salt Lake City. Enjoy your trip."

I take the ticket and the woman says, "Next." I gulp at this idea I'm on my way.

"Gate 7 already has a line," Jen says. She tries helping carry the backpack, which admittedly, not on my back, is about as awkward to maneuver as a corpse. I tell her to get a place in line. I follow her, past the bored and distracted on benches with their luggage.

"You might as well stand here, you'll be sitting for days," Jen says, when I join her.

I look back over the concourse, this crowded space and tell Jen, "You're not going to believe it, but there's a hotel under this floor."

She says impossible. I go on to tell her I met a guy who works nights here as a security guard. He said under the terminal, drivers have an entire subterranean hotel. They sleep below as we speak. I tell her at first I didn't believe it either, the guard saying this. But it's there, all these individual rooms with beds, some even have kitchen facilities, showers, of course, and all at company expense for drivers away from home.

Jen and I pass time, talking about a few other such things of small consequence to us, when the driver in his blue-gray uniform and cap, greyhound insignia on the brim, appears, ticket puncher in hand. It's time to say goodbye.

I reach down, hike the backpack to my shoulder and I look at Jen's glistening eyes, the refined aquiline nose, the interesting lips and the moment seems hurried, no time for words anymore. Jen throws both arms around my shoulders. Her warm lips kiss mine. My face rolls against her soft, smooth cheek. She caresses, lets go my free hand, the one holding the ticket. Then I hand it to the driver.

"Call me soon as you get there," she says, stepping away.

I give her a thumb's up. "See you in Davenport," I say.

Out Gate 7, across the bus loading dock, I make for the open door of the idling Scenicruiser that says SALT LAKE CITY above the windshield. I hop on board, put my backpack in the overhead luggage rack, and get a window seat facing the terminal. Ebony locks, ivory skin, Jen's at a window. She waves, I wave. Silent waves, all we can do. Finally, the bus driver jumps on, adjusts the driver's seat, and slowly backs the bus out. Jen's eyes set on mine. Then the bus jerks, and another second, the bus engine's hunting whine lunges us forward, and

her head of tousled hair turns. I can't see her anymore, anyway.

**A**fter snaking a few Portland streets, the bus driver had us eastbound on the Interstate, miles clipping away, and I sat in my reclinable Scenicruiser seat with the familiar amenities of retractable footrest, armrests, and an overhead reading light. I couldn't shake a longing to be with Jen again, to take her in my arms, but logic side of my brain said, sure, several weeks, you'll get up to Davenport, see her then. Still, deep inside, I hurt.

Thirty or so of these self-pitying minutes and we were gliding the asphalt ribbon beside the wide gray waters of the Columbia River. I realized I'd last been on this road in August, Cris driving us out to Fossil. Next stop for our Scenicruiser was Hood River, where I'd paid for the gas. And how did that turn out, me yearning after the wisp of a spiritual surfer girl?

With Jen, love was real and, act of faith, would return.

The bus later climbed out of the Columbia River Gorge and began the long, high-desert trek toward Boise, then Salt Lake City. A monotony of drifting snow told me riding Greyhound Scenicruisers across the northern tier of the United States, the dead of January, more than fifty hours, more than 2,000 miles, was a similar--or the same--act of faith.

I soon snapped on the reading light, started on a John Le Carre, and went with the eastern flow.

**W**e're rolling on the freeway, now outbound from St. Louis, having stopped at the main terminal, where the driver, as ever, had some tight maneuvers to wrestle our Scenicruiser through city streets. The driver announces out to our left is the St. Louis Gateway Arch. It rises like some white pretzel in the sky, a pretzel without its salt. Another minute or so and we're over the Mississippi River. Now if they'd built

that arch across this river.

I'll leave that idea for later. The far side of the bridge comes up and we're descending into Illinois and East St. Louis. The railroad yards, the industrial warehouses stretch out by the mile. Buildings, I suppose, for all the stuff coming out those railroad cars.

The driver downshifts. The bus slows, dip-wallows the freeway offramp, stops, then turns right. I sit up in my seat, my attention taken by this street of vacant storefronts. FOR LEASE signs in dirty store windows. A street with more than a few games over. Several people are out, singly or in pairs, navigating the sidewalk patched with gray snow.

This is not like anything in Portland. I strum my fingers on my leg. And this is where I'll live? My shoulders fall back against the seat. Okay, others, guys here with AmeriCorps, have gone before me and settled in.

We circle several blocks then park in front of a small Greyhound station, small enough it doesn't have a parking lot for buses in back or on the alley, just this off-loading area in front.

Ready to take on my fate, I slip my arms through the straps of my backpack and I'm Turtle Man. Only the driver and I leave the bus. Figures, East St. Louis gonna be a people magnet, let's say, when the Mississippi River flows backwards. Okay by me. I crunch steps on the icy sidewalk for the front door, while the driver busies with opening the cargo area. Inside the waiting room, a wall poster says *See America, Go by Greyhound*. No more than eight people can sit and those seats are taken, so some people stand, waiting for buses going west, I suppose, or just going back to St. Louis. The people really look like they have little choice but to travel by bus or thumb. Not that I was to expect different. This assignment is a bootstrap effort for the harder-pressed sections of East St. Louis. I smile, wanting these people, or people like them, to accept me as another local resident before too long.

But first things first. My wire donkey. Is it here? It should have arrived on an earlier bus.

I go to the counter, holding the ticket that got me here from Portland, claim check stapled to it. The agent with thick eyebrows and sunken eyes follows a football game on the color TV hanging from a ceiling bracket provided for the benefit of waiting travellers. The fellow gives no pretense of working, not now that my bus has pulled away. Before he was out there, helping the driver load, unload things to get at one cardboard box from the cargo compartment before the driver closed down the aluminum doors and pushed home the latch handles.

Anyway, the bus terminal agent cuts his beetle eyes to me and asks what I need.

"I sent my bike here on an earlier bus."

"You got your claim check?"

I hand him my ticket. He'll be back, one minute.

"Came in yesterday. Why don't you come back, get it?" The agent suddenly seems reabsorbed in TV football. Someone gambled and missed the fourth down.

"I was kinda hoping to pick it up later."

"We'll keep it a week, and then I gotta charge storage." He says this matter-of-factly, his eyes steady on the TV screen, like it's policy he's used to saying.

"Well, I need to check in with my employer and get situated before I take the bike."

"Alright, but only five more days, then you're paying storage."

"Okay."

He goes back to the football's crushing action and I head over to the pay phone fixed to the wall between the passageway to the restrooms and a bank of coin lockers. I've gotta check in and find out what happens next with the Uplift Project. I'm supposed to call for a ride.

I get Tedford on the phone, the AmeriCorps coordinator in town. He welcomes me, is glad to hear I had a good trip, seems like a bump-heads-make-things-happen kinda guy. Says no worries, he's sending a guy out with the project pickup. I look over at the ticket agent, realize the bike in its box will be out of his hands soon. The paranoid force is kicking and out to do me good. Can't help, in this new, strange neighborhood, but smile about that.

Two African-American kids, however, are arguing between themselves, wanting to take a comic book away from the other, some *Dragonball Z* comic--I can see that. The kids square off in the space of worn linoleum floor between two facing benches. They shove each other. The mom ignores them, having apparently seen this same confrontation too often.

My conversation with Tedford ends when he tells me I can't miss the truck. It's distinctive and Drew should be here, fifteen minutes or so. I hang up, heft my weighty possessions, head back to the counter, drop the backpack. The agent lowers his eyes from the overhead TV. His bushy eyebrows jump in puzzlement.

"I'm in luck, my employer's coming by with the pickup," I say. "I can take the bike now."

He walks me back to the storage area where the big, flat cardboard box with my steadfast wire donkey looks pretty much the same as when Ethan and I dropped it off at the Portland terminal last Wednesday. It's not heavy, just awkward. The agent and I waggle it through the waiting room, more than a few mute, wide-eyed faces wondering where, on a day like this, I'm going with this box.

Outside, we lean the cardboard box on the wall and it doesn't matter now if, for a few minutes, the bottom sits in wet snow. I follow the agent back through the door and fetch my backpack.

Once again, I step into the calm, wintry day and drop the backpack on the dirty snow right by the boxed-up wire donkey. The sky's thick with clouds out north and the land around here is flat as a lake and

compared to Oregon, no trees.

Big changes, and yet I think I'll like it here. Talking to Tedford, I've a feeling I'll belong soon enough. Why I can't say, except I'm not here to take anything away from these people. I'm here to help with what people need for the basics of life. I will work long hours. I will receive little pay. I will sleep well. This is my promise to myself.

This is, as Cris might say, a right livelihood. Even if on this street, I sense something ghostly about where I am. Like there might've been more businesses thriving at one time, and people might've had a bit more resources to get by. So few people seem left, keeping up appearances of a community. And the ones left amble about on the sidewalk, they don't drive cars.

Yes, it could be like Kyoto and one tumbledown monastery. I think Cris might agree this place, too, is past its prime. And like Kyoto for her, this has something I've been searching out for a long time.

If the world were suddenly perfect tomorrow, it would also become suddenly boring. No, the world is not tidy and more of it's like East St. Louis than is not. So we've got our parts to find. I think back to what Cris said about our all being actors in this very old script, how it's all been done before, there are only so many roles to play, for any of us, and for that reason alone, we must regard ourselves casually. I think I've now found my bit part.

And then, thanks to a pantheon of gods, Jen will be in Iowa, the Hawkeye State, soon.

Like the Bard said, all the world's a stage, and for me everything's come down to being in this new place, to being ready for this new challenge, all the while having one live romance going. Yeah, for this Oregon boy, this is not all bad.

END





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**C**harlie Dickinson was born in Los Angeles, California, and his peripatetic youth included student days at South Eugene High School, which his fictional protagonist, Ocean, in *The Wire Donkey*, also attended.

Now living in Portland, Oregon, Dickinson previously published a collection of short stories, *The Cat at Light's End*, and his fiction appears online at *Amarillo Bay*, *Mississippi Review*, *Southern Cross Review*, and elsewhere. *The Wire Donkey* is his first novel.

A note on word origins:

One common Hungarian nickname for bicycle is *drótszamar* or wire donkey. In German, *drahtesel* (*draht* = wire & *esel* = donkey) has the same colloquial meaning.

~ CD