

The Alien that changed the world

Part 2

*Otsiron's Return to
Earth*

A novel



By Risto Stefov

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A Novel

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FICTION - ADVENTURE

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On the way back from the trader's galaxy

“Did they at least thank us for escorting them all this way?” I asked Ori.

“No!”

“Oh, well, we did what we had to do to the best of our ability and if they aren't happy with that there's not much that we can do,” I said.

“It's not a matter of how much we can do for them or not, it's a matter of them understanding and appreciating what you've done. We are simply being taken for granted. They expect the world from us and are prepared to give us nothing in return. This has been ingrained in our culture for more than a century and I'm afraid it's going to hurt us a lot when we start making contact with outsiders, with sensitive and powerful cultures... I say good luck to them,” said Delche.

We watched one of the galaxy trader ships escort the shuttle into the distance while the other waited for us to turn back and leave.

I turned the ship around and said, “So, now I just push the home button with the coordinates for Delche's restaurant and activate the autopilot and the ship will take us home?”

Delche cracked up laughing. Ori looked puzzled.

“That's what you told me to do when I get lost, right? Just push the button and the ship will take me home,” I explained.

“That only works if you are on our planet, not millions of kilometres away,” replied Delche and explained to Ori what we were talking about.

“Well, any ideas on how we're going to get home?” I asked.

“We can follow the same coordinates that led us here and return via Barkon or we can take a straight line towards Ostikon and I will

search the star maps for markers and when we pass one, I will program the autopilot to get us home,” suggested Delche.

“Now that we are free and away from prying eyes I want to test the full performance of the ship. I want to push it to its maximum speed and see what it can do. Is that advisable? What do you guys think?” I asked.

“I’ll read the instruction manual on the ship’s performance and see what it says,” said Ori.

While Ori was reading the manual, Delche looked through the maps and star charts to make sure there were no planets, asteroids or space junk in the path we were going to take.

When he was done looking Delche looked unsure. A couple of minutes later Ori came up with some changes that we needed to make to the ship’s computers.

“We need to reprogram a number of things before we can leap blindly into the darkness,” explained Ori.

“I bet you can go 50% faster than the top recommended speed,” said Delche and added. “This ship was designed and built to take a lot of punishment, look how the hull was made.”

“We don’t have to do this if it’s too complicated or risky,” I said.

“Let’s get on with it, the sooner we get back home the better,” said Delche.

“I just finished reprogramming the stabilizers for a smoother ride. Now I have to reprogram a few more things like the front sensor and make it more sensitive as well as enable the reverse rockets so that the ship can automatically stop without intervention from the pilot in case of an emergency. It will just take me a few more minutes,” said Ori.

“It’s all empty space out here, what kind of emergency could we be running into that would require us to stop?” I asked.

“Ori is right; we need to take precautions because we could end up flying right through a planet or something. The guns should also be charged and set on auto fire because even a small rock could cause catastrophic damage at high speed,” replied Delche.

“If it’s that dangerous maybe we shouldn’t do it at all,” I said.

“It’s not dangerous if proper precautions are taken, all the big ships fly fast when they travel long distances,” Delche reassured me.

Moments later Ori said, “It’s all done. I made all the recommended changes that I found in the manual. The ship is now ready for high speed flight. You can’t use your joystick at this speed so why don’t we program the ship for a five minute burst and see where it takes us.”

Delche made his calculations and said, “If this ship is truly capable of flying that fast we will overshoot our target in about two minutes.”

“Well, let’s set the timer for only two minutes then and see what happens,” I suggested.

The moment Ori said he was done I punched the hyper-speed button and the stars in the distance became streaks of light. Our bodies became heavy and we were glued to our seats. It was difficult to move or talk. There was nothing we could do but wait. We couldn’t stop the ship even if we had wanted to.

The two minutes felt like seconds. When the reverse rockets fired we all thought that something had gone wrong until Delche checked our position.

“I can’t believe it!” he exclaimed. “We overshot our position by about an entire day of flying at normal speed. We went way past where I was expecting us to be.”

“You mean to tell me that in two minutes we traveled what the shuttle would have taken five days to travel at top speed?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m telling you,” replied Delche.

“Did you find any of the markers you were looking for and can you plot a course for home?” I asked.

“I sure can, and did,” replied Delche. “We should be home in about four hours at normal speed. But, before we go, I suggest you run diagnostics and make sure nothing was damaged during the flight; especially the hull.”

While I was running diagnostics I asked Ori to check the logs and see if anything unusual had been recorded.

“Except for the guns firing six times there is nothing unusual recorded in the logs.”

“Six times? I didn’t hear them fire at all,” I cried.

“The ship shot at small particles blocking its path,” replied Ori.

Delche looked at my panel and said, “The ship passed all your diagnostics and it looks like we are okay to go.”

I was about to set the speed when Delche interrupted and said he had laid in the course and set the speeds. All I had to do was punch the autopilot and that’s exactly what I did.

When we got closer to the planet Ostikon I asked Ori to contact Viera and bring her up to date with everything that had happened, and ask her what she wanted us to do next.

Moments later Ori informed us that Viera and Asora wanted to see us the next day at ten o’clock in the morning at Delche’s restaurant.

“That’s all Viera said?” I asked Ori.

“That’s it!”

“What did you expect, marching bands? Haven’t you been paying attention lately? No one from the middle zone on my planet cares about anything,” said Delche. “The more I get to know these people, the more disappointed I become.”

Delche was right but what could we do? We could easily make things worse for both Viera and Asora by making demands which could then be interpreted as disobedience.

“I expect when someone invites you for something they usually tell you what that something is. So we are going to show up tomorrow for another surprise? I hate surprises,” I said. “But on the other hand, it could be a nice surprise.”

“Don’t bet on it,” said Delche and Ori agreed.

Of course we never told anyone about what happened to us at Barkon with the tractor beam and there was no point in telling because then we could be held liable for the damage we had done; creating a crater on the side of the mountain. Could Viera and Asora have found out about that? Is that why they wanted to see us... because we didn’t report the incident? This began to weigh on me.

“Let’s get to the restaurant and get something decent to eat,” suggested Delche, “I’m also anxious to see how Airam and my new staff are doing without me.”

When we arrived Airam had a surprise party for us. Delche was happy and so were Ori and I. Finally some recognition for our efforts, I thought.

Asora wasn’t there.

I told Delche to thank Airam and ask her what the occasion was for the party.

Delche spoke to her and she replied as Ori translated. “I missed you and wanted to do something nice for you.”

After we sat down at our usual table Delche left for a while to inspect his restaurant but soon came back with a smile on his face.

He said, “They are doing a fantastic job and sales are up. I finally feel like a real boss. Also, I have never seen Airam so happy before. If things continue this way I can take on a full time job navigating and exploring the stars with you guys.”

It was getting late so Ori and I decided it was time for us to go back to the ship and have a rest. We said goodbye to everyone and left.

“So, Ori, what do you think they will say to us tomorrow?”

“From what I’ve been hearing in the news there has been a lot of pressure from the middle zone elite to get rid of our ship. They say we are unmanageable vigilantes and renegades and should not be allowed to exist and operate on this planet with that kind of power. In fact some are calling for our downright capture and imprisonment and others for the dismantling of our ship. Channel 45 is saying that a compromise has been reached, the results of which will be announced by Asora’s party tomorrow at noon. So, Vieria and Asora may want to talk to us before they make their announcement. That’s my guess.”

“Do you think Vieria and Asora will agree to dismantle the ship?”

“I don’t think they will have any choice. It’s a condition for getting support from the elite or go to war with them. I don’t think Vieria or Asora would want a war.”

“What do you think we should do?” I asked Ori.

“I don’t know. But whatever you decide I will support you and so will Delche, I believe.”

“I’m going to bed, we can speculate about this all night and still get nowhere or we can get a good night’s rest and find out tomorrow,” I said and went to bed.

The next day I got up early in the morning and put on my camouflage uniform. I decided to let Ori sleep until it was time to go. I figured he had probably spent half the night listening to the news on every channel to find out what people were saying.

About an hour before our meeting we received a call from Delche wanting to know why we weren't at the restaurant yet. The call woke Ori.

Ori apologized for sleeping in and we left as soon as he got dressed. We were both quiet on the way.

When we got there Delche had our breakfast ready on the table. Everyone was there except for Asora who was expected to arrive at ten o'clock sharp with Viera, in Viera's limousine.

Ori helped me brief Delche on what we thought the talk was going to be about and what to say and do should the occasion arise.

Knowing Delche, the first thing he did was get upset which of course upset his daughter and his staff. When he realized he was upsetting them he apologized and put on a happy face. When Airam and the staff finished eating they left and went to work.

Delche looked at me and said, "We outlanders can't seem to raise our heads above the muck without being clobbered, so there is no point in me making things difficult. I trust you and whatever you decide I will support."

"So, this whole thing now rests on my shoulders, eh?" I asked.

"And why not? You've never steered us wrong so far and there's no reason to believe that you will now. If you want to go to war with these bastards, I will be right there with you," replied Delche and Ori echoed his sentiments, but from the look on his face I could see that he didn't want to go to war.

"I hope it never comes to that," I said.

The silence was broken when we heard voices outside. Ori went to look and said, “They’re here, Viera and Asora are here. They’re coming in through the back door.

I felt a rush of adrenalin all over my body and my heart started pumping hard and fast. I had no idea why I was so nervous.

Immediately after Viera and Asora came into the back room Airam came out and asked us to go in. Asora waved us to sit. Airam left.

The atmosphere inside the little room was thick and tense and no one was smiling. Asora spoke first and told us why we had been called to this meeting, which basically was to bring us up to date with the most recent political developments on the planet and to let us know what was expected of us in the future. Asora explained the ins and outs of what was discussed at the negotiating table between her party and the ruling party and the decisions they needed to make to open the way for elections. And then there was the matter of the little ship.

After Asora was finished with her update she turned to me and, according to Ori who translated, said, “The ruling party is demanding that we destroy the ship and execute you for interfering in affairs that don’t concern you. Our reply was that you are a soldier of this planet and that you followed Viera’s orders, which is true, but Viera, for the good of the people, acted without authority, which made your actions illegal. Viera is a royal and has immunity from prosecution but you don’t. So the question is what do we do with you and the ship?

We have some decisions to make. One, we can fight and bring the ruling party to its knees through violence, which can erupt into civil war.

Two, you can take the ship and run somewhere and never return.

Three, we can do something in between.

We know you have been a lot of help to us and none of this would have been possible without you but unfortunately we need to act in order to move forward.”

“What do you suggest I do?” I asked.

“We don’t want bloodshed, it must never come to that. We do want some sort of compromise; do something that’s good for everyone,” replied Asora.

I looked at Viera who was sitting opposite me and for the first time I saw sadness in her eyes. I looked at Delche on one side and Ori on the other. They both looked serious and wondered what I was going to say.

I asked Ori to translate for me, “One, I am not a coward and I will not run. Besides, what guarantee does the opposition have that I won’t come back? So, I don’t think this will be an acceptable option for them.

Two, you all know that I will not turn the ship’s guns on civilians. So that’s not an option at all.

Three, decommissioning the ship and its crew and sending me to jail or executing me is not an option either. If that happens it will mean that we are all guilty of wrongdoing, and I won’t allow that to happen, not to my friends. We didn’t do anything wrong. This will also be devastating for the outlanders and disastrous for your party. With the ship out of the way who is going to stop the rats from taking revenge on you and on all the outlanders who support you?

You need a solution that will allow you to move forward and also protect your interests. You will need a means to prevent the opposition from usurping power by force and guarantee your survival. You will need a means to make sure the ruling party delivers on its commitments made to you and to the people. How are you going to do that without a guarantor? You can’t, that’s why you need me alive and the ship intact. At the same time you need to meet the ruling party’s demands; remove the ship and its captain from

active duty. You can do that by mothballing the ship and sending its captain back to earth.

I am prepared to relinquish the ship and put it back where I found it under lock and key and go back to earth.

I believe this option should satisfy everyone.

It should also be made clear to everyone that should any of the parties renege on their commitments then I will have the right to return and put the ship back into active service.

I also want full immunity for Delche and Ori.

These are my conditions.”

Just as I finished talking both Viera and Asora got up. Asora thanked me for the advice and they both went back to the limousine and left.

“What just happened?” I asked.

“Well, you can see how we do business here on this planet... I need a drink,” said Delche. Ori agreed.

“What do you think they will do next?” asked Ori.

“So, they are going to break us up. Why am I not surprised?” asked Delche and took a big gulp of his rakia.

“I’m sorry guys...” I said.

Delche interrupted and said, “You did the right thing...”

We hadn’t eaten and we were drinking a lot and fast. The rakia was burning my stomach. I looked up and caught Airam’s eyes. She knew exactly what to do and brought us a platter of chunks of fried meat and three forks. I shook my head and she smiled.

Moments later Ori got a call on his communicator. It was Viera. She had called to let us know that the ruling party had accepted the offered proposal and ordered us to take the ship back to the Apserpon facilities and lock it up. As for me, I was told to prepare to leave the next day. Someone was going to come and pick me up from Delche's restaurant at noon tomorrow. She also asked Ori to tune in to channel 45 for the announcement that was to air at noon the same day.

It was hard to believe what had just happened. About an hour ago all this was a proposal. I don't believe any one of us seriously thought it was going to be accepted. I guess I finally got what I wanted; to go back home to earth. But why was I feeling so uncertain and so sad? I guess for the short time I was here I became attached to these people. They were now my friends and I didn't want to lose them.

The prospect of losing them made me feel sad. I felt like I was letting them down. They too were feeling sad. I could see it in their faces. I had again found myself in a situation that was not of my making.

"It's almost noon, we should go into the restaurant and turn on the big screen. Let's hear what they have to say," said Ori.

We sat at the usual table. Delche turned on the big screen, tuned it to channel 45, turned up the sound and said, "It looks like they are ready to start."

People began to drift from other parts of the restaurant and congregated in front of the screen, making my guards stir.

The hologram went blank and when it came back on two people appeared. The one on our right was Asora dressed in a white dress with patterns of red and yellow. The one on our left was a man, shorter than Asora, dressed all in white.

I heard Airam say something behind me. Ori said, "Airam designed Asora's dress." Delche grinned from ear to ear.

Asora spoke first and step by step explained her party's progress and platform. She then spoke about the concerns the ruling party had about various issues including the ship Dragon Fire.

There was a pause in her speech and her face turned from happy to sad when she announced the ship's destiny. There was uproar in the restaurant with, according to Delche, a lot of swearing especially against Asora.

When she started talking again everyone stopped yelling. She first explained why the ship had to go and then explained how it was going to go. Then, with a stern face, she said that the ship would be right back if promises were broken. There was uproar again in the restaurant, this time praising Asora.

When Asora was done with her speech the man next to her spoke and said that his party had accepted all conditions and was prepared to hold elections... That was all we heard before the crowd in the restaurant went wild yelling and jumping with joy.

We sat there in silence waiting for the yelling to stop. Delche got up, turned off the screen and told everyone to calm down and go back to their seats.

When he came back he said, "Well, let's go to the ship and retrieve our stuff before we take it back."

We walked to the ship in silence. I felt I had to say something to break the ice.

"I want a traditional Macedonian farewell party tonight with songs and dancing. When our people went far away for a long time their friends danced the "Teshkoto" (hard) dance to signify that departing from the ones they cared for was hard to do and so was the dance difficult to dance. But first let's go do all our chores."

I only got a tiny smile from them but we had started talking again.

Delche said, "I'm taking the meat back to the restaurant but I'm leaving the 22 full bottles of rakia here. We will drink it when we

meet again and when this ship rises and surpasses its current glory with us behind its controls. I'm also leaving my uniform with the Macedonian colours here on my seat to wait for me."

Ori too said that he was leaving his uniform on his seat to save it for him.

I said I would do the same also.

When we were done emptying the ship we had my guards help us carry the heavy stuff back to the restaurant. We took the meat to the basement. Delche said he was going to put it on the menu. Delche then gave me a couple of bottles of the firewater and asked me to take them with me. He said, "If you feel threatened on your trip back or anywhere, use it, it will clear your mind and give you incredible physical strength. But don't abuse it!"

"Do you think I will be in danger?" I asked.

"Of course you will always be in danger, that's why you have to take precautions, you taught me that, remember?"

"If an attack comes it will be sudden and I won't have time to make the potion," I said.

"You're right," he replied and went to get three small empty plastic vial tubes, filled them with water, added four drops of firewater in each and sealed them. "If anyone asks what they are just show them the label. The label says its medicine for space sickness. It was a common medicine many years ago. Now they use vapour (spray)."

"Thank you. I will put them in my shirt pocket where they can easily be reached," I said.

Ori asked Delche if he could leave his clothes and other stuff here until it was time for him to leave.

"That reminds me, what about my stuff, can I take it back to earth with me?" I asked.

“Absolutely not! Before they take you to earth they will strip you of everything alien and toss you back naked if necessary.”

“What about my badge? I have to take it with me. The badge is part of me now. Besides, should the occasion arise, how are you guys going to find me on earth if you can’t track me through the badge?”

“Good point!” said Delche and offered a suggestion. “I can imbed your badge in a red plastic medallion with the yellow Macedonian sun on it. It’s an earth symbol and they will allow you to keep it. But the chain will have to go.”

“No problem, we can make a ribbon from my earth clothing,” I said. “I’m going to show you how later.”

When we got back on the ship I said, “This is going to be our last ride...”

I was interrupted by Delche who said, “I don’t have the coordinates for our destination.”

Ori searched through the logs and gave him the numbers which Delche punched into the navigation computer. I then tapped the autopilot.

Delche said, “Watch where you are going we don’t want to hit anything. The numbers Ori gave me put us in a straight line to Apserpon.”

We flew low and very slowly over Nirelon and from there to Apserpon. I realized Delche had never been to Apserpon. When I recognized the terrain I took control of the ship and took the guys for a tour. I circled around the ancient city and down the valley towards the facilities. I showed them where Vos and I went hunting as well as the spice garden and the buildings where I had spent many days living and training to fly the ship. It was a sad moment for me knowing that I might never see this place again.

When we got above the ship's hanger I pushed the hangar open button and the hangar roof began to open. I activated the docking robot and passed control to it.

The ship was docked in its proper position in no time.

I pushed the hangar close button and the hangar roof slowly and noisily began to close.

I then activated the other two robots to clean the energy cannons and torpedo tube, top the torpedo shelf with torpedoes and recharge the fuel cells so that the ship would be ready for a long voyage should the occasion arise. In the meantime I ran diagnostics to make sure everything on the ship was operational.

When the robots were finished they took their docking positions and turned themselves off.

I looked at Ori.

"I know what you're going to ask. How do I turn off the guards?" said Ori.

"Yes, how do I do that?"

"All you have to do is say 'guards deactivate'. That's it! I found the information in the operations manual."

"Do it then," I said.

"You're the only one who can do that," replied Ori.

"You knew this all along and you let me drag my guards everywhere we went?" I asked.

"You told me you did it for our protection," replied Ori.

Delche looked at Ori and said, "He's messing with you again."

After I deactivated my guards I opened the ship's door, went into the hanger and turned on the lights. I then went back up inside the ship and inspected everything. We found a portable communicator was missing.

"I gave it to Asora, she can keep it," I said.

After we got off the ship I pushed the close door button and the ship door began to close.

"Since this is our last time here shouldn't we say something?" I asked.

"Don't bother," replied Delche. "We'll be back sooner than you think. I don't trust the rats, they won't keep their promises."

We all looked at the ship one last time, turned off the lights and came out through the thick door with the big shield. I forced the door shut and tested it to make sure it was locked. I then instinctively touched my chest to make sure my badge was there.

I was going to take the guys for a tour through the facilities but Ori reminded me that we had very little time before nightfall and urged me to pick up what I needed so that we could leave as soon as possible. We had a long way to travel via the tube tunnels and a long distance to walk to Delche's restaurant.

I took Ori's advice and grabbed my clothes and old shoes, as well as the cut off pants and pant legs and we left.

On the way to the tube station I showed Delche the pant leg and said, "We can cut ribbons from this material and replace the chain on my badge. This is earth material. After we insert my badge into the medallion I can wear the medallion around my neck."

As soon as we sat down in one of those cylindrical glass cars that looked like a jar, I rummaged through my shirt pockets and found Vos's name tag. I don't remember putting it there but I was relieved I had it.

It took us hours to get back to the restaurant. When we did I asked Delche to give me a pen and some paper on which I wrote the codes that activated the ship, the robots, as well as the code on Vos's name tag. I needed to write them down in case I forgot them.

In the meantime Delche went to the store to buy some epoxy and a couple of small tubes of red and yellow paint with which he was going to make my medallion.

While he was away Airam came over to our table to see us. After Ori explained to her what we were doing she volunteered to make the ribbon and paint the Macedonian sun on the plastic medallion.

By the time Delche came back from the store Airam had made the ribbon and I had finished writing the codes, folded the paper and taped it to the back of my badge.

After we decided what the medallion was going to look like, Delche found a round paper lid just the right size to fit the badge inside. He then mixed the red paint with two parts of the epoxy and half-filled the paper lid. He gave the epoxy a moment to settle. In the meantime he removed the chain from my badge and replaced it with the ribbon Airam had made. He placed the badge with the piece of paper in the centre of the lid, squeezed it down slightly and filled the rest of the lid with epoxy. The badge completely disappeared in the red viscous liquid. Delche then placed the paper lid with the concoction in a warming oven until the material became rock hard. At that point Delche removed the paper lid and polished the disk until it was smooth and its edges were rounded. He then gave the disk to Airam who sketched out and painted the yellow sun, after which Delche again put it in the warming oven to dry the paint.

Moments later he gave it to me. I looked at it and felt it. The yellow paint had sunk inside the disk and the surface felt smooth to the touch. I thanked them both and put the medallion around my neck. It looked beautiful.

I felt uneasy without my guards and with my medallion hanging around my neck where anyone could grab it.

Delche kept looking at me and finally said, “If you are so worried about it then put it inside your shirt. I need you to focus on your farewell party and not on your medallion.”

After I hid the medallion inside my shirt I felt much better. Moments later I showed them how to dance the “hard” dance but without music. I then got the chef involved and showed him how to tap the hard dance drum rhythm on the table. When he had mastered the rhythm, Delche, Ori and I began to dance. After watching us a while Airam ran over and joined us. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that this was a man’s dance but was glad I hadn’t because she was a better dancer than all of us. She could handle the strain on her legs much better than we could and out-danced us all.

The people watching didn’t know what to make of our silly performance. At first they laughed and then clapped when we were done.

After a few minutes of attempting to dance the hard dance we all broke into a sweat and gave up. Airam and the chef brought the food they had prepared for us.

When people from the neighbourhood found out that this was my last night on their planet they came to say goodbye and wished me good luck and a safe trip home. Each had some advice for me and almost everyone wanted me to come back some day.

“Except for not understanding the language, I feel like I am back in my village,” I said. “The outlanders are good people and I am going to miss them.”

We spent most of the night eating, drinking and reminiscing about the things we had done together, especially the silly things. No one wanted this to end and no one wanted us to be separated.

After everyone left we were too drunk to move so we each took a couch in the restaurant and slept until morning when the chef arrived to open the restaurant.

When Airam arrived she and the chef took us outside one by one and sat us on a bench in front of the restaurant. It was cool outside.

Delche said, “This is humiliating, people seeing us like this.”

I looked around, there was no one there. I didn’t say anything.

It was too cold to sit so Delche recommended we walk around for a while.

We walked for a long time in silence; no one wanted to talk. There were so many things to say but no one wanted to start.

“What will you do when you go back?” asked Ori.

“I don’t know I replied. I don’t even know how I am going to explain my disappearance to my family. What will I tell them? Aliens kidnapped me? They will all think I’m nuts. Of course they won’t believe me because aliens don’t exist. Until yesterday I was dying to go home but now I’m not so sure. I’m not even sure why your people are letting me go.”

“Don’t go then, stay here, we can go back to the ship, take it and fly to the trader’s galaxy. I’m sure they can use us in their service,” suggested Ori. Delche perked up and agreed.

“What about Asora’s commitments and promises to the people? Doing anything other than what was agreed upon will put Asora’s party in jeopardy, I can’t do that to her. I’m sure the outlanders will love our rebellious move but what about the governing elite?”

“Who cares about them, screw them,” said Delche.

“Delche, you wanted to change the world, we have changed the world, our job is done here. We should be thankful that we get to live. Separating me from the ship is much better than executing me and destroying the ship. To be honest with you I was surprised that the ruling party agreed to this plan. They know they won’t win so why agree to the plan?” I said.

“There is only one way they can win and that is by cheating. But if they cheat they know the ship will be back,” replied Ori.

“Not if they manage to kill the captain,” said Delche and they both looked at me.

Suddenly there was an urgency to contact Viera but we didn't have our communicators. We turned back and began to walk towards the restaurant hoping we could use Asora's communicator. But Asora wasn't there, she hadn't returned from her negotiation's meeting the night before.

When we got back to the restaurant Delche asked Airam to find Asora's communicator.

Moments later she came back empty handed but she did tell us that Asora and Viera were coming to the restaurant before noon to say goodbye to me.

We sat at our usual table and both Delche and Ori mentioned how strange I looked without my guards behind me. We now had an urgent matter to think about, my safety, which kept us from thinking about our separation.

The chef showed up with our favourite breakfast, fried eggs. Delche smiled and said, “It's nice to be the boss and be served like this.”

“It's even nicer to be a permanent guest and eat for free every day,” I said, looked at Ori and continued. “Some day when you become rich I hope you will pay Delche for all this.”

“I offered to pay him but he won't accept my money,” replied Ori.

“He's messing with you... again,” said Delche.

“I will never understand your warped humour,” exclaimed Ori and continued to eat his breakfast very slowly, as usual.

The silence was broken by voices heard coming from the outside. Viera and Asora were here and coming in through the back.

We quickly finished eating.

Moments later Airam showed up and waved us into the back room.

After we greeted each other Ori brought up the subject of my safety during the trip back to earth. Viera spoke up and assured us that everything was taken care of. My safety was Viera's primary concern which was why she was going to send me back with people she trusted. She said she had contemplated sending Ori with me to serve as a translator until we reached earth but had a more important task for him here in Asora's government. She said she had assigned a young lady to take Ori's place who I was going to meet on the science vessel. Viera also said that she had been appointed minister of defense in Asora's government and was going to take charge of the military, replacing Vos as the commander and chief."

I congratulated her and shook her hand. She said goodbye and walked out through the back door.

I looked at Asora. She smiled shyly and clapped her hands together in front of her. I offered her my hand which she shook and then pulled me in and gave me a hug. We didn't exchange any words. She also left through the back door but before she did she said something.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"We need to go," replied Ori.

When we stepped out into the restaurant the staff was there waiting for us. I said goodbye to everyone including Airam who had tears in her eyes. I gave her a hug.

Delche, Ori and I then walked back into the back room and went outside through the back door. Ori led the way and took us to the place where we used to park our ship. There was a little ship, the kind that had brought me to the planet, waiting for us. A young lady, much younger than Ori, came out of the back seat smiling, shook my hand and called me Sir in Macedonian.

“So, you are my translator, nice to meet you.”

She then took the grubby clothes and shoes out of my hands, put them in a plastic bag and shoved them under the back seat.

Without saying a word and holding back my tears, I hugged first Ori and then Delche and stepped into the back seat. I watched them both looking gloomy with tears in their eyes as the little ship lifted off.

The young lady tried not to look at me as tears rolled down my cheeks.

Moments later when I had composed myself I asked her what her name was and she told me to call her Ruzha. She had assumed a Macedonian name, the name of a popular flower that grew in abundance in Macedonia back on earth.

Voyage back to earth

“It’s a nice name,” I said. “I’m familiar with the ruzha flower which is often confused with the rose’s flower. In some dialects in Macedonian the rose’s flower is called ruzha. But do you know what the word ruzha means?”

“No. What does it mean?”

“In my dialect it means ‘beautifully dressed’...”

“I have been a student of the Macedonian language for a while now and someday I hope to go on a scientific mission to Macedonia and study its culture. Anything you can tell me will be helpful.”

“So, tell me, how did you get mixed up with me?” I asked.

“When Viera came to the academy looking for volunteers I jumped out of my seat with excitement. The only thing she asked me was how good I was at speaking Macedonian, to which I replied I’m the best. That’s it. She just pulled me to the side and asked me if I wanted to be your translator. I said I would love to be the translator for the most famous person in Ostikon.”

“So, you think I’m famous, eh?” I asked. “Aren’t you from the middle zone?”

“So, what if I am?”

“Do your parents approve of what you are doing?”

“No! But the young people in the middle zone will think I’m cool.”

“How do you know about me?” I asked.

“Everyone is talking about you and how important you are, you’re famous.”

“I’m not famous or important. I’m just a simple person. Circumstances put me where I am. You mustn’t think more of me

than what I am, a simple person caught up in a complicated situation. I am just like you.”

“I knew you were going to say that, but that’s not true.”

“If you aren’t going to listen to me how do you expect to learn anything from me?”

She was finding it hard to accept what I was telling her. This isn’t how she pictured things would be with me.

“I don’t know how else to treat you,” she said.

“You can treat me like an older brother. Be honest and open with me, tell me what you really think.”

“Okay, I will try,” she said, looked at me and smiled.

One of the men in the front seat said something. “What did he say?” I asked.

“He said we are closing in on the ship and will be there very shortly.”

“What do you know about this ship and its crew?”

“Absolutely nothing, not even its name.”

“Didn’t Viera brief you on what you were supposed to do?”

“No. All she said was that she needed me to be your translator. That’s all.”

“What did she tell you about me?”

“Nothing! Everything I know about you I learned from the news reports.”

“What about the voyage we are going on, what did she tell you about that?”

“Nothing!”

“Didn’t she tell you that you might be on this ship for a long time? Up to four years maybe?”

“No!”

“It was my understanding that the science vessel we are joining will be going on a scientific mission and won’t be returning to your planet for four years. The trip to my planet will only last about twelve days. What do they expect you to do for the rest of the time?”

“I suppose I’ll be finishing my field work on the ship. But I don’t know for sure.”

“Who knows? You’d better contact them and find out before we leave.”

“I don’t have a communicator.”

“Talk to the pilot and ask him to patch you in to Vieria and find out from her.”

She spoke to the people in the front seat. There was some hesitation but they finally put her in contact with Vieria. When she was finished talking she said that Vieria had spoken to her parents and got their permission to send her on a two year mission to another galaxy with an assignment to study some star system and that she would be given all the details when she had her orientation on the ship.

“So, she told your parents nothing about you being my translator?” I asked.

“It would appear so.”

One of the men in the front seat said something. Ruzha turned to look. I also turned and saw that we had arrived and were entering the ship’s bay. It was a large ship.

After we landed Ruzha picked up the plastic bag with my clothes from under the seat and gave it to me, opened the little ship's door and we both stepped out. The little ship turned around and flew right back out. When it left the bay the big bay door began to close.

“How do they keep the air from rushing out when the bay door is open?” I asked.

She said she didn't know but that was one of the things she was going to find out for me.

Moments later a woman in uniform came and signaled for us to follow her. There was an elevator at the end of the bay waiting for us. We got in, went up four floors and got off. We turned left and followed a long corridor with many doors. We stopped in front of two adjacent doors and the woman gave us a key each and pointed to the door symbol and the key symbol. Ruzha spoke to her. The woman looked surprised and then smiled and said something. She left and went back into the elevator.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“This is where we sleep. Someone will come to see us soon.”

After she showed me how to use the key she came into my tiny cabin and pointed out the various things in it and left. One of the things that I noticed that was familiar to me was the little black box that sat on top of a tiny table. It was exactly the same kind of black box as the one that Vos had given me to study his language. If only I had listened to Vos, by now I could have learned at least a small part of his language, I thought. It brought back memories; mostly sad ones.

There was a soft knock on the door; I figured it was Ruzha so I opened it wide. There was a man in uniform standing there who was slightly startled by my sudden appearance. He said something but I didn't understand him so I pointed to the next door where Ruzha was staying. He smiled, took a step away and knocked on the next

door. Ruzha opened the door slightly, saw me and opened it wide. The man hesitated but eventually said something.

Ruzha turned to me and said, “This is our guide who wants show us around.”

I looked at him and extended my hand. He looked at it and looked at my face again. Ruzha told him something and he extended his hand. I grabbed it and shook it hard; it was a firm handshake. The man became excited and laughed. I smiled back and accepted his laugh as a sign of respect or perhaps shaking hands for him was a novelty.

We closed the doors to our little cabins and followed our guide. Ruzha looked at me and placed her cabin key in her pocket. I showed her my key and put it back in my shirt pocket.

We arrived at the end of the hall and stopped behind a big door. Our guide said something and pointed at the door, then to the left and to the right. Ruzha translated.

“The big door leads to the mess hall, the left and right corridors lead to the dorms and the rest of the ship.”

Our guide opened the big door and we walked inside. There was no one there but the room was tightly packed with tables and chairs. Our guide said something and Ruzha translated.

“If you look on your key there are times when you are expected to come here and eat. The number on the key corresponds to the number of the chair where you will be sitting.”

I looked at my key and all I saw were alien symbols. “I will explain later,” said Ruzha.

When he was done showing us the mess hall our guide took us out and down the left side of the corridor. I felt a sensation. He said something. “The ship started moving,” Ruzha translated.

We walked down the corridor and at the end we boarded an elevator and went up. When we came out we went straight ahead and stopped

behind a silver metal door. Our guide said something and Ruzha translated.

“We are going to the ship’s bridge to meet the captain and his officers. You must stay in the designated area and not wander off.”

The door suddenly opened and I could see bright light beaming in through a very large curved window. It appeared like we were heading towards the yellow sun. The bridge crew sat in their chairs and monitored their holographic panels. A big bearded man standing directly in front of us turned around and came over. He looked at me from top to bottom and said something. Ruzha translated.

“This is the ship’s captain,” she said, “He is happy to meet you.”

“I’m happy to meet you too Sir,” and extended my hand. To my surprise he grabbed it, shook it and said something. Ruzha translated.

“He said he likes your tradition of shaking hands. From what he understands, by shaking hands you show that you are not hiding knives.”

As soon as Ruzha translated what he had said the captain cracked up laughing. I too began to laugh, I couldn’t help myself. He said something.

Ruzha said, “We are invited to the captain’s cabin tonight after his shift is over.”

I told him we would be there. After that each of his officers came over and shook my hand. I just shook my head at them and smiled as each said something to me. Ruzha didn’t translate.

“We are invited to be with the captain yet we haven’t brought anything to offer him,” I said.

“It’s not in our tradition to offer him anything. He won’t be expecting anything.”

“I don’t feel right going empty handed,” I replied.

When we were done meeting the captain and the bridge officers our guide took us to meet the scientists and visit their laboratories. I wasn’t familiar with their work but shook my head with enthusiasm as Ruzha desperately tried to translate what they were saying.

When we were done she apologized and said she didn’t know the Macedonian words for most of the things they were telling us. I told her not to worry because the Macedonians probably didn’t have the vocabulary for most of the things they were talking about.

When we were done with that part of the tour our guide took us to the ship’s botanical garden where fresh fruits and vegetables were grown. The area was high and large with many plants and fruit trees. It was really brightly lit inside and quite serene. I felt at peace and so did Ruzha when we were inside.

After spending a few hours sightseeing our guide took us back to the mess hall and showed us to our seats. I sat side by side with Ruzha. The mess hall was packed with people. Our food was already set on our table when we arrived and we began to eat as soon as we sat down.

When we were finished eating our guide came over and took us to an observation deck. From there we could see outside the ship and observe the stars in the distance. The ship was moving quite fast but felt like it was standing still. All the seats in the observation deck were occupied when we arrived.

Ruzha asked our guide a question and she translated his answer for me. “The air is kept inside the bay by a force field which squeezes around the ships to let them pass but keeps the air from blowing out.”

A few minutes later, people began to leave the observation desk and freed up some of the seats. Ruzha and I sat side by side but our guide preferred to stand. We sat silently for a long time watching the flickering stars in the distance surrounded by dark space.

Our guide received a call on his communicator. He excused himself to attend to an urgent matter and said he would be back in a short time.

“So, what do you want to talk about?” I asked Ruzha.

“I thought I had a million questions to ask you but now I can’t even think of one. I think the captain is quite interested in you and I’m sure he has many things to discuss with you. Are you looking forward to meeting with him?”

“Yes. It should be an interesting experience.”

About an hour later our guide returned and took us down to a lower level where the schools and nurseries were located. Next to them were all sorts of shops and various services. There were no children outside in the play area. They must have all been inside the classrooms. The place was practically empty. Our guide told us to hang around here until dinner time. He would come back and get us then.

I asked Ruzha to ask our guide if there was a place where I could get a haircut, shave and shower.

He explained to Ruzha how to find the place and to charge the service to our rooms using the door key. Viera had apparently opened an account for both of us.

As soon as our guide left Ruzha and I went looking for the place. When we found it and she explained to the proprietor what I wanted he went to work immediately.

I got a 70’s haircut so that I wouldn’t look weird when I got back to earth. Ruzha waited for me in the hair salon lobby.

“You look like a different person without your beard, much younger,” she said as we walked out of the hair salon.

There were many shops and services all built in a circle around the school area that catered to the needs of the ship’s crew and

passengers. Some of the proprietors stared at us as we passed by their establishments.

“Why do you think they’re looking at us?” I asked Ruzha

“I don’t know? Perhaps they’re hoping we’ll go in and give them some business. Or perhaps they have seen your face on the video screen. Or perhaps because we are people of working age and aren’t working. Who knows?”

“I doubt that they recognize me, I just got a shave, and I doubt that they want our business because if they did they would have invited us in. Perhaps we look like loiterers to them. But we could be vacationers or off duty crew people?”

“Perhaps we look like loiterers because there is no one around, everyone is working.”

An older woman stared at us at the next shop and we stared back. She looked away.

“Let’s go inside and ask her why she did that,” I said.

“What should we ask her?”

“Be nice and ask her why she and the other shopkeepers are staring at us.”

Ruzha asked her and the woman answered. Ruzha translated. “Well, it’s your clothes, you look like outlander vagabonds from the outer zones and the shopkeepers are wondering why you are here and if you’re going to rob them.”

Ruzha got red in the face and was about to say something. I grabbed her by the hand, took her outside and we sat on a bench.

“We need to talk,” I said. “Don’t blame people for what they are feeling. They must have their reasons for feeling this way. You know and I know that all outlanders are not criminals yet these people treat them like they are. Thieves don’t need to be dressed as

vagabonds to be thieves. They can be dressed as anything. It would make more sense if a thief was dressed in white to blend in. It makes no sense for a thief to dress as an outlander and risk being spotted. There are hardly any outlanders on the ship anyway. So, what makes these people fear them? More precisely why are they afraid of people dressed as outlanders? How many people have actually robbed a shop inside the ship and how many were outlanders? I bet you none of the shops were ever robbed! Besides, where would the robbers go after they robbed a shop, fly out into outer space? No, they would remain inside the ship where they would easily be caught. So, why then are these people so afraid of the outlanders? Let me put it this way, we can't deal with people's fears until we find out what causes them."

"You're right."

"From what I know from my short time being here on your planet the people who settled the underground wronged the outlanders when they threw them out of the middle zone without a care for whether they lived or died. Since then they have ignored the outlanders and abused them, a practice that has survived for a long time and exists today. The outlanders are victims and have done nothing wrong yet they are feared and despised like they have done something wrong. The outlanders are made to look like they are the bad people. Why?"

"I don't know, but it's wrong. When I was younger I was always told to avoid the outlanders because they were bad people and would cause me harm. But that never happened; not to me or to any of my friends. No outlander ever caused harm to anyone that I know. And you're right, I was afraid of them but I never hated them."

"So, what changed to alleviate your fears?"

"I began to think for myself. Also you and the movement you started helped me move along. It was something my friends and I, and generations before us, were thinking about but never had the nerve to do."

“I didn’t start anything. I was merely caught in an existing situation. I just helped it along.”

“Yes, I understand that. So, where do we go from here?”

“Well, our immediate problem is to examine where the prejudice against the outlanders is coming from.”

“How do you suggest we do that?”

“The way I see it the people in the middle zone have been lied to by their government for many generations. The fear of Mother Nature has been hammered into them all their lives; to be afraid of the outlanders because they supposedly are bad people. So, these shopkeepers don’t know anything except to be afraid of them. And as you know fear breeds hatred. Getting mad at them and yelling at them won’t help. It will only reinforce their fears and they will fear and hate the outlanders even more. There has to be a better way to deal with the problem.”

Ruzha looked through a shop window and said, “Look at them staring at us, all dressed in their pure white dresses thinking that they are better than us. I’m angry all right, very angry.”

“You told me you’re from the middle zone, didn’t you?”

“Yes! But I never liked the way we lived, that’s why I wanted to study alien cultures and find out how they lived and how they dealt with their problems. That’s why I wanted to be chosen for this mission. I wanted to learn more. Viera wanted a man for the job, it would have been more appropriate she said, but I am better than any of the men in the academy, plus not too many people want to study Macedonian so there weren’t many to pick from.”

“Yes, learning about other cultures is a good start but you will still need to deal with the internal problems inside your planet, especially with the inequality between the elite in the middle zone and the cast out outlanders.

“So, what do you suggest we do?”

“I don’t know. From what I know from our experiences on earth, inequalities have been dealt with through violent revolutions because those who have the power don’t want to share it. So it had to be taken from them by force. The equalizer on your planet was my ship. Your society managed to shift the balance of power by using the ship as leverage. Mothballing the ship and sending me away I think was a mistake. But it wasn’t my decision to make. But to answer your question, after Asora wins the election her government must admit the wrong the people from the middle zone did to the outlanders years ago and apologize to their descendents. Asora’s government must then accept the outlanders as equal citizens and guarantee their human and national rights. Her government must also pass anti-discrimination laws to protect their rights.”

“Perhaps that’s what Asora will do.”

“Asora is one person and she will need a lot of help, especially from sympathetic youth like yourself. You should write her and tell her some of your ideas and give her your support.”

“Oh, no, why would she listen to me?”

“You would be surprised. She listened to me and I’m not even from here. Remember the two men who came to say goodbye to me on the surface? The older man is her husband and he not only speaks Macedonian, he was in Macedonia on a mission and wrote an anthropological report based on his personal experience. You should look it up. Inquire about it through Viera.”

“Wow, that’s great.”

I looked around and noticed the people passing us by kept staring. They were making me nervous.

“Perhaps we should change into different clothing so people don’t stare,” I suggested.

“No, I am not changing my clothes. I am not going to let them define me by the clothes I wear, let them stare.”

Moments later our guide arrived and took us to supper. After that he took us to the observation deck for a while and then to see the captain. The captain had a large cabin with a large table in one room that could sit a dozen people. Sitting around his table were six of his senior officers, three men and three women, his wife and himself.

They all stood up when we walked in. Our guide closed the door and left. The officers appeared to be older than me and waited standing until we sat down. I sat near the captain and Ruzha sat between me and the captain. His wife sat opposite me.

All eyes were on us, which made me a bit nervous so I kept smiling while looking at everyone. The captain spoke first and introduced his wife. I smiled, stood up and offered her my hand. She took it and shook it firmly. The captain then said that I had already met the officers as he made a circular motion with his hand.

A moment later the captain rubbed his hands together, smiled widely and said, “It’s nice to have you here with us.”

“I am happy to be here,” I said.

“You know, I was thrilled when I got the call from Aunt Viera asking me if I could take you back to your home world. I thought what a privilege it would be to meet the captain of our mightiest warship who my uncle, Voskot, had personally trained.”

I gave him a curious look.

“Oh, let me explain,” he said. “My mother and Voskot are first cousins. His mother and my grandmother were sisters. My mother married an alien from another galaxy. My father was a big man, even bigger than you... and that is why I am much bigger and look different from other people on this planet. My father was sent here as an ambassador.”

The mention of Vos instinctively made me sad and I looked down at the table.

“I can see that you liked the man. I liked him too; he was my favourite uncle and my commander and chief. He personally came to the academy to see me graduate. But after that I don’t know what happened to him, he just disappeared and didn’t want to see anyone.”

Just as the captain finished talking one of the women officers said something. The captain replied and the six officers got up, waved goodbye and left.

The captain’s wife said something and we moved to another room and sat on soft chairs. The captain disappeared for a moment and came back with two bottles in his hands. One was green, the other clear. I could have sworn the clear bottle looked like one of Delche’s bottles. The moment he came back his wife went to the back and brought four small drinking glasses and a box of pastries.

The captain said, “These were given to me by the galaxy trader captain of the 2nd destroyer. He told me that he had met you and was very impressed with you... but not so impressed with our ambassador. He told me you gave him the clear liquid which he called rakia. So, when I heard you were coming to my ship I thought I would have a drink with you,” and handed me the bottles.

“Thank you,” I said. “I would be honoured to have a drink with you. Have you tried the rakia?”

“Yes, I had several drinks with the captain before he gave me the bottle. I understand you gave him several bottles.”

“Yes, from what I remember we gave him three bottles,” I replied and turned to the captain’s wife, looked at her and said, “In my culture it is customary for the hostess to serve the rakia. Would you mind?”

By the look on her face she was thrilled with the idea but said she didn’t know how. I showed her. I poured a little rakia in one glass

and then added some of the green stuff on top. She then did the same with the other three glasses and passed them around.

“In my culture we sip the rakia a bit at a time but before we start drinking we clink our glasses and make a toast,” I said, and then clinked my glass with the captain’s to show everyone how it was done and we toasted.

“To our health,” I said.

“To our friendship and may we all live long and healthy lives,” the captain said.

The four of us then brought our glasses together and clinked them again.

The captain’s wife said, “To our young captain who today taught us something new.”

Ruzha said, “To our health and to all the people on our planet and may their future be bright.”

The captain’s wife and Ruzha found the drink a bit strong so I added some more of the green stuff to their glasses. They both approved of the flavour. I then added some more rakia to mine and the captain’s glass. We smiled, clinked our glasses and took a satisfying gulp.

“I’ve had all kinds of ales in my lifetime but outside of our firewater I have never tasted anything so strong, how do you make it?”

“We make the ale first by fermenting the juice of a fruit; we then boil the juice and distill its spirits to make the rakia. In Macedonia, where I come from, we make our ale from a fruit called the grape and when it’s fully fermented we distill the rakia from it. It’s a very simple process.”

“Well, to be honest with you, the reason the galaxy trader captain gave me the bottle is because he is interested in purchasing a lot of this stuff. When I told him I had never heard of it he gave me the bottle and asked me to find him some. I asked around but no one

seemed to know what I was talking about. I know it's illegal to make the stuff on my planet but it seems somehow it found its way there. How did you get a hold of it? Did you bring it from your planet?"

"I know a person who makes it here on your planet. I will give you his name if you promise me that no harm will come to him. I know it's illegal to make it here so I'm sure he will get into trouble for making the stuff if the authorities find out."

"I promise you no harm will come to him. I just want him to make some for me."

"His name is Delche. You can get in touch with him through Vieria."

"Is he Asora's husband by any chance?"

"Yes he is."

"I know the man and he knows me. He used to be a navigator in one of our older science vessels. I was with Uncle Voskot at his trial when he was sued for being associated with his wife when she was charged with committing crimes against the government. What a farce that was. I think Uncle Voskot was really disgusted with how that family was treated." The captain paused for a moment and then said, "Thank you for that, I will certainly contact Delche and have him make some of that stuff for me. And who knows, some day we might even find a market for it."

The captain looked at his wife and at Ruzha who seemed to be disinterested in our conversation and our drinking. He decided to change the subject.

"So, tell me, was it exciting to pilot the mightiest ship on our planet?"

I looked at the two women. They were looking at me with anticipation. I looked at the captain. His mouth was wide open with a big smile, his eyebrows were raised and his head was slightly

shaking back and forth encouraging me to say something, perhaps something exciting.

“Yes, it was very exciting. With my two beautifully dressed women guards I was the centre of focus everywhere, especially at King Velion’s party. When I looked around every young woman was looking at me with a big smile. And when the king offered me one of his daughters in marriage, oh, I became the envy of every young woman...”

“Go on,” said Ruzha.”

“You’re messing with us, right?” asked the captain’s wife.

I laughed out loud and they all cracked up laughing.

“Seriously, tell us how it really was, how did you outwit the old galaxy trader captain? He is an old fox you know, we met him several times. He is retired now; he took his defeat very hard. But you, you’re a legend among his people. They are strange, but good people,” said the captain’s wife.

“If you see him again please apologize for me. But to be honest with you there was no outwitting. I anticipated he would use classic maneuvers that had worked for him in the past. His ship was designed to attack big, slow moving targets at a distance but not fast moving little ships. Our ship would have been obliterated had we stood still. He made a couple of simple mistakes. One, he attacked us with his big cannons and two, he didn’t launch his little attack ships early enough. We knew we could not withstand an attack if he spotted us because his long range cannons would have destroyed us before we had a chance to get near enough to fire, so we had to hide and surprise him. One, we didn’t reveal our position until he was on top of us. And two, we fired at him to momentarily blind his sensors so that our ship could slip away out of his reach undetected. The captain acted appropriately by aiming all his guns at our last known position where the flash came from thinking that our ship was still there hiding in the debris. He had no idea we had slipped away, circled around and began firing at his cannons. It took a lot of pounding to disable the giant cannons and we had to do it one by

one, which took a lot more time than I thought. When the captain realized his cannons were disabled he immediately ordered the launch of his little attack ships. But by then it was too late. He should have launched them the moment he detected us. But by then we had torpedoed his launch bay and he couldn't launch them. One of his little ships however did manage to get out and fired at us but missed us. It was a shame we had to destroy it killing its pilot, ending the life of another young man, ruining the lives of his family, and leaving his mother to mourn."

My last words must have made the women sad. They seemed to have lost interest in my story and were now looking down at the floor. The captain looked at them and at me and said something. Ruzha didn't hear him.

"Ruzha, what did the captain say?"

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes and then looked at the captain.

"War is a dirty business, there's nothing romantic about it. I'm sure it's a big burden to carry for such a young man as yourself. Thank Mother Nature for keeping me out of the wars, I have never experienced war and I hope I never will," said the captain.

"There is no glory in war, only sadness, pain and tragedy, that's why soldiers don't want to talk about war," I replied.

"Well, in comparison, my experience has been rather bland but I can't complain. I have met many people in my travels and as a result have made many friends," said the captain.

"As the captain's wife, I too had the privilege of meeting many people which has enriched my life. Many of my friends think my life is boring sitting around the ship for years at a time but we do a lot of visiting and not just with the crew. Sometimes we go down to the planets and spend time. But best of all is that we get to try the various foods of other cultures."

“Well, all this is new to me; I haven’t been outside of my planet. In fact I haven’t been outside of my home and the academy. So, to be out here with you is a great privilege,” said Ruzha.

Just as our conversation began to warm up there was a knock on the door. The captain answered it. It was our guide; he had come to take us back to our rooms. We apologized for having to leave so early. The captain said he would invite us again another time. We said our goodbyes and left.

The next morning there was a knock on my door. I opened it. It was Ruzha. She said it was time to go to breakfast. I asked her what had happened to our guide. I was under the impression we were not allowed to roam around the ship unescorted.

She said, “Our guide had something important to do and was going to be late. He gave me the okay to go on our own.” She also said that technically we weren’t allowed to walk around unescorted but if we didn’t we would miss breakfast.

Some of the meals served on the ship were similar to the fruit jellies and dry foods we had eaten on the planet but once in a while the kitchen staff cooked unusual cuisines depending on food availability. This particular morning, in addition to jelly and cookies we were served something that looked like strips of bacon but tasted more like fish. I asked Ruzha what it was but she didn’t know.

Before we were finished eating our guide arrived and apologized for being late. He then asked us where we wanted to go. Both Ruzha and I were caught off guard because neither of us knew anything about the ship and what activities were available.

When our guide saw Ruzha hesitating he apologized and said he would take us down to the shopping concourse and we could either wander around or rest on the available benches in the open areas. Ruzha reluctantly agreed and our guide took us back to where we had been the day before.

We sat on the same bench as the day before and we both strained to find something to talk about. Ruzha spoke first.

“I haven’t thought about it much but wasn’t it awesome that we spent time with the captain and his wife last night? None of my friends will believe me when I tell them.”

“Well, you should have taken pictures. Someday when you write your autobiography you can include them to give more meaning to your story. When someone says ‘get out of here, stop messing with me,’ you pull out the picture and show them.”

“You’re right, you know, I should have done that but I don’t have a camera.”

“Why don’t you buy one? You can charge it to your room. We should go and look for one.”

We walked around for a while but couldn’t find any store that sold cameras.

“There has to be one, the scientists surely need cameras to record things, right? Where do they get them?” I asked.

Ruzha figured we should ask someone. Unfortunately everyone we asked couldn’t help us. We then spotted a woman, who looked familiar, coming our way and decided to ask her. She was one of the scientists we had met the day before. After Ruzha had a chat with her she waved for us to follow her. We walked behind her silently. For some reason I didn’t want to ask and Ruzha didn’t want to tell me where we were going.

After going up a few levels and walking down several corridors we entered her lab where she had many cameras.

She said she was the official photographer for one of the missions and could certainly use some assistants if we were available for the job. Ruzha had to explain to her that I was leaving in a few days and going back to my home planet, but she was certainly available.

The woman said, “So, you’re the cause of my delay getting to my mission?”

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders. She smiled back and waved her arms as if saying “don’t worry about it”.

Ruzha and the woman talked for a long time and practically looked at every camera before they chose one. When they were done, the woman escorted us out of her lab and closed the door behind us.

“Well, how much did it cost you?” I asked.

“She gave it to me on loan for free so that I can practice taking holographic still and moving pictures. After she sees my pictures she will decide if I get the assistant job or not. She even has money in her budget to pay me. Isn’t that great?”

“Wow, that’s great, you must be very lucky. What a great opportunity.”

“I think I will film all our meetings with important people, perhaps starting with the captain.”

“If you want to be a good journalist you should interview all kinds of people who have something important to say, especially unimportant people who have something important to say like how they have been neglected by the system. You should also make a record of the prejudice some people have over others and expose that prejudice every chance you get. That’s what a good journalist does.”

“Yes, you are right but first I have to learn how to use the camera.”

“You will also have to learn how to ask questions without putting people on the spot. Most people would want to know why you are recording them and asking them sensitive questions. You will need to tell them the truth and you should always get their permission to record them.”

“You’re already making things complicated and I haven’t even started,” she said.

“There are consequences to everything you do regardless of how good your intentions are. If you want to be good at what you do you need to be prepared.”

“Like you, who destroyed one hundred Karon ships in which many lives were lost?”

“Yes, I have to live with that for the rest of my life and learn how to cope with it. In a similar way a journalist could do damage to themselves and to others if they aren’t careful.”

“You’re right. But for now let me take your picture and interview you. Tell me some stories. How about the history of your planet?”

“I would love to be your first subject but as you know I don’t speak your language. Also, I don’t know my planet’s history. All I know is the Macedonian people’s history.”

“For the time being none of that matters while I learn how to use the camera but you just reminded me of something. Imagine how important it would be to the academy to have the Macedonian people’s history taught in Macedonian to the students who are learning the Macedonian language?”

“Yes, I can imagine. Now can you imagine how many more projects like that you can do with that camera once you learn how to use it.”

“Why don’t I take a still picture of you and see how it turns out.”

“Do you want me to smile or look serious?” I asked.

“Smile, people like to see people smile, it makes them happy.”

“Okay, I’ll smile but that doesn’t reflect the mood I’m in at the moment. Your subjects should look natural.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Now stand still.”

After she took a holographic picture of me she came over and showed it to me. I was surprised and amazed at the kind of

photographs this camera was capable of taking. I stared at a small image of myself that looked almost alive. Ruzha rotated a knob and the projected image became smaller. When she rotated the knob backwards the image became larger.

“Wow,” I said, “I’ve never seen anything like this. That small camera can do that? Where does it get its power?”

“It’s self-powered, it has a mini generator built-in and it probably costs a fortune. The woman told me to be careful with it because it’s very expensive.”

“Can it take moving pictures? How about you take some moving pictures and let’s see what they look like?”

After looking at the camera for a while she asked me to go some distance away and walk back towards her. When she was done she showed me the results.

“I walk like that?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s how you walk.”

After looking around for something to mount the camera on so that Ruzha could interview me, we decided to go back to the scientist’s lab and ask for a tripod. I’m glad Ruzha remembered the way because after we took a few turns in those endless corridors I was lost. When we knocked on the door the woman answered and apologized for not thinking to give us the camera’s tripod.

“That was easy,” I said.

“Yeah, I was surprised too. I figured she was going to give us some grief.”

When we got back to our bench Ruzha set up the camera on the tripod and pointed it at the bench.

She said, “The camera self-adjusts and focuses the images automatically.”

“How do you know all these things?” I asked.

“The camera has files and files of written instructions. The first thing I read was how it self-adjusts for focus, distance, sound and light. In fact there are so many instructions in the camera it would take me months to go through.”

When she came over she sat on one end of the bench and asked me to go to the other and face her. She then pushed a button on what looked like a remote control and asked me to start talking. I didn’t know what to say so I cracked up laughing. She started laughing too and said, “You are great at giving advice but terrible at taking it.”

“Aren’t we all?” I asked.

She pushed the little button again and the camera stopped recording.

“Watch this,” she said and pushed a few more buttons. A whole bunch of writing appeared on top of the camera. She made a few selections and we got to see ourselves talking and laughing.

“Is that what I sound like?” I asked.

“Yes. What about me, is that what I sound like?”

I smiled and shook my head.

“See, I told you, you shouldn’t put your subjects on the spot. You should talk to them and explain what you are going to do and then ask specific questions. The person should know beforehand what you’re going to ask,” I said.

She cracked up laughing and said, “If you know so much, then why don’t you do the interview?”

After she turned on the camera I said, “This here is Ruzha and today she will tell us something about her life. Ruzha tell the audience how old you are.”

She cracked up laughing and said, “This here? What is that? And don’t you know you never ask a woman her age in public?”

She played back the recording and was surprised at the images and reactions it captured.

Just as we were about to set up the camera again, our guide showed up and told us it was time to go to lunch. Ruzha explained how she got the camera and what she was planning to do with it. To her surprise the guide volunteered to do an interview for practice.

After we ate our lunch our guide took us to the botanical garden. He told Ruzha to set up her camera in a certain spot and record the various fruit trees. While she recorded each tree the guide said something about it. The man was very calm. It looked like he had done this before. He also helped Ruzha with the finer things of operating the camera like zooming and rotating, both of which had to be done very slowly and steadily. After the interview was done our guide left. He told us to wander around in the botanical garden and warned us not to touch anything.

Ruzha couldn’t wait to play back the recording. It was so well done it looked professional.

“If you do a couple more recordings like this one you’ll impress the scientist and she will give you the job for sure,” I said.

She smiled, collected her camera and sat on one of the steps leading to the top of the garden and said, “Here I thought he was a stuffed shirt but he turned out to be a nice man, helping me like that.”

“Well, when you become a famous photo-journalist he can boast that he gave you your first lesson,” I replied.

She grinned at me in a sarcastic way and then said, “You really think I can do this and become famous?”

“I have no doubt,” I said.

While she sat on the step and looked into the distance I decided to walk up and admire the flora in the big garden. The garden was located on the outer left top side of the ship and was covered with a transparent material that looked like glass windows. The ceiling was very high and dotted with bright yellow lights. There were hundreds of fruit trees loaded with flowers and fruit. It was very aromatic inside which gave me a sense of peace. Every metre or so there were thin pipes running down and releasing small droplets of water. With the exception of a certain type of bee there were no other creatures present in the garden. Below the trees were rows and rows of vegetables, none of which I recognized. Below that were the smelly grasses (spices). Some had very beautiful flowers and a superb aroma. Despite the warning to keep away, I bent down and smelled every one of the spices.

By the time I was done I had forgotten about Ruzha and for a moment I had forgotten where I was. When I looked up I saw the camera pointing at me and Ruzha was grinning.

“What, you thought I would let a moment like this pass me by?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Come and have a look,” she said.

She had recorded my entire experience in the garden with every facial expression I had made. I saw things in the recording which I did not remember doing.

“Why did you close your eyes when you smelled the grass?” she wanted to know.

“I closed my eyes to turn off my other senses so that I could focus my full attention on taking in the aroma of the spice. I also do that when I drink ale (wine).”

“How interesting,” she said and sat down on the step. I sat beside her.

“This will be the second piece of my recording which I will name ‘the sensitive side of Captain Otsiron’...” she added.

I was about to burst out laughing but suppressed it. This was something she had done on her own and I wasn’t going to mock it, downplay it or do something negative to discourage her.

“What, no witty comeback?” she said.

“No,” I said. “You did well and deserve to be praised but, as you are finding out, I am a little short on giving praise.”

We both sat and looked into the distance, trying to look beyond the transparent roof and into the dark space beyond but found it impossible in the face of the many bright lights shining on us.

We heard footsteps. I turned and looked but couldn’t see anything. My eyes were blinded from looking at the lights. I recognized the voice, it was our guide.

“It’s time to go to supper,” said Ruzha.

My blindness was temporary and my full vision came back before Ruzha had packed her camera.

On the way to supper our guide spoke at length. Ruzha didn’t translate.

After we arrived in the mess hall our guide left. We ate our bland dinner in silence. When we were done we went to the observation deck. Ruzha led the way.

“I suppose you can call it good news but at the same time it’s bad news. The day after tomorrow we will be separated. I will be attending the academy on the ship and five days from now you will be briefed for four days about your new life on earth. Sadly, we will not be together. So, I suggest we do my interview with you tomorrow. We can go to the botanical garden first thing in the morning and spend the entire day recording you telling me the history of your people. I’m very sorry about that.”

“Well, I’m very sorry too but this was inevitable and we both knew it.”

I was feeling a bit anxious because the news reminded me that another great change was about to take place in my life over which I had no control. I stared into space looking sad. Ruzha sat close to me and I put my arm over her shoulders. I couldn’t believe how close we had become in such a short time.

We sat there for hours in silence staring at the flickering black space, knowing that words or looks could make the situation worse.

Finally Ruzha stood up grabbed my hand and we both walked back to our rooms in silence.

The next morning I heard a knock on my door. It was Ruzha and before I had chance to say anything she said, “We are on our own today so let’s make the best of it. Let’s go eat and go to the botanical garden.”

I just shook my head, grabbed her camera and followed her to the mess hall. We ate in silence. The only thing she asked me was if I was prepared to do the interview. I said I was.

When we arrived in the garden she set up her camera and we both sat on the same step at an angle half facing each other and half facing the camera. She spoke in her own language first facing the camera and then looked at me and asked me a question. When I was finished speaking she looked back at the camera and translated what I had said. While she was translating I too looked at the camera. We continued to do this uninterrupted for what seemed like hours. We completely forgot about lunch and continued with the interview until it was done. After that she asked me to tell her the story of how I had gotten here and what I had done during my stay on her planet. I did that too.

She then packed up her camera and we went to supper but it was too late, the mess hall was cleared. We both went to our rooms hungry and without speaking to one another.

The next morning there was a knock on the door. It was Ruzha and she was crying.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing!” she said. “I’m so sorry I acted like a jerk yesterday.”

“Don’t worry about it, we are friends and friends forgive each other.”

She then lunged at me and gave me a big hug.

“Where did you learn to do that?” I asked. “Your people don’t like to hug.”

“I learned it from you,” she said. “I saw you doing that with your two friends before you left our planet when I first met you. I thought it was cool.”

We walked side by side to breakfast. She was quiet but seemed happier than the day before. Then, just as we were about to finish our breakfast, she told me the interview turned out great and very professional. She asked me what I was going to do when she was in school today. I said I would find something. I might go hunting for an ehsib (wild pig). She cracked up laughing and got the attention of the entire mess hall.

“You’re very funny,” she said. “How would you like to escort me to school today?”

“I would be happy... but what do I do while you are in class? You know I will get lost the moment you leave me alone.”

“You can stay outside and wait for me all day,” she said and broke out laughing again.

“Okay let’s go, lead the way,” I said.

“Are you serious?” she asked. “You’re going to wait outside for me?”

I didn’t answer her.

When we arrived we entered the lobby of her school building. She went straight to a panel and punched a few buttons. She turned to me and said, “Look, they registered me as Ruzha without a last name, isn’t that funny?”

“No, not at all,” I said. “They probably did this to protect you and your family because what you’re doing is considered dangerous, you know, aiding me, a known criminal on your planet.”

She seemed to be confused by what I had said but then a woman walked into the lobby, looked at her and asked her something. She also looked at me and asked me something. Ruzha answered her. The woman smiled and waved us to follow her.

“Who is this woman and where is she taking us?” I asked.

“I think she may be my teacher but I have no idea where she is taking us.”

After walking a little while we entered a big room full of people Ruzha’s age.

She said something to Ruzha and Ruzha said yes. That much I understood. The woman then brought up some writing on her panel, looked at it and then looked at me and said something. I looked at Ruzha.

Ruzha must have explained that I was not a student and when I heard her say “Otsiron” there was uproar in the crowd in front of us. The young people were yelling, cheering, jumping up and down, looking at me.

The woman pointed at me and then at the door without saying anything. There was a big protest from the young people.

I asked Ruzha what was going on. She said, “This is my class, that’s my teacher and these people are her students. She wants you to leave but they want you to stay.”

“Why would they want me to stay?” I asked.

“Because they know who you are and are threatening to walk out if she doesn’t let you stay.”

“So, what is she going to do?” I asked.

“Let me ask her,” she said and spoke to the teacher.

“The teacher said it’s up to you.”

I looked at the students who suddenly began to yell “Otsiron, Otsiron, Otsiron.”

“I’m staying,” I said. “But they’d better make good use of my time.”

They were thrilled to hear that I was going to spend the day with them, which then turned into four days. Ruzha and I spent the next four days answering all kinds of questions that ranged from “did you really eat the meat of the disgusting ehsib” to marriage proposals from some of the female students. On the third day Ruzha brought her camera to class and interviewed her teacher and many of the students. She asked them how they felt about meeting Captain Otsiron, the alien from the planet earth, or as she referred to me “The alien that changed the world”.

I spent my evenings with Ruzha and with some of her new friends. I learned as much about them as they learned about me. I made sure I mentioned many times that they would be the future leaders of Ostikon and had better take their studies very seriously because their world was changing and they would be the leaders to carry out the change. There was one overriding idea that came out of all this and that was my confidence in them. Because I showed confidence in them they believed what I told them. How long that was going to last was up to them. I felt I had done enough to boost their self-confidence and their teacher agreed.

At the end of the fourth day I said goodbye and they all wished me a good trip, not to forget them and to come back as soon as possible.

On the way to supper Ruzha said, “I can’t believe how much influence you had on the students. They probably learned more in the last four days from you than they did during the whole year. I now have more respect and admiration for you too. One time I was even jealous when that beautiful, tall girl offered to marry you.”

“It’s my popularity they love and not necessarily me. In real life, as you know, I am unpopular and boring.”

I didn’t know where she was going with this so I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to discuss it and make things more complicated between us. We only had four days left to be together and I didn’t want to say anything to upset her. So, momentarily I put my arm over her shoulders and smiled. She smiled back. We spent the rest of the evening on the observation deck greeting people and answering their questions. The students had told their parents and the parents told their colleagues and they all knew about me and that I was on the ship. Everyone was kind and there was no moment that I felt threatened in any way.

The next day there was a knock on the door. It was Ruzha and beside her stood our guide.

“I have good news,” Ruzha said. “This evening we are invited to visit the captain and his wife. Isn’t that great? Our guide will bring you back to your room after you are done with your briefing.”

After we ate breakfast we took Ruzha to the front of her school and left for another section of the ship, where secret stuff was done, and I met my handlers. One of the three spoke English very well. After he dropped me off my guide left.

“This is going to be long and tedious,” my handler said, “and anything we discuss here cannot be taken outside. Usually we dispose of people who know too much but, it seems, we are making an exception with you because the powers to be have a vested

interest in you. You have friends in high places. As a result we have to give you a new identity. It will be new for you but this identity already exists on earth, you will just be assuming it. As a result you will have a place to stay, money to spend and a vehicle to drive. We will give you the necessary identification and bank accounts plus names of people who know you, I mean people who knew the previous person whose identity you are assuming. You are to visit these people and only these people until your identity is confirmed and verified by them. You will speak to them as if you know them well and will call them by their first names. You will tell them you had left on a business trip to Algeria and that you got very ill. But now you are better and happy to be back home and planning to stay for good.”

“What happened to the person whose identity I am taking and why Algeria?” I asked.

“Well, we had to eliminate that person for obvious reasons and Algeria because Peter James, the person you’re replacing, used to do business in Algeria,” he replied and continued.

“We’ll spend the rest of today telling you things you need to know and tomorrow we’ll give you your various identification papers and the money you will need. The house where you will live is in the mountains of British Columbia inside an abandoned World War II army base. You will have access to the entire base which is self-sufficient with regards to energy. The last two days we will question you about every detail you need to know and if you fail... let’s say you will not be going home.”

“What happened to the friends in high places and them wanting me to stay alive?” I asked.

“Well, we have our orders. We will make sure you don’t fail. That’s why we’re giving you four days for something that takes four hours to learn.”

“How long are you keeping me here?” I asked.

“We know about your visit with the captain so it depends on you. The quicker you learn and the more you cooperate the sooner you will get out. We’ll call your guide to take you back the moment we are done with you. In the meantime your food will be brought to you here.”

“Peter James?” I said but was abruptly interrupted.

“Don’t even think about it!” my handler said with a stern voice.

I decided it was to my advantage to fully cooperate and learn and remember everything I was told so that I could get out of here early and alive if possible.

“What about my clothes, I don’t have any clothes,” I said.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself. We will talk about that later. We have clothes for you and now that you asked, we will burn everything you own,” he replied.

They told me a lot of things which I played over in my mind like a movie. They showed me pictures and told me the names of several people who Peter James knew. One was an old woman at the CIBC bank to whom Peter James often went for services like paying his bills. They told me to call her Agnes. Another one was the local drunk named Oscar who frequented the local bar. I was to buy him a few drinks and say a few things from his past. Another one was a store owner, a man named Fred, who ran a small variety store and sold me cigarettes. And so on.

This went on and on for hours and finally they decided to call it quits. The briefing took much longer than I expected but ended early enough that I didn’t miss my visit with the captain.

When my guide arrived I insisted we skip dinner and go straight to my room. We met Ruzha in front of my room door wondering what had happened to me. As soon as we arrived I gave her a big hug, which surprised her, and went into my room. I went through my clothes and found the three items I was looking for, my watch, knife and lighter.

When I came out I said to Ruzha, “I want to give you one of these items to remember me by, which one would you like?”

“Which one means the most to you?” she asked.

I showed her the knife and said, “This served me well on your planet.”

She took it, smiled, gave me a hug and said, “I will cherish it.”

Our guide insisted that we hurry because as he put it, “His ass was on the line with the captain who hated waiting.”

Ruzha grabbed my hand and we walked hurriedly towards the captain’s cabin.

Even before our guide had a chance to knock on the door the captain flung it open and in a big voice said, “Ah, you’re here, right on time.”

Our guide turned around and left.

The captain and his wife looked jovial and very relaxed. Ruzha hugged them both, first the captain and then his wife. I shook hands with the captain and hugged his wife.

“That feels both awkward and nice. What is it; another one of your customs?” she asked,

For some reason Ruzha was very happy to explain the hug. She said it was a demonstration of affection that she had learned from me.

The captain escorted us to the long table and said, “I heard a lot of good things about you two and I also know you haven’t eaten dinner this evening.”

We both looked at him. He looked at Ruzha and said, “My son is in your class. He was so excited he couldn’t wait to tell me all the things you two did.”

“Which one is your son?” asked Ruzha.

“The tall, thin boy,” replied the captain.

“The loud mouth,” Ruzha told me in Macedonian.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my watch. I gave it to the captain and said, “I don’t have much but this is one of the items I brought with me from earth and I want you to have it. It would mean a lot to me if you would accept it. It’s an earth timepiece, useless here but it was given to me by my father and I want you to have it.”

“Yes, I have seen one of these before in a museum, very rare and very valuable. I am intrigued by the machinery in it and would love to accept it. It will be the most valuable piece in my collection. Thank you.”

“I’m glad,” I said and looked at the many foods and rakia on the table.

“I hope you are very hungry, I have a delicious dish of a special meat which I believe you have eaten before. So let’s sit down and eat.”

I looked at the captain’s wife. She smiled, picked up my glass and poured some rakia into it and topped it with the green stuff. She did the same with the captain’s glass and then poured some green stuff in hers and Ruzha’s glass. She then picked up her glass and raised it high. We all raised our glasses, clinked them, said “To our health” and had a sip. The captain’s wife was ecstatic with the idea of her leading the toast and said, “This is a great day for all women!”

Ruzha looked at her and smiled feeling she was in good company.

The moment I tasted the meat I knew what it was and where I had eaten it before. I smiled and shook my head.

The captain looked at me, smiled and said, “It’s fantastic and not poisonous when the blood is drained out of it.”

Even though Ruzha translated this information for me she had no idea what we were talking about. She too very much enjoyed the meat and ate it to the last crumb.

“How did you manage to get it?” I asked the captain.

“You would be surprised what I can get,” he said. “Too bad you are leaving so early.”

He then looked at Ruzha who looked sad and said, “I’m sure you will be back in no time.”

Seeing that Ruzha was still looking sad the captain’s wife asked her how she was doing with her camera projects.

Ruzha perked up and asked, “How did you know about that?”

“My son, my dear, my son couldn’t wait to tell us everything about you and Otsiron.”

The meat tasted so good that the captain and I kept polishing glass after glass of the mix of rakia and the green stuff.

“Do you know what the name of this drink is?” I asked the captain.

He laughed and said, “You name your drinks too?”

“Yes, but it was not me who named it, it was the captain of the 2nd Destroyer. He called it ‘a symbol of the merging of our two worlds’, the rakia from your world and the green stuff from his.”

While Ruzha talked with the captain’s wife, the captain and I spent the time quietly sipping our drinks and enjoying our company. When our guide arrived the captain invited him to sit with us and offered him food and drink. I was surprised that he accepted to drink alcohol in front of his captain. Yes, indeed, like Ruzha predicted, he was a nice man, reserved but nice.

At one point I decided it was time for us to go. We all needed our sleep and had something to do early the next morning.

“In my tradition it’s impolite to tell the guests to leave so the guests must use their discretion and not abuse their privileges. It’s time to go. We all have things to do tomorrow,” I said.

The captain laughed and said, “I’ll have to remember that one.”

We said thank you to our hosts who voluntarily offered themselves for a hug and we left.

On the way to our rooms Ruzha said, “The captain’s wife invited me to visit her anytime I want to. Isn’t that great?”

“And you should, she has been a diplomat for a long time and she will teach you many things, I’m sure.”

When the elevator door opened Ruzha and I walked out but our guide remained inside and left.

Ruzha gave me a hug, a kiss on the cheek and said she had had a great time tonight.

We then each went to our rooms.

The next three days were uneventful. I spent my days being grilled by my handlers and the evenings with Ruzha visiting the usual places. We were both trying desperately to avoid the attraction we had for each other and to not make things worse than they were.

The final day of my briefing they gave me everything I needed to take with me including the clothing I was expected to wear and sent me to my room. They told me to stay there until the next morning when I was to board the shuttle that was going to take me to earth.

At supertime Ruzha knocked on my door and I answered it. I didn’t tell her anything except that the next day at ten o’clock I was leaving for earth.

I decided to disobey orders and went to supper with her and spent the rest of the evening walking along the hallways in the shop district and meeting up with her friends.

It was an anxious time for me and I'm sure she too was feeling anxious but it was a subject we didn't want to discuss.

When we returned to our rooms she gave me a strong hug and again kissed me on the cheek and turned away fast. I was sure she was in tears.

The next morning I was dressed in Peter James's clothing and had filled the pockets with my money and various documents that I was given when the knock came to my door. It was Ruzha and our guide.

Ruzha said, "You have to give him your room card and everything you have in your room."

I went back inside and gave him a bag full of clothing and my lighter. I showed him how it worked and told Ruzha to tell him this was a gift from me to him.

This was the first time I saw our guide smile. He thanked me and shook my hand.

From there we went to breakfast. While Ruzha and I ate, our guide left and went to dispose of my old clothing.

"You look really strange," said Ruzha.

"What? I thought I finally looked normal," I replied.

She gave me a slap on my arm and said, "You are so funny!"

When our guide came back we went straight to the launch bay and saw the shuttle waiting for me. It was surrounded by Ruzha's classmates who began to yell "Otsiron" when they saw me. I waved at them. I also waved at their teacher. She was there too.

As soon as we arrived I was told to board immediately. Ruzha gave me a hug and a kiss and began to cry out loud. "Take me with you!" she yelled.

"You know I can't," I said.

"Then just remember, I offered to come with you," she said and yelled. "DON'T FORGET ME!"

In the midst of all the yelling I was pushed into the shuttle and the door was closed. Moments later we were in outer space.

It took about half an hour to reach our destination.

After we landed on top of a heap of rubble I was literally pushed out and the shuttle left quickly.

It was dark and cold outside.

Back on earth

I watched the shuttle fly low towards the mountain and then shoot up vertically like a rocket into the sky and disappear.

I couldn't believe I was back on earth. I looked around and felt completely alone. I touched my chest and felt for my medallion. It was still there under my plaid shirt.

I was quickly reminded of how cold it could get in the mountains at night here on earth. I searched my pockets and found the key to the door through which I could enter my new home. But where was the door?

I walked down the round hill in the dark and suddenly slipped into a crevice with overgrown vegetation. I followed the gap in the ground and found my way in the open near the road. I was shivering in the cold and couldn't find my bearings in the dark. The place didn't look like the photograph I'd been shown. I felt completely lost and regretted my decision to come back. A cold wind blew and I felt my teeth chatter uncontrollably. I wondered if I was going to freeze to death?

I looked up towards the sky. There was a full moon but it was blocked by black clouds. I decided to go back into the crevice to shelter from the wind. I walked as far as I could feel my way in the dark until I reached a wall. I felt to the left and then to the right. I felt something metallic. It felt like there was a door on the right side. I felt for a handle and found it. I turned it but the door was locked. I felt my way around the handle and found the keyhole. I got my key out and kept trying until it entered the keyhole. Then I turned it and heard the locking mechanism click. I turned the handle again and pulled but the door wouldn't open. I remembered what had happened at the Apserpon facilities and decided to turn the handle and push. The door moved slightly. I pushed again but this time much harder and the metal door flung open. It was pitch black inside and stunk of mold. I slid my hand up and down inside the right hand wall looking for a light switch. I found it and turned it on. A row of flickering fluorescent lights came on. The floor was littered with

paper and junk. I quickly closed the door and put the key back in my pocket. I was still shivering.

I looked around and saw a fireplace in the distance and a pile of wood resting beside it. I went towards it. There was paper, kindling and firewood in the fireplace ready to be lit. But how was I going to light it? I had given away my lighter. I looked up on the mantle above the fireplace and found several boxes full of matches. I lit one and started the fire. Several minutes later I could feel the heat radiating and my shivering began to subside. There was a wooden bench behind me so I decided to stretch out on it. The warmth of the burning fire allowed me to relax and watching the soothing flames dance in the fireplace lulled me to sleep.

Several hours later my body felt numb from head to toe. I slowly got up and put some more wood in the fireplace over the shimmering coals and blew on them until the wood started burning. I felt light-headed. I looked around the room and there was nothing there; no food, no water, no clothing, no toilet, no shower... nothing. There were a lot of windows with bars on them on the outside but I could see nothing through them. The fluorescent lights weren't much help. Half of them didn't work and most of them flickered and were giving me a headache. But, on the bright side, I was no longer outside freezing. I decided to stay put for the night and do some exploring the next day. I bolted the door from the inside, turned off the lights, put some more wood on the fire and went back and lay on the bench.

Many things were on my mind. I had just left the ship no more than six hours ago but to me it seemed like it was a lifetime ago. My mind was in total limbo, half looking ahead and half looking behind. I couldn't sleep and I couldn't turn off my thoughts.

I don't know when I fell asleep but when I woke up I was overpowered by a great feeling of sadness. It was unbearable. Thank God it only lasted several minutes. I looked outside but it was still dark. I got up, put more wood on the fire and lay back down on the bench.

Suddenly I jumped up. I heard a noise. I'd been sleeping on my back and realized the noise I heard was me snoring. I looked up, light was coming through the windows. It was morning. The fire was still simmering so I tossed some kindling over the coals and when they lit up I added more firewood. It was nice and warm inside but it still reeked of mold.

I went outside. It was freezing cold. I looked around and saw another metal door about ten metres away from the crevice. It was much wider than the door inside the crevice. I went over and tried to open it. It was locked. I pulled out the key but it wouldn't fit in the keyhole. It was a different type of lock. My handlers on the ship briefed me on everything but neglected to brief me about the most important things, how to get inside. It was getting too cold to stay out so I went back in and sat down on the bench. If I had no key then I needed to break the lock on that door, I thought.

Now that it was lighter in this big empty room I decided to look around and see what else I could find. I went to the darkest part of the room on the far side hoping to find a washroom but all I found was another locked metal door. My key didn't fit this one either. I came back and looked through the papers and junk on the floor. The papers were old mail from five years ago. It looked like someone had gone mad, torn up all their papers and tossed them on the floor. I regretted that I had to clean all that up but the nice thing was I now had a lot of paper to start the fire.

Just as I decided to add more wood to the fire I looked up on the mantle to see what else there was besides the matches. When I went closer I noticed something on the side of the mantel that looked like a bat hanging upside down. I was startled and backed away. Don't tell me I'd slept in here with a bat I thought to myself. I picked up a piece of kindling and hurled it at it. I hit it and it fell on the floor.

"Got you!" I said. When I went to investigate I noticed that it wasn't a bat... It was a set of keys. They were well-hidden on the dark side of the mantle and hanging on a nail. I grabbed them and counted them. There were six and they were all different.

The first door I tried opening was the one inside the big room. The second key I tried fit. I turned it and it worked. After turning it a second time I heard the locking mechanism click. I turned the handle and pulled. The door opened and it was dark inside.

A few metres ahead were black drapes. I looked for a switch and found it. When I turned it on I saw spotlights shining behind the drapes. I parted the drapes and found myself on a stage. What the hell is this I wondered? The stage wasn't large, about six metres deep by eight metres wide. I found the front curtain and opened it. There was a huge room in front of the stage. It was dark. I stepped off the stage and walked along the wall in the direction I had come from and found a door which I figured was the door I had seen earlier when I went outside. There was a light switch which I turned on. Many lights came on and lit the entire room. I tried the door and found it wasn't locked. It had no lock. I opened it and entered a short hallway. I turned on the light switch. On the left there was what looked like a coatroom. Straight ahead was the large metal outside door I had seen earlier. I tried to open it but it was locked. I turned the latch under the door handle and unlocked it. I opened it and tried my keys. One of them worked.

I locked up the outside door and went back into the big room. On my left between the door and the stage were six large display cabinets inside the wall about three metres high. In them were nicely displayed old flags and World War II army uniforms. On the other side of the stage were two display cabinets displaying World War II guns and ammunition. Past the two cabinets were two doors. They were the doors leading to the men's and women's washrooms. On the right side of the big room there was a lower level with three sets of staircases leading to it. Separating the two levels were railings. There was a huge long table with chairs that could sit about sixty people on the higher level. The lower level had many small tables sitting four to six people each. Facing the centre set of stairs was a large fireplace and to its left, mounted up high, was a very large television. In the bottom corner nearest the television was another door.

After going to the washroom I went to see what was behind that door. It was locked. I went through the keys and found one that

opened it. Behind this door was a huge kitchen with two corridors. In one corridor there were four walk-in freezers and two refrigerators. In the other corridor on one side there was a large oven, a large stove with six elements, two grills and a fryer. On the other side was a long counter. Under the counter and above it were many cupboards full of canned foods, dishes, pots, pans, spoons, forks, knives and other kitchen utensils. It was a big kitchen.

I opened the refrigerators. They were working but there was nothing in them. The freezers were packed with well-labeled frozen meats.

I pulled out a box labeled beef steaks and one labeled hamburger patties and put them out on the counter. I opened the boxes and with a cleaver I removed one steak and a block of six square hamburgers and left them on the counter to thaw. I put the boxes back in the freezer. When I was done I came back up and went into another room past the washrooms. There was no door connecting the two rooms, only a wide entrance.

On the far side of this room were big, tall windows extending along the entire length of the wall through which a garden could be seen and beyond the garden was a large dugout filled with water. The right side of this room, which extended above the kitchen, was furnished with a number of evenly spaced benches with coffee tables in front of them facing the windows. The room looked like a lounge. Immediately to the right past the entrance was a staircase that led to an upper floor. On the right side on top of the stairs there were twelve doors leading to fully furnished bedrooms. Each had a bed, night table, closet, desk, washroom and shower. Outside the door of each room was a large closet full of bedding materials. To the left there was a long well-lit hallway that led to the rooms.

I decided to take the last bedroom, the corner room, the one furthest from the staircase because it had a second window facing east. The rest of the rooms had windows facing north. I took out sheets, bed covers and towels from the closet outside and made the bed. Then I had a shower. I had to run the water for a while to get it to clear. The taps and the hot water seemed to work fine. When I was done I began to look for clothing. I figured every army base had to have all kinds of clothing so it was only a matter of finding them. If I

couldn't find any then I would wear some of those uniforms in the display cases, I thought.

I then remembered what my handlers had told me. I was Peter James and I had to dress like Peter James. So the question was where did Peter James store his stuff and how was I going to find it.

I spent the next couple of hours looking through every room and in every closet but I didn't find Peter's stuff. When I returned to the kitchen I found the steak was semi- thawed. I separated the hamburger patties and left them to thaw further.

When I left the kitchen I looked at the door and it struck me that I had six keys. I had identified three and I had three more which opened doors I had not yet found. I figured there had to be more to this base than what I had discovered so far. I decided to go outside and see what else I could find. I went out through the big front door.

It was past noon now and the sun was beaming from directly above and it was warm outside. Everything was visible including the crevice into which I had fallen the night before. I went out towards the road, up to the fence and began to walk down in an easterly direction.

About ten metres away from the crevice there was a driveway overgrown with grass, weeds and thorn bushes. It was sloping down and at the bottom of it was a huge wooden door that looked like a barn door that split in half and rotated on wheels. There was a lock on the door. I went through my keys and found the key that unlocked it. The big room was poorly lit by light coming through a couple of windows. There was no light switch. I went inside and after my eyes adjusted I could see that it was an underground parking lot. There were two vehicles inside. One looked like a snowplow and the other was a pickup truck. I couldn't figure out how the snowplow worked and the pickup truck was locked and I had no keys. I looked around the parking lot and saw a door that led to the building I'd been in earlier. It was locked. I tried the keys and found that the key that opened the big front door also opened this door. I opened the door and found a light switch inside. There was a

staircase leading up which I followed and came out beside the coatroom I had discovered earlier.

I went back down and turned off the lights, locked the doors and went outside to look for more doors. This time I followed the fence going up in a westerly direction. I found another driveway. It too was overgrown with grass, weeds and thorn bushes. This driveway was sloping up and then down and at the bottom of it was a huge door that looked like that of an automotive garage. Beside it was a smaller metal door. It was locked. I tried my keys and found the same key that had unlocked the other two doors worked on this one. I went inside and turned on the lights.

It was a big room in which a military tank was parked in the far left corner. To the right just behind the front door was another door that led to a room that looked like an office. I tried opening it. It was locked but I had a key that unlocked it. I opened it and turned on the lights. The office was painted white and was brightly lit. There was a desk facing the window separating the big room from the office. At the far end of the office there were two doors, both had no locks. One led into a washroom and the other to storage room which had been converted into a bedroom. There was a dresser in which Peter James kept his clothes and a safe where he kept all his important papers, passport, jewelry, money, etc., as I later found out. The safe was locked.

My stomach was growling from hunger so I decided to take a break from exploring and went back to the kitchen to cook the meat. I had no idea if any of the equipment was going to work. I tried the stove and it worked. I found a pan, washed it and put some oil in but it smelled rancid. I rinsed it off and tossed the bottle in the garbage and then opened another bottle. This one smelled okay. I turned on one of the bigger elements on the stove, put the frying pan on it and fried four hamburgers.

Surprisingly they were good even after God knows how many years they had sat in the freezer. I cooked the other two hamburgers and the steak. When I was done I went through the freezers and found frozen hamburger buns and bread. I took a package of buns and a loaf of bread and put them in one of the refrigerators. I also took the

box of steak and hamburgers I had opened earlier and put them in the fridge.

After I ate the meat I felt lethargic and wanted to rest so I went to my new bedroom in the corner room on the second floor and lay down.

The next morning I woke up very early. It was still dark outside. I lay in the bed for a while and tried to plan my day. The first thing I needed to do was purchase some groceries. I needed a variety of food to eat, not just meat and bread. But the market was far and for that I needed transportation. So, I figured my first priority after eating breakfast was to find the keys to the pickup truck and get it working. I figured the keys would be somewhere in the garage office.

After eating breakfast, consisting of two hamburger patties on a single hamburger bun, I rushed back to the office and started looking. I found a pad with handwriting on it in the middle drawer of the desk. Peter James had written everything I needed to know on the pad, including where the keys to the pickup truck were located. I would have never found them on my own.

I immediately went to the parking lot, found the keys and went to the pickup truck.

I got in it and tried to start it. The battery was dead. I went back to the office to look for tools. I found a wrench in a toolbox inside one of the desk drawers. I took the battery out and brought it back to the office. The problem now was how to charge it. I remembered reading something about tools on the pad. I took the pad out and reread portions of it. A lot of the tools it specified were stored on the shelves of the tool cabinets on the adjacent wall. I walked over to the other side and began to open the door cabinets one by one from the left, from furthest away from the tank. There were all kinds of things there, including folding metal beds and mattresses. This room must have been used to temporarily house soldiers spending the night here on their way somewhere. I could spend weeks looking through all that stuff. I then looked up and noticed beneath the dust

on the cabinet doors there was writing. I went back and turned on all the lights. That was better, now I could see the writing.

I went from cabinet to cabinet and found one that had a number of items including air pumps and chargers inside. I opened it and rolled out a charger. I grabbed the first one I saw. It was heavy but was on wheels. I rolled it over to where I had the battery, placed the charging clamps red on positive and black on negative, switched the charge to trickle, plugged it in and turned the power on. The on light and the charging light came on. I put the charger on a two amp trickle because when the battery heats up it releases a lot of hydrogen gas when it's charged fast. I had seen a battery explode before so I took precautions. I also left the doors open so that air could circulate and blow away the hydrogen. I didn't want it accumulating indoors.

After a few minutes of trickle charge I put the switch to the ten amp charge. There was also a fifty amp charge but I was afraid to try it. Besides I wasn't in any hurry.

One thing that was bothering me was; what if the battery was a dud and wouldn't hold the charge at all? Well, there was a test for that. The longer the battery charges the more charge it holds. In any case I left the battery charging and went back to the cabinet to see what else was in it. Next to the cabinet with the chargers was another cabinet and the writing on it was "batteries". I opened the cabinet door. The top shelves on the entire cabinet were full of all kinds of flashlight batteries. The large batteries were sitting on the floor and looked new.

I went back to the charger and saw that it was still charging. The battery must be okay I figured so I went outside and walked down to the parking lot. I noticed that not a single vehicle had passed on the road. I left the big doors open so that I could get more light and went in to check the truck.

I checked the oil and other fluids including the antifreeze. It looked like the vehicle hadn't been used since its last tune-up and oil change. That's good, I thought. The tires were also new but had

deflated a lot and needed filling with air. I would do that after I drove the truck into the garage, I figured.

I decided to go back to the garage and check on the battery. It was still charging. I was getting impatient so I decided to take it back to the truck. After I installed it I tried to start the truck. It started cranking but wouldn't start. After several tries the battery died.

I took it back into the garage, opened the big garage door by flicking a red switch upwards and watched the door rise and stop on its own. I was happy to see it working.

I placed the battery and charger near the big door, put the charge switch to fifty amps and plugged the charger, which had a long cord, into an electric outlet in the garage. I anticipated an explosion but it didn't happen although I could hear the battery boiling and the charger clicking every ten seconds or so.

About ten to fifteen minutes later the charger stopped clicking and the green light was on, indicating that the battery was fully charged. The clicking inside the charger was the safety switch going off and on and was designed to protect the charger from overheating.

I turned off the charger and left it there anticipating I was going to come back.

I took the battery back and tried again but after about five long cranks I stopped trying. The truck refused to start. I figured the gasoline reservoir in the truck's carburetor must have dried up and gummed up the flow. I pushed the lever connected to the gas pedal and saw gasoline spraying inside the carburetor. The gasoline was flowing so it had to be something else. I figured the carburetor was flooded or there was no spark in the electrical system. I let it sit for a few minutes and tried cranking again. It started on the first try. A lot of white smoke came out from the exhaust but it was momentary. The engine seemed to run smoothly.

I ran it for a couple of minutes until the idle subsided and then put it in reverse so that I could back it up and take it into the garage. It refused to move. I gave it some gas but nothing. I checked the

parking brake; it wasn't engaged. I tried going forward, same thing the wheels refused to turn. It appeared like the brakes were seized up. I figured I would try one more time. I put it in reverse and suddenly I gave it a lot of gas. I heard a loud snap and the vehicle moved. I figured something had broken. I hit the brakes and the vehicle stopped. No matter what, I decided to drive the vehicle into the garage and examine it there but as I drove through the parking lot and up the driveway, except for the scraping sound, the brakes seemed to work fine. The scraping sound was made by the rust on the drums and disks.

I drove the truck inside the garage and turned off the engine.

I went to the tool cabinet marked pumps and grabbed an electric pump with a long air hose. I plugged it in and turned it on. It worked. I turned it off and connected it to one of the front tires. I checked the driver's door for the recommended air pressure. It was 32 psi so I turned the pump on and ran it until the gauge showed 32 and then turned it off. The gauge dropped to 30 when the pump went off. I ran it again until it reached 34 and when I turned it off it dropped to 32. I did the same with all the tires.

I started the truck and took it outside on the road. I drove it some distance with the brakes slightly applied until the scraping stopped. I tried all the lights and signals, they all worked fine. The gasoline gauge showed the gas tank was full.

I left the truck running while I checked my pockets for my (fake) driver's license and the amount of money I had. I had something in all my pockets including the three vials of fire water. Unfortunately my handlers only gave me one hundred dollars in cash which was not going to last long. And even though the vehicle permit on the truck had expired five years ago and I had no auto insurance, I decided to drive to the nearest town anyway. I looked at the map in the glove compartment to figure out which direction to go and estimated that the town was about 32 kilometres from the base.

The truck drove very well on the rugged winding back roads and I reached the town in less than forty minutes. It was a small town with a fair sized grocery store located at an intersection between a main

road and the back road I had driven on. I parked in the large empty lot and went inside. I felt very uncomfortable walking in but there was hardly anyone in the store and those who were inside paid no attention to me. In fact no one looked at me or noticed me being there. I picked up some eggs, butter and a box of chocolate chip cookies and paid for them at the checkout counter. The woman who took my money said thank you but didn't look at me. So, in essence, no one saw me or cared about me, which in a way was a relief but a poor welcome home.

I drove back and parked in the garage. There was so much to do I didn't know where to start. I closed all the doors, turned off all lights so as not to attract attention, not that there was anyone for miles around, went into the kitchen and put the eggs and butter in the fridge. I had no watch so I couldn't tell what time it was. My stomach was telling me it was time to eat. I fried four eggs with butter in the same pan I had used the day before, which I had forgotten to wash, and ate them straight out of it. I felt hungrier than when I had started eating so I grabbed the box of cookies, opened it and ate them one after another, all while sitting at the desk in the garage office staring at the handwritten pad.

I read every line very carefully. There was a lot of information, much, much more than my handlers had given me. It turns out I had a telephone, a lawyer, an accountant, etc., and there was a name, a telephone number and questions to ask. It turns out I had a post office box in which I would be able to find my real driver's license, insurance for the vehicles (not for the tank) and permits to drive them. There was also information on how to open the safe but it was very cryptic and very long. So, before going to do anything I felt it was important to first read the entire pad and make my own notes.

I read as much as I could before I became overwhelmed and returned to the part that revealed information about the safe. For some reason I was drawn to it. Perhaps it was the challenge to open it or my curiosity of what was in it.

I copied the number-letter sequence onto a piece of paper and began to look at it. I stared at it for an hour and it made absolutely no sense. In my frustration I rummaged through the papers in the desk

drawers looking for clues and found some information on the safe. It was the manufacturer's specification. I read through it and all that was there were instructions on how to open the safe. The lock had numbers one to sixty like the minutes on the clock and you were supposed to rotate it four full turns clockwise and position the pointer on the first number then rotate twice in the opposite direction and place the pointer on the second number, back to the third number and then back to the fourth number. But I had no idea what the numbers were?

I kept looking at the sequence but nothing made sense. There was no separation between the numbers and letters and there were far too many numbers. I decided to rewrite the sequence and separate the number-letters in pairs. After I did that the sequence looked like the machine code I used to write for the microprocessors at the university lab. The first number was 34. What if the numbers were coded in ASCII, I wondered? I remembered 30 hex was the number 0 and 41 hex was the letter A in ASCII. I also noticed the letters in the sequence ranged from A to F. The second number in the sequence was 52 hex which in ASCII is R. The third number was 34 hex or ASCII 4, the next number was 39 hex or ASCII 9. So the sequence went something like this: 4R49... meaning four turns to the right and stop at 49... and so on. When I was done decoding the sequence I wrote the numbers down. I got out of the chair and stood up. My entire body was stiff. I looked outside, it was dark. I had spent the entire day working on this and hoped I had cracked the code. There was one way to be sure and that was to try it out on the safe. For some reason I felt nervous about what was I going to find in the safe?

Before going to the safe I decided to go to the washroom because my bladder was about to burst and I had had a long drink of water to wash down the sugar I had consumed while eating the cookies.

When I got back I took my piece of paper and went straight to the safe. I got down on my knees and began to turn the knob. I went through the sequence and tried to open the safe but it wouldn't open. I tried again and nothing. This reminded me of the time when I was in grade seven and was given a locker and a lock in school. I had a

hell of a time unlocking the lock but eventually I did it. I wasn't discouraged then and I wasn't discouraged now.

The third time it opened. I have no idea what I had done wrong the first two times. Perhaps the tumblers were stuck? I don't know.

While attempting to open the safe I was surprised that Peter James chose such a complicated method to disguise the safe's combination. Had I not been familiar with the hexadecimal numbers or the ASCII coding I would have never been able to open it. Well, as fate would have it, I did open it and now the question was, what was in it and how was it going to help me adjust to my new life as Peter James?

Peter James Returns

The safe had three shelves that were neatly organized. On the top shelf was Peter James's diary with a piece of paper taped to it which had the words "Please read this" written on it.

On the middle shelf there was a pile of cash in Canadian bills, some diamonds and some gold coins as well as a pistol and a box of ammunition.

On the bottom shelf there were all kinds of papers ranging from a passport to bank cheques and a bank account book.

It was getting late and I was feeling tired and hungry but there was nothing quick and convenient to eat so I decided to head on back to my room and go to sleep. I locked the safe as a precaution and hid the combination in a secure place.

I got up in the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep. I'd become used to the long days of Ostikon and the change was wreaking havoc with my system. I had no watch so I couldn't tell what time it was.

I grabbed a pad of paper and a pen and decided to make a list of what I needed. Number one on my list was a watch. I needed food, fruit, vegetables, bread, etc. So I began to write things down. It was a long list so I wondered if I had enough money in my pocket.

My stomach was growling, disturbing the dead silence in my room so I decided to go to the kitchen and fry another four eggs. I had only bought a dozen so I decided to add eggs to the list. I looked at the list and was sure I would need more money.

After I ate the eggs I went back to the safe and took some money from the pile of twenty dollar bills. I pulled out ten to fifteen bills. I didn't bother to count it. I looked at the diary and the note on it drew my attention. Why would Peter James want me to read his diary? Perhaps it wasn't a diary even though the word "DIARY" was written on the front.

I pulled off the taped note and tossed it into the empty waste basket. At the bottom of the wastebasket lay a crumpled up Rothman's cigarette package. I opened the diary and began to read. The first entry was dated some ten years ago when he made first contact with the space people in Algeria. He explained how he had accidentally discovered their shuttle and laboratory while prospecting for diamonds inside a dormant volcano and realized they weren't from earth. He also explained how he had been helpful to them and convinced them not to "do away" with him. He volunteered to move to Canada and was given a new start. He also explained how he had gotten the diamonds, gold and Canadian money. He said that he had no permit for his pistol which he had purchased on the black market in Algeria.

There was a lot of stuff after that in which he explained how he was brought to British Columbia and dumped in the mountains and how he had accidentally discovered this abandoned, secret World War II military base.

The next thing that caught my attention was a sketch he had made of the base's layout. It would appear that with all the searching I had done I had only found half of the buildings. But with his help I was later able to find everything which, at first glance, didn't appear to be relevant to my life of solitude and loneliness. There were pages and pages of handwritten information in the diary and I had the impression that it hadn't been written for me or someone else. It was something that Peter James felt he needed to do. But why had he put the note "Please read this" on the diary. Was it for him perhaps? What was happening to him? My lack of sleep had cut down my attention span and I found I couldn't read for too long. I could read but I could not retain what I was reading.

I put the diary back on the safe and looked at the piles of paper on the bottom shelf. I flicked at it with my hand and saw the edge of a large photograph. I pulled it out. It was a photograph of a man who looked to be in his early forties. I flipped it and there was a name and date "Peter James 1967". "YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME?" I heard myself yell out loud. How was I going to pass for a man in his fifties when I was only twenty five?

I grabbed the cloth bag with the gold coins and dumped it on top of the safe. There were twenty gold coins with writing that was unfamiliar to me. They looked very old and probably belonged in a museum. In the bottom of the pouch were two large rings and a gold watch. It was very thin and had a wrist chain which appeared to be made of pure gold. It too looked old. I grabbed the picture again and looked more carefully. Peter James was wearing both rings, one on each hand on the middle finger as well as the gold watch on his left wrist. That's good to know, I thought.

I looked at the watch closely and began to wind it. It started working. That's one item off my list I figured. I didn't want to wear the rings because I felt uncomfortable, also the gold rings could turn me into a target for a mugger. The watch I could hide under the sleeve of my shirt.

I put everything back into the safe and locked it. I then opened the big door and started the truck with the first crank. The battery was good and held its charge. I drove down the same road and parked in the same spot. I looked up and noticed the grocery store wasn't open. I looked around and saw a restaurant. It was open so I went inside and sat down in a corner seat. A young lady with a big smile came over. Before she had a chance to ask I said, "Just a coffee please."

I watched her walk away and go inside the kitchen. I noticed there was an electric clock on top of the far wall. The time was 7:15 a.m. I set my watch.

She was back with my coffee in less than a minute. The black coffee was in a porcelain cup sitting on a saucer and on the side of the saucer was a small spoon, a creamer and two packets of sugar.

"Thank you. I'm just going to have a coffee. How much is it and can I pay you now?" I asked.

She smiled and said, "Twenty-five cents."

I gave her a dollar since I didn't have anything smaller and said, "Keep the change."

She gave me a big smile and said, “Thank you sir, thank you very much, you are my first customer today and I know this is going to be a great day. May I ask your name?”

“My name is Peter James.”

After that I felt a bit uncomfortable. I drank the coffee fast and left the restaurant.

I went to the grocery store and looked at the hours. Then I realized that I didn’t know what the date was. In any case the store was open seven days a week from 8:00 a.m. every day. I had a little over half an hour to kill before the store opened.

I looked around the parking lot and noticed that there were a couple of newspaper boxes on the sidewalk. I went over and looked at them. I had no change to buy one but I could clearly see “Thursday September 27, 1976” through the glass display. I had only been away from June 11, 1976 to September 25, 1976 but I felt like I had been away for a lifetime.

I went back to the truck and tried to spend the remainder of my time thinking about my tragedy or my great adventure depending on how you want to look at it. Sitting in the quiet I could hear the watch ticking and watched the second hand moving second by second, minute by minute. As I stared at the watch I began to realize the predicament I was in. I pulled my fake driver’s license out of my pocket and looked at it more carefully. It was a simple piece of paper issued by the province of British Columbia which had the name Peter James, a post office box for an address, type of vehicles I could drive, that I was a male and born December 24, 1931. I knew I was going to have problems with that date so I decided to bend and crease the driver’s license along the 3 in 1931 and used my black pen to make it look like a 5. I hope this works, I thought.

By the time I was done messing with my driver’s license the store had already opened.

I went in, got a cart and started looking. A young man came over and asked me if I needed help and then whispered please say yes because my boss is going to send me outside to pick garbage.

“Can you please help me out. I’m new here and don’t know where things are,” I said out loud,

He looked at his boss and the boss gave him the signal to help me.

I gave him the list and asked him if he could read my handwriting.

“We have everything you’ve written here except for the watch,” he said.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “Take your time I have all day.”

He took my cart and decided to move around from place to place in the store filling my order according to the list from top to bottom. When we were done he escorted me to the cash register counter and packed all my stuff in paper bags. After I had paid the cashier he took the groceries out to my truck and thanked me for saving him from having to collect garbage. I looked through my money and the smallest bill I could find was a five dollar bill. I pulled it out and gave it to him. First he said that I didn’t have to do that but then took the money and said, “Thank you man, that’s half a day’s worth of work for me.” He then asked “What’s your name man?”

“My name is Peter James.”

He walked away happy. I got into my truck and drove back to the base.

After I put everything away I made myself a “shopska” salad with tomatoes and cucumbers, a bit of finely diced peppers and onion and a lot of feta cheese sprinkled over it along with some pepper and olive oil. The only thing that was missing was rakia to go with it.

I had a sudden attack of loneliness. I wished Delche and Ori were here so that I could share it with them.

After I ate the salad I went back to the garage, opened the door, started the truck and drove off into town. I kept driving until I found a liquor store. I went inside and looked for rakia. The closest I could find was a Serbian brand of rakia which was twice the price of whiskey. I decided it was too expensive and instead I picked up a bottle of bourbon, whiskey, vodka and rum. When I had paid for them I found out that they had cost me more than my entire groceries.

When I got back to the base I went to the kitchen and fried a couple of steaks, cut them into little pieces and put them on a plate, just like we used to do in Delche's restaurant. I opened the whiskey bottle and poured myself a drink. Drinking alone was not the same as drinking with Delche and Ori. The more I drank the more I thought of them. I needed to sit down so I went to the lower level lounge and put my plate, bottle and glass on the side table and lay down on a bench. Getting drunk didn't help me escape my loneliness and depression. The harder I tried to reconcile things the messier they became. I felt like I was stepping backwards while trying to climb a steep hill and was about to lose my balance and tumble down. It was a terrible feeling and I couldn't shake it off. I was missing my friends... terribly.

I don't know how long I lay there and must have fallen asleep. When I woke up I was as stiff as a board and had a terrible headache.

I looked out the big windows. It was pitch black outside and it looked like it was pouring rain. I took my stuff and went to the kitchen. I put the leftover meat in the fridge and the whisky in the cupboard. I rinsed the glass and drank some water. I drank some more. The water hitting my stomach gave me a sick feeling. I was about to vomit but the feeling slowly passed. I looked at my watch; it was twenty minutes past midnight.

I turned off the lights and went back to the bench. There was dead silence inside. There was a flash of lightening which lit the entire lounge. Seconds later I heard thunder. It was muffled and echoed many times. The mountains around the base created the echoes, I thought. The base was underground or, I should say, under an

artificial hill made of thick layers of rocks and rubble. I heard a large motor start in the distance and felt a draft of air on my face. I realized it was warm inside and the air was fresh because the heating and cooling systems were running all year round. It wasn't like the room I was in during my first night back which had no ventilation.

I wanted to go back to the garage office and continue reading the diary but it was pouring rain and I had to go outside. By the time I got into the office I was soaking wet. There had to be a better way to get around inside rather than go outside.

The first thing I did when I got to the office was go to the back room and change my clothes. I emptied my pockets and put my stuff on the table. I couldn't believe how many things I was carrying in my pockets. Did I need to carry all that stuff? I didn't think so.

After I lay my wet pants and shirt on Peter's bed I got another checkered shirt and a beige pair of pants from the closet and put them on. I then opened the safe, got the diary out and flipped the pages to the sketch of the building. Number 5 on the sketch described a door between the stage and the garage which I didn't know existed. But according to the description it could be opened with key 5. Number 6 on the sketch was a door that led to the firing range which could be opened with key 6. "There's a firing range?" I heard myself say.

I took the keys off the desk and went straight for door 5. I found it in the far right hand corner of the garage. I unlocked and opened it. It led directly into the corner of the stage. I left it open and went for door 6 which was behind the tank. I unlocked it too and opened it. It led to a long hallway. On my right was the firing range and on my left was a hall that led to a dark tunnel. On the left side of the hall was a room. The door had no lock. Inside the room were many shelves with complete military uniforms lying on them. There were a variety of sizes of pants, shirts, coats, long-sleeved undershirts, long underwear, sweaters, socks, blankets, boots, shoes...

I turned off the lights in the room, closed the door and decided to follow the dark tunnel. A few steps into the tunnel I found a light switch and turned it on. A whole row of lights came on. The tunnel

was straight and about 250 metres long. A few steps away from the switch was a staircase leading down. I went down and found a light switch at the bottom of the stairs. I turned it on. There was another tunnel under the tunnel above. On my right there was a long cement deck and on the left was a long, narrow pool of water about a couple of metres deep leading to the outside on the far side. I could see fish swimming in the clear water, small and big fish; small to the left of the iron bars that divided the pool and big to the right leading to the outside.

I turned off the lights and went back up the stairs and followed the long tunnel. When I got to the end of the tunnel I took a sharp right turn and went for another 200 metres. As I turned the corner I could hear water running and the humming of a motor. When I got to the end I saw an underground river divided into two channels by a concrete divide and emptying into two huge, vertically mounted pipes running down into the ground. In the middle of the two pipes there was a concrete divide on which sat a couple of generators. I assumed these were the generators that provided electricity for the base. In front of the generators was a panel on which there was a switch. The handle pointed to “Generator 1” on the left. I assumed generator 1 was online and generator 2 was the backup. On a shelf under the panel was a manual. It was covered in dust. I was sure it was the operating manual for the generators. I would look at it another time. The water running down the pipes was very loud.

I walked back along the tunnel. When I got to the firing range I noticed the back wall was lined with three plates of lead, each about a couple of centimetres wide. They were full of little holes. About 30 cm in front of the wall sat six large half metre wide round targets about a metre apart and a metre and a half off the floor.

The last cabinet behind the military tank was marked “Rifles”. I opened it and looked inside. Off hand it looked like there were about sixty WW II rifles nicely stacked, sitting upright next to one another in multiple rows. Underneath them on the bottom shelf were many green metal, square boxes. I opened the lid of one. It was full of shiny brass bullets that looked like fingers. There were hundreds of them in rows mounted on metal brackets. Each bracket held five bullets. I took out a bracket and dislodged one bullet. I then pulled a

rifle out of the rack. I was familiar with the rifle and with the bullets. The partisans had used them during the Greek Civil War in my native Macedonia. I checked out the barrel and found that it was clean. As I loaded the bullet into the rifle barrel I felt excited and my heart began to beat hard and fast. I decided not to fire it, and a good thing too because I had no earplugs and firing a loud rifle indoors could have blown my eardrums.

I took the bullet out and put both the gun and bullet back where I had found them.

I then took a tour around the various places inside the buildings and unlocked all the inside doors. There was no point in keeping them locked or carrying all those keys around in my pockets. When I went back to the office I placed all the items I had inside a drawer and only took with me the key to the outside doors, my driver's license, my truck key and the post office box key.

I looked outside. It was still dark. I figured now would be a good time to go to the post office box and get my mail. I found the address on the pad in the desk and looked up the street on the map. It was in the same plaza as the grocery store. I drove there and parked near the post office. There was no one there. The front door was open. I walked in and found an entire roomful of post boxes along three walls. Some were small and mine, number 106, was much larger. I opened it and a whole pile of envelopes slid out and fell on the floor. I grabbed a large handful, took them out to the truck and dumped them on the passenger seat. I did the same two more times until I had gotten all the mail into my truck. I locked the mailbox. It was still dark and there was no one in the plaza and not a single car in the parking lot when I left.

It was starting to get light outside when I arrived at the base. I parked the truck inside the garage. I grabbed the waste basket from the office and put all the mail in it and took it in. I sat at the desk and began to sort it out. I dumped all the junk mail on the floor and sorted the rest. I placed all the mail from the bank in one pile, the mail from the car insurance company on another and so on. There were letters from Peter's lawyer, accountant, and so on.

After I sorted out the mail I dumped the junk mail in the waste basket and went to the kitchen to make breakfast because it was going to take a long time to sift through five years worth of letters, bills, bank statements, etc.

I came back after I had eaten breakfast and, one by one, I opened all the envelopes and went through their contents. I found the latest issue of Peter's driver's license, car insurance and a sticker for his vehicle ownership permit. I also found all of Peter's bank statements, income tax returns and property tax payments for the past five years. The property under which the military base was buried was designated a wilderness. Before the base was built the site was a rock quarry filled with water. The buildings were built above the water table and covered with large rocks and loose gravel and now they looked like a large mound.

One other thing I noticed was that the lawyer's fees and accountant's fees were getting progressively more expensive with every year and the bank account was going to run out soon if I didn't add more money to it. So, I figured it was time for me to pay a visit to Agnes, the bank lady, and deposit some cash. But before I could do that I needed to know more about Agnes and Peter James: a lot more than what my handlers had told me back on the ship.

I stuffed the empty envelopes in the waste basket and went to the fireplace in the moldy room and set them on fire. After all the papers were burnt I went back to the office, opened the safe, took the diary out and put the papers I wanted to keep on the top shelf.

I grabbed Peter's big photograph and looked at it again. I had doubts that anyone would believe that I was him. I had no idea why my handlers on the ship thought I could pass as him. And more importantly how had he "disappeared". Had someone killed him or had he gone into hiding? I was hoping there would be something in his diary that would explain things.

As I tossed the picture back on the bottom shelf of the safe I noticed a black strip in the corner looking like the edge of a thick ruler. I pulled it up. It was a wallet. It was wedged behind the pile of papers. It was thin and except for the small photograph of a woman about

his age in it, it was empty. There was nothing written on the back of the photograph to indicate the date it was taken or who she was. Since I didn't have a wallet of my own I figured I could use it. I put my papers and money in it and stuffed it into my back, right hand pocket.

I was about to grab the entire pile of papers and sift through them but decided against it. There were too many papers to go through before lunch.

I pulled out Peter's passport and looked at it. It was Algerian which didn't interest me at the moment. I tossed it back and locked the safe.

I picked up the diary and went to the kitchen to make some lunch. I looked through the cupboards and found a small coffee pot. I made coffee to go with my lunch. I decided to have two fried hamburgers garnished with a slice of tomato and onion. After I ate my lunch I began to read the diary from where I'd left off. I found nothing about Agnes. In fact there wasn't much about anything except for Peter's daily experiences in this isolated part of British Columbia and how he had found and purchased the rock quarry and managed to convince the province to turn it into a nature preserve. It was interesting reading but I had more pressing matters to attend to at the moment.

I decided to wing it and take my chances going to the bank and meeting Agnes, that is, if she still worked in the bank.

After I had my coffee I went to the safe and grabbed a handful of bills from each pile. I counted them and wrote down the number of bills of each denomination. I had picked up \$7,860 in total. I picked up the bankbook, got into my truck and drove to town.

Meeting Agnes the bank teller

I had seen the bank before, it was in the same plaza as the grocery store. I parked my truck close to it and looked inside from the large window. There were three customers inside. I decided to wait until everyone was gone. I tried hard to remember what Agnes looked like from the picture my handlers had shown me but couldn't remember. All I remembered was that she looked old. Another customer showed up. Now there were four people in the bank. I decided to go in. There were four tellers, all women, only one was old. I went and stood in line. One of the customers on the far right counter left. The teller behind the counter looked at me and said, "Next."

"I'll wait for Agnes," I said and pointed to the leftmost counter. The teller shook her head and looked away.

A little later two more customers came in and lined up behind me. I waved them by. By the time Agnes was finished with her customer all the customers had left. I kept getting looks from the tellers who now were free. Finally the old lady waved me in.

As I began to walk towards the counter I said, "Hello Agnes." She looked up. She was wearing thick glasses. The other three tellers also looked.

"Who are you again?" she asked.

"It's Peter," I said.

"Peter who?"

"Peter James."

"You're not Peter James!"

"Is this the guy that dated your daughter?" asked one of the tellers.

“No silly, he was a different Peter James. Our Peter was an older man,” she said, looked at me and asked. “What can I do for you Mr. James?”

I fumbled through my pockets pulled out the cash and the bankbook and dumped them on the counter. Everyone was looking at me.

“What do you want me to do with that?” asked Agnes.

I let out a nervous laugh and said, “Ah, deposit it please.”

Agnes looked at me and asked, “Do you have any identification?”

I fumbled through my wallet and pulled out my creased driver’s license and asked, “Is this okay?”

“It will do,” she said as she looked at it. “We have your card in here somewhere, let me find it.” She then went to the back, pulled out a cabinet drawer and came back with a card. She looked at the driver’s license and said, “You were born which year?”

“I was born in 1951,” I said.

She made an adjustment to the card and put it away. She then counted the money, updated my account book and gave it to me.

Just as I was about to walk away she yelled, “You forgot your receipt!”

I turned around, took the paper, thanked her and left. I could hear whispers and giggles as I walked away.

I was about to toss the deposit receipt in the garbage outside the bank when I saw some handwriting on it. It said “Come and see me at 7 pm” and there was an address and a telephone number.

I spent the next several hours on edge wondering why Agnes would want to see me in her home. Well, I assumed the address she had given me was from her home. The comment the other teller made about Peter James dating her daughter made me nervous. What did

she know about Peter James? Why did Peter James give my handlers Agnes's name as my bank contact? Obviously Agnes knew I wasn't Peter James. Agnes, I believe, changed the year of my birth on the bank card from 1931 to 1951 to hide something, but what? Something wasn't right.

I looked up her street on the map. It was walking distance from the plaza where she worked. I took the bottle of bourbon I had bought the other day and put it in a paper bag. I thought it would be a nice gesture to bring her something. Wine would have been better but I didn't have any.

I arrived early and decided to park my truck in the plaza parking lot to pass the time. The place was dead. Most stores closed at 6 p.m. except for the restaurant. I went in for a quick coffee. I looked around but the young lady who had served me wasn't there. An older and slightly plump woman came over and brought my coffee.

"It's Peter James, right?" she asked. "My daughter couldn't get over the tip you gave her the other day. The coffee is on the house."

I said thank you, smiled, drank the coffee fast and went back to the truck.

A few minutes later I drove off and went to look for Agnes's address. I looked at my watch as I pulled into her driveway. It was two minutes to seven, close enough I thought.

I took the bottle which I had wrapped in a paper bag and went to the front door. I rang the bell. A younger woman came to the door. I recognized her. She was the woman from the little picture in my wallet.

"Don't just stand there. Invite him in," Agnes said from inside the house. I recognized her voice.

She kept looking at me as she escorted me to the kitchen where Agnes was cooking something that smelled delicious. I handed the woman the bottle. She took it out of the bag and said, "Look mom, your favourite. He brought you a bottle of bourbon."

Agnes didn't say anything. I was getting nervous.

A moment later she said, "So, you are the new Peter James, eh?"

I didn't know how to respond to that so I didn't say anything.

To ease the tension her daughter asked me if I wanted something to drink and then said, "You are staying for dinner, okay?"

I looked at Agnes and she shook her head "yes".

"What did you mean when you said that I was the new Peter James?" I asked.

"Son, we have a lot to talk about so please let me finish preparing the food first and I will tell you everything I know... And, by the way, this is my daughter Olivia."

Olivia smiled, shook my hand and said, "You look nothing like him."

I didn't know what to say so I kept quiet while Agnes served the food.

"Also, thank you for the bottle of bourbon. Did they tell you about that too?"

"No," I said. "No one told me anything. I got the bourbon myself..."

"Well, what did they tell you?" she asked.

I didn't know these women and was not prepared to reveal anything until I found out more about them.

"You seem to know a lot about me but I know nothing about you," I said and smiled.

Olivia smiled back at me and said, “We don’t know anything about you. All we know is that you took my husband’s name and showed up in town pretending to be him.”

“Why did you refer to me as ‘the new Peter James’? Who was the old Peter James and why do you think I’ve taken his name?”

Agnes looked at me and said, “All I can tell you is that Peter James came to me in the bank one day and asked me to help him open an account. He seemed like a lost soul so I invited him here for a meal and a nice chat. He immediately hit it off with my daughter and about a year later they got married. She wanted children and I wanted grandchildren but he said no and kept making excuses. Finally one day my daughter had had enough and pressed him to tell her why. He came up with this bizarre story about which she can tell you more, which we didn’t believe. After that he began to lose his memory and had to write things down to remind him what to do; even the simplest things. Then, one day, poof he vanished. And five years later, when we thought we had closure, here you are pretending to be him.”

“Wow!” I said.

“That’s all you have to say? I helped you out today. I could have turned you in to the authorities you know? So stop dancing around and tell us who you really are and what’s your game!”

“Mom, stop it! I’ll tell him everything I know first and if he doesn’t cooperate then you can turn him in!” said Olivia and began to tell her side of the story.

“When I first met him I knew he wasn’t from around here. He spoke English with a slight accent, British, Australian, I couldn’t tell. When I asked him where he was from originally he said he was from Algeria. He didn’t tell me from where in Algeria. He said he was a prospector in gold and diamonds. One day he even showed me some. He was a mess when we first met him. He looked like a hobo. We asked him to stay with us for a while until he found his own place. I even helped him look for a job but he didn’t want to work. He was very grateful for what we did for him and was always polite.

I was his only friend in town so we spent a lot of time together. We got very close.

But, as I got to know him more I could feel that he was hiding something. I also knew he wasn't happy about what he was hiding and often left when I pressed him for answers. He used to disappear for days. Then, after he bought that desolate property up there near the river, he used to go there and spend a lot of time alone. I have no idea what he ate or where he slept. One time I went looking for him and found him fishing in the quarry. He had caught two fair sized fish. He had no barbeque or open fire pit and when I forced him to tell me what he was going to do with the fish he wouldn't tell me. I stormed out of the place and drove myself home. He followed me with that truck, the same one you're driving, and brought the fish here. He said he was catching them for us but I knew he was lying. I got mad and yelled at him. I accused him of seeing another woman, even though I knew he wasn't seeing anyone. It's a small town and we all know what's going on. He got very upset and asked me what I wanted from him. I told him I wanted him to marry me. He got upset and left. A couple of days later he came back and said he wanted to marry me. My mother told me not to do it but I didn't listen. I loved him, you know. I still do, so I ignored my mother's advice and we got married. We had a small private wedding.

I convinced him to stay here with us but he felt confined. He wasn't very happy but we managed. I had to go to work while he stayed at home. I know he had money. He sold some of the gold and diamonds he had brought with him, probably on the black market because I know he didn't have the papers to prove that they were his. Anyway I didn't care about that. All I cared about was us. And then there were the annoying rumours people were spreading about us. Everyone in town thought I supported him instead of him supporting me like the way it should be. He asked me to quit working. "If that bothers you so much then why not just stop working and we can live off my savings."

I said no.

We lived like this for a few years.

One day we visited one of my friends. She was married two years after us and had a baby. I held the little boy in my arms and couldn't put him down. My friend noticed and asked why we didn't have children of our own. I didn't know what to say. I told her that someday we would. I was getting older and almost past child bearing age. This bothered me a lot and when Peter asked me what was wrong I told him. I told him I wanted to have a child. He immediately said no, it wasn't possible. I began to cry and wanted to know why. I was ready to jump out of the truck and kill myself. He slammed the brakes and said no. I told him I just wanted him to tell me why. He said he would.

The next day we drove up to the quarry and sat on the rocks. He told me some ridiculous story about him being brought there by aliens because he had discovered their secrets and crap like that. I asked him if they were Mexicans and he laughed. He actually said they were from outer space. When I heard that I freaked and ran. I told him that that was one of the lamest excuses I had ever heard. I told him that if he didn't like me I could understand... but to tell me that? What did he think? I was born yesterday? I was that stupid?

After he brought me home I told him that I didn't want to see him again until he was ready to tell me the truth. I was so upset I told mom and my friends.

About a week later a detective or private investigator came over to our house looking for him. I figured his past was finally catching up with him. I was so mad I told the detective everything. The detective didn't tell me why he was looking for him or comment on the bizarre story.

A few days later when I calmed down I went to the quarry to look for him. He wasn't there. Weeks later he was in town but when I went to see him he didn't recognize me. I told him who I was and he believed me. But then he told me the aliens were after him and were attempting to erase his memory. When I heard him say that I told him that we were through. It was over between us. I never wanted to see him again. I guess after that he left town and never came back."

"That's quite a story," I said.

“Isn’t it?” replied Olivia sarcastically.

“And here you are five years later and twenty years younger,” Agnes said to me.

“Yeah, aliens,” I said and laughed thinking to myself I’d better come up with a good story or my goose would be cooked one way or another.

“Well? What do you have to say?” asked Agnes.

“The food was great, thank you. But, after what I heard, I could use a drink and so could Olivia,” I said and gently took Olivia’s hand, kissed it and said. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s it!” yelled Agnes.

“Mom!? Take it easy!” Olivia pleaded.

“Your mother is right, she has suffered a lot because of Peter James and deserves to know everything.”

“Well, I never met Peter James in person but know of him. I found out about him from his acquaintances and from the police. I was told that he was dead but they didn’t tell me how he died. I suspect he was killed for his gold and diamonds which were never found. I came here to look for them. He confessed to someone that he had hidden them up in the quarry but no one believed him. I do. I also found out that he loved Olivia very much but was afraid his enemies would come after her and Agnes. That’s why he had to keep a low profile. He was afraid that if he had a child his enemies would use the child to get to him. There is no doubt he had a shady past that involved violent characters. That’s about all I know. And oh, I bought Peter’s wallet from one of his acquaintances. I wanted it for his driver’s license. That’s where I found Olivia’s picture. I needed his license to assume his identity,” I said, took out the wallet and gave the picture in it to Olivia.

Olivia opened her mouth wide and held her face with her hands while staring at the picture. Seeing her own picture in my wallet became very real for her.

I could see Agnes was getting angry as Olivia began to cry.

“I’m very sorry for causing you grief,” I said. “I never meant to hurt anyone. And if there is any way I can make it up to you please let me know. Please don’t get the authorities involved it all this. And to be honest with you, it’s not about the loot either. If I ever do find it I wouldn’t mind sharing it with you at all.”

“I don’t want his money, I…” declared Olivia before she was interrupted by her mother who said.

“You must be in big trouble to be willing to go that far.”

“Yes ma’am I am and I will do anything to avoid the authorities.”

“What mother? You want his money now?!” snapped Olivia.

“Why not!? I’m 67 years old and I’m still working. How is it going to hurt if I take his money? And look at you, you’re his widow. That money belongs to you… It is legally yours.”

“Ladies please, I give you my word if I find his stuff I will bring it here and we can share it. You decide what you want. I am close to finding it. I just have to turn over enough rocks in the quarry and if Peter James truly had what his acquaintances told me he had, I will find it.”

Agnes opened the bottle of bourbon and poured us each a shot. She picked up her shot, gulped it down in one gulp and said, “I miss this stuff; I can’t afford it anymore. I am piss poor and the bank is trying to force me to retire and here is my daughter, his wife, telling me we don’t need his money,” paused and said, “son, you get us that loot and we’ll forget about the authorities.”

Olivia and I sipped our drinks slowly while Agnes poured herself a second and a third.

“Thank you for the meal. I’d better get going,” I said.

Olivia grabbed my hand and said, “I enjoyed our visit today please come back again.”

I stood up, put my wallet in my pocket and left. Olivia walked me to the door.

After I got into my truck and drove off I wondered if they had bought my story. I concluded they hadn’t so I decided to follow through with giving them the loot.

Four days later, on a Saturday morning, I went into town to a payphone and called the number Agnes had given me. Olivia answered. She was thrilled to hear my voice and invited me to come and see her.

“Don’t you want to know why I’m calling? I asked.”

“I don’t care,” she said. “We just want to see you. Can you come today?”

“Is Agnes okay with it?” I asked.

“Yes, yes, Agnes is okay with it,” she replied.

“Okay. See you in a couple of hours then.”

When I got back to the base I went down to the kitchen and debated which bottle to take with me as a gift; rum or vodka. I decided rum.

I looked around for a bag to put it in but I couldn’t find one. I found a small canvas pouch which had probably been used by the army people on the base. It was old and moldy so I tossed it in the trash. I decided this was a good opportunity to take the gold, diamonds and some cash to Agnes and Olivia.

I went to the safe and grabbed the gold, diamonds and a pile of cash. I estimated I took out over ten thousand dollars. If I told them I had

found this stuff under a rock then how was I going to explain their pristine condition? I went to the kitchen, took the canvas bag from the garbage and put everything into it. If asked I was going to say it was sealed in a plastic bag which I had thrown out. If they believed me fine, if not who cares, I thought.

I arrived ten minutes early. Olivia was at the door waiting for me. When I arrived she gave me a big kiss on the mouth. I found that very strange considering she was almost old enough to be my mother.

“Don’t mind my daughter, she gets carried away sometimes. She had a hard life and deserves some happiness. I see you brought me another one of my favourite drinks. Thank you. We did some baking today hoping you would come and see us. I’m glad you’re here,” said Agnes.

Olivia grabbed me by the hand and sat me down at the kitchen table. “Smell that? It’s homemade cherry pie, Peter’s favourite.”

Agnes snapped at her and said, “Olivia, behave yourself, he is not your Peter.”

I kissed her hand and said, “I’m happy to see you too. I have some good news for you.”

“And what is that?” asked Agnes.

“I found Peter’s loot.”

“I don’t believe you!” replied Agnes.

I opened the rotting pouch and pulled out the diamonds, the gold and the cash.

“What are you trying to pull?” Agnes asked.

“Mom, wait mom. This is Peter’s stuff. He showed it to me. This is his stuff. There are twenty gold coins, two rings and a gold watch in the pouch,” she said.

Agnes grabbed the little bag and dumped everything out. She counted the coins. There were twenty. “Everything is here except for the gold watch.”

I raised my sleeve, showed them the watch and said, “I’m keeping the watch, everything else is yours.”

“The diamonds too?” asked Olivia.

“Yes, the diamonds, the cash, everything... It’s all yours,” I said. “The watch is my finder’s fee. I’m keeping it. As his wife, everything else is rightfully yours.”

Olivia came over and asked me to stand up and gave me a big hug. Agnes looked at me and said, “Son, I underestimated you, I figured you for a scoundrel but I was wrong. I just don’t know how to thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said and jokingly added. “Well, you can adopt me as your grandson and call me Peter James Jr.”

They both cracked up laughing.

“When you decide to cash in the gold and diamonds you’ll have to find a broker on the black market who won’t ask questions,” I said.

“Don’t you worry about that,” replied Agnes and asked me to stay for lunch.

“How about I take you out to lunch at the restaurant near the bank? My treat!” I said.

The two women looked at each other and smiled. Olivia grabbed me again and gave me another big hug.

By the time the two were ready to go it was way past lunch time. I could never understand what women did to get ready and why they took so long. I drove them to the restaurant with Olivia sitting tightly against me in the truck.

When we arrived we were escorted to our table by the same young waitress I had met a week ago. She was thrilled to see me. Agnes piped up and said, “This is my grandson Peter and he is treating us today. What’s good to eat here?”

The waitress told Agnes, whom she recognized from the bank, that we had met a last week and wondered where I had been all these years. Agnes told her that I had been with my father in another part of the country.

After the young waitress gave us a menu Agnes asked her for a drink. The young lady said she couldn’t serve us drinks in the restaurant and that we would have to go to the bar for that. She then waved at the bartender. When he came over he recognized Agnes from the bank and immediately brought us a beer each and said it was on the house.

I looked at Agnes and she looked back at me and said, “I’m everybody’s favourite lady, you know, because I have done so many favours.”

“And here I thought I was the only scoundrel in town,” I said.

She smiled. I felt like we had finally made a connection.

We had a wonderful meal. After Agnes and Olivia started to walk out of the restaurant I left a ten dollar tip for our waitress and walked out.

I took the two women home and had a couple of slices of the delicious cherry pie they had baked. After that we had coffee and I left. Olivia escorted me to the truck and gave me a long kiss on the mouth. I felt for her loss but I wasn’t the Peter she craved. I didn’t have the heart to say anything. It was nice to be loved but not because of someone else.

I said goodbye and left.

Poor Olivia.

Meeting Fred the variety store owner

After spending some time reading Peter's diary I came to the conclusion that Peter was killed for telling Olivia his story. Even though she didn't believe him she unintentionally kept spreading it around. This violated intergalactic rules. So, something had to be done. It would appear that at first the aliens tried to erase his memory but that was unsuccessful because Peter kept leaving clues for himself to remind him of things. So they had to kill him.

I have no idea why they left the notepad in his desk drawer and why they didn't destroy his diary. Perhaps they didn't know about them?

When I came along they found it convenient to give me Peter's identity. Unfortunately it wasn't well thought out. I don't know if this was intentional or if the aliens weren't as informed about earth people as they thought. I would tend to believe the first. This may have been intentional and an attempt by the rats to finally get rid of me once and for all and make it look like it was my own fault.

My handlers gave me the identity of a man who was much older than me. Didn't they know that? Or were they hoping that I'd be discovered and charged with identity theft and the death of Peter James. They also told me that Agnes was half blind, which wasn't true.

It was now time to face Fred the variety store owner and see what surprises lurked around him.

I looked through the information I had in the office but couldn't find anything on Fred. I had no idea what he looked like, even though I had seen his photograph, or where his store was.

On Sunday, the day after I visited Agnes and Olivia, I drove into town and looked around in hopes of finding Fred's store but had no luck. Besides, almost every store in town was closed on Sunday. I decided to come back on a working day.

When I got back to the base I remembered Olivia saying that Peter had done some fishing in the quarry. I had also personally seen fish

in the water in the lower tunnel. Now the question was where did Peter hide his fishing gear?

I spent most of Sunday and Monday going through the various cabinets in the base until I found the fishing gear. Tuesday morning after breakfast I was out at the quarry sitting on a big rock casting my fishing rod. It reminded me of my younger days when my friends and I used to go fishing for carp in the Trent Canal on summer weekends. I used to love going fishing with them. But, it seems, my experience here was not the same, it was far too boring and dreary. It lacked good company and a lot of beer, I figured.

After spending the entire day fishing with artificial bait I caught nothing. Early the next day I went down to the garden with a shovel and unearthed a dozen or so earthworms. I used them for bait. I caught my first fish in a matter of minutes which got my hopes up. By noon I had caught four fish. I kept the first two for myself and decided to take the other two, the bigger ones, to Agnes and Olivia. I figured I would go and deliver the fish and ask them if they knew Fred. And, perhaps, they would point me in the right direction. It was almost evening when I finished cleaning and seasoned the fish.

I arrived at Agnes's house, uninvited, at about six-thirty in the evening and rang the doorbell. Olivia came to the door and opened it. She gave me a big hug and then took the fish from my hand. I asked her if she knew Fred from the variety store but before she had a chance to say something Agnes yelled from the back, "What could you possibly want with that louse?"

Olivia grabbed my hand and tried to pull me in.

"I'm sorry I can't stay I have things to do, perhaps another time?" I said.

I then heard Agnes say, "He's in the same plaza where I work, a couple of doors to the left of the barber shop, you can't miss him." She then yelled at Olivia, "Leave the young man alone and come back here."

After Olivia gave me another big kiss on the mouth she said, “That woman has eyes in the back of her head,” and waved goodbye.

After I left I drove around the plaza and found “Fred’s smoke shop”. It was already closed. I checked the hours when it was open and decided to come back the next day.

When I got back to the base I fried my fish in olive oil. They were delicious even without lemon juice.

I decided I needed to buy a few things and began a shopping list. I wrote down beer, wine and lemons.

After I ate my dinner I climbed up the stairs to the big room and stared at the nicely arranged uniforms behind the glass windows. They must have meant a lot to those who had put them up, I thought. I turned around and looked at the giant television on the far wall and wondered if it still worked. It must have been put there recently, probably by Peter James. Televisions didn’t come out until the early 1950’s.

I then walked up over the stage and into the garage. I went inside the office and to the back room. This is where Peter James slept. I looked under his bed, one place where I hadn’t looked before. There were a couple of cardboard boxes under it. I was curious as to what was in them. I pulled one out and opened it. There were two telephone books, the kind Bell used to deliver to the houses back in Toronto. I thought that was strange given I had never seen a telephone at the base. I pulled out the second box. It had a telephone inside. It was a black desk top model. It looked new.

I pulled it out. It had a cord with a funny plug at the end. I looked around the room for a place to plug it in. There was nothing. I checked the date on the phone books, they were from 1969. I went out to the office and looked around. There was no funny socket anywhere. I pulled the desk back away from the window and found the socket. It was at the bottom near the floor.

“So, here is where Peter plugged in the phone... probably to talk to Olivia when they were dating,” I said to myself. But why hide it under his bed? And more importantly, who was he hiding it from?

I was curious if the phone still worked. I had my doubts but I tried it anyway. I put the set on the table and plugged it in. I picked up the receiver and to my surprise, it still worked. I got a dial tone. So, now I had a telephone but who was I going to call?

It was getting very late so I decided to sleep in Peter’s old bed. I washed my hands in the tiny sink in the tiny washroom to get rid of the dirt. I then shook the sheets to get rid of the dust and went to bed. Surprisingly the dust in the air disappeared quickly. The base had an excellent ventilation system.

The next day I got up and I don’t know why, but the first thing I did was try the telephone to see if it still worked. It did. I then went back to the safe and looked at the bank statements. I was curious to see if there were telephone bills on them. There were none. So, why was the phone still working? It looked like a phone from the 1960’s so it couldn’t have been installed by the army. So the question is who installed it and why was it still working?

I figured Peter must have installed the cable and connected it to a telephone company line used for emergency purposes.

After I had breakfast I decided to go and see Fred. I parked in front of his store and walked in. Fred was standing behind the counter. There was no one else in the store.

I said, “Good morning Fred, how are you?”

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“I’m Peter James,” I answered.

“No you’re not! That truck out there belongs to Peter James but you aren’t him.”

“It’s a long story,” I said.

“If you’re Peter James then tell me how much did you owe me when you skipped out on your tab five years ago?”

“It’s hard to say and, as you said, it was five years ago.”

He pulled out an old book from under the counter, flipped a few pages and said, “You owe me for one hundred packs of Players cigarettes. That’s two hundred dollars.”

“First of all, you sold me Rothmans not Players and second why don’t you tell me the real number of packets you sold me before I ask you to show me the book.”

“You owe me 24 dollars.”

I pulled out my wallet and gave him 40 dollars and told him to keep the change to pay for the interest his money had accumulated over the years.

Fred’s face lit up as he took the money and put it in his pocket.

“Make sure you close my tab,” I said and began to walk out.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” he said. “What’s with you pretending to be Peter James?”

“I am Peter James. I was Peter James Jr. but my pop died so now I’m Peter James. I came here to see my stepmother Olivia and stepgrandmother Agnes.

“Oh, you’re Peter’s kid eh, I had no idea he was married. He hung around a lot with that loose woman, what’s her name... and her witch of a mother.”

“No, my pop wasn’t married to my mom; I was an accident, a bastard. But, never mind that, why such harsh words about Olivia and Agnes?”

“Well, I wasn’t good enough for them, but lazy Peter James was. I just don’t see what they saw in him.”

“Well, if you didn’t like Peter then why did you sell him cigarettes on credit?”

“Oh, I liked Peter, he was okay, a little strange but okay. Peter wasn’t the problem.”

“So who was the problem? You’re confusing me.”

“Look, I was dating Olivia even before Peter came here. I was planning to propose to her right after we finished high school but Agnes didn’t think I was good enough for Olivia and told me to get lost. Then this stranger comes along, ten years older than her, without a job, probably hiding from something, and she falls for him? And worse than that, Agnes lets her marry him!? He didn’t love her, not like me.”

“Why would you think he didn’t love her?”

“She constantly complained to me about how secretive he was and that he would leave for days at the slightest problem. And in the end, in the end telling her that aliens were after him trying to kill him and after that pretending to have lost his memory to skip out on her and paying his tab. Well that was rich wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, he never told me about that but my father was in trouble with some very bad people and if he had stayed he would have put you and her at risk. Look, I grew up with my mother who was just a teenager when she got pregnant. He never married her and left us when I was a baby. My mother died a long time ago and I had to look after myself. I didn’t meet Peter until much later. When I did he told me to come back here and settle his debts. He had to leave quickly because his enemies were closing in. Why he told Olivia that weird story about aliens, I don’t know. Also, let me understand this, you and Olivia are in your early forties?”

“Yes, Olivia was much younger than Peter.”

“Have you thought of getting back together with Olivia?”

“Her mother would never allow it. Yeah, I still love her. I will take her if she wants me. But I know that will never happen. Plus Olivia’s not the same anymore. I heard she has become a hermit and avoids everyone.”

“Look, I don’t want to get your hopes up but I am willing to talk to Agnes. Olivia is a real sweetheart and I’d hate to see her being punished for my father’s mistakes.”

“I am all for it if you can swing it.”

“How are you doing money wise? Would you be able to support her? I’m sure that would be the first objection Agnes is going to have.”

“Well, after my parents died they left me everything, the house, the store and a lot of investments which I haven’t made use of. I have no brothers or sisters and no friends. Who was I going to spend them on? So I’ve been building my finances like the Great Wall of China. I don’t know what else to do with them. And outside of this store I have no life.”

“Ah, one more thing. I think Agnes is clinging hard on Olivia because she’s afraid of being left alone in her old age. Would you be willing to look after her? Plus, she’s past retirement age and is still working. She feels she needs to work because she doesn’t have the finances to retire.”

“As long as she doesn’t insult me every day I’m willing to look after her.”

“Don’t bet on that, people don’t change their character,” I said and started walking towards the door.

“Let me know what happens,” he said and added. “Your father would be proud of you. You remind me a lot of him.”

After I left I passed by the barber shop. It reminded me to purchase razor blades.

From there I went straight to the bank. There were no customers. The tellers were chatting amongst themselves and Agnes was reading a magazine. I went straight for her counter. The tellers stopped talking and looked my way.

“Good morning Agnes, do you have some time, I want to talk to you.”

There was a lot of snickering from the tellers.

“What, I can’t talk to my grandson now without you making fun of me? He is Peter’s son, you know. I didn’t know I had a grandson but here his is.” There was silence. Everyone was staring at me.

“What do you want to talk about?” she asked.

“Not here, when is your break?”

“We don’t get breaks here but I can take lunch at 11:30, in about forty-five minutes.”

“Okay then I’ll wait for you in the restaurant. What can I order for you?”

“I’m just going to have coffee. I brought my lunch from home. See you at 11:30.”

I smiled at the ladies staring at me and quickly left the bank. From there I went straight to the restaurant. I was greeted with a big smile from the young waitress.

“Mr. Peter James. How are you today? What will you have?” she asked.

“Just a coffee and please call me Peter.”

She smiled and said, “You are the buzz of the town. Imagine that, you are Olivia’s son.”

“Is that what the town’s people think? How old do you think I am?”

“Mid-twenties I would estimate.”

“How old do you think Olivia is?”

“Forty maybe?”

“So do you think she gave birth to me at 15? Peter, my father wasn’t even here when Olivia was 15.”

“So, she isn’t your mother then.”

“No, she was my father’s wife which makes her my stepmother,” I said.

Then I heard the waitress’s mother yell, “Stop bothering the man and bring him his order.”

She apologized, ran back to the kitchen and brought me my coffee. She then went back behind the counter, sat down, put her face in her hands and stared at me, making me feel nervous. There were no other customers in the restaurant.

Her mother watched her looking at me and said something. She came over and sat on the chair opposite me and said, “Do you mind if I sit with you? There’s nothing for me to do and I hardly have any company.”

“Please do,” I said. “But I’m meeting someone in a short time.”

“Okay, when your friend shows up I’ll leave.”

“What’s your name?” I asked her.

“My name is Gloria.”

“That’s a nice name. I used to have a friend named Glory a long time ago.”

“What was she like? Did she love you?”

“She was beautiful like you and yes she loved me, so much so that she was willing to die for me.”

“Oh, how romantic...”

“Gloria, may I ask how old you are?”

“I’m 17.”

“Why aren’t you in school?”

“Well, I’m needed here in the restaurant to help my parents. I’ll take over the restaurant when they retire.”

“Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“No, I’m an only child,” she said and watched her mother waving at her calling her to go back into the kitchen.

“Excuse me,” she said, left and disappeared into the kitchen.

About five minutes later Agnes showed up and sat at the table opposite to me. Gloria’s mother came over and took Agnes’s order. She ordered a coffee.

“So, what do you want to see me about? You found more loot?” she asked.

I smiled and said, “I wish.”

“Did you find Fred? What did he have to say for himself?”

“Yes, I found Fred, thanks to you, and I did speak with him. He bought the idea that I was Peter’s son and that I am your grandson.

But that's not what I want to talk to you about. I want to talk to you about Olivia. I really like her and feel she deserves to be happy."

She gave me a strange look and said, "What are you suggesting?"

"I will get to the point. Fred still loves her very much and she has a good chance of being happy with him... that is if she wants to, with your approval of course."

"Yeah, I agree with you. Her life has been a waste of time and you're right, she deserves to be happy. But with Fred?"

"What's wrong with Fred? He is an honest and upright man and has his own business. And besides that, he is loaded."

"Well, what happens to me in my old age when Olivia's gone?"

"Well, I asked Fred that very same question and he said he was prepared to look after you. You can retire from your job as soon as you feel comfortable."

"That's fantastic," she said. "I didn't expect that but I knew you would bring us good luck the moment I met you. I often wondered about what to do for Olivia. Now I see there is hope... But would I be able to see grandchildren...?"

"Agnes, you need not worry about that, I will always be your grandson."

"Well, that's all good and dandy but who is going to tell Olivia about this and how is she going to react?"

"You do know that Fred and her were high school sweethearts and should have married, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know about that. You talk to her and give her my blessings. I have to go now or I'll be late for work. Thanks for the coffee."

As soon as Agnes left, Gloria showed up. I gave her 50 cents for the coffee and slipped a fiver into her hand. She jumped over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I heard her mother yelling at her as I left the restaurant.

I figured I should go and see Olivia right away and get the ball rolling. I went straight from the restaurant to her house. I rang the bell and there she was with a smile on her face.

“I knew it would be you and I bet you have some good news for me,” she said and looked at my hands. I hadn’t brought her anything and felt bad about it.

“Have you had lunch?” I asked her.

“Not yet, but I’m making it now. Would you like to join me?”

I hesitated for a moment as she stared at me and said, “Sure, thank you.”

She grabbed my hand, dragged me into the kitchen and sat me down. I looked at her. She had beautiful and innocent eyes.

“I came here to talk to you. Please hear me out and then tell me what you think.”

It was difficult staring at those beautiful eyes without having feelings for her. So I decided to tell her what I came to tell her before things started going sideways.

“I came here to talk to you about Fred. How do you feel about Fred? If you had had a chance to get back together with him would you want to? He still loves you, you know?”

“Mother would never allow it, I am sure of that.”

“Assuming your mother did allow it would you consider getting together with him?”

“I suppose so. He is a nice man, but mother wouldn’t allow it.”

“Despite what you think your mother loves you and wants what’s best for you. I spoke to her today before I came here and she said you have her blessings, if that’s what you want.”

“Really? That’s wonderful,” she said and gave me a huge hug and then said. “But would Fred want me back after I rejected him?”

“Before I went to see your mother I went to see Fred and I can assure you he still has feelings for you. He loves you today as much as he did when you were high school sweethearts.”

“He actually said that?”

“Yes, yes he did and you know something he is filthy rich and is willing to look after your mother. And you know what that means? Agnes can quit working and maybe go on a long vacation before she is too old.”

Olivia began to cry and came over again and kissed me all over my face.

After we had lunch I said thank you and promised to get back to her as soon as I had spoken to Fred again. She walked me to the door and gave me a long kiss on the mouth. I told her I loved her too but not like this and made her promise me, no more kissing on the mouth. She agreed.

Minutes later I was in Fred’s shop again. He had a customer. I waited until he was done.

“You’re back again,” he said.

“Yes, do you have any booze?”

“Yeah? Why?” he asked.

“It’s time to celebrate. I’ve never given a bride away before.”

“And the old battleaxe agreed?”

“You have her blessings. And please, be nice she’ll soon be your mother-in-law.”

“In that case I’d better go to the back and get the good stuff.”

Moments later he came back with a couple of cognac glasses and a bottle of cognac.

“Keep pouring,” I said. “I haven’t had a good stiff drink for a long time.”

We clinked our glasses and I said, “Do you realize that after you marry my stepmother you will be my stepfather?”

He cracked up laughing and said, “I haven’t felt so happy in a long time.”

After I drank my cognac I thanked Fred for the drink and told him to save the bottle for another time. In the meantime I said I had to go and see Agnes and give her the good news.

The bank was full of people when I arrived but Agnes waved me in and said, “I assume you have good news.”

I said, “It’s done. Everyone is in agreement...”

She smiled, gave me the thumbs up and went back to work.

After I left the bank I went to the restaurant and was greeted by Gloria’s mother and before she had a chance to accost me I said I wanted to make reservations for four on Sunday at noon, for a private gathering for a few hours to include a five course meal and a lot of drinks. I then gave her a 100 dollar deposit.

No problem she said and wrote it in her reservation book. She gave me a smile as I walked out.

From there I went to Fred’s store and told him that I had made reservations at the restaurant for Sunday at noon to meet Olivia and

Agnes and have a nice chat with them. Fred said he would be there and poured me another drink. I then asked him if I could use his phone to call Olivia and let her know about Sunday. He said yes and pointed me to the back room. Olivia answered on the first ring and I told her the news and that I was using Fred's phone to call her. She insisted that I put Fred on. He hesitated at first but picked up the receiver. He was on the phone for 20 minutes. Lucky for me his customers knew what they wanted, where the merchandise was and how much it cost. I had to write things down.

When Fred was done on the phone he looked ecstatic like a teenager in love.

I wrote down Olivia's phone number and gave it to him. He poured us another drink and before he gave it to me, he gave me a crushing hug. I gulped the drink down, said see you Sunday and left as more customers began to pile in.

When I got back to the base I went straight into the kitchen and poured myself a double whiskey. I took my glass and bottle to the office, sat down on the chair and began to sip my drink. I went over the events of the day and felt proud of what I had done but, for some reason, I felt funny like I was about to eat my cake and then before I could take a bite I had to give it to someone else. I was proud of bringing Fred and Olivia together but there was nothing there for me.

I don't know when I fell asleep but I found myself slumped over the desk. I was happy to see that my booze and glass were still intact and hadn't fallen on the floor. I had a hell of a headache.

It was still dark outside. I drank a couple of glasses of water and went to bed.

It was 11 am when I got up the next day. I decided to telephone Olivia and see how things had gone between her and her mother. She was happy to hear from me and said she had a long and productive talk with her mother. She also said Fred called her again in the evening and couldn't wait to see her on Sunday. I told her I

was happy for her and asked her if she wanted me to bring her some fish. The next day I was going to go fishing.

She said, “Yes, I would be happy if you would bring me fish but you don’t need a reason or an excuse to come and see me, you can come and see me anytime.”

I said, “You’re right, I’ll remember that. I’ll see you tomorrow, probably late afternoon.”

Later that evening I took a shovel and went to the garden and got some earthworms. We were into October by now and the weather was getting pretty cold up on the base. I got about a dozen worms and placed them in a tin can with some soil.

The next morning I was in the quarry with my fishing rod fishing in the cool water. It was brisk and I could see my breath. I spent about an hour in one spot where I had had luck the last time but I didn’t catch anything this time. I then moved to another spot and within a couple of hours I caught six fish. I was frozen by the time I got back inside and decided to have an early lunch just to warm up. I fried four hamburgers and ate them like they were steak, no buns and no garnish. I also made myself a pot of coffee.

After that I cleaned the fish. I put two in the fridge and took the other four with me and put them in the back of my truck. I had them wrapped in a plastic bag.

I decided to call Olivia to warn her that I was coming earlier than expected. She was thrilled to hear my voice.

It was mid-afternoon when I arrived. She was at the door waiting for me. She looked at me with those big beautiful eyes and said, “I know, I know no kissing on the mouth.”

She took the fish and put them in the fridge. After that all she wanted to do was talk about Fred.

I said, “Why don’t I take you there and you can see him in person.”

Suddenly her face turned red and she asked me to hold her.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’m so nervous. I think I’m going to faint.”

“Nonsense,” I said. “There’s nothing to be nervous about.”

She tried to run back into the house but I grabbed her and carried her to the truck. I sat her on the passenger seat and told her not to worry, he was the same Fred she had always known, and the only difference now was that he was older.”

“I know that silly,” she said.

It was only a couple of minutes drive before we arrived. I asked her to come out of the truck but she refused.

“Do you want me to carry you in?”

She laughed and grabbed my hand and began to squeeze it. I pulled her into the store.

When she saw Fred she let go of me, dashed towards him and embraced him hard. She was shaking and crying. He grabbed her and took her to the back. His customers were wondering what had happened.

“Did someone die?” one of them asked.

“No, no it’s a happy occasion,” I said. “They’re getting married.”

There was uproar in the store with everyone yelling congratulations.

“Please give them a moment,” I said and went back to see how they were doing.

They both apologized and came back out.

I asked Olivia if she wanted me to take her back home but she said no. Fred piped up and said that he was going to take her and not to worry about it.

“In that case,” I said, “I’ll go home and cook my fish for dinner.”

Fred reached under the counter and gave me the bottle of his expensive cognac and said, “Thanks for everything...”

As I left I watched Fred taking money from his customers and Olivia looking at them with those big beautiful eyes and smiling at them. I couldn’t help but be jealous.

The next day I spent wondering if I should go to the restaurant or not. I was more worried about me and how I would feel than about Fred and Olivia. If only I had someone to go with... but I had no one. It would be incredibly callous of me if I didn’t go, so I decided to go.

I looked through Peter’s closet and found a light coloured suit which I felt would be appropriate for the occasion. I arrived at the restaurant first and about three minutes later Fred arrived.

“Where are the ladies?” I asked.

“They’re coming,” he said.

Moments later Agnes walked in followed by Olivia. The moment Olivia walked in she began to cry. I ran over and asked her what was wrong.

“I married Peter in that suit.”

“I am so sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

“Give me a minute, I will be fine,” she said.

Fred looked at me with an inquisitive look.

“You know how mothers are, seeing their sons all grown up,” I said.

Agnes cracked up laughing and so did Fred. Olivia then began to laugh.

After we sat down Fred ordered us a beer each. Gloria's father who was also the bartender and cook brought us the beer.

After that we each ordered the various courses of our meal and dessert. Since I knew very little about the foods, Olivia ordered them for me. She also ordered the wine. I gave her a look and she said, "Your father taught me all that," and then winked at me.

I looked through the cracks in the dividers and I could see Gloria in the kitchen looking our way. I waved her to come over but she shook her head from side to side. I guess her mother had confined her to kitchen duty. Also, her mother probably didn't trust me with her infatuated teenage daughter.

After we ate and drank as much as we could I thought it was a good idea to discuss why we were there but Fred and Olivia beat me to the punch.

"Fred and I will make all the necessary wedding arrangements," Olivia said and thanked me for everything I had done.

I looked at Agnes and she looked back at me and smiled. There was nothing more to be said. Fred waved at Gloria's mother and asked her to bring our coffee, dessert and the check. I looked at Fred and he shook his head at me. He was going to pay for everything with his credit card, including the tip.

I took a walk towards the washroom and Gloria's mother handed me the 100 dollar deposit I had made a few days earlier. As soon as she stepped out I gave the money to Gloria. She took it, counted it and couldn't believe her eyes.

"Hide it," I said. "Your mother will kill me if she finds out."

When I went back to my table Gloria ran over, put her arms around my neck and give me a big kiss on the mouth and said, “I wanted you to be my first,” and ran off back to the kitchen.

Everyone looked at me. Agnes spoke up and said, “You’re quite popular with the ladies, aren’t you? Even the bank tellers were eyeing you.”

But, deep inside, I knew I had no one, and I couldn’t have anyone.

Meeting Oscar the town drunk

When I got back to the base I lay down on my bed in the room next to the office and in my mind I went over the various things that had happened in the restaurant. The reason I had planned the get together in a public place was so that we could work out a deal of how the relationship between Agnes, Fred and Olivia was going to work but, as it turned out, Fred and Olivia had it under control.

Fred and Olivia had not seen each other in five or maybe ten years, yet they accepted their arrangement without question. Also, neither of them had remarried. So it got me thinking. Did I really make this arrangement? Or did I bring an existing secret relationship in the open?. I was sure Olivia was going to tell me the truth if I asked her... But I wasn't going to ask her. As far as I was concerned my cover was not blown and they and the town's people believed I was Peter's son. My part here was done. The only other person that was a wildcard now was Oscar the town drunk.

I decided to call Olivia and ask her if she knew Oscar and where I could find him. Agnes answered the phone so I first asked her what she thought of how things had gone earlier today. She didn't have much to say except that she had not seen Olivia so happy in a long time.

"I thought Olivia was too old for that sort of thing but I guess I was wrong," she said.

I then asked Agnes if she knew anyone named Oscar. She said no and gave me Fred's telephone number. She figured Fred or Olivia might know something and to call them. I thanked her and hung up.

It was getting late in the day and I figured Fred and Olivia were celebrating their reunion and it would be impolite and downright rude to interrupt them, so I decided to call them the next day at Fred's store. I was certain Olivia would be there.

I got up late the next day and made myself a good breakfast. I didn't eat supper the night before. It was almost ten o'clock in the morning

when I made the call. Olivia answered in a nice cheery voice, “Fred’s smoke shop, how may I help you?”

“It should be Fred and Olivia’s smoke shop...” I said.

She recognized me and was thrilled to hear my voice. She again thanked me for what I had done and wondered if I was checking up on her.

“Only because I love you so much,” I said.

“You’re too late, I’m engaged now and no longer available. You had your chance,” she said and laughed out loud and then added. “I love you too, what can I do for you?”

“Do you know anyone named Oscar?” I asked.

“Yeah, I know an Oscar, he was Peter’s friend. He hangs around in a bar on the other side of town, the rough side of town.”

“Do you know the name of the bar?”

“No, I’m sorry I don’t. But, please don’t go there... It’s dangerous... A lot of unsavory characters hang around there. At least that’s what Peter used to tell me.”

“Thank you, I will be careful. Say hello to Fred for me,” I said and hung up.

What a lovely woman, I thought.

I went to the safe and opened it. I looked at the gun and thought of taking it. I decided against it. I had been carrying my badge everywhere I went since I got here; it was time to put it away in the safe. I thought if something happened to me and it was discovered someone might wonder what it was and ask questions. If I got hurt and taken to the hospital someone would see it for sure and perhaps confiscate it. The police might want to know what it was, especially the badge and the material it was made of. It should be okay in the

safe, I figured. I filled my wallet with money, put my badge in the safe and shut it.

It was getting colder by the day outside so I decided to dress warm and take a coat with me in case my truck broke down and I had to walk a long way. I also took one of Peter's hats and put it on. I looked like a different person, older and weirder.

I stopped at the gas station in town and filled the truck's tank with gasoline. Gas prices had increased considerably since I had left Toronto four months ago. But I didn't care, I had plenty of money.

When I came out of the service station I turned left and took the east main road which I discovered circled around town before going south. I saw only one bar. It was located off the main road between the residential area and the factory. The parking lot was empty. I parked in the middle and walked down to the bar entrance. I walked in, it was dark inside. Most of the lights were off. The bartender was standing behind the bar counter wiping beer glasses with a white cloth.

I passed by a man slumped over a table wearing a winter coat. I said, "Oscar, is that you?"

He rose up and said, "Nobody calls me that! Who are you?!"

The bartender spoke up and said, "What do you want with him?"

I ignored the bartender and said, "Oscar, it's me Peter James. Don't you recognize me?"

He looked at me carefully and said, "You're not Peter James..." He then yelled out loud, "I KNOW PETER JAMES AND YOU ARE NOT HIM."

The bartender got upset and told me to get lost. I took a few steps away. Two men came from the back and told him to shut up. Oscar got upset and swore at them.

They started coming towards us and one of them said, “We’ll fix the injun and teach him a lesson.”

The other one picked up a pool cue from the billiard table. When I saw that I quickly reached into my pocket, opened one of the vials with firewater and drank it. I don’t think anyone saw me. I put the empty vial back in my pocket.

When the man raised the cue to hit Oscar on the back I grabbed it from him and tossed it away. I then grabbed him by his stomach and tossed him like a rag doll. The other man, the bigger one, grabbed me from behind and locked his arms around my chest so that his partner could punch me in the gut. I snapped his locked arms open, turned around, grabbed him, raised him above my head and tossed him on top of his partner.

I was feeling angry and it was showing in my face and body. When the two saw me approaching they took off outside and vanished. I went to the door and looked for them; they were nowhere to be seen. I came back and went straight for the bartender.

He raised his arms high and said, “You got no trouble from me.”

I went back to Oscar. He was sitting up looking sober.

He said, “Oh, c’mon man, if you said you were the Hulk I would have believed you, but you’re not Peter James.” He then whispered and said, “Are you one of those aliens who wants to kill him?”

I said, “No. But its time we had a talk.”

“Not here,” he said. I agreed.

I helped him up and we began walking towards the door.

The bartender yelled, “Excuse me.”

“What do you want?” I asked.

“He hasn’t paid for his bar tab.”

“How much?” I asked.

“Five hundred dollars,” he said.

“WHAT?” I yelled.

“You pay or I call the cops,” he said.

“I have a better idea,” I said. “How about I destroy the bar and break your legs and then you call the cops and we’ll see where that will get you?”

“Are you some sort of Fed?” he asked.

“How much or I swear to you I will do it!” I yelled.

“Fifty-five dollars,” he said and Oscar agreed.

“Here’s sixty and keep the change,” I said and we walked out.

“You’re one bad son of a bitch and I know you’re not a Fed, so who are you? And thank you for saving my ass.”

“I told you, I am Peter James,” I replied.

“No, you’re not him!”

“How do you know?”

“Peter James was my friend and I know everything about him and you’re not him.”

“I am Peter James Jr., his son. Peter James is dead.”

“You’re not his son. Peter didn’t have a son. He may be dead but he had no son.”

“What am I then?”

“You’re one of them Aliens, you’re not human. No human has that kind of strength.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“Look, I have put up with a lot of crap from the whites here and I don’t need no alien to lie to me. I know all about you aliens and your invasion of our planet.”

“You know jack shit... and what whites are you talking about.”

“You know the Europeans who came here and took our lands.”

I looked at him with a surprised look.

“Don’t you look at me like that? I am indigenous to these lands. Yes, that’s right; these are my people’s lands...”

I opened the door to my truck and sat him down in the passenger seat.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked.

“I have nowhere to go, take me to the base. And, what are you doing with Peter’s truck.”

“What base?” I asked. “And what makes you think this is Peter’s truck?”

“I may be a drunk but I’m not stupid. Cut the horse shit and take me to the base.”

“Okay, if you want to go to the base, whatever that may be, then show me how to get there.”

“Fine, we’ll play your game,” he replied.

He showed me a different way to get there, a more rugged way over the mountain and asked me to turn right just as we passed the garage.

“What’s this place?” I asked.

“This is the parking lot in front of the base. And to the right on the side is the door where you get into the garage. There, on the far left corner you will find a WW II tank. I made that tank work for Peter James. And to the left, here, inside that door are the gasoline and diesel pumps. Last time I checked they were full with thousands of gallons of fuel. Did you find Peter’s phone inside? Well I installed it for him. Do you want me to tell you more?” he asked.

“Let’s go inside,” I said.

We got out of the truck and instead of going to the garage he took me and showed me where the fuel was stored.

“Do you have your keys?” he asked.

The outside key also opened that door to the fuel depot. The room stunk of diesel fuel. It was dark inside and there were no lights, but I could see the two nozzles inside clearly marked “diesel” and “regular”.

“These were used to fuel the military trucks when the base was active. Peter used them to fill his truck. There is a gas can inside behind the door. It holds four gallons of fuel. Fill it and take it to the truck.”

“I just filled the truck on the way to see you,” I said.

“Next time don’t. This is free and the pumps are gravity driven. Just make sure you put regular in the truck and not diesel.”

I shook my head and locked the door.

When we went inside he went straight for the military tank. I followed.

“I parked this baby here and I see it’s still here. After I got it running we fired it at the hillside of that mountain. It was a huge blast that

echoed for a long time. You can still see the rocks we dislodged,” he said, looked at me and said. “I bet you I can make it work again.”

I didn't say anything but at this point I was no longer sure that the base was mine. But, from every indication he gave me I got the impression that I was in charge here. I decided to test that.

“I'll let you fix the tank and we'll fire it again but first we have to eat. Have you eaten?”

“Thanks man, I would love to hear this beast roar one more time... No, I haven't eaten. I don't eat, I drink,” he replied.

“All I have is a little bit of whiskey and a bottle of vodka,” I said.

“No... Not that shit man, come with me.”

He walked to the opposite side of the garage, through the stage door, down the big room and into the kitchen. He went to the back where the used frying oil was stored. He opened the cupboard, reached in the back and pulled out a glass gallon smeared with brown oil drippings all over it.

“That looks disgusting,” I said.

“It's what's inside that counts not outside. Give me your whiskey bottle,” he said.

I grabbed the whiskey bottle from the cupboard on the other side and handed it to him. There was very little whiskey left in it. He grabbed it, removed the lid and was about to dump the whiskey into the sink.

He looked at me and said, “Give me one of those water glasses.”

I gave him a large glass and he poured the whiskey into it.

He then reached into one of the top cupboards, pulled out a small funnel and placed it over the whiskey bottle. He unscrewed the lid from the gallon and poured a greenish brown liquid into the empty

whiskey bottle. When he was done he screwed the lid back on, raised the gallon up, looked at me and licked the brown grease drippings on the outside of the gallon.

I shivered when I saw that. He began to laugh and couldn't stop.

“You should have seen your face man... It's epoxy, brown epoxy, it's not grease. We made it look like that in case we were caught bringing it here. We brought a truck load. I stashed it everywhere. There are several gallons behind the grease container.”

“You crazy bastard, you upset my stomach for nothing,” I said.

“Crazy maybe, but I'm not a bastard, I have a mother and father...” he said and suddenly showed me a sad face, but only for a moment. “This stuff will fix your stomach, get me a couple of glasses. Not those, bigger ones, the juice glasses further up.”

After I gave him the glasses he filled them three quarters full and handed me one. He then took a huge gulp, twisted his head in a vibrating motion and said, “That's good medicine man, good for your soul.”

The liquid was clear but looked disgustingly greenish brown.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You can't be Peter James if you don't know what this is...” he said and added. “It's 100% proof moonshine, 50% alcohol made right here in town by a red-neck. I despise the guy but I love his drink. The bastard refuses to sell it to me but sold it to Peter James, a complete stranger,” he said and took another gulp.

“In my tradition we toast before we drink and then sip our drink,” I said, raised my glass and clinked it against his.

“And whose tradition is that? Come on spit it out. The outer space man's tradition? I bet you'd never heard of moonshine until you got here. Am I right?”

“Look, stop that. I’m from here just like you and the rest of us. I don’t know what Peter and you were smoking and hallucinating but I’m from here and not from outer space. There are no aliens. Peter invented them to cover his criminal activities. He was my father, he got my mother pregnant when they were going to high school and instead of marrying her and looking after us, he took off and got involved with criminals. He told me everything before he died and asked me to make amends to those he had conned. How do you think I found you? And those who he told you were aliens were detectives catching up to him. He told people he was losing his mind which was an excuse for him to leave you and for you to believe he didn’t know what he was doing. Did you know he had a wife here and never told her about this base?”

“Stop, stop, I don’t believe you man. But, come and think of it, why would the aliens go through the trouble of bringing him here in the woods and leaving him to die instead of pushing him into the volcano in Algeria? Perhaps you’re right. I’ll have to think about that... I found him in the woods half dead you know and brought him here to the base,” he replied.

“He never told me about that,” I said.

“Well, it’s true. I told him to buy the base. It was put on auction but never sold. I even got him a buyer on the black market to buy his diamonds. Come to think of it, I should have wondered how a prospector could get cut diamonds from the earth. He told me he found them on the ground and I believed him. God damn it, you Europeans robbed us blind and we Indians still trust you! Why did I trust that lying Irishman... I don’t know. Why should I trust you?”

“Look, my father was a good man; he just got caught in a bad situation and was trying to do his best to survive and protect those he cared for, like you, me, his wife, his friends. And yes, you should never trust anyone. People will do things, unbelievable things, when they are desperate and in big trouble.”

“Well, I suppose his alien story was better than telling us he was a criminal... I’m sure if he pissed me off I would have turned him in,” he said, finished his drink and began to laugh uncontrollably. I

didn't laugh; it would have been disrespectful. In situations like this some people laugh and some cry.

When he had composed himself he said, "Aren't you going to drink and tell me about that tradition of yours?"

"Well, my mother was Macedonian, God bless her soul. She was a tormented soul. When her father found out she was pregnant he wanted to kill her and the bastard who did it, so Peter had no choice but to leave. He wasn't going to kill them but Peter didn't know that. Then, when Peter became involved with the criminals he couldn't come back, not without risking everyone's lives. So, I basically grew up with my grandparents. They named me Riki but my mother registered me as Peter James Jr. She loved him very much you know, and died a sad woman."

"What about the tradition?"

"Well, like I said, I was very much involved in the Macedonian tradition with my grandparents, including the ceremonial tradition of toasting and sipping the drink which they called rakia. That's about it... I lived a normal boring life, that is until my father found me and loaded me with his burden."

"Do you speak Macedonian?"

"A little, but my grandfather taught me his people's history which was a tragic affair, something like your history."

"Get out of here! Like my history? You've got to be joking! Do you know who I am? I'm the son of the chief of my tribe, we are a proud people, a peaceful people, a trusting people... And look what happened to us because of you Europeans."

"Then we have something on common!" I said and poured him another drink.

I picked up my glass, we clinked glasses and I said, "To you and your people."

“To our differences which makes us unique,” he said.

He then said, “I’ve never heard of Macedonia or its people before. You’ll have to tell me more.”

“I too know very little about your people and the only reason I know is because my grandfather mentioned the similarities between your people and his. He said we shared a similar fate.”

I took a drink from the concoction and found it okay. It was strong but had a smooth aromatic and spicy taste, not at all like rakia.

“Wow,” I said. “It’s really good.

“I think I’ll call it rakia, that way no one will know what we’re talking about. So, you like the aroma, well that’s my formula. We bought the moonshine and I added the spices myself later.”

“So, it’s the spices that give it the disgusting colour?” I asked.

“It’s not disgusting, it’s beautiful, you just need to get used to it.”

“I can’t drink too much of this stuff on an empty stomach. I need to eat something,” I said.

“Here, I’ll make something for you,” he replied and went to the fridge to have a look. He found a raw steak thawing. He took it out, added salt and some spices and massaged it with his dirty hands. He then cut it into thin slices, added olive oil and some lemon. He grabbed a couple of forks and said, “Eat!”

I looked at him and he looked at me. He picked up a fork, put a piece in his mouth and began to chew. I did the same. It tasted quite good and the raw meat was chewy but tender.

I put my fork down, grabbed an onion from the fridge, cut it into quarter inch slices, put it on the plate, poured olive oil on it and took a bite. He tried it too.

“I knew something was missing,” he said. “Now it’s perfect.”

“Our tribes to the north ate raw meat. Some still do. But it wasn’t meat like this; it was healthy meat from nature. We ate it raw when it was available but also had to preserve it for when it wasn’t. You Europeans don’t know what you’re missing. Watching us eat raw meat disgusts you. You think we’re animals, uncivilized and uncultured. But we’re the only ones who care about the planet and try to preserve it, live with it and not live to destroy it like you do because you think you’re better than us...

Ah, why am I even telling you this... You wouldn’t understand even if your life depended on it. Ironically your life does depend on it; maybe not yours but your children’s lives. You depleted your own homeland and then came here to deplete ours. You have no idea how to live. What will happen to your children when you deplete everything on this planet and there’s no more to deplete, eh?”

I looked at him get more and more frustrated and listened. What was I to say? I knew he was right.

After he composed himself he said, “Tell me, how come you are so strong, eh?”

“Because I’m Macedonian!” I replied.

“C’mon, stop bullshitting me.”

“Okay then, I don’t know! I got mad, that’s why I guess?”

“You lifted a two-hundred pound man over your head and tossed him like a rag doll.”

I scratched my head and made a face. Then I lifted my arms up.

“Don’t fret kid, I’m only messing with you but I’m grateful you did. I’m sure he would have broken a lot of my bones. I’ve heard of mothers lifting cars to save their children but I’m nothing to you, so I was wondering why you did it, that’s all.”

I didn't say anything. He picked up the bottle, his fork and his glass and walked up to the big table. I picked up my glass, fork and plate with the meat and onions and followed him.

He looked around and said, "This crazy place still looks the same, when did you get here?"

"No more than a few weeks ago."

"Where did you come from?"

"From a small town in the valley in BC."

"I guess you can't tell me eh? You have relatives there you want to protect? Brothers and sisters, perhaps?"

"No, just cousins, I'm an only child. My mother never married."

"That's smart of you protecting your family. Are you a criminal too?"

"No not that I know of, but we're all criminals of some sort or another. You accused me of raping your country so that makes me a criminal I guess."

He started laughing out loud and said, "You Europeans are all the same, you find ways to make the victim look guilty, but I like you. Let's get drunk now and we'll talk more later."

"Do you have a place to stay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have a place under the big bridge just out of town. I sleep under it... it keeps the rain and snow off me."

"Well, if you want, you can stay here. There's plenty of space..." I said.

"And plenty of booze. Thanks man. You're a credit to your father, that bastard."

I filled his glass again and gave it to him.

“What? None for you? C’mon man...” he said,

“I’ll pour some in my glass but I won’t drink it. This is strong stuff and I don’t know how much I can drink before I get sick.”

“Yeah, keep fooling yourself that way...” he replied.

“You said you found Peter in the woods and saved his life?” I asked.

“Yeah, I was hunting up there on the mountain northeast from here and found him lying on the ground half frozen. I lit a fire and warmed him but he couldn’t walk so I carried him down. He asked me where I was taking him. When I said into town he refused to go any further. I put him down near the road where the river is and went looking for wood to make a fire. I found this hole in the rocks. I figured it would be a good place to rest and light a fire. I didn’t know this place was a base. Inside the hole, at the end of it there was a door. The key was in it so I unlocked it and forced it open. It was a big room under a huge pile of rocks. We looked around and found a fireplace. We lit a fire and spent the night there. Peter wanted to stay there but had no provisions. He told me he had money and asked me to go into town and buy him things. I had to walk for a day and some before I got into town. The first thing I did was buy that truck you’re driving. It was real piece of junk before I fixed it. I used it to bring his provisions and he kept giving me money. That’s how I started drinking and sleeping under the bridge. On top of that he used to come with me to the bar and kept paying my tab. He liked to go to the library and that’s how we discovered the place he was staying in was a military base.

When we went to the municipal building to check it out we found out it was for sale. They told us if we paid the back taxes the place could be ours for a dollar. Peter agreed to it but wanted it re-zoned as a park or fish sanctuary, or something like that I don’t remember exactly what. When we looked at the price Peter said he didn’t have that kind of cash but had some assets he could sell. What kind of assets I asked and he said the kind you sell on the black market. I had no idea what kind of assets he had so I said I would help him if

he told me more. That's when he said he was from Algeria and showed me a handful of cut diamonds. I got him a buyer; he got his money, opened a bank account, paid for the property by cheque and got his keys.

When I asked him how he had gotten here from Algeria, that's when the bastard lied to me and told me the alien story, which I swallowed like a fool.

After that I helped him establish himself here and I was his best buddy until he got involved with the Olivia chick and began distancing himself from me. One day I left and never came back," he concluded and downed the rest of the drink.

I helped him to the next room and sat him on a bench. He stunk, he needed a bath. He slumped over and fell asleep. I turned him on his side, went upstairs, got a pillow and a cover. I put the pillow under his head and covered him up.

I then went back to the big table, took the meat to the kitchen put it in the big frying pan, fried it until the onions were caramelized, added four raw eggs to it, stirred it well and fried it until the eggs were cooked. Now that was some meal, and Oscar was right I did finish drinking my new-found drink...

Deep down I felt terrible for deceiving Oscar about mine and Peter's past but I had to do it to protect us. But from whom?! I don't know. I had to re-evaluate that option, but not today. I was feeling mighty tipsy and had to lie down and fast.

It was dark outside when I woke up with a whopping headache. Oscar was still sleeping.

I went and drank some water and went back to sleep on the bench opposite Oscar. I didn't want to abandon him.

The next thing I remember was hearing a lot of yelling and swearing. I ran over to the bench where Oscar was sleeping and found him on the floor wrestling to uncover himself. I pulled the sheet off him and asked him what was happening. He said he had

had nightmare in which a crow was trying to peck his eyes out. He didn't know what it meant but he got the feeling something wasn't right at home.

"I've sinned. I've sinned too many times," he said and put his head on the floor.

I didn't know what to say. I had just met the man and knew nothing about him. I was just like the others to him. Maybe I was. Maybe we were all bastards like he said... I don't know. All I knew was that I was feeling uncomfortable seeing him like that.

Suddenly he got up on his knees and said, "I'm sorry man. I don't know what gets into me sometimes... It might be the booze... It causes depression and funny stuff you know. You must think I'm some sort of weirdo. Maybe I am."

I didn't say anything. I just sat there looking at him with a worried look on my face.

"You're a good man," he said. "If it was anybody else they would have thrown me out by now like the bum that I am."

"Okay then, since we got all that out of our system, how about you take a bath because you stink and I'll give you some of my clothes to wear. Ditch that rotten stuff you call clothes."

"Thanks man I needed a bath a long time ago but the river is too cold at this time of year... and I'll need a pair of shoes to go with those clothes... and maybe later we can go to a barber shop. We both need a haircut and I need a shave... But I have no money," he said.

"Okay, and after that we can go fishing," I said.

"What does that mean? Fishing! To catch fish?" he asked.

"Yes!" I replied.

He got up and I walked him upstairs to the nearest room. He took off everything he was wearing while I tested the shower to make sure it worked, he dumped everything on the floor.

“I forgot, we don’t have bathtubs here,” I yelled.

“A shower will do just fine,” he replied.

I went outside the room to the closet and found a bar of soap and a plastic bag. I gave him the soap and then put his clothes in the plastic bag. They smelled sour. His socks and shoes were full of holes and stunk even worse.

When he was done I threw him a large towel to dry and wrap himself in.

“Thanks man, I feel like I’m reborn... Where are those clothes you promised me?”

“I don’t have any here. They’re in the room next to the office in the garage.”

“I don’t want to wear army clothing... man,” he protested.

“No, I have civilian clothing up there, you just have to choose what you want.”

“Wow, I get to choose?”

“Yes. But tell me why don’t you want to wear army clothing?”

“Because I was in the army and the army screwed me and I don’t want to talk about it.”

When we arrived in the room I opened the closet and he looked around.

“There’s a nice dark suit here; if it fits me can I have it?”

“Yes, you can have it but you’ll also need casual clothing to wear, pick something.”

I gave him a pair of underwear, an undershirt and socks. He tried the suit and it fit.

He looked at himself in the mirror and said, “I look like a werewolf in a suit.”

He took it off and found a shirt, sweater and pants and a pair of brown shoes. He again looked in the mirror and said, “Now I look like a werewolf dressed like Peewee Herman but without a bowtie.”

I cracked up laughing, I couldn’t help myself. He cracked up laughing too.

We skipped breakfast and went straight to the barbershop in town. We both got a haircut and a shave. He couldn’t believe how good he looked. When we got back he tried the suit again and said, “I could be the prime minister of Canada. I sure look it in this suit. Are you sure I can have it?”

“Yes,” I said. “But you have to do me a favour.”

“Well, here we go... What favour?” he asked.

“You should go home and see your family.”

Suddenly he felt uncomfortable and overwhelmed with sadness and anxiety.

“Well?” I asked, pressing the issue and added. “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine with me, but you have to go.”

He changed back to the other clothing and said, “Let’s go fishing.”

It was past noon and we’d had no breakfast and no lunch so I said, “Should we eat first?”

“No,” he said. “We’ll bring the bottle of... what did you call it?”

“Rakia.”

“Yes, rakia and drink that for lunch.”

We grabbed a couple of jackets, went to the kitchen and he grabbed the half full bottle of rakia. I grabbed half a loaf of bread and we went outside to dig for worms.

“It’s too cold for worms at this time of year, man,” he said. “We’ll use the bread. That’s why you brought the bread, for bait, right?”

“Okay,” I said. “Now let’s go and get the fishing gear.”

“Are we driving there?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “We’ll be fishing outside in the quarry.”

“Oh, yes, I remember now, there are fish in the quarry, Peter and I put them there.”

We walked over quietly and found a nice spot. He said a few words in his native language and baited both hooks with bread. He compressed it first, put it on the hook and dropped it gently into the water so as not to dislodge it.

We both sat down on the cold rocks and he poured us a drink. After we toasted I casually reached into the bag of bread, pulled out a slice and began to chew it, one bite with every sip.

He was about to say something but was distracted by the fishing rod bending. He jumped to his feet and gently reeled it in. The bread had fallen off.

He looked at me and said, “Don’t be discouraged. At least we know they’re biting.”

He baited the hook again and dropped it in. Moments later the same rod moved again. He reeled it in and there was a fish about a foot long. He took the bag with the bread, took all the bread out and

handed it to me. He then stuffed the fish in the bag, put it between a couple of rocks and said, "Once it got the taste for bread it went for it."

He baited both hooks again and slowly lowered them into the water.

I set a couple of slices of bread on a rock and, one by one, ate the rest. He poured us more rakia. The bottle was empty.

The rods kept moving but no fish. He suggested we move over. I agreed. My butt was getting stone cold sitting on the rock.

Moments after we moved we caught another fish.

"Let's go back inside and cook them," I said. "I'm starving." He agreed.

When we got to the kitchen he showed me how to clean them and fillet them. I already knew how to clean fish but didn't know how to fillet them.

I preferred to have my fish fried but Oscar insisted that we eat them raw. It was tough for me but I did eat it raw. The fish was crunchy but had no fishy taste. I kept adding salt to it which helped me stomach it better. Rakia tasted terrible with raw fish. All night I felt like I hadn't eaten and wondered what Vos would have thought if he saw us eating raw fish.

After we ate we had a fire in the big fireplace. I was feeling a bit cold and didn't want to get sick. Oscar enjoyed watching the fire and was quiet most of the evening.

At some point I excused myself and went to bed. Oscar said he was going to spend the night by the fire, it reminded him of home. I brought a blanket for him and left.

Oscar goes home

The next morning when I got up I was very hungry. As soon as I got dressed I went to see how Oscar was doing. He was awake.

“Did you sleep okay?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember sleeping at all,” he said. “I lay here all night thinking about what you said.”

“And what was that?” I asked.

“About going home!” he replied. “I want to go home. Will you drive me? I want you to come with me.”

“Okay,” I said, “but we need to eat something first. I’ll fry some eggs, will you have some?”

“Yes, a couple for me. I don’t know how my stomach is going to react.”

I took four slices of bread, fried them in butter and then cooked four eggs and made two egg sandwiches.

I ate mine no problem but Oscar was having difficulty. I looked at the whiskey bottle. It was empty, we had emptied it yesterday.

Oscar saw me looking at it and said, “No more, not today, today I’m going home and want to be sober.”

Just as he said that he ran for the garbage can and threw up.

“I hate to be disrespectful but I’m sorry, I can’t eat solid foods, especially greasy foods. I’ll just eat some plain bread,” he said, threw the egg sandwich in the garbage and took a single slice of bread from the bag.

“Do you want to leave right away? I asked.

“Yes, please if possible.”

“How far is it to your place?”

“About a two hour drive.”

“What are you going to tell your people when we get there?”

“I don’t know. Any ideas?”

“How long have you been gone?”

“Ten years.”

“TEN YEARS?” I yelled out loud and my voice echoed in the big room.

“Yeah, man, I’m ashamed but...”

“Do you have anything to bring back home for your parents?”

“No?”

“Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“Yes, one sister and a brother, both younger than me.”

“Do you have anything to bring them?”

“No! What’s with the interrogation... man?”

“I’m trying to figure out what we can do to make your return easier... How many people in your village?”

“About sixty to seventy. Why?”

“Here is what I think we should do. You get dressed in that black suit you like and take the clothes you’re wearing with you, also take the black pair of shoes and black socks that go with the suit and put them on. I will also give you a pile of money. You give everyone in the village one hundred dollars each. You give your mother, sister

and brother two hundred dollars each. Whatever is left you give to your father and apologize to your family for leaving. You don't tell them where and how you got the money, except that you earned it working hard. What do you say?"

"Okay, if you think it's going to work?"

"I don't know if it's going to work or not, but it would be a good gesture on your part to give your people something you think is of value. They may toss it back in your face if they are as proud as you say they are. If that happens then we'll have to improvise."

"Meaning what...?"

"How about doing some begging for forgiveness..."

And before I had a chance to finish what I was saying, he whacked me on the back and said, "Go get the money and my suit, I'll wait here. I don't want to puke all over the place."

I went up to the safe and grabbed ten bundles of fifties (\$ 10,000) and dropped them in the shoe box with the black shoes.

When I came back I said, "Before I forget, when you feel it's the right time, you take your black suit and shoes off and give them to your father."

"Meaning what? He doesn't need a suit. It's stupid!" he protested.

"Have you ever heard of the expression 'he gave him his shirt off his back'? Well it's a gesture of love and respect; it means you care for him more than for yourself or for your valuable suit. If he is as wise as you say, he will figure it out."

He put the black socks on and then the black suit but without a tie. He then opened the shoe box and his jaw dropped.

He looked at me and said, "Oh, wow, I thought you were joking about the money. No way man, I'll never be able to pay you back not with the \$200 a month pogie I get from the government."

“You don’t have to worry about paying me back, it’s a gift, a down payment for fixing the tank and that snowplow in the parking lot, which you promised me you would do?”

We went to the truck. I had forgotten we’d left it outside in the front parking lot which, until yesterday, I didn’t know existed, got on and drove up the mountain. It had snowed up there and it was treacherous.

I must have had white knuckles when Oscar said, “It looks like you’re not used to driving on bad roads in snow. You must be from the valley.”

I didn’t say anything.

About half an hour later we were on the main highway. It was well paved but also treacherous. Huge trucks were passing us by like we were standing still and spraying slush and salt. We slowly climbed down the mountain and when we reached about half way it stopped snowing and the sun came out.

We traveled a short time in the valley before we started climbing up another mountain. The road was dry here and we did well driving until Oscar pointed to a side road that was paved only part way. After that it was slow driving and watching out for potholes.

We finally arrived at his village. I was exhausted from driving non-stop for two hours and twenty minutes on treacherous roads.

Before we stopped I asked Oscar why the road to the village wasn’t paved. He said because the reservation was considered Indian land and if we wanted it paved we would have to pay. But, outside of the small monthly government cheques we receive, we have no money.

We parked the truck at the bottom of the village just as we reached the clearing out of the woods. A lot of children and their dogs ran down to greet us but the children turned back because their mother’s yelled at them. We were greeted by dogs. At least they were friendly and didn’t bark at us.

Oscar reached in and grabbed the shoebox with the money.

“Not now,” I said. “I’ll tell you when.”

He put it back in the truck.

“These are my people, my family, man, why am I so nervous?” he asked.

“It’s always like that with family,” I said.

An older broken down woman started coming down towards us. “She’s my mother,” he said. “She looks so old.”

She came down, looked at him and then at me. She went back to him and said something in her native language.

“What did she say? I asked.

“The eyes never lie,” he replied.

She grabbed him by his face, looked into his eyes and began to cry.

The scene was too sad and uncomfortable for me so I turned around, went back into the truck and got the bag with his clothes. By the time I came back more women had come down and all I understood from what they were saying was the word “Oscar”.

I was left behind alone. I was all alone... Alone again... All I could think of was my own parents and what they were feeling at that moment. Did they think I had abandoned them? Did they think I had been kidnapped? No matter what... there was only one outcome... I am sure they were heartbroken...

A good looking young woman in her early twenties came down and greeted me. She said her name was... which translated to “Little Pony” in English but she said I could call get Jean. She said she was Oscar’s first cousin and Oscar had sent her down to get me. I hesitated and felt that I didn’t belong there. I didn’t want to go, I

resisted. She grabbed my hand and pulled me up. When we arrived everyone turned and looked at me.

Oscar said, “This is Riki my Macedonian friend. Does anyone know where Macedonia is?”

At that very moment his father walked in with a bunch of older man and said. “I know where it is. I was there when I was a soldier with the Canadian forces during World War II.”

Oscar jumped to his feet and just froze. I tried to escape the grip of his beautiful cousin but she refused to let me go. Oscar’s father looked at her and she let go. I extended my hand to him and he took it.

“It is nice to meet you Sir,” I said.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you too. I see you brought my son back,” he said.

By now Oscar had recovered from his initial shock and went and hugged his father and shook the hands of the other men. They all welcomed him back.

His father looked at me, and for some reason I raised my eyebrows. He then said to him, “Welcome home son.”

The moment the men looked away Jean grabbed my hand again. I looked at her and she looked at me and said, “What...! Oscar told me to look after you.”

More people came into the room. “Is this everyone in the village?” asked Oscar.

“Yes, my son, we are all here,” answered his mother.

Oscar stood up and said, “It’s nice to see you all again and learn that you are all well. It’s nice to see our village grow with so many young ones. I am sorry I have been away from my family and friends for so long but, from now on, I promise you I will come and

visit more often. I want to thank my friend Riki for driving me here. I also want to thank him for the advice he has given me. I have accumulated some small wealth in my travels and when I asked my friend how to invest it, he suggested I bring it home to my family and friends... There is no better investment than that, he told me. So, if you are not too proud to take it, I have some money to give you. It's a gift to you from me, if you want it."

He looked around, smiled and said, "Come on up and get it, you children too... But you have to give it to your parents and tell them to save it for you."

He then motioned for me to go get the box. I dragged his cousin with me, who refused to let go. We went and got the shoebox from the car. I gave it to her and she gave it to Oscar.

When he opened it there was a gasp from the women.

He took two fifties out and gave them to the first child and told her to give it to her parents. He said he had worked hard for it and to make sure they put it to good use. He did that with every child. He then gave money to the women. Each came over, took it and gave him a hug and a blessing. He then got up and gave each of the men their money. He didn't give any to his own family. The last one he gave money to was his cousin who he told to let go of me if she wanted the money. She took the money and left. Everyone else also left. He then gave his little brother and sister two hundred each and gave his mother five hundred. He put the lid on the shoebox and gave it to his father. His father took it, opened it and put the lid back on.

Oscar then took off his suit, put on his casual clothes, gave the suit to his father and said, "This is for you."

His father didn't know what to say. He looked at me. I nodded.

He said, "Thank you son," and left the room.

I looked at Oscar. He was shaking. "Are you okay?" I asked.

“Just nerves, I’ll be okay,” he said.

His father came back and told me, “We are preparing a traditional meal for you; we want you to be our guest.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Then he asked Oscar to go with him.

The moment they stepped out his mother gave me a hug, kissed me on the cheek and said, “Thank you for bringing my son home.”

At the same moment Jean walked in and said, “Oscar sent me to keep you company.”

I felt uneasy and looked at Oscar’s mother. She looked at me and shook her head giving me her approval, for what I don’t know. These were people of a different culture and I had no idea what was appropriate and inappropriate. I didn’t want to embarrass Oscar by doing something wrong.

I grabbed Jean by the hand, went outside where we could be seen and told her that I felt uncomfortable holding her hand.

“I know how you feel, I’m not from a different planet you know, but I too am trying to do the right thing according to my tradition. Holding a stranger’s hand and grinning like an idiot is not exactly my cup of tea either...”

I looked at her with a surprised look. She was a kitten on the outside and a ferocious tiger on the inside.

“Oh, I get it, just because I’m Indian you thought I was coming on to you... Is that right? How typical of you Europeans...” she said angrily.

“You sound just like Oscar...” I said and gave her a tap on the shoulder.

“What’s that for?” she snapped.

“For being honest with me,” I said.

“We are poor, we have nothing to give, the only things we have are our integrity and our dignity. I am not going to compromise them by being dishonest,” she snapped.

“Will you sit with me at dinner?” I asked her.

“No, women sit by themselves opposite the men, in my tradition,” she snapped.

“I guess I have a lot to learn,” I said.

“What’s the deal with you and my cousin?” she asked and added. “Are you some kind of rich guy trying to buy our affection with your money? Did you give him the money? Where would an Indian get that kind of money and a five-hundred dollar suit?” she said angrily.

“I don’t know how to answer that question; you’ll have to take it up with your cousin,” I said and added. “Things may not always be what they seem, but sometimes they are what they are.

She got very upset and stormed off across the road.

Oscar’s mother was watching us and came to see me. I looked sad and disappointed.

“She is just like Oscar. Oscar was like that when he was her age. Stubborn as a mule... Don’t mind her, she is a good girl, she only wants what’s best for us.”

I sat on the front steps of Oscar’s house with his mother. She could see I was upset but didn’t know what to say. What could she say? She had no idea what my troubles were and obviously she could see that whatever Jean said had upset me.

A little later Jean stormed back, stopped in front of me and with tears in her eyes said out loud, “I’m sorry!” and stormed away again.

I was about to jump up and run after her when I felt a hand grab my wrist. “Let her go,” she said.

Oscar’s mother had work to do but couldn’t go. She didn’t want to leave me alone.

“Go,” I said, “you have things to do. I’ll manage...”

Jean must have realized why Oscar’s mother was still sitting there with me so she came over and told her to go, she would look after me.

She sat beside me but I refused to look at her. She knew nothing about me and yet she did to me exactly what racist Europeans do to her people.

“I, I, I am sorry. What I said was inappropriate. I spoke with Oscar. He told me everything. Now he won’t talk to me because of my foolishness. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say...” she said and started sobbing.

I grabbed her by her face and kissed her hard on the mouth. She was shocked. I was ready for the slap on the face. I deserved it. She could see that I wanted her to hit me. She didn’t. I don’t know why I kissed her.

To my surprise she grabbed my face and kissed me right back hard on the mouth. There was laughter on the other side of the street and a bunch of women started clapping their hands.

We both stood up. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re going to have a wedding,” she said.

“Who’s getting married?” I asked.

“You and me!” she said sarcastically.

I started laughing and she did too. I stuck out my hand and she grabbed it and shook it.

“Friends?” I asked.

“Friends!” she replied then grabbed my hand and took me for a tour of the village.

“What’s it like for a white man to live in this country?” she asked.

“Just like every other man, we all have our troubles; they’re just different kinds of troubles.”

“I guess you’re right, we are all born to suffer,” she said.

Just as we reached the top of the village, a young girl ran up and told us to come back down.

“This is my youngest sister,” she said. “The food must be ready. You’re lucky; yesterday my brother shot a big deer during the hunt. We are having fresh venison for dinner.”

“Are we going to eat it raw?” I asked.

Both sisters began to laugh which made me look silly.

“Don’t tell me, Oscar made you eat raw meat,” she said with a curious look on her face.

“And raw fish too,” I said.

“He likes to be a traditionalist with strangers. No, the venison will be slow boiled in a stew with spices and potatoes. That’s how my brother likes it. I hope you get to meet him... I’m sure he won’t like you...” she said and added. “After the women tell him what you did...”

“What did I do?” I asked.

“You know... kissed me...”

After that Jean's sister began to make fun of us yelling, "Jean is going to marry Riki..."

"See what you've done?" I said.

When we arrived we found everyone sitting in two circles, one made up exclusively of women and the other of men. They were all sitting on the ground with legs crossed. Oscar was sitting beside his father and there was an empty space for me to sit on the other side beside his father. Oscar's little brother was sitting beside Oscar. Jean sat with the women.

Everyone was watching me as I sat down. I felt nervous.

Oscar's father said, "Don't be intimidated by the looks, we don't get many visitors here and everyone is anxious to get to know you, especially Jean who has taken a liking to you."

Everyone laughed. The women began to clap their hands again. Jean ignored them.

When everyone was seated Oscar's father said something in their language, I assume it was a prayer. Oscar's mother and Jean got up and went to the big cauldron. Jean handed out the spoons first and then went back, picked up a bowl and presented it to Oscar's mother who scooped a ladle full of stew from the cauldron and poured it into the bowl. She served the first bowl to Oscar's father and the second to her brother, the hunter who had killed the deer. After that more women got up and began to serve everyone from oldest to youngest. We began to eat as soon as we got our bowl.

Everyone was eating quietly. There were no conversations taking place. I was sure because of me. A puffy cloud got in front of the sun which was about to set and a cold wind blew down from up the mountain. I felt a chill all over my body.

As each person finished eating they put their bowl on the grass in front of them. When everyone had set their bowl down Oscar's

father again said something in their native language and announced to everyone that the men were going inside.

I tried to stand up but my legs were locked. They were numb and wouldn't hold me up. Oscar's father gave me his hand and I managed to stand up. There was laughter coming from the younger men my age. Jean rushed to my rescue and grabbed me by my arm.

Oscar came over and grabbed me by my other arm and said, "What happened to you man?"

A few steps later I recovered but Jean insisted on helping me. We walked into this big room which could have been a classroom but without desks, a meeting hall without chairs, a recreational centre without... The important thing was that there was a fireplace and Oscar's father was starting a fire.

After the fire started burning he said, "You sit on that side and pointed to the left side of the fireplace. He sat on the right side and added more wood to the fire. The rest of the men sat in a semicircle. Oscar sat in the middle of the semicircle. Jean sat to my right and held onto me. Oscar's father looked at her but she refused to go. More women arrived after they put their children to bed and sat behind the men.

"This is highly unusual," said Oscar's father, "but let us begin." I think he said that because women weren't allowed to sit with the men.

"He looked at me and said, "On behalf of my people first let me welcome you to our village. Second, I want to thank you for bringing my son home to us, we are grateful for that. And third, I want to thank you for the money and for the suit you gave us, Oscar told me all about it."

I looked at Oscar. He nodded.

"We are very grateful for the money. We can finally buy our own truck to go to town and get our own supplies instead of paying hefty fees to have them delivered. We know you gave us about ten

thousand dollars. That would be five years worth of savings for a working man.

We just want to know why you gave us this money.”

There was silence in the room. I looked around. Everyone was looking at me anxiously waiting to hear what I had to say. What was I going to say? Tell them the truth? What was the truth? Tell them more lies? They were smart people. They were decent people.

I waited too long to answer. Jean piped up and said, “I knew it. It’s not your money...”

Oscar’s father jumped in and said, “Be quiet, let the man speak.”

“Jean is right, it’s not my money. It was my father’s. I inherited it from him. How he got it, I don’t know and I don’t want to know. It’s mine now and I can do with it as I please. All my life I have been poor but I never needed money. We did fine without money. My family gave me all the support I needed.

I also had a good teacher, my grandfather, and I was a good student. He taught me many things. One of the things he taught me was that family is very important. Unity in the family is the most important thing in life. It gives you strength and peace. You have people who love you, care for you and help you when you need help.

I don’t know if my grandfather was right or wrong but that’s what he taught me.

Another thing he taught me was that we are all the same, rich or poor, we are people and one day we all die.

Many of us argue about things which at the moment may seem important but in the long-term are a waste of time. They make us feel angry at one another but accomplish very little if anything. We spend our entire lives being angry at someone or something. The things we argue about, in the scheme of things, don’t really matter because they are usually not important but tend to split us apart.

Many people spend their entire lives pursuing wealth while neglecting subtle things like their fellow man and even their own families. And then one day when they are rich they die, usually alone. I could never understand why people spent their entire lives trying to get richer and richer. What is the point of all that wealth? You can't take it with you when you die?

My grandfather taught me there are two rules by which we live. One is the pursuit of justice, decency and right and wrong. We apply this rule by being honest and truthful. The other rule we apply is the pursuit of interests and most often we pursue interests with deceit. We will lie and cheat in order to get what we want.

The poor are usually taught to be decent and honest.

But from what my grandfather taught me, many times in life the two roles collide and cause friction between us. We are often confused by each other's actions which cause us to loathe one another.

When I was given this wealth I didn't want it. At the same time I didn't want to squander it or give it to someone who didn't deserve it. That kind of wealth doesn't come easily. If not my father then someone else had to work very hard to earn it. I had to respect that. I lived without a father for most of my life. I didn't get to know him until recently, during his dying days. I think he was a good man because he tried to make amends to those he had deceived.

When I met Oscar, the answer came to me. My value system told me to invest the money in people, your people. I didn't know any other people who had suffered as much as my people. I couldn't help my people, they are scattered all over the world but I could help your people.

There is no mystery to it. I know if I kept the money chances are that it would have corrupted me, just like it did my father, and I would be a disappointment to my grandfather who invested years of his life to bring me up properly in his view.

This is how it is and I don't know what else I can tell you," I said and stopped talking.

There was silence. Everyone kept staring at me.

Oscar's father broke the silence and said, "Thank you for sharing that with us, it has given us a lot to think about. But I'm curious, what happened to your people and how does that relate to us?"

Everyone's eyes were on me again. Answering this question should be easy in comparison to answering to the earlier question, I thought.

"We, from what my grandfather told me, both of our countries, were occupied by imperialists whose primary aim was to rob us of our wealth. The same imperialists occupied both of our countries. They did it so that they could exploit us and pursue their interests. They occupied your country directly and my grandfather's country through proxies. They drove you off your lands and pushed you onto reservations. They drove my grandfather's people right out of their country. My grandfather's people now roam the world as permanent refugees. The invaders took everything from them, their homes, their lands, their dignity and their future as Macedonians. Now it's a matter of time before all these Macedonians are assimilated. It may take a few generations but they will all be assimilated and there will be no Macedonians.

And, if you aren't careful, the same thing could happen to you. They may not drive you out but they certainly will try to assimilate you. You see, you already stand in the way of progress and because you own the land they can't develop it or exploit it in the way they want to. This is your land, you love your land and you will not stand for it being exploited. Maybe not all of you love your land. Maybe there are some who will want to become rich and sell off their heritage. There will be friction between those who want to sell your land and those who want to preserve it. That friction will be exploited and you will find yourselves at odds with each other.

This is what happened to my grandfather's people who ended up in a civil war. Those who loved their land and wanted to preserve it began to fight against those who wanted to sell the lands and

become rich. Those who wanted to preserve the lands lost the fight and were either killed or driven out of their homes.

The moment you pick up a gun and spill blood, no matter what your reasons, you are doomed. I don't know how much more I can tell you," I said and stopped talking.

There was silence but no one was looking at me. They were all looking at the ground.

"Thank you again for your explanation, you have given us a lot to think about, but you know what? We can sit here all night and talk and by tomorrow morning we will still have things to talk about. So if you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to go to bed. You also must be tired and need your rest."

And with those words Oscar's father and everyone else left the big room, went outside and disappeared into the dark. The only ones who remained were Oscar, myself and Jean.

Oscar picked up a couple of logs, tossed them into the fire and said, "Oh man, I didn't know you were such a philosopher?"

I didn't know what to say so I looked at Jean. She looked at me and said, "You mean such a bull-shit-er?"

Oh, c'mon Jean, why must you be so cynical? He's my friend, why must you insult him?" he asked, turned to me and said. "Jean here wants to be the next village chief and rain fire on you whites."

She got upset and said, "What would rather have me be like you? Drinking myself to death and sleeping under a bridge?"

"How did you know about that?" snapped Oscar with a raspy voice.

"People talk you know, people talk."

Oscar got upset and yelled at her to get out of the room or else.

She ran off and disappeared. Oscar ran behind her and locked the door.

I asked him why he was locking the door.

“There are bears out here and they come down during the night. You don’t want one of them coming in here.”

He paused for a moment and said, “If she knows, then everyone knows. I’m so ashamed... I need to leave. We need to leave first thing in the morning before anyone is up.”

“Oscar, we’re not going to leave. No one said anything to you so far and no one is going to say anything to you tomorrow. We will leave tomorrow, if that’s what you want but not as bandits, okay?”

“Okay,” he said. “That Jean is such a bitch!”

“And who does she remind you of?” I asked.

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to rub it in.”

“Your people have accepted you for who you are. They have shown you respect and you must not take that for granted.”

“You’re right man, now shut up and go to sleep.”

It was nice and warm in the big room but I wasn’t able to sleep. I kept going over the things that I had said and the lies that I had spread. I pretended to be honest and righteous but I was no better than the people I loathed. If there was a hell I figured I would be going to it. Among all the people I know only Jean was honest but we were punishing her for it. She was right, I was the biggest bull-shit-er of them all and I hated myself for it. I spent the entire night thinking about what I had said.

There was a knock at the door. I sat up. The fire was burning. I figured Oscar had been feeding it with logs all night. He probably hadn’t sleep at all either.

I opened the door. It was Jean. She looked at me and said, “Good morning, I’m frying eggs this morning. Would you like some?”

Without thinking and without saying good morning I said, “Yes, please.”

She went away and I closed the door. It was cold outside.

I went over to see how Oscar was doing. He had his back turned to me but I could see he was shivering.

“Oscar, what’s the matter? Why are you shivering? Are you cold?” I asked.

“No man, I have the shakes. I need a drink, I’m feeling terrible,” he replied.

I looked around in all the cupboards but couldn’t find any. I didn’t hear Jean come in. She startled me when she spoke. She asked me what I was looking for. When I told her I figured she would be very upset but she put the two plates on the floor and ran out. About a minute later she came back with a small bottle of whiskey and a glass. She handed them to me and went and locked the door. The bottle hadn’t been opened. I opened it, poured some whisky in the glass and gave it to Oscar. He drank it in one gulp and asked for more. I gave him the bottle and a glass. He helped himself. He tried to give the bottle back to Jean but she said she didn’t want it. Oscar stashed it in his pocket and gave Jean the empty glass.

Jean pushed his plate with the eggs towards him but he said, “No thank you that will make me puke for sure.”

Jean took his plate of eggs and ate them. I looked at her.

“What? I’m not going to throw them out,” she protested.

I ate my eggs while watching Oscar slowly recover from his shakes.

There was a knock at the door. Jean opened it. A male voice yelled something. She came over and told me to go to the door.

I looked outside. There were three young men standing there. “How can I help you?” I asked.

The one in the middle spoke. I recognized him from the night before. He was Jean’s brother, the hunter who had killed the deer.

In a stern tone of voice he said, “What are your intentions towards my sister?”

“I have no intentions towards you sister,” I replied.

“After you befouled her you tell me you have no intentions? Come out here and say that!” he ordered.

Just as I was about to take a step out I heard Oscar yell, “NOOO!”

He ran past me and yelled at his cousin, “Are you crazy man, don’t fight him. If he gets mad he will kill you. I saw him beat up two guys twice your size at the same time. I saw him lift a two hundred pound guy over his head and toss him ten feet.” If Oscar hadn’t looked so serious nobody would have believed him. I looked at Oscar, he looked exhausted.

Jean grabbed me by my arm and pulled me back in. I shrugged my shoulders. “You beat up people too! Why doesn’t that surprise me!” she said with a disappointed tone of voice.

People started coming out of their houses and wondered what the commotion was. Jean went around and told everyone we were leaving. They all came out and said goodbye. Both of Oscar’s parents gave me a hug and invited me to come back.

Jean gave Oscar a hug and helped him get into the truck. She then came over to my side, looked at the people looking at us, looked at me and kissed me on the mouth.

“What was that for,” I asked.

“To show you that I’m not a heartless bitch,” she said, slammed the door of my truck shut and waved goodbye.

Back to the military base with Oscar

Just as we drove down past the clearing and into the forest Oscar took a long breath and a gulp of whiskey straight out of the bottle.

“We shouldn’t have come,” he said. “It was a mistake.” He then curled up into a semicircle and put his forehead on the dashboard.

I didn’t say anything.

Moments later he said, “My mother has aged. She has aged a lot. My father was cold to me... because I was cold to him... I’m ashamed of what I have become and I just couldn’t face him. Everything he told me is true. He was right about everything. I know that now but I didn’t listen, I wouldn’t listen, I refused to listen. I was going to change the world and I was going to show him. But look what I’ve done instead. I’ve brought shame to my family and myself.”

He paused for a moment to compose himself and said, “Jean is right you know, I am a bum. I’ve known Jean since she was a baby. I was her hero and look what happened. I left when she was ten or eleven years old. I abandoned her. She used to follow me around everywhere like a little puppy,” he laughed and then cried out loud. He took a long breath through his nose, sucking back the tears and exhaled through his mouth.

I drove down the hill quietly trying to avoid the potholes but once in a while I would hit one and watch Oscar’s head bounce off the dashboard. I didn’t know what to say, he was on his own. There is no denying that it was my meddling in his affairs that caused him this pain. I had to take some responsibility.

After a long silence I said, “I’m sorry for putting you through this. At least your people got to see you, especially your mother. Yesterday we planted some seeds. What they will yield, I don’t know. I don’t know if we did the right thing or not, only time will tell. But let me say this, I feel terrible for causing you so much pain and I am sorry.”

“What are you talking about man? You tried to do what you thought was right. You didn’t cause me this pain, I caused it myself. You listened to your grandfather and you are the better for it. Look at me, I listened to no one, except my own stupid head and look what it got me.”

“You’re a good person Oscar, don’t beat yourself up, there is no need.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, to begin with, you are accepting responsibility for your actions and it takes wisdom and a lot of guts to do that. Let me put it another way, you’re not blaming others, like your father, for example, for your troubles.”

“You’re right, man. I’m beyond that and you think I should excuse myself because of it? I don’t think so?”

“Well, you can beat yourself up until you are old and grey or you can pull yourself together and move on. If you want to make amends then help others avoid the mistakes you made.”

“You really think I can help others when I can’t even help myself?”

“It’s all up to you. If you don’t think you can do it then don’t do it. But let me ask you this; do you want to see your cousin Jean take the same path as you did? Imagine what will happen to a beautiful native girl roaming the bars and sleeping under bridges. That’s what’s going to happen if there is no one to show her the ropes, someone who has experienced life at its worst.”

I could hear him sob with his head between his knees as we arrived in the valley and took the main highway back to the base. I decided to shut up. There was nothing I could say or do which would ease his pain. He was folded over for a long time. I called his name several times, he didn’t answer. I grabbed him by the back of his coat collar and pulled him up. He was asleep. I rested his head on the seat. He slept all the way home. I parked the truck inside the garage and left him there. I noticed the whiskey bottle was empty. I

decided to let him sleep it off. He was too heavy for me to carry and take him to bed.

I hung around the garage for another hour. I was very tired myself and too nervous to do anything. I looked outside. It started snowing. I heard the truck door slam shut. It was Oscar.

“It’s a good thing we got back, you have no idea how bad the weather can get up here,” he said.

I didn’t say anything.

He walked over to the tank and said, “I guess I’d better get working on this baby.” He then slapped the long cannon resting on it.

“Oscar, do you know how to drive and operate the tank?”

“Yes, I can show you when I get it working.”

“Where did you learn?”

“I told you I was in the army. When I left home I joined the army. I spent six months training to repair all kinds of mobile machinery. I was the best mechanic on the base. I drove tanks from the depot to the garage and did preventive maintenance and repaired them when they broke down. This one was completely seized up that’s why the army left it here when it abandoned the base. I rebuilt its entire engine and got it working. Peter and I only drove it a couple of times just outside of here. We only fired it once. I was afraid the cannon might have developed micro fractures over time but it tested okay. There wasn’t much temperature fluctuation inside. It should be okay, the only thing it might need is new batteries.”

I was going to ask him why he had left the army but I didn’t want to open another wound, not yet, so I said, “Can we do this another time, perhaps tomorrow? I’m really tired. I didn’t sleep last night at all and the drive back was torture.”

“Okay, man. Let’s have a fire and a short snooze. If we sleep now we won’t be able to sleep during the night.”

“Do you feel like eating something?”

“No man, you know I can’t eat, but I will have a drink with you. Can you go and fill the bottle from the gallon while I start the fire?”

“Okay. But I need to eat something. I can’t drink on an empty stomach.”

“Bring some of those sausages you like and I’ll cook them for you in the fireplace.”

I brought back a full bottle of rakia, two juice glasses, a plate and four sausages. Oscar filled the glasses half full and handed me one.

“It’s too much, I can’t drink all that,” I said.

Just as I said that he clinked my glass and said, “To you! I’ll make a drinker out of you,” and laughed out loud. “Drink as much as you want, nobody is forcing you.”

“To our health,” I said, took a sip and sat down by the fire.

After he had a gulp of rakia he took the poker and stirred the fire. He then unearthed some unburned coals from the ashes and placed them on top of some burning sticks. He left them there until they were glowing red. He then used the poker to bury them in the ashes and placed one of the sausages on top.

I looked at him and said, “Is this how you’re going to cook my sausages?”

“Yes,” he said, “let the sausage simmer for a while then just blow off the ashes and eat it. That’s how we used to cook our meat in the old days when we didn’t want to eat it raw. This is how we cooked our eggs. We didn’t have pots and pans.”

I didn’t say anything.

A few minutes later the sausage began to sizzle and fat spurted all over the ashes. Oscar flipped it over with the poker and let it cook on the other side. By the time it was done, the sausage was covered in wet ash. Oscar flicked off the ashes and it landed on the floor. It was completely covered in sticky, wet, greasy ash.

I looked at it and he looked at me, saw the expression on my face and began to laugh out loud. He then picked up the sausage, went to the sink and ran some water over it and gave it to me. When I bit it he began to laugh again.

“Why did you introduce me to your people as Riki the Macedonian and not Peter the Irishman?” I asked.

He stopped laughing and said, “First, you hardly look Irish and second, as a Macedonian you aren’t part of our problem and I figured my people would accept you more easily. And while we’re on the subject what was all that about with your botched up morality lesson telling my people about good, bad and interests. Don’t you think we know all that? And do you think it was appropriate for a white man to lecture us on morality after what the whites did to us, man?”

“Look, I’m sorry. I was put on the spot, I was very nervous just like you; I’m not good at public speaking.”

“It’s sad, you know, when people judge you without knowing you. Stereotyping you based on some false knowledge they have about you... that somehow because we are different from the Europeans we’re not people... that we are savages... And you, the real savages are somehow civilized and better than us. Ah, don’t get me started,” he said and stopped talking.

After a few minutes of silence he said, “We used to have a white teacher in our village, a nice young woman. She was sent there to civilize us savages. She was very kind and caring. We all liked her. I was in grade four when she began to teach us American history and told us that Christopher Columbus, a European, discovered America. Hell, I was very young, I didn’t know anything so when my mother asked me what I had learned that day I happily told her about

Columbus discovering America. I thought she would to be very happy with me but, instead, she began to cry and wouldn't tell me why. I asked her why she was crying but she wouldn't tell me. What the hell man, Columbus discovered America? How much salt must you rub in our wounds, man?" he asked and began to sob. Moments later he looked up at me and said, "Indians!? Indians!? What the hell? Of all the names you could have chosen you chose Indians? Did we come from India or something? Was that another lie to cover up the first lie? There was no one here when Columbus discovered America and we came from India? Is that it? What about the colony of Russians who lived here, here in British Columbia. Why they were not mentioned in your history? You historians didn't know that or did they simply forget to mention it. Yes we traded with the Russians for years and some of their trading posts still exist here to this day." When he was finished talking he looked down again.

I didn't say anything. There was nothing I could touch on that didn't have a sensitive spot.

Like he predicted, sip after sip I finished drinking the rakia. He took the next sausage and placed it over several sticks and let it simmer without touching the ashes.

I must have passed out because the next thing I remember is being covered with Oscar's blanket that I had left there a couple of nights before and looking at Oscar's back while he was staring at the roaring fire.

"The way you're going you'll burn all the firewood before winter arrives," I said.

"I see you're up. And always with the jokes... I cut this wood for Peter, you know. I'll cut some more, there is plenty of dry wood up the hill."

I got up and got myself some water to drink but after I drank it I felt sick and went and lay down again. The world all around me began to spin. It moved faster and faster, it was an unpleasant feeling which I could not shake. I closed my eyes. Oscar covered me with the blanket.

The next thing I remember is waking up with a bad headache. My body was stiff and I could hardly move. I looked around. Oscar wasn't there. The big room up the stairs was brightly lit. I walked up the stairs, sat down at the big table and looked outside. It was a clear and bright day and the sun was up. I looked for Oscar but I couldn't find him. I yelled and heard his voice.

“Up here in the garage.”

I went up and asked him what he was doing. He said he had looked over the tank and it looked fine and he was now charging the batteries. I asked him if he wanted to eat breakfast. He showed me the bottle Jean had given him. He'd filled it with rakia.

I went to the kitchen and grabbed a couple of slices of bread. I toasted them on top of the stove element and took them with me to the garage. My stomach was upset and I couldn't tolerate eating anything.

Oscar took one of my slices and said, “I'll try and cut down on drinking and if my stomach can tolerate it, I'll start eating solid food. I'll start with bread and maybe some plain boiled rice. Do we have any rice?”

“I don't know. If we do it would be from five years ago. But we can take a drive into town, it's a nice day.”

“Okay, it'll take hours for the batteries to charge. We can use a diversion.”

We drove in silence. When we were about to pull into the plaza, Oscar said, “I didn't know there was another way into town. I thought you were taking me somewhere else. This is a much shorter way.”

I didn't say anything.

When we pulled into the parking lot Oscar asked me to stop the truck. There was an old European car he wanted to have a look at. A tow truck was about to hook it up and take it away.

He jumped out of the truck and said, “Isn’t she a beauty?”

The tow truck driver said, “If you say so. To me it’s a piece of junk. I don’t know what’s wrong with it and I have no idea how to fix it.”

Oscar asked him if he could have look at it. The man asked him if he was a mechanic. Oscar said he was a certified mechanic, certified by the army and he had worked on a vehicle exactly like it. It belonged to his commander’s wife. Oscar then asked the man if he had tools; a metric set. The man said he did have a metric set but not with him, he had the tools in his garage.

I shook my head “no”.

“We have an opportunity to help someone here. You told me that, only yesterday, now you say no?” complained Oscar.

We got in the truck and followed the tow truck to the service station. The driver introduced himself as Stan, the owner of the service station. He then said, “I bought the metric set some years ago and thought I’d wasted my money. I’ve never used it.”

Oscar grabbed the tool box, lifted the hood and began to work on the car. Stan looked at me and said, “It took me five minutes to open that hood.”

After watching Oscar work for a couple of minutes Stan said, “I didn’t catch your names.”

“This is Oscar and I’m Peter.”

“Are you Peter James, by any chance?”

“Yes, that’s me,” I said.

“So, you’re Olivia’s stepson, eh? She and Fred were here just yesterday and they couldn’t stop talking about you. Nice to meet you both...”

Oscar asked Stan to try starting the engine. It wouldn’t start, the battery was very low.

Oscar said, “Do you happen to have a 24 volt charger?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” replied Stan. “No I don’t.”

“No problem,” said Oscar, “do you have two charged batteries?”

“Those I do have. I have four over there on the shelf and they’re all charged.”

Oscar took two batteries, one by one and set them side by side beside the car. He then connected them in series with a short jumper cable. After that he asked Stan to use his jumper cables and connect them to the car battery positive to positive and negative to negative. Sparks flew when the final connection was made. While Oscar was looking under the hood, Stan tried to start the engine. It cranked several times before it started. It was shaking and spewing black smoke but Oscar did something to it and it began to purr like a kitten. Oscar removed the cables and told Stan to keep it running for a while. Oscar then rubbed his hands with the towel hanging from Stan’s belt and said to me, “Let’s go.”

Stan offered to pay him but Oscar refused.

We got back in the truck and left. We picked up a bag of rice from the grocery store and returned to the base.

The batteries were still charging. “Why are you charging six batteries?” I asked.

“The tank requires three sets of two. Like that European car it needs 24 volts per set. The radio and lights operate from one set, the starter operates from a second set and the third set serves as backup. Modern tanks can take as many as eleven batteries,” he said.

“Why don’t we go and cook some rice and by the time we’re done the batteries will be charged,” I said and began to walk towards the kitchen.

“You do that,” he replied, “and bring me some rice. I’ll work on the tank.”

About twenty minutes later I heard this awful noise coming from above. I turned the stove off and ran up to the garage. The entire place was filled with white smoke and it stunk. I saw Oscar standing outside. He had opened the big garage door.

“Damn it, I forgot to turn on the ventilator fans,” he said. “But not to worry, I think the smoke will clear fast. The only thing that was wrong with the tank’s engine was the glow plugs were fouled up. Thank God the gas line wasn’t gummed up. It doesn’t usually happen with diesel engines but it could over time.”

As soon as the smoke disappeared Oscar started the tank engine again. It started right away but it was still bellowing thick white smoke. It was very loud.

“Coolant must have got into the chambers to cause the white smoke. The engine block could be cracked. Give it a minute and we’ll see,” he yelled as he revved the engine. About ten second later the white smoke had disappeared. Oscar jumped in the tank and slowly drove it outside, along the road and to the back underground parking lot, away from prying eyes.

When he came back he said, “The tracks need to be greased. I’ll do that another time.”

After he was done, he washed his hands and we went to eat. I looked at his rakia bottle, it was still full. He hadn’t touched it.

The rice was nicely cooked and I filled a couple of bowls. We each grabbed a bowl and a teaspoon and began to eat it a few grains at a time.

“This is good, what did you put in it?” Oscar asked.

“Just salt and butter, that’s it,” I replied.

It took us almost an hour to eat it but neither of us complained about stomach problems. When we were done, I tossed the dishes in the sink and we walked back to the tank.

“I can show you how to drive it but if we get caught we’ll be screwed for sure,” he said.

We looked at each other and decided it wasn’t worth it. Then just as we started walking back Oscar said, “Have you ever been inside a tank before?”

“I haven’t even seen one, never mind being inside one.”

“Come on,” he said and we both squeezed through a small hatch on the top. I started laughing.

“What now?” he asked.

“What happens if you’re too fat to fit through this?”

He gave me a dirty look and said, “Again with the jokes...”

We looked around; there was hardly any space to move inside. The tank was packed with equipment and ammunition for the cannon and the machine gun. There was a tiny window in front of the driver’s seat. I looked through it and could hardly see anything except the front of the tank.

Oscar said, “This is nothing, wait until it gets hot in here, these babies have no cooling system. You could boil in here on a hot day, never mind the noise of the engine and tracks (wheels) clicking and squealing. And God help you if you don’t have ear muffs when the cannon or the machine gun is fired.”

I looked around for a steering wheel. There wasn’t one. Oscar must have seen me looking and said, “What are you looking for?”

“A steering wheel.”

“See the two levers in front of the seat, they’re used to steer the tank. Some day I’ll show you how. Now let’s get out of here.”

After we got out of the tank Oscar closed the hatch and we climbed off. He caught me looking at the far side of the parking lot.

“Oh, c’mon man, you don’t want that thing fixed today, do you?” he asked.

“What are you talking about,” I said.

“Never mind,” he said as we both walked towards the yellow beast that looked like a cross between a tank, a bulldozer and a snowplow.

“The least you can do is tell me is what it is,” I said.

“Whatever your heart desires... It could be a snowplow, a bus, a tow truck, a tank without a cannon or simply a pile of junk. To me it’s a pile of junk. It burns more fuel than its worth.”

I didn’t say anything.

He looked at me and said, “I got it working before. I can get it working again. I’ll give it a try tomorrow if the weather isn’t too cold. Now let’s get the hell out of here.”

We spent the rest of the day sitting quietly in front of the fireplace. We had no desire to eat, drink, or talk. I think we were overtired from the trip and the emotional rollercoaster.

The next morning I found Oscar in the garage going through the cabinets.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“Grease, long canisters of grease to lubricate the tank tracks,” he replied. “With my luck there won’t be any or I’ll find them in the last cabinet.”

“I’ll help you look but I don’t know what they look like.”

Just as I said that he yelled, “Here they are, I found them.”

He took out two and went straight to the fireplace and started a fire. He then stood the canisters in an upright position in front of the flames and said, “They are solid, grease dries over time and solidifies, I need the grease as a liquid so I can squirt it over the spokes.”

He had me lost. I didn’t say anything. I sat there and watched.

A few minutes later Oscar popped the lid of one of the canisters open and tried to pour the grease into a metal bucket that looked like a watering can to water flowers. Only a few drops came out. “It needs to be heated more,” he said.

A few minutes later he did the same and a blob of grease slid out and landed in the bucket. He did the same with the second canister. After that he placed the canisters on top of the flame and drained the rest of the liquid grease into the bucket and said, “I’m going to put the bucket in the fire to liquefy the grease, it will stink a bit.”

When he was done he screwed the lid on the bucket and we rushed outside to the tank. “We have to do this while the grease is still liquid,” he said as he lay on the ground and squirted grease at each spoke inside the tracks of the tank. When he was done he greased the cannon turret, the machine gun wheel and various other moving parts. After he was done he said, “We have to take her for a spin so that the grease will work itself in.”

“Are we going outside? What if somebody sees us?” I asked.

“No, we’re just going to run it inside the parking lot, and only for a short time.”

We got inside the tank. Oscar showed me how to start it. It started instantly and the engine made a growling sound. It was vibrating the entire tank. Oscar sat in the driver's seat and showed me how the two levers operated the tank's tracks giving it motion in various directions. He then asked me to take the driver's seat and told me to be gentle with the controls. I made the tank move forward and turn right and left. I couldn't see what was happening from the inside and that made me very nervous. Oscar also showed me how to operate the cannon turret and raise and lower the cannon. He then showed me how to open and close the cannon barrel.

He was about to show me how to load a live shell when I said, "No more. I'm really nervous and need to get out."

He turned off the tank's engine and we both got out. The underground parking lot was filled with smoke.

"Now if you think the tank is complicated, let's go and have a look at that contraption over there."

When I got closer I could see it had both tires and tracks. The tracks were padded with rubber.

Oscar saw me touching the track and said, "Those are rubber pads so that you can drive the beast on asphalt roads. You lower them when you get stuck on ice or snow and you raise them on dry road and let the rubber tires take over. This was a military emergency vehicle for rescuing soldiers in bad winter weather. Why it was left behind, I don't know."

Oscar stepped on top of the vehicle's track on the right side in the back and opened a door. We both walked in. The inside was crowded with cabinets. It could sit twelve people and could accommodate about twenty four in total plus the driver. Oscar pushed a button but nothing happened. He then pulled a button out but again nothing happened.

"The batteries are completely dead," he explained. "This vehicle takes two batteries, one serves as a backup."

He opened one of the cabinets, pulled out a small toolbox and said, “This thing has everything, even a pot for making coffee.”

We went outside to the left of the vehicle and he flipped the side of the panel open. He then used one of the wrenches to remove the batteries. He gave me one to carry. It was very heavy. He picked up the other one and we took them to the garage. He connected them to the charger. He checked the batteries for fluid and said they were dry. He then went to the battery cabinet and pulled out a yellow plastic bottle marked distilled water and filled all the chambers in both batteries. He then connected the charger in parallel and said, “This is not how it’s usually done but I’ll put this thing to maximum charge and see what happens.”

Moment’s later the light on the charger turned green. “One or both of these batteries are dead,” he said and turned off the charger. He then connected one battery and again turned on the charger. It kept charging. He did the same with the other battery. It showed it to be fully charged. “This one is dead,” he declared and said. “I hope we have another one in the battery cabinet.”

I didn’t know what to do so I scratched my head and said, “Is there anything I can do?”

“Take a good look at this battery and go find a similar one in the battery cabinet.”

The big batteries were on the bottom and I spotted one immediately. I took it over to the charger and Oscar again connected the two in parallel. We waited for over five minutes, the batteries were still charging.

“When the light turns green we’ll further charge them one by one,” he said. “This is the only heavy duty charger we have. The others chargers will take too long.”

I watched the battery fluid bubble and droplets of water began to spurt out.

“That’s hydrogen gas you see bubbling out. I need to open the big door again. That stuff is explosive and I don’t want it building up in here,” he said and pushed the door open button.

It was a nice day outside; cool but the sun was shining.

“I haven’t gone for a walk in a long time,” I said.

“I haven’t either,” said Oscar. “I used to go hunting and sometimes I would walk for days. But now, since I started drinking, I’ve given up on everything. But I’m happy to say that this is the second day that I haven’t had a drink. Maybe I can beat this thing.”

“Why? Do you think you’re an alcoholic?” I asked.

“Maybe? I don’t know what that means,” he replied.

“Well, do you crave alcohol? Do you think about your next drink day and night? Do you drink alone and try to hide it?”

“No, I don’t think so. I only want to drink when people upset me. It’s a way of turning off things for me; a way to forget my troubles.”

“In my tradition we drink during happy occasions and never alone, although I do drink alone on occasion, just for the buzz, for the fun of it. I also drink when I’m bored. I often think of the good times I had with my friends and try to relive them through drinking. Does that make any sense?

I’ve seen how people look at me, people who don’t know anything about drinking. I guess it makes them feel better when they see people like us drinking.

This is true in Canada but not in Macedonia; people tend to be more understanding in Macedonia. And from what my grandfather tells me, drinking is an art in Macedonia. Rakia is respected and never abused. But I don’t completely believe that. People are people, everywhere.”

“Yeah man, your grandpa is one smart man. I wish I’d known him.”

“I heard that alcoholism is an illness. It may be for some but not for me. I drink in moderation. I have learned how much to drink and to drink with food. But sometimes I forget and if I drink too much it makes me sick,” I said.

“I don’t know, man, but people sure treat me like I’m an alcoholic.”

“Can you quit if you want to?” I asked.

“I don’t feel like drinking if I’m busy doing something I like or if I’m not feeling stressed. I guess I could quit if I had to,” he replied.

“Then you’re not an alcoholic,” I said.

“I like your style man, you can rationalize almost anything. Next you’re going to tell me shit is sugar.”

I started laughing and said, “Man, you create your own barriers, you build walls around yourself and you don’t know how to breach them.”

He swore at me and said, “I love you man, you’re the real deal. I’m so happy we found each other.”

We stood there in silence. It was cold outside but neither one of us wanted to leave.

After a while I said, “The batteries must be charged by now? What do you think?”

He looked at me and said, “Charged or not, let’s take them and see if we can start the beast.”

We didn’t have a single drop of rakia that day yet we both felt intoxicated. Our friendship was working out. How long it was going to last nobody knew.

We carried the batteries back and Oscar installed them in the beast. We both walked inside and he pushed the start button. The starter

activated and screamed and screamed and screamed but the engine refused to start.

“What the f...?” yelled Oscar. “It could be a number of things. I just hope it isn’t the fuel lines or the carburetor because that would be one bitch of a job.”

We got out of the beast and Oscar opened another panel and found the carburetor.

“How in God’s name did you learn about all these things?”

“I don’t know, I just have a knack for these things,” he said.

He tugged on a cable and declared it wasn’t the fuel line. He then pulled a glow plug and said, “I should have known, the glow plugs are gummed up. It’s the same problem as the tank. Get that wire brush out of the tool box and start scrubbing.”

After we scrubbed the plugs clean he tried starting the engine again and after a few cranks it started. He pumped the gas pedal until the engine stopped shaking.

“We’ll have to grease the tracks on this beast too, but maybe tomorrow. I don’t want to do any more work today,” he said.

The rest of the evening we spent trying to get the big television working. We found a room, a projection room, above the fireplace accessible from the coatroom. There we found a remote control for the TV and used it to turn it on. Oscar had installed the TV for Peter James. Unfortunately he couldn’t get it working and gave up.

“There is nothing good on TV anyway,” he said so we spent the evening staring at the flames in the fireplace.

The next day I got up first and found Oscar sleeping in front of the fireplace. He preferred to sleep on the floor. He was punishing himself for something but for what, I don’t know.

We both had boiled rice for breakfast and wondered how long we could do this before we started suffering from malnutrition.

After breakfast I asked Oscar if he wanted go into town and eat out. He said only if I was paying and after we greased the beast (snowplow).

He again lit a fire and we melted some more grease and greased the beast's tracks and other moving parts. We then started the beast and Oscar showed me how to operate it. The beast had a steering wheel and drove like a truck. It was easy to operate.

The next day we went to the restaurant and were served by my favourite waitress, Gloria. The first thing she did was give me a kiss on the cheek which surprised Oscar.

“What the f...?” he asked. “She's young enough to be your daughter.”

“Maybe she is,” I said. “So what?”

She smiled, looked at Oscar and said, “Who's your friend?”

“Oh, I'm sorry, this is Oscar. Oscar this is Gloria, my daughter.”

“What the F...!” he said and was about to toss the sugar container at me when Gloria said, “Relax Oscar, we're just friends...”

Just about the same time Gloria's mother came out of the kitchen and gave her hell for flirting with the customers.

“What can I get you?” Gloria asked.

“Something light,” replied Oscar.

“We have nice, fluffy pancakes,” said Gloria.

“Pancakes it is sweetheart,” I said and she gave me a wink.

Oscar slapped his face and shook his head.

After Gloria left, Agnes showed up and in passing told me that Olivia was looking for me.

“Who’s Olivia?” asked Oscar.

“Her daughter,” I said.

He again smacked his face and a moment later looked at me and said, “The Olivia? You mean Peter’s chick?”

“Yes,” I replied, “Peter’s wife.”

He didn’t say anything.

Gloria’s mother showed up with our pancakes and the bill.

I left Gloria’s mother a small tip for being mean to Gloria. Gloria waved goodbye from the kitchen as we were leaving. Oscar shook his head again.

“Let’s go to Fred’s smoke shop,” I said.

“Why, you don’t smoke, do you?” asked Oscar.

“To see Olivia,” I said. “She works with Fred now and they’re soon to be married.”

We left the truck in the parking lot and walked over to Fred’s. There were only a few customers when we walked in. Olivia ran over to me and jumped into my arms. I gave her a kiss on the cheek and asked her how things were going. She said things were going fine and asked who my friend was.

“This is Oscar.”

“The Oscar you were looking for, Peter’s friend?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, “the very same.”

Olivia ran over to him, gave him a hug and said, “I was Peter’s wife. He spoke a lot about you. I’m so happy to meet you.”

She then turned to me and said, “I’m so happy to see you, what brings you here?”

“Actually you do, your mom told me you were looking for me.”

“Oh yeah, you know Stan, the car repair guy, he’s looking for you. He was so impressed with the guy you were with that he wants to offer him a job. He couldn’t stop talking about him.”

Oscar and I looked at each other and I said, “We’ll go and pay him a visit then, thanks for the information.”

She then ran at me, gave me a kiss on the mouth and said, “See you soon.”

Oscar gave me the look and said, “And she is supposed to be your stepmother...?”

I waved goodbye to Fred who was busy serving customers and we walked out.

“Well, what do you say? Do you want to go and see Stan now or forget about it?”

“Let’s go see him, what do we have to lose?” he replied.

It took us minutes to get to the service station. There were a dozen cars parked in front of it. The moment we arrived Stan dropped everything and ran outside to greet us.

“Thank God you’re here I’m so swamped with work I can’t even take a breath. My mechanic quit on me and left for the city and now I have to handle everything, orders, repairs, emergencies, tows, everything myself. I sure could use a hand but didn’t know who to turn to. Thank God you came.”

Oscar turned to him and said, “Do you have a pair of overalls?”

Stan pointed to a locker inside the garage and said, “Does that mean you’ll help me?”

Oscar went inside, put the overalls on and asked Stan to give him the paperwork for the first car he wanted repaired and went outside, drove the car in and began to work on it. Ten minutes later he was back and asked for the paperwork on the next car.

Stan was stunned. “This is a miracle, thank you,” he said to me.

I sat there for four hours watching Oscar work until it was dark. Oscar couldn’t stop until he had all the cars fixed.

“I don’t know what to say. I don’t think I can afford that kind of talent. I was hoping to give you a job but you finished a week’s worth of work in an afternoon. I have no idea what I can pay you to make it worth your while,” Stan said to Oscar.

Oscar didn’t say anything and made it look like he wasn’t interested. Perhaps he wasn’t.

“Stan, give us a day or two to think about it and we’ll get back to you,” I said.

Stan offered to pay for the work Oscar did but Oscar again turned him down.

We drove in the dark in silence all the way back to the base. We left the truck in the garage and went straight to the fireplace. Oscar lit a fire.

“You don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to but Stan is a nice guy and we need to give him an answer,” I said.

“I know that! Don’t you think I know that? But if I accept a job here that means I accept disconnecting myself from my people. It’s too hard and too painful to explain,” he said.

This reminded me of what I'd said to Vos back in Ostikon so I said, "My dear friend, your family and friends will still be your family and friends even if you take a job here. Taking a job doesn't mean you'll be abandoning your family. It means you will be richer for it and you will have your own money with which you can help them."

He thought about it for a moment and said, "You're right man, I should consider taking the job and do something with my life instead of wasting it. Maybe then Jean can show me some respect." He thought about it for a minute and then said, "Let's go back there tomorrow and see what we can work out with Stan."

The fire was warm and the flames were mesmerizing. I went and got another blanket and a couple of pillows. I dropped a blanket and a pillow on Oscar's head. He looked at me and took them without saying a word.

We spent the night hungry, sleeping on the floor. Another day passed without a drink of rakia.

While he was starting the fire I said, "I'm as hungry as a dog and need to eat something. I think I'm going to have some fried eggs."

"Oh man, you know I can't eat fried stuff. Can you boil me a couple of eggs? Hard boiled, please... But I can't promise I'll be able to eat them."

I put my eggs on a plate and his in a bowl and brought them over. He had the fire going. He looked at my eggs and then looked away. After I ate my eggs I peeled one of the boiled eggs and handed it to him.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that man..." he said, took the egg with his right hand, held his nose with his left hand and took a small bite. I couldn't see what he was doing but I peeled another egg for him and he took it and did the same.

"Are you eating them or hiding them from me," I asked.

“Eating them, man, eating them! But that’s enough, no more; let’s see how my stomach handles them.”

“Do you want some rakia?” I asked.

“NO MAN! Are you trying to be funny? It’s not funny.”

I didn’t say anything.

When the flames in the fireplace had subsided Oscar stood up, folded his blanket, placed his pillow on top of it and placed it on the floor some distance away from the fireplace. I did the same. Then, without saying a word, he began to walk towards the garage. I followed him. He opened the passenger door of the truck and sat down. I pulled the truck outside of the garage, closed the big door and locked it.

We drove down to Stan’s garage without saying a word. The cars that were in the parking lot the night before were gone. There was a huge bulldozer sitting on a trailer in front of the garage.

When Stan saw us pull in he ran out to greet us. The first thing he said was, “I found this thing parked here,” pointing to the bulldozer, “with a note on it saying. ‘It won’t start, can you fix it, as soon as possible please. We need it for a job immediately’...” After he said that he realized he hadn’t greeted us, apologized and said, “I’ve been in panic mode since my mechanic quit.”

Without saying a word, Oscar walked into the service station, put on the same overalls, grabbed a tool box and a can of spray, climbed on the bulldozer, opened a panel and began to work. He tried starting the engine but it refused to start. He disconnected a hose and sprayed some stuff into it with the spray can. He connected it back and started cranking the engine. He cranked it nonstop and just before he killed the battery there was a huge backfire and the engine began to shake, spewing black smoke. Oscar kept pumping the gas until it started working normally and the black smoke disappeared. He left the engine running, closed the panel and jumped off.

Stan and I were both looking at Oscar in amazement. He looked at Stan and said, “We had machines like this one in the army base and if they’re left outside unused for a long time the gas line gets plugged up. That it..”

Just as we were about to go inside a truck pulled up and a man wearing a white safety helmet and construction boots jumped out of the passenger side of the truck and smiled a big smile when he heard his bulldozer idling on top of the trailer.

The first thing he said was, “You guys are lifesavers.” He looked at Oscar in the overalls and said, “You must be the mechanic who saved my life.” He then looked at the bulldozer and then at Oscar and said, “Do you do site visits? I have a whole pile of machines that can use tune-ups and minor repairs.”

Oscar looked at me and at Stan. We both nodded.

“Yes Sir, we do, this here is my manager,” and he pointed at Stan. “You can make arrangements with him.”

The man then shook our hands and thanked us. Stan and he exchanged business cards and before the man jumped back into his truck said, “Send me an invoice.”

By then the driver had hooked the trailer up to the truck and they drove off with the bulldozer idling.

Stan was happy, very happy. He hit the workbench with his hand and said, “Ha, ha!” and shook his head. He then looked at Oscar and said, “What will it take to get you to work here.”

To our surprise Oscar said, “Nothing, I’m already working here. But before I accept I have some conditions. One, I want to profit share with you, you only pay me a percentage of the work I do. You tell me how much you can afford to pay me for each job. Two, I choose the days and hours I work. Three, you help me open a bank account under my name and you deposit my earnings in it as well as give me a statement of each deposit. Four, I will do site visits, construction, emergencies, etc. but I will need wheels. Five, I will also need a

place to stay. Find me a place, preferably close to the service station, a small room with a washroom, a small kitchen and fridge will do if possible. These are my conditions.”

“Done!” said Stan. “The second floor on top of the garage is a house. It’s been empty for a while and might need cleaning and painting. It’s well furnished and it’s yours rent free.” Then they shook on it.

“When can you start?” asked Stan.

“I can start right now; just give me the next work order,” replied Oscar.

I took Oscar to the side and asked him if this was what he really wanted.

“Yes, this is as good a start as any. I will do what I like and will do it on my terms. Our friendship will remain intact and you can come and see me or I will come and see you. Let’s leave it at that.” He then reached into his overall breast pocket and gave me one of Stan’s business cards and said, “I know you have an illegal telephone on the base, call me. I will expect you to call me. Maybe soon we can go back to the reservation and you can see Jean, your girlfriend.” He then laughed out loud and went to do the next job.

I looked at Stan and he said, “Your friend is in good hands, don’t worry.”

“Bye Oscar,” I yelled and got back in my truck and drove back to the base.

It was back to being alone again...

Life in the abandoned military base

I spent the next couple of days puttering around and cleaning. I filled my vial with water, added four drops of firewater and put it back in my shirt pocket. I then secured the firewater bottle in the safe. I cleaned and oiled the pistol and was going to fire it but chickened out. I put it back in the safe. It was boring being alone, even though the base was a big place with a lot of things to do.

The third day was cool but nice and sunny. It was a good day to go fishing before the water in the quarry froze over. Around ten o'clock in the morning I took half a loaf of bread, put on a coat and hat, took my fishing gear and went outside to the quarry. The sun was shining at the right angle and I could see the bottom of the quarry through the crisp, clear and still water. The fish must have also enjoyed the bright sun as they were congregating around the bright spots at the bottom.

It was a serene day. I was feeling calm and relaxed. It was quiet out there and everything was bright. Most of the leaves had fallen off the trees and the forest looked dreary. I looked up the mountain. There were a lot of bare trees. I would need more firewood soon, I thought, not that I needed it to heat the place but it would be nice to have a fire once in a while, when I had company. The thought of having company made me laugh out loud. I heard my echo several times laughing back at me.

I decided to use bread as bait. I took a bite of the crust at the edge to make my way to the soft part but then it occurred to me. Why not use the crust as bait? I should be using the crust; it was more intact, less soluble and could perhaps stay on the hook longer. I also decided to use a triple hook to keep the bread in place better.

I took the bread crust out of my mouth, rolled it into a ball in my palms and placed it on the hook. I then slowly dropped the hook down to the deepest part of the quarry and watched the sinker take it down to the bottom. Its presence frightened the fish and they all dispersed in the rock crevices.

Moments later tiny fish began to appear and took runs at the bait making it swing around. Then, suddenly, there was a flash and I almost lost my rod. A big fish grabbed the hook and swam away fast. I pulled the line up slowly to keep the fish from going under the rocks and got my net ready. I let it swim around for a while. I didn't care if it escaped, which allowed me to relax and avoid the usual excitement and anxiety which came with reeling a fish in.

Moments later I lined it up over my net and scooped it in. It was a big one, double or even triple the size of fish I had caught before. This one could feed an entire family. Oscar would be so proud of me, I thought.

I scooped some water into the metal bucket and dropped the fish in it head first. It was too big for the bucket. About one third of it was stuck out above the bucket rim.

Just about then I heard a vehicle driving along the road. I looked up but couldn't see anything. The quarry and the military base were hidden from the road by a mound of soil strategically placed between the road and the base so that the base would remain invisible to passing vehicles. The vehicle didn't stop and continued driving down the road. It was very rare to see vehicles driving by on this road.

Moments later I ate the soft part of the slice of bread and wetted part of the crust with my saliva and rolled it into a ball. Was it my saliva that had attracted the big fish?

I dropped the hook down at the same place again and when the ripples disappeared I stood there calmly looking down. Little fish kept taking a run at the bread, kicking it like a soccer ball back and forth. Once in a while the little fish would flash away and disappear, only to come back again moments later. I stood there about ten minutes looking down, it was too cold to sit and, just as I lost interest, my rod moved and stopped. I decide to pull on it gently and that's when it bent forward hard. It was another big fish.

In a couple of hours I had caught two big fish and four smaller ones.

After standing for over two hours in the quarry I felt cold and really tired. I packed my things and went straight to the kitchen. I put the fish in the big sink and added some water. The fish were still alive.

After I put my fishing gear and coat and hat away I came back to the kitchen. It was way past noon by now but I wasn't hungry. I then realized that I had just eaten half a loaf of bread.

What to do with the fish? First I figured I would clean them and then decide what to do with them.

The base was a big place but it was a ghost town. The only sound one could hear inside was the ventilation system starting and stopping.

After I removed their scales and gutted the fish I wanted to fillet them but I didn't have the confidence to do it. I wasn't Oscar and watching him do it was not the same as doing it myself.

It had only been a few days and I was already missing Oscar's company, even though he didn't say much. Then it hit me; I could take him a fish and use it as an excuse to visit him. In fact, I should take a fish to Stan, Agnes, Fred and Olivia, and I should do it today while the fish were still fresh. Why not? One big fish for Stan and his family, assuming he had a family, one big fish for Fred and Olivia, a smaller fish for Agnes and one for Oscar. That would leave me two smaller ones. I could always catch more.

I packaged the fish in paper bags and marked them so that I knew which was for whom.

About an hour later I arrived at Stan's garage. Oscar was bent over the open hood of a car working on it. Stan was sitting at his desk looking at some paperwork and scratching his head.

"Hey," I yelled, "from here it looks like the car has swallowed half of you."

Oscar jumped up and bumped his head. He said something in his language and yelled, "Don't do that!"

When he looked at me I smiled and said, “I’m sorry, man... What, you don’t swear in English anymore?”

After he told me off he asked what I had in my hands.

“I have a fresh fish for you and Stan.” When I looked towards Stan he was standing beside me.

“What do I hear, you have fish for us?” he asked.

“Yes, for you and your family,” I said and looked at him.

“Thank you, thank you, my wife and two girls will be thrilled. We should have you over sometime...” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, “I just came over to drop these off and I’m going.” I then gave Stan the fish and he put it on top of his desk.

“No you’re not going!” yelled Oscar. “I need your help to buy me some stuff from the store. I don’t have any money. Here’s a list, add oil to it so that I can fry the fish. I assume you caught it today.”

I was going to say, “Aren’t you going to eat it raw?” but I didn’t want to embarrass him in front of Stan.

“Yes,” I replied and took his list and walked to the grocery store. When I came back they were ready to close the service station and go home. I left Oscar’s groceries on Stan’s desk. Oscar was washing up. I yelled, “Goodbye Oscar, see you later,” and left.

Just as I drove around the corner I saw Agnes walking home. “Are you still working? I thought you would be retired by now,” I said.

“Yup, still slugging it,” she replied.

I gave her the fish and turned down her invitation to cook dinner for me. I said I was going to Fred’s to give him and Olivia a fish.

“You’d better hurry up because they’ll be closing the store in a few minutes.”

I said goodbye and rushed over to Fred’s. The shop was locked but they were both still inside. I knocked on the door and heard Olivia say, “Sorry, we’re closed.”

“Even for fresh fish?” I yelled.

She ran to the door, opened it and jumped on me and made me drop the big fish on the ground.

“Olivia, I’m happy to see you too but you have to stop jumping on me. Fred will get jealous one of these days and he’ll shoot me and I won’t be around anymore.”

She got off me and picked up the fish. “Oh, it’s a big one,” she said and kept staring at the bag with a surprised look on her face.

I looked at Fred; he was smiling. “Isn’t she a jewel?” he said.

“One of a kind,” I said. “One of a kind, you’re so lucky.”

“Thank you,” he said, “and thanks for the fish.”

I said goodbye and walked away. I heard Olivia say goodbye while still looking at the paper bag with their names written on it.

I felt sad as I walked away.

I drove back to the base, went to the kitchen, took the two fish from the fridge, got the big pan out, poured a heap of olive oil in it, placed it on the large element of the stove and turned the element on high.

Moments later when the oil was sizzling I turned the element to low and placed both fish in the pan.

I went and got a juice glass and the bottle of rakia and poured myself half a glass. I then raised it up and said, “To solitude and sad

times.” I had a large gulp. It was quite good. I must make a point of asking Oscar to give me his formula, I said to myself.

The aroma of the frying fish was intoxicating. I decided to add some lemon juice and slivers of garlic.

I started to get tipsy so I decided not to drink anymore until I’d had something to eat.

About five minutes later I tested the fish with a fork. It appeared to be done. I turned off the element, scraped the fish out of the pan and put them on a plate. I added butter to them and more lemon juice.

The meat was coming off the bone nicely and it tasted superb, the only thing about fish is you can’t get a large mouthful; you have to pick at it. I ate the whole thing and was still hungry. I went to the fridge, got two sausages out, put them in the same pan and began to fry them. When they were done I put them on a plate. I then took four slices of bread and fried them on both sides until they had soaked up all the oil. I ate the bread next while it was still warm. It was delicious. I ate the sausages slowly while drinking rakia.

I don’t remember when I went to bed but the next day I found myself in Peter’s bed in the room next to the office. I didn’t feel like getting up. I was feeling horrible and depressed. I didn’t feel like doing anything. I lay in bed and thought about things. I replayed my life like a motion picture from the time I left home to go to Kanata to this day. It had only been six months since that day but it felt like it was a lifetime. My old life now seemed like a dream and my new life was a nightmare of events which I couldn’t control. I could never have imagined this in a million years. I was back on earth but I could just as well have been on another planet. This wasn’t my life. I was living someone else’s life. I was living a lie. This wasn’t my idea of living. I was a pawn caught in a web of circumstances. This was someone else’s game, a game that had no purpose and no future for me because the moment I got involved with someone I would suffer Peter’s fate.

Anyway that’s what I thought and that’s how I felt at the moment.

I was thirsty and my body was becoming numb from lying around in bed too long. I figured I should get up and exercise.

I looked around for jobs to do but I didn't feel like doing anything. I thought of shooting a few rounds in the firing range but I already had a bad headache. In my indecision I decided to go to the uniform room and picked out a military uniform for myself. I looked at myself in the mirror. I hadn't shaven for days and had too much fur on my face, which I figured would be a disgrace to the uniform. I took it off and left it in Peter's closet. Maybe I would wear it later.

After walking in circles around my truck I decided to explore the cabinets leaning against the far wall of the garage, especially those that were hidden behind the tank; now that the tank was out of the way. I wondered why all this equipment was left here? Why hadn't the army just taken everything when it abandoned the base? I also thought about the gasoline. The military left this base in the 1950's. Why did they leave all this fuel behind? Did they intend to come back? And would the fuel from those days work in modern vehicles like my truck? Oscar seemed to think so. And he knew what he was talking about.

Just as I was going through the next cabinet my eye caught a saw. I grabbed it by the blade and dragged it out past the other equipment. It was a small gas powered chainsaw. It looked like a toy and was dripping with oil. It had made a mess in the cabinet. I grabbed a rag and cleaned as much of the oil as I could without taking everything out of the cabinet.

I could use this thing to cut some wood, I thought. Maybe that's what I should do today, cut wood. But first I would have to clean the saw and get it working. I didn't know they had saws like this in the 1950's. Or was this the saw Oscar used. Oscar did say he cut wood for Peter. How did he cut it? I decided to call Oscar and ask him.

Stan answered the phone and thanked me for the fish. He said his wife cooked it the night before and it was delicious.

I asked him if I could speak to Oscar. He said Oscar was busy at the moment but could call me back later. My number wasn't listed and neither he nor I knew what it was.

I said, "I'll call back later."

That's when I heard Stan tell Oscar the call was for him. Oscar wanted to know who it was and what I wanted. When he heard that it was me he came down and, while Stan held the handset, Oscar put his ear on the earpiece and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, everything is okay. It's not important; I just wanted to ask you how you cut the firewood for Peter. That's all."

"There's a gas powered chainsaw inside the cabinet marked 'equipment'. Peter bought it so we could cut wood for the fireplace. Use that and make sure to use the fuel in the can next to it. Don't use raw gasoline, you'll burn the motor. I've got to go; my hands are filthy with black grease."

"Thank you!" I yelled, then thanked Stan and hung up.

That was easy, I thought, and realized that the excitement from the phone call had given me new impetus and a desire to get going with the job of cutting wood right away.

I went back to the cabinet and found the can with the fuel. All I needed now was a bench to work on. There wasn't one in the garage. There was only the huge tool box on wheels sitting against the wall near the office. It already had a wooden cover to protect the metal that could be used as a table. Perfect, I thought, plus I could use the tools in the box which would be handy.

I rolled the big tool box away from the wall and placed the saw on top of it.

I got more rags from the rag cabinet and began to vigorously wipe the gunk off the saw. It came off quite easily. The oil kept the wood chips and dust moist and they were easy to wipe off. When I was done the saw looked new. There were instructions all over it marked

“Danger”, “Warning” this and “Warning” that and finally how to mix gas and oil for fuel and how to add oil for the chain. I looked at it again and it truly looked like a toy with a short chainsaw.

I removed the two caps and there was no fuel or oil in it. Oscar said nothing about oil but I could see under the instructions it said use clean oil but didn’t specify what kind.

I went back to the cabinet and found a can of oil marked 10W30. The can had tiny holes poked with nails at opposite ends on the top. The nails were still in the holes.

I took it back to the bench and poured some oil in the hole marked oil until it was full. I then screwed the cap tight.

I did the same with the fuel and tried to start the little engine. I kept pulling and pulling on the starter rope but nothing. I checked it over again and everything was clean and shiny. I couldn’t understand why it wouldn’t start.

It then occurred to me to check the spark plug. I found a wrench and got it out. It was loaded with gunk. I tried to clean it but the gunk refused to come out. I decided to burn it off with a match. After several tries the gunk dried up enough to scoop it out with the tip of a knife. I burned it some more until it was completely dry. I then used sandpaper to clean the spark plug gap.

I put the spark plug back and felt my heart pounding. Why I was so nervous I don’t know.

The engine fired with the first pull but stopped. I tried it again, same thing. The next time I gave it some gas and it began to rev. I played with the motor for a while and then activated the chain. It spun around nicely without resistance.

I turned it off and tried testing the tension on the chain as per the instructions. It was okay. I noticed there was an adjustment for idle and realized what the problem was. The idle needed adjusting. I gave it a quarter of turn towards “rich” and started the engine again. This time it started and maintained a nice idle on its own.

I felt great. I went outside and found a dead branch on the other side of the road. I dragged it over and put it on top of the toolbox. Then I started the saw and began to cut. I was surprised by how well it cut. I didn't have to do anything except place the revolving chain lightly on top of the wood and let it cut. It worked like magic even on hardwood.

I tossed the chainsaw, fuel and oil in the back of my pickup truck and drove up the mountain. Every time I saw a dry branch I stopped, cut it to pieces and tossed it on the truck. Further up the mountain along the road I found a small, dead oak tree and cut it down. I cut it all to pieces. It filled the back of the truck to the top. I didn't know how much weight the truck could carry and I didn't want to take chances, so I drove back to the base and parked the truck inside the garage.

I unloaded all the wood and placed it in the corner by the door that led to the stage. I left six big logs on the floor by the truck. They were too big to burn as they were and needed splitting.

I decided to take a rest. I was perspiring profusely. What did you expect, I thought? I hadn't exercised or done any vigorous activities for months. I sat on the chair behind the desk in the office and wondered how I could split the logs. The quickest way to find out, I figured was to call Oscar. But all he would do is tell where to find the axe.

I got up and went to the equipment cabinet and looked around. There was no axe. I went in the cabinet where I kept the shovel and sure enough I found the axe.

I got back to the wood and decided to try my luck on one of the smaller logs. I gave it a swift whack and all I did was lodge the axe into it and then I couldn't remove it. I tried everything but the axe blade refused to come out.

I went back to the cabinet and on the bottom shelf found a small mallet with a short handle and two metal wedges. Aha, I thought.

I placed the smaller wedge beside the axe blade in the little crack and used the mallet to drive it down. The axe fell off on its own. A few hits later the log split in two without difficulty.

After that I split all the logs, some in half and the others in quarters and put them away with the other wood.

By now I was tired but decided to clean the saw and put everything away before I rested.

A truck load of wood, I figured would last me a week or two unless Oscar came for a visit in which case it would last three to five days, tops. But so what, I could always get more. There was plenty more where that came from.

I took a long shower and went to the kitchen to make dinner. It was way past dinner time and I hadn't had breakfast or lunch.

I filled my juice glass half full of rakia and sipped some while washing the dishes and large pan that I'd left unwashed the day before.

I noticed I had two steaks thawing in the fridge and plenty of tomatoes and cucumbers. I salt and peppered the steak and placed them on a plate. I then made myself a large tomato and cucumber salad and sprinkled it with feta cheese. And while I nibbled on the salad I gently fried the steak in olive oil and garnished them with butter and garlic powder. When they were done, I fried two slices of bread in the left over oil and butter. I fried them on both sides until they were brown. They were delicious. The entire meal was delicious. The only thing lacking was eating in front of a fire which I was too tired or maybe too lazy to start.

After I ate dinner and washed the dishes I took some more steak and some sausages out of the freezer and put them in the fridge to thaw. After that I went to bed in the room near the garage. Somehow I preferred that bedroom even though it didn't have any windows.

The next day I got up late. My body ached all over but it was a healthy ache from the work I had done the day before.

As soon as I got up I decided to eat breakfast and go into town to buy groceries. It was a dreary day and it looked like it was going to rain and maybe snow. I made a list of what I needed and added wine and beer to the list in case I got guests who preferred wine or beer over rakia. I laughed at the idea of having guests but one never knew.

While rolling the cart around the grocery store I ran into Gloria who was doing some shopping for the restaurant. I saw her first and called her name. She came over but looked extraordinarily shy.

After greeting her and asking how she and her folks were doing I asked her, "What brings you here?"

"My parents forgot to order some spices so they asked me to pick some up here until the next order comes in." She then looked at me, smiled and said, "I got to go. Bye."

This was not the Gloria I knew. It struck me as odd that she would be so shy outside the restaurant.

From the grocery store I went to the beer store and then to the liquor store and from there back to the base.

As I was unpacking my groceries I couldn't stop thinking of Gloria and how she'd acted in the store.

I was too upset to sit, or drink, or mope around so I went outside and walked up the road towards the mountain. I then decided to turn back and go inside the underground parking lot. I looked around in hopes of finding something new I hadn't discovered before but there was nothing. I got bored and climbed on the beast. I pushed the start button and it immediately started. I put it in reverse and drove it to the centre of the parking lot. The place was filling with smoke so I decided to drive it out to the road. I felt uncomfortable being in the open so I drove over the mound and into the front parking lot where Oscar had taken me several days ago. It was secluded there and I thought I'd fool around practicing to drive the beast, even though it

drove like a truck and I knew how to drive a truck. The beast was not like the tank which drove like a bulldozer.

I practically touched every control and figured out what they did. The controls for each function were separate and grouped together. In front of me were the controls that steered the vehicle and lowered and raised the tracks. To my left were the controls that lowered, raised and turned the snowplow blade. To my right were the controls that lowered and raised the trailer at the back of the beast and the hinge and chain.

The beast was a lot simpler to operate than I thought and I figured I would have no problem operating it if I had to. All I needed now was an emergency.

But, how would anybody be able to find me?

Satisfied that I would be able to operate the beast, I drove it back into the underground parking lot and parked it next to the tank.

I looked at the tank and wondered why Oscar had brought it out here. It must have sat in the atmosphere controlled garage all those years for a reason. It was an old machine and still in pristine condition and there was a reason for that, it was protected in the garage from the elements. So, I decided to put it back where it belonged.

Just as I went closer the thought of having to drive it without being able to see was disturbing. I'm not doing anything, I thought, until I'm sure of what I'm doing.

After I got up enough courage I opened the hatch and climbed inside. It was cold like a freezer and dark. I couldn't see anything. I waited a while and as my eyes acclimatized to the dark I found my way to the driver's seat. The tiny front window was facing a dark wall and I could see nothing outside. I remembered where the start button was and pushed it. The engine turned several times and it started. It was very loud and I could smell the smoke coming in through the hatch.

I needed to move the tank out of the closed space and fast before I choked from the smoke. At the same time I didn't want to make a mistake with the controls. If I did it could be disastrous. I could go through a wall. So, my only option was to put the tank in reverse and slowly turn right.

I gently pushed the levers back and gave it some gas. I felt it move. I did it again for a few seconds and then only pushed the left lever back. I felt it turn right. I climbed up the hatch and saw the tank was almost turned. I went down again and pushed the left lever back for another couple of seconds. The tank was lined up with the outside door. But that was no good to me. I couldn't see where I was going in reverse. I had to turn the tank around and fast because I was choking from the diesel fumes.

I took a chance and backed up some more and then held the left lever back until I could see light through the front window. I could now see the frame of the front door.

I pushed both levers forward and gave it some gas. It growled momentarily and I could hear the tracks flapping. Just as I got closer to the door I jumped and looked through the hatch. The tank was perfectly aligned with the door. I got back down pushed both levers forward again and gave it some gas. I cringed as I waited for a bang but it didn't happen. When I looked again through the hatch I saw that I had cleared the door and was out in the open.

I left the tank running, jumped out and closed and locked the parking lot door. On my way back I noticed the little front window was filthy with dust. I took a napkin from my pocket and cleaned it. The dust just slipped off. I did the same inside and now I had a clear view of where I was going. I was drenched in sweat and freezing at the same time.

I pushed both levers forward hard and floored the gas. The tank jumped and began to climb the incline slowly but sped up in time. I let go of the gas when the front part hit the asphalt road.

Instead of going on the asphalt I drove it on the shoulder of the road until I reached the outdoor parking lot at which point I turned right

and parked it in the middle of the lot. It was now out of sight. I left it running while I went inside and changed my undershirt because it was drenched with sweat and came back.

With the hatch open I could see the controls and switches on the panel in front of the driver's seat. I also found the light switch that controlled the interior lights. I found the switch that controlled the outside lights under the front of the tank. I didn't know tanks even had outside lights. I found the heater and heater fan and they both worked. I didn't bother with the turret and cannon controls or the machine gun controls. I don't know why I even bothered with the tank?

I drove it back into the garage where it was before and left it there.

Getting into mischief seemed to ease my pain of loneliness and boredom.

Gloria goes back to school

A couple of days later when I woke up, I walked over to the office and looked in the garage. From the little light that was entering through the windows I could see that it was very bright outside. I looked at my watch; it was almost ten past nine in the morning. It could be a vehicle shining its lights at the big door, I thought. I decided to look. I unlocked and opened the outside door.

It was all white outside. It had snowed over night. By morning the clouds had disappeared and the sun was shining with full intensity. It was blinding but beautiful. It was also cold, very cold.

I went back inside and got dressed in warm clothing. After breakfast I decided to go outside and look around. There was a thin sheet of ice over the quarry which made me wonder if the water in the quarry freezes all the way to the bottom. What happens to the fish when that happens, I wondered? Surely the tunnel wouldn't freeze, I thought, but wasn't sure. Maybe the fish hid under the falls where the generator turbines were. But what did they eat?

By eleven o'clock it was getting considerably warmer and the snow on the paved part of the road started to melt. I figured it would be a good day to go into town and visit with Oscar before the roads got too hazardous.

I left the base a little after noon and arrived at Stan's garage just before one. There was no snow in town. Oscar was working on a carburetor on the bench and Stan was sitting at his desk. They were both happy to see me. It was a slow day in the garage and they both said they could use the company.

I asked if they wanted to go and eat lunch at the restaurant. Oscar said yes, if I was buying. Stan said he had brought his lunch from home, his wife made it for him last night.

"Besides," he said, "someone has to stay here and mind the shop."

While Oscar went to wash up I asked Stan how he was doing. Stan was very happy with him and had never seen anyone work so hard.

“And, not only that,” he said, “he knows how to fix almost everything, even that old carburetor. He tore it apart and rebuilt it without a schematic diagram. He’s a miracle worker that never stops working.”

When Oscar returned he asked me to go up and see his apartment. The first thing he showed me was the whiskey bottle Jean had given him. It was still full of rakia. He hadn’t taken a sip since he left the base. I gave him the thumbs up.

In terms of furniture and appliances he had very little to none but he liked it that way. The only thing he didn’t have which he missed was a fireplace.

He looked happy.

When we arrived at the restaurant Gloria’s mother greeted us and sat us down. Before he was asked what he wanted, Oscar ordered a hamburger, french fries and a coffee. I ordered the same.

I looked at him with a surprised look.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve been eating healthy all week, I deserve a treat.”

“Look at you,” I said. “Now you’re eating greasy food.”

“The greasier the better,” he said which reminded him of the fish I had brought him last week. “The fish was fantastic; bring me another one when you come down the next time.”

I looked at him and said, “The water in the quarry is starting to freeze, fishing days are over.”

“You can still fish,” he said, “do it from the dock inside the tunnel. Buy a bag of fish food from the grocery store and start throwing a few handfuls into the water inside the tunnel. Do it every day. The fish will get used to it and when they dash to eat scoop them up with the net. The one with the long handle... You’ll find it mounted on

the wall in the tunnel. You can fish all winter, the water in the tunnel doesn't freeze."

"Thank you for telling me that," I said. "And speaking of freezing, it really got cold up there last night and there was snow on the ground this morning."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "You have no idea how cold it can get. It drops as low as -40 F (-40 C) sometimes and stays that way for days, even a week. So it's best you buy yourself some supplies, enough for a month or two and stock up. Once the back roads freeze you'll be stuck on the base for a long time."

"Thanks, I think I'll do that."

"If you come down this Saturday I'll take you to the local market and you can buy bags of potatoes, onions, leeks, cabbages and other vegetables that last. The farmers want to get rid of their stock before winter and you can get them for cheap. You can also purchase live chickens, rabbits, pigeons, even pigs if you have the stomach to butcher them yourself."

"That's great; I'll be here on Saturday."

"You have to get here early. The market opens at six o'clock in the morning. And maybe one of these days we can go to the reservation so you can see Jean," he said.

"We should go soon," I said, "before the weather turns sour. Maybe we can leave Saturday afternoon and be back Sunday evening, weather permitting. And please, don't just make it just about me. You also want to see your people. And as for Jean, she never did approve of me, so what makes you think she would want to see me?"

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said man, and I don't want her to take the same road I took, so I need you to be with me and help me out. I know you can. I hate to say this but you're the first white person I met who actually cared about me and my people, so you can see why I want you to be there. Plus I need a ride..."

“I get it... Just joking, I’ll take you there, no problem.”

Gloria’s mom showed up with our lunch, dropped it off on the table and went back to get our coffee. As she walked away I asked her where Gloria was. She said she was working in the kitchen.

Moment’s later Gloria showed up with our coffee and, after greeting us with a big smile, said, “Mom said you wanted to see me?”

“Yes,” I said, “I just wanted to see how my favourite waitress is doing? I just saw you briefly in the store a few days ago and you took off on me. Why?”

The poor girl turned red in the face and didn’t know what to say.

“Come here and give me a hug,” I said. She did and then ran back to the kitchen.

Oscar wanted to know what that was all about so I explained to him that she had acted funny in the grocery store a few days ago and I just wanted to reassure her that I still cared for her. She’s nice and I like her but her mother doesn’t like me messing with her. She could be in school but her parents want her to stay here and take over the restaurant.

“I’ve been going by here on my daily walks, man, and I can tell you the place had been empty every time. There’s no future for the restaurant. It will be tough for her without an education or a skill, even in this town. How does she feel about that? Does she want to stay here?”

“I asked her once why she wasn’t in school and she just said her parents wanted her to eventually take over the restaurant and there was no need for school.”

About the same time Gloria’s mother showed up and we suddenly stopped talking.

“Are you talking about my girl?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Oscar. “Why isn’t she in school?”

“Oscar!” I said.

“What? I’m just asking,” he replied.

I figured Gloria’s mother was going to tell us to mind our own business but suddenly that gruff exterior disappeared and, with a sad face, she said, “We don’t have the money. We want to send her to college but we just don’t have the money to pay for it.”

Oscar jumped up and said, “I have some money...”

I interrupted him and said, “If we can find the money to pay for it, will you let her go to school?”

“Yes, of course. And thank you,” she replied.

I gave her ten dollars for a three dollar lunch. She smiled and said thank you.

We waved goodbye to Gloria who was spying on us from the kitchen wondering what we were talking about, especially with her mother, and walked out.

On the way back to Stan’s I apologized to Oscar for cutting him off and told him the money he was saving was for his people, he should concentrate on helping them instead of trying to save the world. He agreed.

When we got back to the service station we told Stan what we were thinking and he said he could help.

“It would be good for business to help out a local young lady. I can also write off the donation as a business expense and save money on taxes.”

“I have no idea how much it costs nowadays for tuition, books, residence and all that,” I said, “so we can’t really plan how much money we need to raise.”

“I can help with that,” replied Stan. “I can call the universities and colleges and find out what education costs nowadays.”

“We should also talk to Fred and Olivia about this, I know Fred is loaded and doesn’t have children of his own,” I said.

“Why don’t we go now?” suggested Oscar. “Now that we aren’t busy here and see what they say.”

When we arrived at Fred’s there were no customers in the store. Fred grabbed Olivia by the waist before she had a chance to run at me and said, “Thank you for the fish. Olivia did a superb job of cooking it. It was delicious.”

Before I had a chance to say anything Olivia grabbed me and gave me a big hug, looked at me and smiled. She also greeted Oscar with a big smile.

Fred was one of those people who wanted to get to the point so I wasted no time and told him why we were there. He was thrilled by the idea and said he was going to help but wanted to know how much. Olivia was thrilled too, especially about helping Gloria who she knew from the restaurant and had taken a liking to her.

“We’ll get back to you soon,” I said. “Now we have to go, Oscar needs to get back to work.”

At that point I saw Fred grab Olivia by her waist as they both said goodbye.

When we got back to the garage Stan had some news for us. He had called several schools and found that it costs about 2,500 dollars on average a year for tuition, books and residence for a general course. The courses to study law and medicine were more expensive. Since we didn’t know what Gloria wanted to study we couldn’t determine exactly how much money was needed. The other problem was the

school year had already started in September and we had no idea if she could even be accepted this late in the school year.

The three of us looked at each other and Oscar said, “We should go and talk to Gloria now because the longer we wait the harder it will be for her to get into a school.”

“I did ask about the late entry,” Stan said, “and the only place that will accept her now is the hospitality college. It’s a bit more expensive but she won’t miss the year. Of course she’ll have to pay for the full course but that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Oscar and I went back to the restaurant and asked her mother if we could speak to Gloria. Gloria ran over and said, “My mom told me what you’re trying to do, but you don’t have to... My parents won’t let me go.”

I waved at her mother and both she and Gloria’s father came over. Gloria was shaking her head looking unsure.

Her mother said, “We always wanted to send her to school but didn’t have the money. The best we could offer her is this restaurant.” She then turned to Gloria and said, “You can still have it after you finish school. We don’t have the money to send you to school but if these gentlemen want to help you then take their offer. Consider it a loan, you can pay them back when you become rich and famous.” Her father nodded in agreement.

She looked at Oscar and me and said, “You would do that for me?”

I smiled, nodded and said, “Yes, but you’ll have to tell us what you want to study.”

“Well, all I know is how to work in this restaurant and don’t know anything else. I haven’t thought about it because I figured I wouldn’t need to study anything, considering I wasn’t going to go to school.”

“It has to be your choice, if you intend to stay in the restaurant business then that’s what you should learn to do. Maybe you can breathe some life into this place,” Oscar suggested.

Realizing what he had just said Oscar then added, “I like this place as it is but you need to bring in new customers.”

“Oscar’s right,” said her mother, “we’ve reached our limit as to what your father and I can do. Neither one of us had any knowledge of how to run a restaurant when we took it over. We learned whatever we could from the previous owners and that was it.”

“I guess I could use to learn more about the restaurant business but when I’m done with school I want to be the boss here and you will do as I tell you.”

We all had a good laugh. Her mother gave her a big hug.

“So, what happens now?” asked her father.

Oscar told him everything we knew so far, also that there was a college that was willing to accept her and that we would need her transcripts from school to be available. Oscar suggested he contact her school and let them know that she would be going to college.

“We should do as much as possible today and get things moving right away. Instead of going back and forth, maybe we should invite Stan, Fred and Olivia here to the restaurant and we can discuss things when we’re all together,” I said and gave Oscar my little phone book and told him to call them. I also told him to, “Ask Stan to bring the phone number of the hospitality college.”

Gloria and her parents wanted to know what was going on. After I told them they were thrilled that all these people were interested in helping Gloria. Gloria’s father offered to make us supper.

Oscar said they’d all be there as soon as they closed their places of business.

Stan showed up first. After he met Gloria and Gloria’s parents I asked him to contact the college again and get as many details as possible. He asked where the phone was and Gloria took him to the kitchen. Stan, it seems was very good at making inquiries and taking

down detailed information. I guess over the years he had learned to do that. Also, he wasn't afraid to use the telephone or talk to people he didn't know. I also found him to be very courteous.

While Stan was on the telephone Fred and Gloria showed up. After they were greeted Gloria's father pulled several tables together and covered them with fresh linen and placed a number of chairs around them. He invited us to sit down and asked what we wanted to eat.

"It's the end of the day whatever you have left we'll eat," I said.

Everyone agreed except for Stan who was still on the phone.

"Stan isn't fussy, he'll eat whatever we eat," Oscar said.

As soon as Stan got off the phone I yelled and said, "Call your wife and tell her you'll be late." He raised his arm up to let me know he'd heard me and then he made the call.

Stan was the last to sit. We left the end chair for him so we could all see him when he told us what he'd found out. I sat at the opposite end.

"Well, I'll give you the urgent news first," he said. "They want Gloria there tomorrow."

No one said anything. He continued.

"They have a room in residence for Gloria. It's a bit more expensive but it's on campus and she won't have roommates. The small apartment will be hers with no one to bother her. I guess it was left vacant because it was a bit more expensive. I have the costs for everything. I also have how much each cheque should be and who to make it out to. You'll need to pay for everything for the entire school year up front.

There's a cafeteria where you can eat. The food will be prepaid including weekends, which will include breakfast, lunch and supper. You'll get a sandwich for lunch. You'll have to order your sandwich the night before or you get what's left over. That's about it. The

dean will give you all the information you need when you get there. She's a nice lady. It's a new college and they need the business. Most importantly they'd love to have you since you're a community sponsored student and they need the publicity. You'll be their first student who is community sponsored and they intend to publicize that, especially if you do well, "explained Stan and looked around.

Fred raised his hand up and said, "Let me be the first to congratulate you and be your first sponsor. I'm, we are, prepared to pay for everything for your first year, if that is okay with you?"

Gloria didn't know what to say. She looked at me and I looked at Olivia. She smiled and gave me the nod.

I looked at Gloria again and said, "Well, what do you say?"

She jumped from the chair and gave Fred a big hug, which surprised him. She then went to Olivia and gave her a big hug and kissed her on the cheek.

"It's settled then, "said Fred, pulling out his cheque book. Stan gave him all the details. When they were done I suggested we make the arrangements to get Gloria to the college the next day, which, according to Stan, was a three hour drive.

After I made the suggestion they all looked at me. Gloria's father said he couldn't leave the restaurant plus his old vehicle would never make it all the way there and back.

Fred couldn't leave his store.

"I'll sponsor Gloria's second year of education but I can't possibly leave my service station for that long," Stan said.

"So, that leaves me, Oscar, Olivia and Gloria's mom," I said.

Gloria's mother said, "You have a truck, you can take her."

Olivia said, "I'll come with you."

I looked at Oscar, Oscar looked at Stan and Stan nodded his head.

“I’ll also go with you,” Oscar said.

“I can only fit three people in the truck,” I said, “and I’ll need a navigator and a mechanic to fix my truck if it breaks down.”

Gloria’s father then said, “It’s settled then, Peter and Oscar will take Gloria and make sure she’s settled in,” and then left to get the food ready. Gloria and Olivia followed him.

While Stan gave Oscar and me a few more details about the school, he asked me to remind him to give me a map. Oscar suggested I fill the truck with gas and bring some extra gas in the canister, which I’d find behind the door in the fuel depot. I guess he didn’t want to reveal my secret that I was living in an abandoned military base.

Oscar emphasized the fact that there were no gas stations for a long stretch of the road we were going to travel, that’s why the extra gasoline was needed.

Gloria’s mother brought us glasses and a bottle of champagne which she had been saving for a special occasion. She put it in a bucket of ice.

Moments later Gloria and Olivia brought the food out. It was hot beef (thin slices of roast beef) with gravy on top, french fries and coleslaw on the side. There was also plenty of coffee for those who wanted to drink coffee.

While we were eating Stan suggested we go early the next morning and be back the same day before nightfall. He also suggested that Gloria pack her suitcases tonight and be ready to leave the next day. Fred gave Gloria an envelope with all the cheques in it and showed her which was for what. Olivia gave Gloria a big hug and told her she was proud of her.

As soon as Stan was done eating he said goodbye to everyone, wished Gloria good luck and said he had to go home to see his

daughters before they went to bed. Soon after, Fred and Olivia wished us a good trip and left.

Oscar and I looked at each other. I said we too needed to go and get some rest tonight. After we said our goodbyes we shook hands with Gloria's father, got a hug from Gloria's mother, who seemed like a totally different person, and left. Poor Gloria looked at us with a stunned look and wasn't sure what was happening. I gave her a wink as we stepped outside and she smiled.

"See you tomorrow at seven in the morning," I said and we left.

I drove Oscar to the service station and we both went inside. He looked at me and said, "I can't believe what just happened today. Imagine if we had that kind of cooperation all the time, especially with my people. I don't believe it... It's a miracle, man."

I didn't say anything so he said, "You're not sore because of me taking Olivia's place are you?"

I gave him a look.

"I know, I know it was a stupid question. See you tomorrow before six." He escorted me out and locked the door.

I drove up the road in the dark and even though I was familiar with it, it still gave me white knuckles.

I got up very early the next day. It was still dark when I topped up the truck's tank with gasoline and filled the spare canister. I had no idea it held five gallons.

Just as I did that, however, I had this nagging feeling that this old gasoline might cause us problems on the way. But I figured only time would tell, besides Oscar was going to be there and would fix any problems that developed.

After I secured the gasoline canister in the back of the truck I went back inside and got some cash out of the safe. I put some in my

wallet and five hundred dollars in an envelope to give to Gloria when we got to the college.

It was dark and cold when I left the base and arrived at Stan's garage about ten minutes to seven. Oscar was inside waiting for me. Stan wasn't in yet.

"You really are an old soldier, aren't you?" I said.

"Good morning to you too," he said waving a roadmap in his hand and added. "And YOU live in a military base."

After he got into the truck and slammed the passenger door shut he said, "Nobody but me knows that you live on a military base or that it exists? Isn't that right?"

I didn't say anything.

We got to the restaurant at five to seven. There was nobody there.

"Were we supposed to meet Gloria here?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Oscar, "they live on the second floor above the restaurant."

Just as we pulled up we saw Gloria's father carrying a couple of suitcases down the stairs. I told him to put them in the back of the truck. Seconds later Gloria showed up with her mother. Oscar got out of the truck and went back to secure the suitcases. Gloria said good morning and sat beside me. Oscar sat beside her and closed the passenger door. Her mother came over to the driver's side. I opened the window and she said, "Please look after my girl."

"Don't worry she's in good hands," I said and waved goodbye as we drove off.

After a few minutes of silence I said, "I don't like long goodbyes. It's not like you're going to another planet or something and don't know if you're coming back. I then looked at Gloria and said, "You'll be back for Christmas, right?"

“Yeah, I would like to, but who’s going to bring me back?” she asked.

I didn’t say anything and neither did Oscar.

After a while I felt guilty. I felt Gloria was reaching out to us and we were avoiding her so I said, “We’ll find a way to bring you back for the holidays. You just worry about school.”

We drove in silence a long way. Oscar broke the silence and said, “If you have anything to discuss now would be a good time.”

Gloria didn’t say anything.

“It’s going to be exciting out there for you. You’ll discover new things, meet new people... and you’ll encounter dangers too. People aren’t always what they seem; you always have to keep your guard up. As a rule you always stay away from sex, drugs and alcohol,” I warned.

Oscar laughed and said, “Sex, drugs and alcohol...”

“I’m trying to be serious here,” I said.

“So, am I,” he replied. “I may have laughed on the outside but I’m crying on the inside.”

Gloria looked at him but didn’t say anything.

Oscar looked at her and in a serious tone of voice said, “I know all about that. They ruined my life. I spent all my money on booze and slept under a bridge. It was no fun. I can tell you that much. So the man is right, you have to be careful. Also, it’s far worse for a woman than it is for a man. Getting pregnant or contracting a disease can ruin your life... and not just your life but also your family’s life and the lives of the people who care for you. A lot of people care for you. You are a special person. You are our future. Okay?”

Gloria kept looking at Oscar and listening. I put my hand on her head and stroked her hair. She looked at me and smiled.

“We are telling you these things because we care...” I said.

“I know that,” she interrupted and grabbed our hands and held them tight.

“I need my hand back to hold the steering wheel.”

She let go.

“I bet you must have questions and concerns,” said Oscar.

“Yeah!” I replied. They both cracked up laughing.

“I, I have never been away from home before. I’m even nervous to go to the store alone,” she said looking timid. “I don’t know what to ask.”

“You’ll be alright. You just have to be vigilant and trust no one especially the sweet talkers. And anything that sounds to be too good to be true, it usually is. And if anyone, outside of the people you trust tells you something is good for you or they are doing things for you, be careful of them... also avoid going to parties,” said Oscar.

“Why, what happens at parties?” she asked.

“Bad things could happen at parties. The fruit punch could be spiked with alcohol or worse, someone could put drugs in your drink without you knowing and then take you outside and do unimaginable things with you,” replied Oscar and placed his hands over his face. His body began to shake as he tried hard to avoid breaking down emotionally.

It was an awkward moment for all of us. God knows what people had done to this poor man, especially on account that he is native. I remember what they were about to do to him the day I met him. But Oscar was one of the most resilient persons I have ever met and he

seemed to bounce right back. He looked at Gloria and smiled like nothing had happened. Here was a shining example of a native person helping a white person despite what the white people (Europeans) had done to him and his people.

Gloria smiled back at both of us and I patted her on the head and messed her hair. She did the same to me. Oscar began to laugh.

I looked at them and asked, “What?”

“Nothing, she just reminds me of my little cousin Jean. She used to do that to me when I touched her head.”

“Speaking of Jean, you never did tell me if we’re going to the reservation this Saturday,” I said.

“Yeah, man, yeah. We’re going. We’d better go before the winter sets in.”

“Are we getting them anything?”

“No. Ah, I get it, you want to get something for Jean? But Jean hates everything. Maybe Gloria might have some ideas.”

“How old is little Jean?” asked Gloria.

“Well, she’s not little now. I was talking about ten years ago, now she’s over twenty and hates me because I abandoned her. She hates him and white people because of me. I wasn’t there to guide her when she was growing up. Now I have to live with the consequences of my actions. That’s why you need to be smart about; what you do and not only to yourself but to others too,” replied Oscar.

To our surprise Gloria took Oscar’s hand, looked him in the eyes and said, “You’re a good person Oscar, look what you’re doing for me. You haven’t abandoned anyone.”

Her comment sure put us in our places. There was no more lecturing until we arrived at the college. We only made one pit stop at a service station about halfway. The trip was not as boring as I’d

expected. We were all tired from sitting but otherwise in good spirits.

We met the dean at about a quarter past ten at the front door. She was a slim soft spoken, well dressed woman in her early forties. She was very polite and easy to talk to so Gloria took a liking to her immediately. I knew that because Gloria gave me the thumbs up. After we brought Gloria's suitcases to her room Oscar and I took the dean aside and explained to her how precious Gloria was to us and the community back home. We also explained to her how innocent she was and that she would need constant guidance. Even though our words may have sounded harsh the woman took us seriously and promised us she would personally look after her.

Gloria came outside and gave the dean the envelope with the cheques. The dean gave us half an hour to say goodbye to Gloria while she went to take care of something.

After the dean left I pulled the envelope with the five hundred dollars out of my pocket and gave it to Gloria and asked her to hide it somewhere safe, and not under the mattress. She didn't know where to hide it so I suggested we put it inside the bed leg pipe but from the underside. I told her that the money was for emergencies only. It was to be used for medical purposes if she got sick, required medication or to pay for a taxi to get back home if there was an emergency, and things like that. She was to tell no one about the money, not even her parents, and if it was still there after she finished school she could have it.

She took the envelope, looked inside it and began to cry. Oscar and I looked at each other. She said she had never seen so much money before and she was grateful for it. I then lifted the bed up and sat it on a stool. I removed the cap from the bottom of the left bed leg, stuffed the envelope inside, put back the cap and put the bed down.

"Emergencies only," she said and thanked us both.

"So, do you like your new place?" I asked.

She shook her head yes.

When the dean came back I told Gloria it was time for us to go. The dean asked for our phone numbers and who to contact in case of emergency besides her parents. Oscar gave her one of Stan's business cards.

The women walked us outside and before we left, Oscar gave Gloria one of Stan's business cards and said, "Call anytime you feel like talking."

The dean also gave us a business card and thanked us both for what we were doing. Gloria ran over and gave us each a hug.

Oscar said, "Goodbye little sister."

I smiled, winked at her and we drove off.

After driving in silence for a while Oscar said, "I hardly know the kid, why do I feel so empty inside?"

"You know why," I said, "because you're a good man."

He didn't say anything but I could see he was deep in thought. What he was thinking and feeling I don't know and I wasn't going to ask.

About ten minutes later I said, "I feel empty inside too..."

The trip back was uneventful and boring. Neither one of us wanted to talk. Just as we were about to enter the town I looked at the gas gauge. It was almost empty but there was enough to get us to the restaurant. I also realized the old gasoline had burned without a problem and I noticed no difference in the truck's performance.

Before entering the restaurant we emptied the gas canister into the truck's gas tank.

"That's pretty good gas mileage considering how far we traveled on one tank of gas," said Oscar.

It was past three in the afternoon when we entered the restaurant. Gloria's parents ran over to see us and invited us for a meal. We realized we hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch that day and we were pretty hungry. We told them how everything went and that Gloria was in good hands at the school.

After that we went to see Fred and Olivia. We told them how things had gone and thanked them for their contribution. Olivia had made a carrot cake and gave us each a piece which we ate and she sent an extra piece for Stan.

When we arrived Stan was up to his eyeballs in work but Oscar told him to drop everything, he would finish it. Oscar gave him the carrot cake and while Stan was eating we told him everything that we had done that day.

After that Oscar told me to go home and he immediately went to work on the cars. I took his advice and went back to the base.

After I had a stiff drink of rakia I fell asleep and didn't wake until the next morning.

Saturday morning I was at Stan's service station ten minutes after six in the morning.

Oscar was standing inside the front door tapping his watch.

"What, your watch has stopped working?" I asked.

He didn't say anything.

It was a clear but cool day.

After he slammed the truck door he said, "Driving should be okay today."

He pointed the way to the market and, after we parked the truck in an unpaved parking lot full of potholes, we went and got my vegetables. Oscar borrowed a wheelbarrow from one of the vendors and, after a couple of trips, had loaded everything onto the truck.

When we got back to the base we debated which entrance would be closest to the kitchen to park the truck. We came to the conclusion that the entrance from the underground parking lot was the closest place.

After I drove in we parked in front of the stairs that led to the coat room. It was dark and I couldn't see where I was going even though it was sunny outside.

“Who was the idiot that built an underground parking lot without lighting,” I asked.

“There's lighting,” replied Oscar.

“Where?” I asked, “You can see there's no lighting. It's dark down here.”

Oscar dragged me to the door and I unlocked it. When we were inside he closed it.

“Look,” he said, “see this box here behind the door? It contains the switches for the lights in the parking lot. He opened the box, turned on a big red switch and then another six black switches. He opened the door and said, “Look outside.” The parking lot was lit up like a Christmas tree.

I thanked him for showing me that and, bag by bag, we took my vegetables inside and put them in the walk in refrigerators.

“There are enough potatoes, beets, leeks, cabbages and onions to last you a lifetime.” I don't know why you got so many,” he said.

“Our local farmers need our support,” I replied. “And this is one way of supporting them.”

When we were finished putting away my vegetables we decided it was time to gas up the truck and head for the reservation.

Oscar looked under the hood, gave me the thumbs up and we were off to the reservation, or as Oscar put it, to see Jean.

Back to the reservation

“I hope the rest of the trip is as good as this. I just hope we don’t run into any snowstorms up the mountain to my village,” said Oscar.

“God will protect us, we earned enough good karma in the last couple of days, don’t you think?”

“Are you trying to make a deal with God now?”

“Well, you know what they say, the universe must maintain a balance or else everything will turn into chaos.”

“And who are they who said that?”

“I don’t remember who said that, but you do believe that nature has to maintain a balance, right?”

“Yeah, but what does that have to do with God and karma. Just because we think we did good doesn’t mean God thinks so too. What if God wanted Gloria to stay home and we interfered with his plans? What if something happens to Gloria because of what we did?”

“You know what your problem is Oscar, you over think things, smart people tend to do that and paralyze themselves. Then they do nothing because they think they can’t control the outcome and because they are afraid of the consequences.”

“You’re right man and I hate you for it. I do over think everything... But, do you really think I’m smart?”

“Yes, you’re one of the smartest people I know. Not only smart but also honest and outspoken. In other words, a pain in the ass...”

Oscar smiled, shook his head and said, “We’re talking about me, right?”

“Yes, we’re talking about you.”

After a long silence Oscar spoke up and said, “Man, all my life I’ve been looking at things in a negative way and thinking about what might go wrong. I have rarely looked at things in a positive way and thought about what might go right. I have never rewarded myself for doing good and every time someone complimented me I took it lightly and felt I didn’t deserve it. I don’t know why I’m like this.”

“You’ll have to figure that out for yourself. You’re not obligated to anyone. If people don’t like you it’s their problem, not yours. You are a human being born to parents just like everyone else. If people have a problem with that, it’s their problem.”

“You’re trying to tell me that people don’t like me because I’m Indian, right?”

“Yes, Oscar, many of your problems stem from you being Indian but again, how is it your problem? Did you have a choice when you were born and did you choose to be Indian? No! You are what you are and you either reject that and suffer, or embrace it and be proud of it. Being proud doesn’t mean flaunting it in the face of the racists. No, in fact you need to avoid the racists. What you did for Stan, Gloria and perhaps what you will do for your people will earn you a lot of respect and as you know you earn respect. It doesn’t come for free. The racists will never change but will look up to you instead of looking down on you.”

“Do you think that will ever happen?”

“Yes, I do, it’s up to you. You have the potential; you’re smart and have a big heart. And those my friend are good qualities. But you’ll need to focus on the positive.”

This was something new for Oscar to think about and it was making him nervous. He started rocking back and forth and biting his dirty fingernails.

“Oscar, you’re over thinking things again,” I said.

“Well, how do you do it?” he asked.

“I do nothing and think of nothing. I just listen to others and learn what I can from them and about them. I’m only obligated to them when they ask me a question or ask me to do something for them. Even then I don’t react impulsively, I think about it.”

“And I see you smile a lot, especially at the pretty girls,” he said.

“Now you got it.”

“Do you know why I never married?” he asked.

I didn’t say anything.

“I knew I was a screw up and I didn’t want another human being to suffer on my account. It’s easy to make children but very difficult to bring them up properly. And besides, what kind of life would they have with me as their father?”

“A wonderful life! You would have been a great father, a great chief and the father of future chiefs,” I replied.

“I’m beginning to see that now,” he said and pointed to the right side of the road where the road to the reservation branched off from the highway.

“Look at that,” he said proudly, “the name of my village on a big sign. Everyone driving up this way will see it.”

As we drove further up the road he said, “They fixed the potholes. I wonder how many more things they have done. I’m sure they bought the truck too... I can’t wait to see it.”

It was wonderful to see Oscar happy, not like the last time we came here when he was sick in the gut with anxiety.

When we cleared the grove and entered the village, everyone ran down to greet us, not just the dogs like the last time. We were both welcomed by everyone with hugs and kisses. Oscar spotted the truck and went over to see it. His mother and father came over and greeted us with much affection.

Oscar's father said, "We got a used truck, there was no need for new one. We only drive it once a week. We used the left over money to improve our village. Now we have outdoor running water in the village square thanks to you boys."

I looked around, everyone was smiling. I looked for Jean but she was nowhere to be found. Oscar's mother saw me looking and shook her head but not in a good way. Bad thoughts began to run through my mind; was she okay, had she run off, had she harmed herself...?

Oscar's mother poked her husband and he invited us into their home.

We all stood there in silence looking at each other.

"Well, where is she?" asked Oscar concerned.

"She's here..." replied Oscar's mother. Her husband told her to be quiet.

"Son, it's bad, it's very bad. She has been very rebellious and causing trouble for everyone. She doesn't like what we're doing and believes we have sold our people out for money. When you go, please take her with you."

We looked at one another.

I took a risk and decided to speak first and said, "With all due respect Chief, I know you are a worldly figure and you very well know what will happen to a young and beautiful native girl outside of here. There has to be a better answer than abandoning her to the wolves."

I was expecting to be told off for interfering but instead, in a calm voice the Chief said, "What do you suggest we do?"

"Have you asked her what she wants?" I asked.

“God help us we have, she doesn’t know what she wants,” replied Oscar’s mother.

“She wants to run the village, she wants to be chief,” replied the chief.

I looked at Oscar. He looked at me and said, “Then she should be chief. I don’t want to be chief. There are many other ways, more effective ways, that I can contribute to my people.”

I looked at the chief and said, “Would you be willing to start giving her some of your responsibilities and guide her?”

“I am willing to do anything to stop this madness but she won’t listen to me.”

“Do you mind if we talk to her? Where is she?” I asked.

“I will take you to her,” replied Oscar’s mother. “She is locked up in the lodge and she only opens the door for me.”

Oscar’s mother knocked on the door five times. We heard a voice from the inside ask, “Are you alone?”

Oscar’s mother said, “EH?”

Jean yelled, “ARE YOU ALONE?”

Oscar’s mother again said, “EH?”

Jean slammed the door open and yelled, “HAVE YOU GONE DEAF OLD WOMAN?”

I grabbed her by the arm and in a firm voice said, “That’s no way to talk to an elder. Even a devil like me knows that.”

She yelled, “Let go of me and started screaming rape, rape, rape.”

Oscar told his mother to go outside and stop people from coming this way and from interfering.

“Nobody is coming to your rescue. Not even Oscar. And if rape is what you want, rape you will get in front of your cousin. And do you know why? Because I am stronger than you and I will force my way into you. And if you think this is terrible, you haven’t seen anything yet nor do you understand what happens to raving mad Indian women out there. Now behave yourself and stop yelling.”

She stopped struggling and I let go of her. She fell to the floor.

“WHO THE F... DO YOU THINK YOU ARE,” she yelled, got up and gave me a swift kick in the nuts. But I was prepared and didn’t even flinch. She looked surprised. She took a run at me and punched me in the gut as hard as she could. She thought she had punched me in the gut but had hit me in the chest instead. She hurt her wrist and grabbed it with her other hand.

“Now it’s my turn,” I said and grabbed her by the hair and tried to lift her. I looked at Oscar and he looked like he was hurting more than her. I let her go and she fell on the floor looking exhausted.

I bent down and said, “If it wasn’t for him and the pain he’s feeling for you I would have torn your hair off.”

She still had a lot of fight in her so I said, “How about I give you a bloody nose and a few broken teeth?”

She looked at Oscar. He looked helpless. She looked at the door. It was still open and no one was coming to rescue her, not even her parents or her mighty big brother.

She slumped down and began to cry and, in a sad and meek voice, said, “What do you want from me?”

“A better question is what do I need to do to make you listen?” I asked.

“I won’t listen to you,” she replied in disgust.

“Perhaps a swift kick in the ribs might convince you,” I said angrily.

She was surprised by my anger and I could see that in her face.

“DO YOU THINK THIS IS SOME SORT OF GAME? I yelled and took a violent step forward. I was sure the entire village had heard that.

No one came through the door to save her, not even her brother.

She curled up in a ball as I took a step back preparing to kick her in the ribs as hard as I could.

I heard Oscar say, “Please don’t. Let me talk to her.”

“Is this what you want? Because this is an example of what you will get if you leave here. And if you don’t leave on your own, the village will throw you out. Do you understand? No one is coming to save you?”

Oscar grabbed his face and began to shake. She looked at him and couldn’t believe what was happening.

Oscar took a deep breath and said, “Do you think it was fun getting beat up every day and drinking myself to sleep in the cold and dark under a bridge not knowing when and who was going to pull out the next baseball bat, knife or gun and end my life? Imagine what would happen to a mouthy girl like you out there. This is not a joke, I’m serious. You’re taking the same path I took and look where it led me.”

Oscar moved closer to her and said, “He’ll torture you and he will break you... The path you have taken will lead you to your own destruction. You are unmanageable and no one knows what to do with you. So, the way I see it you have two choices; one, we take you with us and dump you in the city somewhere. Or, two, you can stay here, work with my father and, if you’re worthy, you can become the next chief. I don’t want the position.”

She looked at me with hatred in her eyes. Oscar noticed that and became bitter with her. He felt I didn’t deserve that.

“See this man here,” he said. “If it wasn’t for him I would probably be dead by now. He helped me out of a situation by risking his own life. I am alive today because of him. I have a good job. I’m helping the community where I live and I have risen from a bum to a respectable citizen and, you know something, I am more Indian now than I ever was. I am proud of who I am. I no longer think negative thoughts and my mind is always searching for good things to do to make people happy. What did this man owe me to do that for me? And now you sit there on your sorry ass and look at him like that? What have you done to make you so special? EH?”

“How about I give her that swift kick now?” I asked.

Oscar didn’t say anything.

Tears were dripping off her face and nose, down her cheeks and chin. She looked at me with a twisted face and in a whiney loud voice said, “Kick me I deserve it.”

I pulled her up by her hand. She grabbed me by my head and kissed my face everywhere smudging her tears and everything else that oozed from her eyes, nose and mouth. “I am so sorry,” she yelped.

“It’s not going to be so easy,” I said. “You’ll have to eat crow now and apologize to all the people you have wronged and it’s going to be a hard pill to swallow, something you will never forget for the rest of your life. You will humble yourself in front of everyone and you will say you are sorry. Do you understand?”

She cried out loud for a moment, looked at Oscar, who was feeling sorry for her, and then looked at me and tearfully said, “Okay.”

I pulled a clean napkin from my pocket and loudly told her to wipe her dirty face.

Mean Jean looked broken down. Oscar took me aside and said, “Aren’t you overdoing it a little? Besides being my cousin she is a precious human being.”

“And what? You think I’m a monster? Have I ever steered you wrong? Let me do my thing now and you can thank me later,” I replied.

“Let’s go Jean,” I said with a rough tone of voice. “Let’s get you washed up.”

We grabbed her by the arms and walked her outside. The entire village was standing outside the lodge. It was getting dark. Everyone stared at us as we passed by. Her brother stopped in front of me and said to me, “I see you tamed the shrew. Good for you.”

Oscar’s mother came over and took Jean from us. “I’ll bring her back,” she said.

Oscar and I turned back and went inside the lodge. I took a deep breath and felt my entire body shake. Oscar’s father walked in.

“I have never been so cruel to another human being, I hope God will forgive me,” I said.

“You have done us a great service and I, more than anyone, appreciate that. If it works out you will have the gratitude of the entire village,” Oscar’s father replied.

Oscar started the fire and said to his father, “I’m sorry I left you with this burden. I, we, should have had this talk with Jean the last time we were here.”

Oscar sounded like a different person which surprised the chief.

Moments later, Oscar’s mother came back with Jean and sat her down beside Oscar. As the old woman was walking out she said to me, “Take it easy on her, you scared her a lot, she was shaking like a leaf.”

I said to her, “Stay here, I’m sure Jean would appreciate it, you give her comfort.” She agreed and sat down beside the chief.

I sat opposite to Jean and faced her with a stern look on my face. She sat there as silent as a lamb. I saw a small smile curve around the Chief's mouth. I wondered what he was thinking.

"Well, are you ready to listen now or should I do some more yelling!" I asked sternly.

She shook her head.

Oscar's mother piped up and said, "We are here because we love you dear..."

Oscar's father looked at her and she stopped talking.

"Like we said before, you have two choices. Do you want to leave the village? If you do Oscar and I will take you wherever you want to go and then you can live on your own. Or, you can stay here with your people. Should you decide to stay here there will be conditions put on you, many conditions. What do you say?" I asked loudly.

"I want to stay here," she said in a meek tone of voice.

"I'm sure there are people outside the lodge who didn't hear that. You will have to speak louder," I yelled.

She started crying again.

"Well?" I yelled.

"Take your time dear, and speak loudly and clearly..." said Oscar's mother who was about to start crying herself.

Jean stood up, looked at everyone's sad eyes and, with a humble tone of voice, loudly and clearly said, "I want to stay here."

Oscar's mother clasped her hands together in front of her chest and began to pray.

At this point Jean realized how serious the situation was and it seemed like she had started to think more about others than about

herself. She leaned over, grabbed the old woman's hands, kissed them and said she was sorry.

Oscar's father looked at me, raised his hand slightly, signaling me to stop, and said, "My dear Jean, you're like a daughter to me. And you know I have always loved you like my own child but you have caused me a lot of pain. You have broken my heart. You have broken my wife's heart. I just want to know why? What have we done to you to deserve this? We have always been kind to you and loved you?"

Jean looked down but did not answer.

Oscar's father lifted her chin up and said, "What has this man done to you to deserve your wrath? You know we are not that kind of people... We don't hate people, not even our enemies, let alone people who are trying to help us. My son tells me he owes his life to this man. Do you think he deserves to be treated this way?"

I looked at Oscar and at his mother. They both looked sad.

I grabbed Jean by her arms and pulled her into my chest. I gave her a kiss on the cheek. Oscar's father did the same and so did Oscar and his mother. Jean was shaking like a leaf. The experience was traumatic for her.

When we were done hugging her we all sat down at our places and I raised my finger up. Jean focused on me and looked into my eyes eager to listen.

"Tomorrow morning at ten o'clock we will bring the entire village together and you will apologize to everyone for your childish behaviour. You will make a speech and ask for forgiveness. I know this will be hard for you but if you don't do it you will be coming with us. If people refuse to accept your apology and show a lack of confidence in you, you will be coming with us. And I don't have to tell you what will happen to you if you leave this place. Just ask Oscar. The choice is yours. Now go."

After she left the lodge I said, “God forgive me, she will have plenty to think about. She is a beautiful human being but, I’m sorry to say, very misguided. I hope what we did will change things for the better.” I then looked at Oscar’s mother and father and said, “It’s up to you from here on. Sometimes you will need to take a firm hand...”

After Oscar’s mother and father left both Oscar and I felt shaken. We were hungry but didn’t feel like eating.

“Someone shoot me, I’m not cut out for this,” I heard Oscar say.

“Me either,” I said.

“Get out of here? You!? You looked like you were enjoying yourself.”

“What, enjoying beating up a helpless woman?” I asked.

“I’m sorry man; I always manage to put my foot in my mouth at the worst possible time.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said and lay down on the floor.

The next morning we were awakened by a knock on the door. Oscar got up and opened the door. “Damn it we forgot to lock the door last night.”

“Who is it and what do they want?” I asked.

“It’s my mom and Jean with our breakfast,” he replied.

I jumped out of bed and felt my heart pounding.

They walked in and put the plates with fried eggs and the cups of coffee on the floor.

I looked at the women. Oscar’s mother smiled with a sorrowful smile. The poor woman, I thought, first Oscar and now Jean. Jean looked burned out. She no longer had the spark that made her rebellious. I felt sorry for her and began to doubt myself. Once again

I had interfered in people's lives without knowing what I was doing. Had I ruined her life?

Oscar's mother took me aside and said, "Don't look so glum. You did what you could... You probably saved her life."

"So why do I feel like crap?" I asked. "Why do I feel like that?"

"We all have to carry our burden for what we do," she said, took Jean with her and they left. What she meant by that I don't know.

"What have we done, man? What have we done!" asked Oscar.

"We planted some seeds," I said. "Time will tell what sprouts..."

It was half past nine when people began to assemble outside the lodge. Many came in to warm up and went outside again. At exactly ten o'clock the chief showed up with Jean beside him. My heart started pounding. I'm sure everyone's heart started pounding.

"I think most of you know why we're assembled here today and I'm sorry to bring you out in this cold but we have something important to share with you today. Jean here has agreed to become my assistant and help the community with its daily affairs. And with that I want to pass the floor to her," the chief said and stepped aside.

I thought it was a bold first step to take for Jean but I figured the chief needed to test Jean's metal and see what she was made of.

Jean took the stand and thanked the chief for the opportunity. She then said, "I can't possibly accept the chief's offer without your approval. I need to know that you will accept me as his assistant before I commit to it."

There was a lot of yelling and clapping in the crowd.

"I will need to see some hands," yelled Jean.

After Oscar raised his hand first then everyone else raised theirs.

“So, it’s unanimous,” yelled Jean and asked. “Are there any who oppose the idea?”

No one raised a hand.

“Now I want to take the opportunity to apologize to all of you for making your lives difficult. I’m sorry. I am very sorry. From now on I will do my best to help my community instead of stand in its way.”

There was a lot of clapping from the crowd, especially from her parents and brother who were yelling, “We’re very proud of you Jean.”

Then and there I saw Jean’s spark return. It was a different spark, a brighter spark.

There was a roar in the crowd and our Jean was back.

She took a bow in front of her people and left and went inside the lodge.

Oscar and I went in and joined her. We all felt like we had aged ten years overnight. I felt very awkward in her presence. I felt like I had damaged her badly and didn’t want to face my responsibility. She was looking at me strangely but I couldn’t make out what she was thinking.

I heard Oscar say, “I’m out of here.”

I felt abandoned and at Jean’s mercy after he left.

She came over and grabbed me by my waist. “What, you have no balls? I kicked you there yesterday and you didn’t even flinch? Are you that strong?”

“Jean, have you gone mad?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “I’m the same Jean and thanks to you one day I will be chief. Don’t worry, I’ll live up to my pledge. I always

wanted to be chief and you made that happen for me.” She then began to kiss me on the mouth.

I pushed her away and said, “There is no future for me and you, so you’d best not do that. You’d better find yourself a local boy. Believe me you don’t want to get involved with me.”

She gave me a stiff punch in the gut and said, “This is for putting me through hell. I’m sure you could have found a better way to solve my problem.”

“Jean, you haven’t changed a bit, you’re the same witch you’ve always been.”

Oscar walked in on us and I said, “Your cousin’s not at all like you.”

After that we walked out of the lodge and Jean escorted us to the truck. We waved goodbye to everyone and left.

As we drove down I told Oscar what had happened. To my surprise he said that he known that all along but what could he do? She was who she was. She was family.

“So, what’s going to happen in the long run?” I asked.

“I don’t know. My father will do whatever he can but if she falls off again I’m sure the village will depose her. But she knows that and she will be careful not to disappoint anyone.”

“God, she is a dangerous woman,” I said.

“But you love her anyway,” replied Oscar.

“I guess I do,” I said.

Women's Italian soccer team visits base

My experience with Jean at the reservation was more of a shock to me than I had initially thought. After I returned to the base I felt withdrawn and had a hard time letting go of the cruelty I had demonstrated towards her. Even though it may have seemed like a game; a means to an end, I couldn't help but feel awful for what I had done. Even though in a weird way she had absolved me of my cruelty by telling me that I had given her what she wanted, I still questioned my actions. My experience with Jean was bitter sweet for me but I was unable to shake off the bitter part. After that I didn't want to see anyone or be with anyone.

I telephoned Oscar to see how he was doing and he felt the same way as me but he had his job to keep him busy, which didn't leave him with much idle time to dwell on Jean.

As winter began to close in the weather turned sour with cold winds blowing down from the mountain and deep drifts of snow plugging up the road. I took the beast out several times and tested it on the road. It had a lot of power but slow mobility. It moved through deep snow like it wasn't there. Unfortunately I couldn't find any practical use for it. It just moved too slowly for me to go anywhere. But it was a good toy to play with.

I even started the tank to make sure it still worked. Someday I was going to take it outside and fire the cannon... but not today. This was a recurring theme with me every time I looked at it.

I did however manage to fire one of the rifles on the firing range. I found four pairs of earmuffs in the ammunition cabinet. The earmuffs were made of metal and leather and were filled with foam which had crumbled to dust over time. I refilled them with napkins from the kitchen and they worked okay.

I went up the mountain several times and collected firewood but it was getting too cold for me and too slippery for the truck so I decided not to do that anymore.

I continued to feed the fish in the tunnel almost every day, when I didn't forget, and even caught a couple with the net but it was hard. It wasn't as easy as Oscar had said. The fish were smart, fast and avoided the net. I made it a point to ask Oscar the next time I spoke to him about how to catch them with the net.

It was late Sunday evening when I thought I heard a woman's voice. I was in the office reading Peter's journal to pass the time. It sounded like a voice on the radio. Perhaps a car was driving by but the road was impassable, too many snowdrifts. Besides I didn't hear a motor running. I decided I must have imagined it.

Moments later I heard the voice again. It sounded like two women yelling at one another. It was real, I was sure of it this time.

I ran over to the garage and opened the door. The wind was howling and it was freezing outside. I looked up the mountain and could see lights shining through the trees. I was sure someone had driven on this road and was stuck in a snowdrift. I felt excited and figured it was time to make use of the beast.

I threw on a long winter military coat, a Russian hat and put on a pair of long military boots. I went down and turned on the parking lot lights, opened the front gate to the parking lot and started the beast. It started without any difficulty.

I was anxious to get going but waited until the beast warmed up. I was feeling very nervous, why I don't know. I think maybe because I was anxious to demonstrate my assistance to people in need to maybe make up for the wrong I'd done to Jean? I don't know.

As I took the beast up the hill its engine roared like a monster, which was heard for miles, especially its echoes from the mountains. When the wheels got stuck in the snow I lowered the tracks and it began to inch its way up. All the lights were on and I could see many people standing on top of the road in the distance looking down at the beast climbing. As I got closer I could see arms waving frantically. They were also yelling and jumping up and down but I couldn't hear a sound over the roar of the beast's engine. I then saw figures moving out of the way and into a small, barely visible white bus.

I stopped the beast right beside the bus and turned off the engine so that I could hear. There was a lot of yelling but I couldn't make out what they were saying.

An older woman in her fifty's wearing black yelled out loud and everyone stopped talking. She got off the little bus and yelled, "Ser-a, Ser-a, can you-a help-a us-a?" Well that's what it sounded like with all the echoing going around.

I got off the beast and went closer to the bus. The front wheels were stuck in a high drift of snow.

"Let me turn my machine around and I'll take you down," I yelled.

I looked at the bus and saw many eyes staring at me through the frosted windows.

I started the beast's engine and drove up a little further, slowly turned it around and parked it in front of the bus. I then lowered the rear gate, pulled the cable out of the winch and hooked it to the front of the bus. I was now ready to pull the bus onto the trailer and haul it behind the beast. It was my first time doing this and I was very nervous.

I went inside the cab turned off the beast's engine, stepped on the track and jumped off. I waved at the people to come over but they didn't know what I wanted.

The lady in black was standing at the bus door. I told her, "I need to tow the bus but in order for me to do that, everyone has to get off and go inside my machine." It wasn't safe towing a vehicle with people in it.

She looked confused. "Just pull our bus out of the snow and we'll go."

"Who's your driver?" I asked.

A younger, thin good-looking woman in her early thirties stepped out.

She said the same thing. “Just pull us out of the drift and we’ll be on our way.”

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” I said, “but you can’t go that way. There are more and even bigger snowdrifts further down. Plus, the road is so curvy and hazardous you’ll never make it... I have a place down the hill where you can stay until the road is plowed.”

She looked at me and said, “Please give me a minute.” She stepped inside, spoke with the woman in black and came out.

“Okay,” she said, “what do you want us to do?”

“I want everyone off the bus and inside this machine. You stay here and when everyone is off the bus you put it in neutral.”

To my surprise, one by one eight young ladies around the age of twenty came out and I helped them jump on board the beast. The ninth woman was in her mid thirties wearing a short jacket. None of the girls were wearing coats. In fact they were wearing sleeveless shirts and short skirts with their knees exposed. I asked the last woman to get everyone’s coats but she said something in Italian. The woman in black told me that she didn’t speak English and none of the girls had coats. Their coats and luggage had already been shipped by truck to the destination where they were going.

After everyone got on the beast I pulled the bus onto the trailer with the winch. I was surprised by how easily it slid off the snow and onto the trailer.

After that I hopped aboard the beast and started its engine. All the lights came on and all eyes were on me. I was surrounded by young and beautiful women looking at me, unshaven with an unwashed face, wearing a Russian hat, military boots and a military coat big enough to fit two of me. I smiled. No one smiled back.

I put the beast in gear and it began to roar down the hill. Everything looked eerie in the dark. The beast began to slide and we hit a barrier of snow. A cloud of snow shot up and blanketed the front window. I turned on the wipers and looked back. Everyone was holding on for dear life.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “The bus is a bit heavy and made us slide down. The machine will get us out.”

No one said a word.

A couple of minutes later I turned right and the beast roared as it climbed over the mound and slowly entered the well-lit underground parking lot. I jumped out and closed the big door. On my way back I saw the bus driver looking at me through the open door.

“One more minute,” I said, “and everyone can get off.”

I drove the beast to the same place where it was before and turned everything off. All eyes were on me as I jumped off the beast and held my hand out. The lady in black got off first, then the eight young girls, the lady in the cool jacket next and the bus driver last. It was cold in the underground parking lot. I could hear the girls shivering. I passed by the women and went to the side door that led to the coat room. I opened it and waved them to come up. The lady in black went up first and the girls followed. The two women came in last. They kept going up as I closed the outside door and turned off the lights in the parking lot.

I took the steps up on the double and escorted them to the big table. It was nice and warm inside but the girls looked frozen. I ran down the stairs and started a fire in the fireplace. All the younger girls ran down saying something in Italian. This was the first time I’d heard them talking.

I went back to the big table and took my coat, hat and boots off and put them against the wall under the glass cabinet where the military uniforms were displayed. The woman in black said something. I asked the bus driver what she had said.

The bus driver said, “I don’t speak Italian.”

The woman in black said, “I see you’re a young man, no? Maybe a soldier?”

“Yes and no,” I replied and felt a bit embarrassed about my messy appearance. I must have looked like an old hobo to them.

“I’m Peter,” I said, “and this is my place.”

“Nice to meet you Peter, I’m Maria, the Italian General Consul for this area, this is Coach Rosa and this is our bus driver Vera who got us lost. And those girls there are our Italian soccer team who came all the way from Italy to compete in a soccer tournament in the big city.”

Maria then yelled at the girls to come up and she introduced them to me one by one. One of them asked something.

“Washrooms?” asked Maria.

I apologized and went to show them where the washroom was. The girl who asked for the washroom grabbed my hand and the rest followed.

When I came back Maria said, “Don’t mind them, it’s in their culture. They thought you were an old man.”

Vera laughed.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

Maria said, “I’m talking about the girl who held your hand. She thought you were an old man.”

I still didn’t understand what she meant but decided not to say anything.

As soon as the girls came out the three women went to the washroom. The girls went back to the fireplace.

When Maria came back from the washroom she said, “Do you have a telephone?”

“I do. Why?”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll miss us at the hotel when we don’t show up. I just want to call them and tell them we are stuck in a snowstorm but we’re okay.”

I took Maria to the office, pulled out the telephone from the drawer and put in on the desk.

While she was dialing I left to give her some privacy and returned to the big table.

When Maria came back she looked at her watch and said, “Where are we going to sleep?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not used to having guests. Come with me.”

Maria yelled something and the girls came running. They all ran to the big windows. It was snowing heavily outside and the wind was fierce.

I said, “It gets really bad up here in the winter.”

Maria yelled for the girls to come back. We climbed up the stairs and went inside the first room. I explained to Maria that there were twelve identical rooms. There were extra sheets, covers and towels outside each room. The girls could each have a room.

Maria explained what I had said and the coach took them and assigned each girl to a room.

Maria said she would take the first room. Rosa said she would take the tenth room. Vera looked at me.

“You can take room eleven, I’ve been sleeping in room twelve.”

Maria then asked me, “And where are you going to be sleeping?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, we have no pajamas and the girls will have to sleep naked...”

“I’ll be sleeping in another part of the base and there is no need to worry. Also, if they don’t mind, I have military underwear I can offer them in place of pajamas. I have long johns and long sleeved undershirts.”

Maria said she didn’t know what that was but if I could show her she would consider it.

We left the bedrooms and went down the stairs, through the big room, past the big table, up on the stage and out into the garage. The girls were going nuts with their chatter.

When we finally got there I opened the room where the military clothing was and pointed them to the right place. Maria explained to them what they had to do and before we knew it they began to strip naked trying out the underwear.

Maria, Vera and I went outside. I told Maria I didn’t want a mess in there so they should take what they needed and put the rest back in their place.

Moments later they started coming out wearing the underwear and looking like little green birds with skinny legs and featherless wings. They looked comical. I began to laugh and then everyone else laughed as each girl came out modeling their ridiculous looking military underwear. Their coach told them to fold up their soccer uniforms and take them to their rooms and then go back to the fireplace.

One of the girls opened the gun cabinet and yelled at the others. They all ran to touch the guns. After I told them to stay out they ran chattering and began touching the tank.

Their coach yelled at them and they stopped. They then, one by one, came over to me, said something and walked away onto the stage.

Maria said, “They are apologizing to you for being rambunctious, the poor souls, they have been cooped up on the bus all day.”

When we came back to the big table I asked them if they had eaten.

Maria said, “Yes and that’s how she (pointing at Vera) got us lost. While waiting for the girls to finish eating at a truck stop, the truck which was supposed to lead us to the city left before they were done.”

Vera said, “I distinctly remember the driver, a man, telling me to go left at the fork in the road and I did.”

Maria looked at her and said, “We have to get to the game. It would be so unfair to the girls if they miss it.”

“When is the game?” I asked.

“Wednesday evening,” she replied.

“You have plenty of time,” I said. “If worse comes to worse, I’ll drive you in my machine to the highway and then you can drive the bus from there to your game.”

“It’s a three hour drive under good road conditions,” said Vera, “plus I’ll need to fill the tank with gas.”

Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll help you out with everything, but you’ll all have to promise me you won’t make a mess of my place. You’ll also have to do your own cooking. I’ll supply the food, I have plenty.”

Maria spoke to the coach and then said, “No problem. Rosa, our coach here, is also a chef; a good one. Her parents own a big restaurant in Italy. Just show us where the kitchen is and we will take care of the cooking.”

I took them down to the kitchen and showed them the walk-in refrigerators and freezers. Rosa looked around, pulled some meats and put them in the fridge.

“Come,” said Maria, “Let’s go up there and let her do her job.”

Just as we stepped out of the kitchen, one after another, the girls ran into the freezers looking for something. One of them announced she had found it. She grabbed a two gallon cylindrical canister and kept yelling “Gelato”, “Gelato”.

“Put that down,” I yelled, “It’s a hundred years old.”

She brought it closer to me and with her finger bending back and forth pointed at a date “1975”. She then pointed to the top of the lid and said, “Vaniglia”, pointing to the label.

The coach waved us to go and we went up and sat around the big table.

“You got anything to drink? Something strong?” asked Maria.

“Yes,” I said, “rakia. Something like grappa.”

“Not now, later, after the girls go to sleep,” she said.

All the girls showed up at the big table and brought bowls and spoons for everyone. One girl brought the ice cream and a scoop.

“Where in God’s name did you find the scoop?” I asked.

“Uh, uh, uh, no swearing now,” Maria said. “Rosa probably found it and gave it to her.”

I shook my head and said, “You have to love them a lot to have that much patience.”

“That I do,” she said. “They are very precious to me.”

After Rosa arrived she began to fill the bowls with ice cream. She gave me the first and I passed it on to Maria.

“They are intelligent and mature girls but when it comes to ice cream they’re like children,” said Maria.

The tall one laughed out loud and said, “Bambine.”

They all laughed.

I looked at her and said, “You must understand some English, right?”

“A little bit...” she said, looked up at the uniforms in the window and said. “My nonno soldato like you. Mm pensionare.”

She then, like a machine gun, spoke to Maria fast and then kept looking at me.

“Aee, Madona,” Maria said. “Her grandfather was a soldier in the big war, the second one I think and she wants that uniform for him... I’m sorry.”

“It’s not possible,” I said. “But maybe I can do something for you tomorrow.”

The coach said something to her and she stopped pestering me.

After we all ate our ice cream the girls asked for seconds and Maria approved it. “I want them to like me and remember me as a good person when they go home...” she said and smiled.

When they were done they took the dishes and left over ice cream to the kitchen. After that they said goodnight and went to their rooms.

When the coach returned she went to the kitchen, grabbed the bottle of rakia and four juice glasses and came up to join us.

Maria laughed and said, “There’s nothing you can hide from us.”

Rosa poured us some and we toasted “saluti”.

Maria drank some and said, “This is good stuff,” grabbed the bottle and looked at it.

“It’s homemade, someone made it for me. It’s very strong, fifty percent alcohol,” I said.

The coach too made a remark on how good it tasted. Vera, looking sad, didn’t say anything.

Maria poured herself a second drink and drank that too.

She said, “This should put me to sleep,” and left for bed.

The coach downed her drink, waved arrivederci, and rushed to join Maria.

I looked at Vera and said, “You hardly said a word all evening.”

“Well, I feel guilty for getting them lost and almost killed. I will never forgive myself if they miss their game.”

She downed her drink and pushed her glass forward. I poured her another. She looked at me with sad eyes and said, “Thank you.”

I looked at her and said, “Vera, that’s a nice name. What’s your background?”

“Second generation Ukrainian, both my parents are Ukrainian.”

“Faith,” I said.

“Yeah, how did you know that?”

At this point I felt like telling her everything but then I thought that would put her and me in danger so I said, “It’s a beautiful name.”

“Are you coming on to me?” she asked. “I’m married you know, husband and two boys.” She showed me her ring and then said, “My husband is also Ukrainian.”

“No, I’m not coming on to you,” I said and looked her in the eyes with a sympathetic look.

“Why would you, with all these beautiful women here?” she said.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said.

“It’s okay to want me, it makes me feel good, like when I was young and beautiful and when all the boys wanted me. But, life is hard when you have to work and bring up a family. Life turns you into a robot.”

“Vera, you’re still a beautiful woman and I would have wanted you very much if you weren’t married,” I said.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said and gave me a kiss on my head. And, while walking away, said, “I guess I’d better go to bed before I do something I will regret.”

It was midnight and my head was spinning. I drank the rest of the rakia in my glass and secured the little bit that was left in the bottle in the kitchen. I didn’t want the girls to find it.

I dragged myself to bed and stared at the dark ceiling for a long time. Many wild thoughts went through my mind. But one thing I could not get over was how an Italian soccer team of beautiful young girls had ended up on my base. Was this karma or what?

It was very early in the morning when I got up the next day. Once I woke up I couldn’t go back to sleep so I decided to take a bath and shave. I then went and picked out a pair of nice military pants, a military shirt and military shoes from the uniform room and put them on.

As I walked down the stage I noticed the girls sitting at the big table, I guess they were waiting for breakfast. My presence startled them.

“It’s me, Peter,” I said. They kept staring at me like they’d never seen me before.

After I came down to the big table, the tall girl ran at me. I thought she was going to hug me or something, but instead she grabbed at my shirt and said, “I want!” pointing at my military clothes.

Her coach came over and told her something. She let go. I then realized that the day before I had promised to give her a uniform for her grandfather. I waved for her to follow me and all the girls came with me to the uniform room.

They were yelling numbers at me in Italian but I didn’t understand what they were asking me. Finally the tall girl put her hands around her waist and shook her hands. I figured she wanted a certain size but I didn’t know what size so I indicated for her to try the pants on. Then, to my surprise every one of them stripped naked and began to try on the pants. I stepped outside and waited.

A long time later a couple of them came out wearing pants and shirts that didn’t exactly fit them at the waist but were tight around their hips. I suggested they find belts but I didn’t know what belts were called in Italian. I didn’t want to go inside. Some of them were still naked trying on pants and shirts.

I figured their coach would be up here any time now and get them under control. I then saw the tall girl carrying a belt in her hand and showed it to the others.

“Yes, belt!” I said.

After that I thought it was time for me to get the hell out of there before I was discovered by Maria and given hell.

I went downstairs and sat at the big table. The coach brought me a plate of fried sausages and some fried bread.

“Ragazze?” she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders and pretended I hadn't seen the girls. She motioned me to go to the kitchen and after I went she gave me four plates full of sausages to carry up to the big table. I didn't think I could do it but I did. She motioned me to go back for four more plates and twelve glasses of orange juice.

I didn't even know that I had orange juice.

I knew she didn't speak English so I said to her, "Why don't you stay here with me and we will make wonderful love together."

She smiled and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"You understood what I said?" I asked."

"Amore," she said, showed me the ring on her finger and shrugged her shoulders.

While we stood there at the table looking at each other, the girls started coming down. They were all wearing military uniforms that fit them well. They had all found belts.

I shook my head in amazement and said, "My God, I've been here for so long and I haven't discovered as many things as these girls have in the last few hours."

I don't think they understood what I said but started eating breakfast like they had never eaten before.

The coach looked at me and said, "Palla, "palla."

The tall girl said, "Ball".

One of the girls jumped up, grabbed my hand and pulled it.

"I don't have a ball."

She kept pulling and dragged me up to one of the cabinets in the garage. She opened it and there was a soccer ball on the bottom shelf in the left corner.

I stood there in awe and said, “My God what is happening to me, am I living a nightmare? How did you know there was a soccer ball there?”

She didn’t understand a thing I had said. She took the ball and closed the cabinet.

When we got back down Maria and Vera were sitting at the big table having their breakfast.

“Thank God you’re here,” I said.

“They look wonderful in the uniforms, thank you,” Maria said.

“God help me they’re into everything. They’re finding things I never knew existed.”

“You should be happy. You look nice and young, by the way, thank you for cleaning up your face. Now come here and sit beside me, tell me about yourself? If you’re not a soldier guarding this base then what are you?”

“Well, it’s simple. The base was abandoned after World War II so my father bought it and turned it into a wildlife sanctuary. After he died he left it to me. I moved in and have been here since.”

One of the girls interrupted. Maria said, “She wants to know if they can keep the uniforms and underwear?”

I looked down with a glum look.

“Have a heart,” she said. “What are you going to do with them anyway?”

I looked up, smiled and said, “Yes!”

They all ran up to me, gave me a kiss and then ran upstairs to their rooms to put the military uniforms away and put their soccer uniforms on for practice.

“Where can they practice?” Maria asked.

“Well, we have the garage or down here in the waiting room,” I said.

The coach looked at both places and chose the garage, except the tank was in the way.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’ll move the tank outside and make room.”

By the time I was ready to move the tank the girls were all in the garage and wanted to ride on it.

I was about to say something but Maria stopped me. “Do it!” she said, “This they will never forget, they will remember you for a long time. Do it for me!”

Vera came inside the tank with me and so did a couple of girls while the rest sat on top of it. The coach warned them to behave themselves and hold on tight.

I started the tank and slowly drove it outside. It was very cold and windy outside so we all ran back inside as quickly as possible.

I gave them chalk to mark up the garage and turn it into a soccer field.

While the coach was doing that one of the girls opened the gun cabinet and grabbed a rifle. I yelled at her and so did Maria. We scared the poor girl and she turned red in the face. I went over, took the rifle from her and gave her a hug. Maria came over and asked her why she’d done that. She said she wanted to shoot the gun.

Maria looked at me with that look. I was about to say no but she twisted her head so I’d agree but only after soccer practice. The girls were ecstatic.

The coach looked at her watch and said something to Maria.

Maria said, “We need to make lunch,” looked at me and said. “You’re in charge,” and the three women walked away and left me alone with the girls.

The girls stopped playing and came over to tease me by stroking my face and calling me bambino. I shook my head and showed them my big hand. They showed me their hands.

“Okay,” I said, “no practice, no shooting,” and made a motion with my arms.

They all went back to their positions. One of them kicked the ball hard and hit me in my gut. When I bent forward she stuck her tongue out at me. I charged at her and she took off laughing and screaming. The rest began to laugh and yell “amore”, “amore”. I couldn’t catch her; she was too fast for me. When I stopped running she came over and gave me a hug.

I felt defeated and started walking towards the stage. One of them ran after me and pulled me back. They started playing and after that they ignored me until they were done practicing. One of them looked at my watch and tapped it. I whistled. They all took off and ran for the washroom. They were all back in a couple of minutes and resumed their practice until the coach came up to get them. The girl who wanted to shoot the gun came over, stuck her beautiful face into mine and pointed to the gun cabinet. The coach yelled at her and she took off. I was left in the garage with Vera. She had a sad and apologetic look on her face.

When everyone was gone I grabbed her, gave her a kiss and said, “I will always remember you, the beautiful Ukrainian mom from whom I stole a kiss.

“Thank you,” she said, “that’s how I want to be remembered.”

I grabbed her by the arm and we walked side by side to the big table. I was going to get a lot of teasing over this from the girls, I figured, but even though everyone saw us, no one said a word.

There was a beautiful aroma emanating from the kitchen as the girls began to deliver the food to the big table. It was broiled chunks of meat, potatoes and carrots, cooked crisp to perfection.

I looked at the mouthwatering food and said, “We could use some beer or wine with it.” I then looked at Maria and said, “If we had any.”

Maria whispered to the coach and the coach shook her head “yes”.

Maria looked at me and gave me the go ahead.

“Vino anyone?” I asked. All the girls looked at their coach. She smiled and said something. They all cheered.

I stuck my hand out with four fingers up. Four girls got up and came down to the kitchen with me. Three of them took four wine glasses each and the fourth took two bottles of red wine. I took one bottle of white wine and four beers.

The coach opened the red wine bottles and gave the girls half a glass each. No one complained. The coach and Maria split the last bit of red wine and then had white wine. Vera and I drank beer, there was no more wine.

The girls enjoyed the food and asked for more. They wanted more wine but the coach said no. Besides I didn’t have any more. When the coach went downstairs to get more food, the tall girl came over and stuck her head under my arm. Maria gave her the look and smiled. She then shook her head to me indicating okay. I gave the girl a gulp of my beer. She made a face.

“I guess they don’t like beer,” Maria said and asked her. She shook her head no.

When they were done eating the coach asked them to take the dishes to the kitchen and bring the ice cream up. There were a lot of cheers.

After I had eaten all that food I felt lethargic and wanted to drink more. I didn’t want to do it in front of the girls.

When all the dishes were taken to the kitchen and washed the girl who wanted to shoot the rifle came over, looked into my eyes and smiled. I pretended I didn't know what she wanted. She was about to slap me on the face when Maria looked at her.

"Sometimes they act like little children," she said.

"I looked at her, smiled and said, "Bambina."

She pulled my arm so I decided to relent and told Maria to tell them we were going to the shooting room.

They all ran up and entered the room. I told Maria to tell them that this was very dangerous because we were using live ammunition and that when the rifle is fired everyone must have their ears plugged.

I got a rifle out, the same one I had fired a few days ago, some bullets and two ear muffs. I got all the girls to watch, showed them how to load the rifle, aim and fire. After the coach made sure everyone had their ears covered I fired the first shot. I saw a few of the girls jump from the loud noise.

I then pointed to the girl who wanted to shoot and she came over. She was so excited she was feeling weak in the knees. I grabbed her by the waist. She was shaking. I gave her the ear muffs and she put them on. I gave her a bullet. Her hands were shaking. I helped her put the bullet in the chamber. Maria asked her if she still wanted to do this. She said yes. I made sure she was pointing the rifle at the target. I looked around to make sure everyone had their ears plugged and guided her little finger to the trigger. She pulled it. The rifle went off and kicked her on the shoulder like a mule. The explosion was violent. She gave out a loud shrill of excitement. I saw urine run down her leg.

Maria looked at me, shook her head and said, "Don't you dare say anything."

The poor girl wasn't even aware that she'd peed herself. I took the rifle from her, gave her a hug and said, "Eccellente."

The tall girl came up next. She took the earmuffs put them on, took the bullet and loaded the gun, aimed and fired. She then handed me the gun. One by one all the girls fired a bullet. When I asked the older women, only the coach wanted to try her luck. She handled the rifle on her own and even hit the bull's eye bang on.

"You've done this before," I said.

"Si," she said.

"She used to hunt wild game with her father," explained Maria.

Before we were done I gave an empty shell to each of the girls as a souvenir and then asked the first girl if she wanted to shoot again.

Maria looked at me and said, "Do you want to see her piss herself again?" But the girl had already accepted. This time she wasn't nervous and did everything on her own. She gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek for giving her a second chance.

The other girls quickly protested but I said, "We'll do this again tomorrow after practice."

The coach left and took the girl to change her underwear.

"When the coach comes back we'll go for a tour and see the generators and the fish," I said.

When the coach came back I realized that the girl had no underwear to change into. The coach looked at me and snickered.

"Whatever you do just don't lift her skirt," Maria said and tried not to laugh.

Vera walked away and began to snicker. I didn't react or say anything.

I turned the lights on in the long corridor and the girls started to run. The coach yelled at them and they stopped. I took the lead and they followed. I heard whispering, “aqua, aqua,” when they heard the water rushing down the turbines. Some of the girls stayed back until Maria told them it was safe. I told them what the turbines were for and Maria translated. The coach was intrigued and looked around.

“So, the base is self-sufficient with regards to energy, very impressive,” the coach said in Italian and Maria translated.

I then took them downstairs and showed them the fish. The coach said something to Maria and she translated, “Do you eat the fish and if you do can we catch some and cook them for dinner tonight?”

“Yes and yes,” I said and grabbed a handful of fish food to throw into the water. The coach took it from me and grabbed the net from the wall. How she’d noticed it was there I don’t know but she laid it flat down at the bottom of the pool, threw a few pellets of top of it and scooped it up quickly. “What is this crazy woman doing?” I wondered until I saw the big fish caught in the net.

“My God, is there anything this woman can’t do?” I yelled out loud.

Maria translated and they all had a good laugh.

I went into the closet and grabbed the big metal bucket. Rosa filled it half full of water and tossed the fish in. One by one she caught six big fish. She tossed the smaller ones back so they could grow big. That’s what she said.

Everyone went by the bucket, looked at the fish and left the bucket for me to carry. It was very heavy.

When we got back Rosa invited all the girls to help her clean and gut the fish. It was going to be part of their daily lesson. She also said no firing range tomorrow for those who didn’t participate in cleaning and cooking the fish. They all went to the kitchen and Vera and I lit the fire and sat in front of the fireplace.

Vera said, “Before I forget, can you give me a small bottle of your rakia, I want to take it to my father. He makes this stuff so maybe he can figure out the spices and make some for me. I would appreciate it if you could do that for me.”

“Of course,” I replied. “Let’s do it now, the rakia is in the kitchen.”

We rummaged through the cupboards and we found an almost empty, small plastic vinegar bottle. I was about to empty it into the sink but Vera asked me to put it into a glass to use later for the salad.

After I emptied the vinegar from the bottle I gave Vera the bottle to wash. While she was washing it I pulled out the gallon from under the grease trap and put it on the counter. When I went to get the whiskey bottle Vera made an awful sound. I ran back to see what had happened. She pointed at the dirty gallon resting on the counter.

“What? This stuff?” I said and licked the gallon with my tongue. I did to her what Oscar had done to me and then laughed.

“She made an awful face and said, “And to think I kissed that mouth...”

I ran after her pretending that I wanted to kiss her and she took off. I then told her it was epoxy. She slapped me on the head.

After I filled the vinegar bottle she took it and went to secure it in her room. I filled the whiskey bottle full and put it back in the cupboard. I also put the gallon away.

When Vera came back she asked where the whiskey bottle was. I said I’d put it away because of the girls.

“Okay then,” she said. “We’ll have a drink later.”

We went back to the fireplace and sat opposite one another. She kept looking at me and I kept looking at her.

She finally said, “I miss my family you know. I don’t like it when I’m away from them for this long.”

One of the girls came to see what we were doing. It was the girl who had pissed herself. Vera smiled at her. She sat next to me and put her arm over my shoulder.

“This little one likes you,” Vera said.

“She looks pretty small, how old do you figure she is?”

“From what Maria told me they are about seventeen to eighteen, maybe even younger, I don’t know.”

“I thought they were over twenty one; that was my impression,” I said. “If they’re so young why did Maria let me give them wine?”

“You know, Italians drink wine at a young age?”

I looked at Vera. Her eyes were wide open and she tried not to smile. “My God,” she said, “doesn’t she know she isn’t wearing underwear? Don’t you dare look!”

I put my elbow over her knees and squeezed her legs together.

Vera grabbed her by the hand, took her up to the uniform room, found a small pair of long underwear and brought it to the kitchen. She gave it to me and told me to cut off the leggings with a sharp knife and bring the underwear back.

When I did Vera asked me to look away while the girl put it on.

Vera then took her with her to the kitchen and asked her to shred some carrots and beets while Vera shredded the cabbage.

I sat in front of the fireplace and tended to the fire, while one by one the girls started coming back smelling of fish, onions and garlic. They all sat quietly and watched the flames dance.

Finally Vera showed up with a huge bowl of salad. She said she had learned how to make it from her Ukrainian grandmother. She put it

on top of the big table and came down to the fireplace. The girls made room for her beside me.

“I guess they want me to sit beside you,” she said as she sat next to me.

When Rosa and Maria showed up the girls made room for them on my other side but Maria declared her body was too sore for the floor, got a chair and sat next to the fireplace. Rosa sat on my left side and put her arm over my shoulder. I sniffed her hand.

“It’s fish, it doesn’t wash off that easily,” translated Maria.

Rosa slapped me on the back and said something.

“She’s married you know, don’t get the wrong idea...,” said Maria.

“Well, I want to know what she said. What did she say?” I asked.

“She said, “You’re a good man and wants to thank you for your hospitality. God knows what would have happened to us if you hadn’t found us.”

“She didn’t say that,” I complained.

“No, but somebody has to say it...” she replied, looked at me and said, “I feel like having a drink.”

“All I have is rakia and beer,” I said.

Bring some beer then. Beer for everybody... Give the girls one quarter bottle each. I don’t want them getting used to drinking or getting drunk. They are athletes...”

While Vera and the girls went to get glasses and beer from the fridge, Rosa went to check on the fish. I looked at my watch, it was half past six.

Maria looked at me and said, “Thank you for the underwear for the girl...”

I didn't say anything.

Rosa showed up and said the fish were cooked.

Maria and I went up to the big table and sat down. Vera and the girls showed up with the beer and glasses. Rosa yelled from the kitchen and the girls started going down. Each brought a plate full of fish and went back to get more. One of the girls brought forks, another brought bread and so on.

Maria sat at the end of the table and said, "I want to say a blessing but sorry it has to be in Italian."

We all said "Amen" when she was done.

"This is a great day for me," Maria said. "I have never had so much fun in my life. These girls are very precious to me and you gave me the opportunity to be close to them."

While the coach divided the beer for the girls, we all began to eat the fish.

"This is the most delicious meal I have ever eaten," I said.

Vera agreed and said Rosa is a really good cook.

As I watched the girls sip their beer I decided to ask them how old they were.

They were between sixteen and nineteen. The little one was sixteen.

One of them said something with a mouthful of food and laughed.

Maria said, "The first time she saw you this one thought you were an old man, a grandfather, but now wants to know if you have a wife."

"Why?" I asked. "Does she want to marry me if I don't have a wife?"

They all laughed. Then she said, “Maybe.”

The coach said something.

When we were done eating the girls asked if they could have ice cream.

“I don’t know, do we have any left?” I asked.

Two of them ran down and brought the almost empty canister and another unopened canister with a label “Strawberry”.

I looked at Maria and Rosa and they both smiled.

Rosa said something and the girls quickly collected the plates and cutlery and took them to the kitchen for washing. Then they brought ice cream, bowls and spoons.

The tall girl, who was nineteen, volunteered to fill the bowls with ice cream and gave me the first bowl. I gave it to Maria.

Vera said, “That one also likes you.”

Maria piped up and said, “They all like him. You know what teenagers are like, you were one once.”

Rosa wanted to know what we were talking about. Maria slipped up and told her in front of the girls. They all erupted in laughter accusing one another of being in love with me.

Maria enjoyed all this and said, “Those of you who love him go and kiss him. But remember he was eating fish and hasn’t brushed his teeth.”

No one came over to kiss me. I pretended to be sad so Vera came over and kissed me.

“No more kissing, eat your ice cream and finish the vanilla. I’m so sad I’m going to drink beer,” I said.

The little one came over, kissed me on the head and went back to eating ice cream.

“They’re unusual girls. Canadian girls are wild. They would be disgusted and wouldn’t come near anyone like me, unless I was a bad boy,” I said.

Vera agreed with me.

Maria said, “I don’t know what that is but I can tell you they’re not wild. And that’s what I love about them. I love their innocence and genuine love. They are from a friendly culture and when you show them kindness they pay it back in kindness. They are all innocent precious angels.”

They wanted to know what we were gossiping about. They knew it was about them but Maria wouldn’t tell them. The tall girl who spoke a few words of English said it was about love and romance. They all laughed.

When we were done eating the ice cream a couple of girls took their spoons and scooped the left over vanilla ice cream from the walls and bottom of the canister. Rosa took the strawberry canister and returned it to the freezer. The girls then helped Rosa and Vera wash the dishes while Maria and I snuck a glass of rakia.

“I feel tired. I think I’ll go to bed when everybody comes back. I’ll say goodnight and go and rest. Tomorrow we’ll talk about the trip to the game. I’ve been keeping watch outside and it’s still snowing non-stop.”

When everyone came back Maria said she was going to bed and began to walk away. The girls got up and followed. No one said goodnight. Rosa too got up to go. I grabbed her by the wrist and motioned for her to stay. She touched my chin, smiled and walked away.

I looked at Vera sitting opposite me. She looked sad.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“I miss my boys...” she replied as she watched the girls disappear into the other room and up the stairs.

I grabbed Vera’s hand and said, “Come with me... come.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise?”

“Oh, I don’t like surprises.”

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes... maybe... no... I don’t know.”

She tried to wiggle her hand out of mine but I held it firmly. She began to moan slightly in protest.

“Just a few more steps,” I said and we entered the office. I let go of her hand, pulled the telephone out of the desk drawer and put it on the desk.

“You have a phone?! Now you tell me you have a phone?!” she yelled and whacked me on the shoulder.

She looked at me, smiled and said, “Can I use it? It’s almost eight o’clock, time for bed for my little boys. I want to hear their voices...”

Even before I had a chance to say yes she began to dial the number. “It’s ringing, it’s ringing,” she yelled in a high pitched tone of voice and began to talk in Ukrainian. I stepped outside to give her some privacy.

She was on the phone for over twenty minutes. When she came out she was in tears but smiling. She jumped on me and kissed me all over my face.

“Vera, stop that, calm down. What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, “I got to talk to my children and husband and I’m happy.”

“What’s with the tears?”

“Well, that. I feel really bad for getting the girls lost and if they miss the game it’s going to be on me.”

She then shivered and said, “Please hold me... Just for a minute...”

I held her tight and she squeezed me back. After taking several long breaths she said, “Okay, you can let me go now.” She took my hand and we walked down to the big table. But instead of sitting down, she gave me a sad look and said, “Goodnight, I’m going to bed.” Before she went up the stairs she turned to look, to see if I was looking at her. I was.

I shook my head in wonderment, put the bottle away and went to bed.

I got up real early the next day and looked outside. It had stopped snowing and the sky was clear.

I went down to the big room through the stage. I looked down and counted nine sleepy heads sitting around the big table. One of them was Vera.

“Where are Maria and Rosa?” I asked.

Vera shrugged her tired shoulders.

One of the girls said something and then ran upstairs.

Moments later she was back shaking her head.

“Why are they wearing their soccer uniforms?” I asked.

Vera didn’t reply. She looked tired.

About a minute later Rosa came down and was followed by Maria.

Before saying good morning Maria said, “We should leave today. It has stopped snowing and we’re going to have a clear day. I know we will disappoint the girls about some things, but making it to the game is a priority.”

She then looked at everyone and said, “I’m sorry, where are my manners, buongiorno a tutti.” (Good morning everyone.)

“Please, sit down,” I said. “I can take you to the highway today, but first let’s work out the schedule and figure out what you’ll need for the trip.”

“You’re more experienced with the roads and climate here so we’ll do what you suggest,” replied Maria.

“First, let’s figure out the logistics of the trip. What time do you want to be at your destination?”

She looked around. Rosa said something. “Six o’clock in the evening today at the latest, preferably at five. But first I’ll have to call my consulate to see if we still have reservations at our hotel. I will do that at nine o’clock when the consulate opens,” she said and then looked at her watch. “It’s almost six now so we have eleven to twelve hours.”

“From what Vera told me, it’s a three hour drive from the last town you were in, so let’s say three hours plus another three from here to the highway and another hour for rest, breaks, traffic and other delays. That makes it seven hours on the road. So if you leave here at ten you should be able to make it to your destination by five. Any particular reason you want to be there at five? Your game isn’t until the next day?”

“We don’t want to drive in the dark,” Maria replied.

“Fair enough,” I said. “We’ll leave here at ten today.”

“About the things you’ll need for the trip. I suggest the girls wear the military clothes. The soccer uniforms leave their arms and knees exposed. The military clothes will protect them from the cold in case you have a breakdown, God forbid. You’ll also need to take food and water. Rosa can make sandwiches for everyone. I’ll give you a big thermos for water. Everyone should take a small glass from the kitchen for drinking water. I don’t know what you’re going to do about going to the bathroom but I suggest you take a few rolls of toilet paper.”

“The girls should have no problem going in the ditch, Rosa will show them how,” said Maria and asked if she could have some rakia, for medicinal purposes, of course.

I went and got the bottle, gave it to her and said, “Share it,” and pointed at the three women. Maria said yes and winked at me.

“You’ll find all kinds of bags in the kitchen, give the girls one each so that they can put their soccer uniforms and other things in them.”

While Rosa and the girls went to change and make the sandwiches, and Maria went to put the bottle away, I told Vera to come with me.

I took her to the uniform room and told her to pick a military uniform.

She said no.

“You’re wearing a skirt, your legs are exposed and you have no coat. You’ll freeze if your bus breaks down,” I insisted.

She again said no.

“You have children, do it for them,” I said.

“I’m a woman and I don’t want to wear men’s pants,” she replied.

“Why, you think your ass is too big for them and it won’t fit?”

She slapped me one on my arm, laughed and said, “I’ll take one pair of underwear and a jacket.”

She grabbed a pair of underwear tested it for length and told me to turn around.

“Okay, you can look now,” she said.

I turned around and started laughing.

First she said, “Don’t!” and after asked me why I was laughing.

“Because you look like Peter Pan,” I said, “with the green tights.”

She said something in Ukrainian. I laughed.

“So you do know what I said...” she said, went through the jackets and picked one that fit just right.

“How do I look?” she asked.

“A little lumpy at the chest,” I replied.

She threw something at me and said, “I’m not talking to you anymore.”

I picked up a Russian hat and threw it at her. She took it and said, “I’ll keep it and give it to my husband. This is a good hat.”

When Vera and I went back to the big table Maria and the girls were all there wearing their military shirts and pants.

I said to Maria, “No one must know where these uniforms came from. They are the property of the Canadian military and I don’t think I have the right to give them away. If anyone asks tell them you bought them from an army surplus store.”

“No one is going to ask. Even if someone asks, none of the girls speak English. Who are they going to tell? Besides, I’m a diplomat and nobody wants to mess with diplomats,” she replied.

“Vera and I are going outside to gas up and check the machines, we’ll be back shortly. I hope someone is making breakfast?” I said and we went down to the underground parking lot.

I opened the big front gate. There was a two metre drift of snow in front of it. Vera looked at it and said, “How are we going to clear that? We won’t be able to get out.”

I didn’t say anything. I was just hoping I could start the beast without problems.

We both got on the big machine. I sat in the driver’s seat and she stood beside me. I pulled the choke button out, gave it some gas and turned on the glow plugs. I grabbed Vera’s hand and used her finger to push the start button. After a couple of cranks the engine started and began to roar. Moments later I pushed the choke button back in.

“You’re my good luck charm,” I said.

After running the beast for about five minutes, the inside began to warm up. I put the beast in gear and slowly drove towards the door. When we got close to the drift of snow Vera covered her eyes and braced herself for impact. There was no impact. She opened one eye and then the other. We were now on top of the mound and heading for the road. I turned right and headed for the garage. But, instead going up towards the garage I turned to the outdoor parking lot and climbed over the big mound.

“What are we doing here?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” I said.

I drove all the way to the gas pumps and turned off the engine. I then reached into one of the cupboards inside the cab and grabbed the water thermos and gave it to Vera to hold.

I stepped outside, unlocked the door to the fuel closet, pulled out the diesel nozzle and began filling the gas canister. While Vera held the funnel I filled the beast’s tank full of diesel fuel.

“That should get us to the highway,” I said and then asked Vera to put the funnel in the tank of the bus.

I filled the canister with gasoline and dumped it into the bus’s gas tank. I did that three times.

“Did you know your gas tank was completely empty?” I asked.

“My God,” she said, “please, no more horror stories...”

I didn’t say anything.

After I filled the bus’s gas tank I asked her to start the bus. She tried but the battery was dead. I heard her yell the “F” word.

“Take it easy Vera, the battery is dead, no problem, we’ll charge it.”

I then took the jumper cables from the beast and we gave the bus a boost. It started after a few cranks. I then noticed that she had left some lights on.

“Here’s the problem, we left the parking lights on. They drained the battery.”

About fifteen minutes later we turned the bus engine off and drove the beast near the garage’s front door and cleared the show.

When we got back our breakfast was waiting on the big table. We found a large plate of breakfast sausages and toasted bread sitting on it.

Rosa said, “Una colazione da campioni” (a breakfast of champions).

Vera gave Rosa the big thermos and Rosa went to fill it with water.

“Now eat and what’s left we’ll take with us,” Maria said.

By the time we were done it was past nine o'clock. I took Maria to the office to make her phone call. Vera came with me. Rosa was still working on the lunches and getting the girls ready.

While Maria spoke on the phone, Vera and I got inside the tank and started it. After that we came out and brushed the snow off with brooms. I then drove it into the garage.

Maria was in the garage when I came out of the tank. She looked at me curiously.

"The tank isn't mine. I can't leave it outside, it might be stolen and I'd be in serious trouble."

She didn't say anything.

"What did they say about the hotel?" I asked.

"It's still reserved for us."

I left the big door open until the fumes and smoke cleared and then I shut it.

I looked at my watch, it was nine-forty.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"They're coming any minute now," replied Maria.

"Will you need a coat or anything?" I asked her.

"I'll be fine," she said, looked at Vera, laughed and said to her. "At least you'll be warm... You look fine, don't mind me."

When everyone showed up Rosa pulled out her checklist and checked it again.

The sun was out and shining brightly. Rosa checked each of the girl's bags to make sure they had everything and I helped them up

over the track and into the beast's cab. Rosa didn't want my help. She jumped up on her own.

She then helped Maria who said, "It must be nice to be young and strong."

I helped Vera as she smiled nervously.

After I closed the door, I looked around.

Maria said, "Don't worry, everyone is here."

I started the engine and looked at the time. It was ten minutes past ten.

Vera sat beside me and watched me operate the controls.

"Keep an eye on the bus behind us and make sure we don't lose it," I said.

Then, as we dropped onto the road and turned right we hit a huge drift under which the beast disappeared. There was a huge gasp from my passengers. Vera grabbed the holding bar with both hands and held it tight.

"Hang on but don't worry," I yelled.

I knew the road well. There was a big dip and an incline. The dip was filled with snow. My only worry was if a truck or large vehicle got stuck at the bottom we wouldn't be able to push it out of the way and we too would be stuck.

The beast's engine roared as mounds of snow rolled over us. Moments later we were on the other side and rolling over the deep snow like it wasn't there.

"That's one down and many more to go," I said then turned my head around and smiled at the girls. I got lots of cheers.

Rosa came over, slapped me on the back and said, “Bravo bellissimo” (good beautiful).

We drove for two hours and forty minutes. Driving was a lot easier than I had expected, I think because it was a clear day and visibility was good. Plus I knew the road well. We didn’t run into as many big drifts as I thought we would. The highway going through town was plowed, so I decided to park the beast in the plaza parking lot and unhitch the bus. But first I took everyone to the restaurant for a pit stop. I introduced Maria to Gloria’s mom and dad and excused myself to finish the job outside. Vera grabbed my arm.

“You stay here and go to the washroom. I’ll unhitch the bus, start it and bring it here in front of the restaurant.” She agreed.

I first went inside the beast’s cab and made sure everyone had taken their things. I then unhitched the bus, started it and pulled it back. Vera had left the keys in it. After I lifted the beast’s gate up I drove the bus and parked it in front of the restaurant.

When I walked in I saw Gloria’s mom and dad smiling and happy.

“When the girls had first walked in we thought they were girl scouts with their nice uniforms. We had no idea they were Italian soccer players,” Gloria’s mother told me.

I offered to pay for the hot raisin buns for the girls and coffee for the women but Gloria’s mother refused to take my money.

“Okay, everybody out!” I yelled. “Its time to go!”

They all lined up in front of the bus and gave me a hug and kiss as they got on. The coach too gave me a hug, walked in, changed her mind, came out and gave me a big kiss. Maria too gave me a hug and a kiss.

She then thanked me for everything and said, “I left my business card on your desk for you. Call me sometime. You’re a good man and have many friends who love you.”

I assume she was talking about Gloria's mom and dad or she may have been talking about the girls.

Vera was the last one to board the bus. She too gave me a long hug and a kiss and then turned away. She didn't want me to see her crying.

She immediately started the bus and drove out of the plaza and made a left turn onto the main road which led to the highway and their destination. I kept waving goodbye until the bus disappeared out of sight.

At the moment I didn't feel like visiting anyone so I got back on the beast and drove myself back to the base.

I was alone again.

Celebrating Christmas at the base

During the bad storm when I was entertaining the Italian girl's soccer team at the base, Oscar was out with a team of tow truck drivers rescuing cars and trucks stranded in the snow on the highways up the mountains.

After the girls left, I caught a number of fish during my idle time sitting around the base. But after the back road was finally plowed I decided to go into town to visit my friends and give them some fish. After I saw how Rosa had done it, it was a breeze for me to catch fish. I only kept the big ones. I was tired of eating fish and had caught enough to give some to all my friends. I also decided to give Gloria's mom and dad some as well. I wanted to know how Gloria was doing but felt awkward calling her, so I figured I would talk to her parents and find out from them. This was another reason why I wanted to go into town.

It was about ten minutes to one in the afternoon when I arrived at Stan's service station. There was no one there. This was unusual, I thought. They're either on a call or maybe at lunch. I decided to go to the restaurant and see if they were there.

To my surprise they were all there; Oscar, Stan, Fred, Olivia, Agnes and an old gentleman dressed in overalls.

There was a big cheer from everyone when I entered the restaurant. Oscar yelled Riki is back.

Before I sat down the gentleman in the overalls said, "So, you're the Peter James Jr. I've heard so much about... I'm farmer Joe, I supplied your father with the meat in your freezers on the base, which Oscar here tells me is still there."

I shook hands with Joe and said, "Nice to meet you sir," and sat down.

"What's this I hear about you entertaining a dozen, fabulous young Italian women?" asked Oscar.

I smiled but didn't reply.

"I don't understand it... What does he have that attracts good looking women?" Oscar asked jokingly, looked around, shook his head and then looked at Gloria's mom.

Gloria's mom said, "He has a big heart..."

"How is Gloria?" I asked.

But before her mom had a chance to answer, Stan looked at his watch and said, "Sorry, I have to go back to work."

"Wait," I said, "I have some fresh fish for all of you in my truck. I'll bring them over."

When I returned I realized I didn't have a package for Joe but Gloria's mom saved the day.

"Why don't we keep them all here and cook them for you. I have a fantastic recipe. Why don't we all get together this evening and we'll have a party... to celebrate our friendship. Joe and Stan you can bring your families. I'll call your wives if you like," Gloria's mom suggested.

"That's a fantastic idea," said Stan and walked out.

Oscar said, "Come and see me later," and followed Stan.

Fred, Olivia, Agnes and Joe also said they'd be there this evening and left. They too had to get back to work.

"I'm sorry your friends left dear," said Gloria's mom. "We usually get together at noon and by one they go back to work. But I'll talk to you if you have the time. I'll finish with my customers first and come back. Have you eaten? Can I bring you something, a coffee maybe?"

"I'm fine thank you, maybe a coffee."

A few minutes later she came back with a cup of coffee and said, "Gloria is fine. The college has a free long distance phone line and she calls us almost every day. She says she misses us. She says you haven't called her. She would love it if you would call her sometimes. I told her about the Italian girls. She wanted to know if they were beautiful and where they were staying when they were with you but I didn't know. I asked Olivia but she didn't know either. Olivia didn't even know about the girls until I told her. And now I heard Joe mentioning a base. What was he talking about? What base? Are you a soldier? I saw you in army clothing the last time you were here. Do you live somewhere on a military base? We know so little about you."

"It's nice to hear that Gloria is doing okay. I'm sorry I haven't called her yet but I will. And yes, I live in an abandoned military base but I'm not a soldier. My father bought the base and turned it into a sanctuary of sorts, I think. The base is located near a rock quarry that has been filled with water. That's where I catch the fish."

"Is this military base far? How come we've never heard of it?"

"Well, the base is underground and it was abandoned by the army in the early 1950's. It's not too far, about a forty minute drive, but the road to and from there is treacherous, especially in the winter."

"What freezers was Joe talking about? You have freezers on the base?"

"I have four walk-in freezers full of meat, vegetables, bread, sausages and even ice cream. They've been sitting there since Joe delivered them more than five years ago."

"What was your father going to do with all of that?"

"That, I couldn't tell you. But I wish I could give it away before it goes bad."

"Your electricity bill must be horrendous having to keep all that stuff frozen all these years?"

“Thank God I don’t have to pay for electricity. The base has its own generators and is self-sufficient in terms of energy. I also have my own water supply. You’ll have to come up some day and see everything.”

“I assume you have a kitchen where you cook your food?”

“Yes I do. In fact the kitchen in the base is bigger than your kitchen here. Unfortunately I don’t know how to use any of the equipment. I should have asked Rosa, the Italian coach who is also a chef, but I never thought of it.”

“I’ll come up some day. I’m curious to see what you’ve got. But you’ll have to drive me up there and back.”

“Just let me know when and maybe we can have everyone up there so they can all see it.”

People started coming into the restaurant so I figured I should get going. I drank the last bit of coffee and offered to pay but she wouldn’t take my money.

I said thank you and began to walk away.

“Dinner will be served at seven sharp, be here!” she yelled,

I drove my truck to Stan’s. Oscar had gone out on a call and Stan was doing paperwork.

“Can I interest you in a job?” he asked. “I need a bookkeeper. I’m tired of doing everything myself. I’m a mechanic not a manager. I have to do the work orders, fill out the paperwork, buy parts and other materials, collect on bills and do the books.”

“You don’t have that much work, do you?” I asked.

“Yes, we now repair and maintain snowplows too. When the county discovered Oscar’s talent they were all over me to sign a contract. You don’t say no to the government. I’ll tell you one thing about the county, they pay well and you don’t have to hound them to get your

money. They send it automatically as soon as they receive the invoice.”

“I would love to help out,” I said. “But I don’t need a job.”

“Do you know anyone who might be willing to do it part time, maybe a couple of hours a day for a couple of days a week?”

“The only people I know outside of Oscar are Fred, Olivia and Agnes but they all have jobs. How about your wife? Does she work?”

“Oh no, my wife has her hands full with the girls. I can’t impose on her to do this too.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “I’ll ask her tonight at dinner, discreetly and indirectly and if she says no we’ll leave her alone. Would you be willing to pay her...?”

He laughed and said, “You’ve got to be joking, I give her all my money anyway.”

“Does she know anything about bookkeeping?” I asked.

“She took a short course in financing but never finished it.”

“Is she good with numbers?”

“I guess so,” he said. “She must be. She keeps track of our finances and pays the bills. She’s also frugal with our money and doesn’t spend a penny on herself.”

“Leave it to me then,” I replied. “You just give her a call and tell her to be at the restaurant this evening.”

“I’ll do it right now,” he said, “before I forget,” and began to dial the phone number.

I stepped away to give him some privacy and spotted a couple of newspaper articles pinned on the top of Stan’s bulletin board. I went

closer to look. One had a big picture of Oscar standing beside a family of six and the other had a photograph of the Italian girls in military uniforms with Maria in the centre and Vera and Rosa on each side. Vera was wearing her military jacket. I couldn't see if she was wearing her Peter Pan tights because she was behind the girls. I figured the picture was taken just as they arrived at their destination. It looked like the picture was taken outdoors and none of the girls were smiling.

There wasn't much to the story about the girls except that they were the Italian soccer players dressed in their scout uniforms. Nothing about who was who and if they had won or lost the game. Then I noticed the date; it was Tuesday. The game was the next day.

The story about Oscar was a bit more explicit. It said that Oscar had risked his own life to save a family of six when their car was jackknifed by a truck sliding down the highway and then caught fire.

"According to this story here Oscar is a hero," I yelled to Stan who was now off the phone.

"Yes he is. But he doesn't want the credit. He says he was only doing his job."

"I guess we're all doing our job but we don't usually take extraordinary measures and risk our lives doing them," I said, paused and asked. "What did the wife say?"

"She and the kids will be there at seven..." he said and added. "Take it easy on Oscar."

"Don't worry, I won't tease him too much," I said. "Now I think I'll walk over to Fred's and see how they're doing. Tell Oscar I'll be back." And with that I walked out of the service station and decided to walk, instead of drive, to Fred's. I left my truck at Stan's.

The moment I walked in Olivia grabbed me by my hand and dragged me behind the counter to show me a couple of pictures of the Italian girls which she had clipped out of the newspapers. I had seen the one at Stan's but not the other one.

“I want to bring something to the dinner tonight. I was thinking beer or maybe wine. What’s Stan bringing?” Fred asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Call him.”

“Okay, thanks, I will,” he replied.

Just as I was done talking to Fred, Olivia turned my head and pointed me to the pictures.

“They look so beautiful in their little soccer uniforms,” she said. “And they won the game too!”

“Oh, thank you for letting me know,” I replied.

“How old were they and were they nice?” she asked.

“They were twenty-five and very beautiful,” I said.

She slapped me on my shoulder and said, “The story said they were sixteen to nineteen; what are you trying to pull here?”

“I’m trying to make you jealous,” I said.

“Tell me more, how were they?”

“They were into everything, like little children. They were going into the freezers, the cabinets and all over the place where they didn’t belong.”

“What freezers are you talking about?” she asked.

Well, I could have lied to her but what would have been the point. Sooner or later she’d find out about the base so I might as well tell her now, I figured.

“I have freezers in the base where I live and I had no idea I had ice cream until they went into them and turned everything upside down and found it.”

“Is that what Joe was talking about?”

“Yes, Joe supplied my father with a lot of stuff which was then frozen and left there. I’ll show you everything and take you for a tour if you want to come up with Gloria’s mom some day when you have the time.”

“So, I take it you don’t want me up there alone with you? You know, you’re turning out to be a jerk just like your father, with this secret stuff. And why did Oscar call you Riki?”

“You caught that,” I said. “Well, that’s my real name. You know I’m not Peter James Jr. right? But if you really want to know, my grandfather used to call me Riki. Maybe he used to watch the show ‘I love Lucy’, and named me Riki after Ricky Ricardo, I don’t know?”

“You’re a clever one aren’t you?” she said sarcastically.

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked mockingly and laughed.

“Olivia dear, would you be so kind as to go and buy four bottles of white wine from the wine store and take them to the restaurant?” Fred asked. “Stan said he’s bringing beer.”

“Okay,” she said and asked me if I wanted to go with her.

I looked at Fred. He didn’t say anything so I assumed he didn’t approve.

“Thank you Olivia for the invitation but I’d best go and see Oscar. He’s waiting for me at Stan’s.”

She put on her winter coat and left. Moments later when Fred was done with his customers I said, “See you this evening,” and headed for Stan’s.

When I arrived Oscar was back and working on something on the bench.

“Ah, you’re back,” he said.

I went over and gave him a hug.

“What’s that for?” he asked loudly.

“Well, I could have shaken your hand but it’s dirty so I hugged you instead.”

“Are you being funny with me?”

“No, it’s to congratulate you for what you did for that family in the story.”

“Not you too!? I didn’t do anything! You know how it is; reporters like to write dramatic stories. That’s all it was. This woman asked me if I could pose for a picture with the family. I didn’t know who she was. What was I supposed to say? No? And that’s it? The next thing I see is Indian saves whites. That’s not going to go over well!”

“It doesn’t say anything like that. All it says is man risks his own life to save family.”

“Is that why you brought it up?”

“No, I brought it up because your story is about heroism. I also wanted to distract you from asking me about the Italian girls.”

“So, I hear you used the beast to save them from freezing and then you drove all the way here. How much fuel did you burn?”

“Oh, crap, I forgot to refuel the damn thing. If I take it out again it’ll run out of gas on me for sure.”

“You’re the real hero here,” Oscar said. “You not only saved those beautiful girls but you also got them to their game on time. So, why aren’t you boasting about that? And why isn’t there a story about your heroism, eh?”

“I told the women not to tell anyone about me, the base or the uniforms,” I said.

I wanted to change the subject, so after a short pause I asked Oscar if he’d heard anything from the reservation and what was happening with Jean.

“Oh, about that,” he said, “I was thinking of installing a telephone in the village. They need a telephone, many of our people in the village have relatives in other villages or working outside the village, like me, and they could use to stay in touch? What do you think?”

“Wouldn’t it be expensive?”

“No, the monthly fees aren’t expensive, I can pay for those. The installation is expensive but I can do it myself. All I need is to buy enough telephone wire to connect the village to the main road. I can cut wood for the telephone poles and install them myself. What do you think?”

“You know something? We may have some telephone wire in the base. I’ve seen a spool somewhere but I don’t remember where. I can also pay for some too, depending on how expensive it is. If it’s not expensive I can pay for all of it.”

“Thanks man, I knew you would help.”

“Why doesn’t the telephone company install it for free like it does in other places?”

“You know why. We live on a reservation, man... And do you still want me to be a hero?”

I didn’t say anything. I changed the subject and asked him if he had spoken to Gloria.

“No, man, I’ve been meaning to but I haven’t. I always tell her mother to say hello, so I hope she does.”

“Oscar, I also need to tell you this,” I said. “Both Gloria’s mother and Olivia know about the base. Farmer Joe said something today and now everyone is curious about the base. I told Gloria’s mother and Olivia about it. I’d like to take them up there and give them a tour some day.”

“You’re making a mistake, man. They’ll blab it to everyone and when people see the stuff you have up there that you’re not supposed to have, someone will blab to the authorities and they’ll arrest you. You have a tank for God’s sake and enough guns and ammunition to arm a small army. How do you think that’s going to go if the police show up and search the place?”

“You’re scaring the crap out of me. I’ve already committed to take the women up. I’ll keep them away from the tank. I’ll just show them the big hall, kitchen, rest area and bedrooms upstairs. I’ll just lock the door behind the stage and pull the curtain in front of it. That should keep the tank and guns out of sight.”

“Okay, that might work. The county already knows about the base, so it’s not something illegal or something you created. And I bet you the base is still on federal land and no one except the army has jurisdiction. If the army shows up they’ll recognize their mistake, take everything that doesn’t belong there and say nothing. But don’t think for a minute that you won’t be compromised. You may have to move because the next thing the army is going to do is blow up the place. The military loves to do that.”

“Well, I knew some day this was going to happen. I may have to leave this place and go back and live with my grandfather.”

“Have you heard from him lately?”

I didn’t answer his question and walked away. I’d been compromised enough for one day.

I went outside to clear my head. It was sunny and clear but bitterly cold. When I returned Stan said a big storm was coming. He’d heard about it on the radio. I reacted sharply to the news but he said it wouldn’t be here until tomorrow or the day after.

“Is there anything I can do to help out?” I asked. “I need to kill some time before dinner and I don’t want to be in your way.”

“Well, since you’re offering,” he said. “You can clean that filthy car part sitting on the bench. I replaced it this morning with a new one but from the looks of it it’s still good; all it needs is cleaning. I can re-use it but it needs to be degreased. There’s a spray can over there. You’ll probably need a second spray can.”

“Do you have a small metal bucket, some gasoline and some laundry detergent?” I asked.

“Yes, under the counter,” he said and looked at me curiously.

Curious to see what I was going to do, Stan came over and gave me an old metal bucket that he used to wash rags in, a small canister of gasoline used to start cars and an old box of powdered laundry detergent.

“Sorry about the greasy mess on the box. A long time ago I used the detergent to wash my dirty rags,” he said.

But instead of going back to his desk, Stan stood there and watched me with curiosity.

I poured some gasoline into the bucket, added some detergent to it and put the car part into the mix. I then took a paint brush from the shelf, dipped it in the gasoline and rubbed it against the part. I worked it vigorously until the dried grease began to dissolve. I then dipped the brush into the detergent, picked up some and rubbed it into the greasy sludge. I took the part out, put it in the sink and ran hot water over it. The sludge started to wash off. I put the part back in the gasoline and repeated the process a couple of times. Before I was done I rinsed the brush under hot water, sprinkled some detergent over the car part and sponged it over until it lathered. I then ran hot water on the car part, dried it with a clean rag and handed it to Stan.

“I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” he said. “I can’t believe it. It looks as new as if it just came out of the box.”

Oscar came over and said, “All the work is done. Maybe we should start cleaning up. It’s getting close to quitting time.”

Stan put the part in the paper box and put it on the shelf with the new parts. When he saw that I was looking he took his pen and wrote “used” on the box. He then smiled and went to the back to wash up and change his clothes. Oscar was already waiting for us by the door.

Stan took a little longer than we expected and when he came out we noticed he’d shaven. Oscar and I looked at each other. We looked like a couple of bums. I even had dirt on my face on top of my thick stubble.

I drove us to the restaurant. It was quarter to seven when we arrived. We were the first ones there. Stan picked up the box of beer he had stashed in the back of my truck earlier, carried it inside and gave it to Oscar. “It’s from both of us,” he said.

I looked at Oscar wondering if he had started drinking again.

“Don’t worry man; I’m just going to have a couple, no big deal.”

Gloria’s parents had set aside a long table made up of three shorter tables that could sit twelve to fourteen people. There was a great aroma emanating from the kitchen that hit us as we entered the warm and humid restaurant.

Gloria’s mother welcomed us and sat us down. Moments later Stan’s wife and daughters arrived.

“It was too cold to walk,” she told Stan, “so I drove.”

Stan introduced her and the girls to us and asked them to sit down beside him. His wife fussed a bit with the girls, who looked like nine and eleven, and then sat down beside them. Both Oscar and I looked

nervous. Stan sensed that and decided to say something to break the tension.

“See this man here,” he said pointing at me, “Daddy learned something from him today.”

“What’s that Daddy?” asked the little one.

“He showed me how to clean a car part the easy and cheap way.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” Stan’s wife said to me. “A few evenings ago we had Oscar over for dinner and all he talked about was you and the things you do for our community.”

“Why thank you Oscar,” I said. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“I don’t!” he said.

“Did you know that your husband offered me a job today?” I asked her.

“No! What to clean greasy car parts?” she asked and laughed.

“No, to do his paperwork and keep his books,” I replied.

“And how much is he paying you?” she asked.

“Well, I don’t know, I haven’t taken the job yet but it’s not about the money. It’s about the distance I have to travel. It’s not worth it for me to travel all the way from the base for just a few hours of work. He tells me he needs someone with experience in finances but I don’t know anyone with that kind of experience. Plus the weather gets so bad out here sometimes; I don’t think it’s safe for me to drive.”

“Did he put you up to this?” she asked.

“Nope,” I replied.

“Look, honey, I can do that for you. Just bring your paperwork home and show me what to do and I’ll do it for you. I don’t mind.”

“Before you accept, negotiate your salary. Don’t work for free,” I said jokingly.

They all laughed.

“I will,” she said.

Moments later Fred, Olivia and Agnes arrived. Olivia sat next to me and said, “You’ll have to tell me more about those Italian girls. You didn’t finish telling me everything earlier.”

Just about then Joe, his wife and three girls showed up at the door. Joe remarked how cold it was and then introduced his wife and three daughters. His wife looked aged like him, weathered down by the elements but his oldest daughter looked remarkable. She had a strong body and a beautiful face. Both Oscar and I were staring at her like we hadn’t seen a woman before.

Joe must have noticed and said, “This here is the pillar of our farm, she does practically everything. Her mother and I are getting old and aren’t what we used to be and if it wasn’t for her I don’t know how we would have survived. Plenty-a-men have come around but didn’t stay, farm work is hard. We haven’t been able to find a man for her. Perhaps you fellows might be interested?”

She was about my age but had a face and figure that were remarkably attractive. She looked at me and said, “Don’t mind my pop, he’s just looking out for me. I could find a fellow if I wanted, but I have my obligations.”

I didn’t say anything and neither did Oscar.

There was a considerable age difference between the first daughter and the other two. I looked at them and they too were beautiful but much younger than the first one. The older daughter must have sensed what I was thinking so she said, “If you’re thinking about the difference in our age, those two are legit... I’m a lovechild.”

“It’s true,” said Joe. “She sure is a lovechild.”

At about the same time Gloria’s dad came over and said the food was ready to be served.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring anything but right now is not a good time for us. I’ll bring a lamb in the spring and we can roast it,” Joe suggested.

“What will you have to drink? We have beer and white wine,” Gloria’s mother said.

All the men said beer. The women said white wine.

The farmer’s wife and older daughter stood up and went to help. The older daughter then waved at her sisters and they went into the kitchen. They brought a plate of fish for each of us. The older daughter brought the beer and wine. Their mother brought orange juice for the four younger girls.

The fish was prepared well. It was broiled with slices of lemon on top. It was good but not as good as Rosa’s. I didn’t say anything other than compliment the chef on how good it tasted.

When we finished eating the fish, Gloria’s mother served us pie with ice cream. This was the first time Joe’s younger girls spoke, remarking on how good the pie tasted with ice cream.

“This is a restaurant dear, they make all kinds of nice things here,” their mother explained.

Joe again mentioned the military base and wanted to know if I had eaten any of the meat he’d supplied and how it tasted after being frozen for years. I told him I ate it practically every day and it was okay. It wasn’t damaged in any way and it had no peculiar taste.

“That’s because it was wrapped well and frozen fresh. Nowadays they let the meat drain and cure, sitting for days in refrigerators and then they freeze it, transport it, sometimes in refrigerators, freeze it

again, let it thaw and sell it as fresh. Sometimes they add food coloring to make it look as fresh as if it was just cut. Sometimes they add preservatives. Well, I'm glad it's still good which tells me I did the right thing."

With those words, Joe dropped his serviette and said, "A farmer's work is never done. We got to get going, thank you folks for the great dinner. Come on girls." They all got up, smiled and left.

"What a peculiar family," remarked Agnes. "I bet you his girls were home schooled. And look at the difference in age between the first daughter and the other two."

We were all thinking the same thing but pretended to be shocked when Agnes said that.

Olivia gave her a look.

Agnes looked at her and said, "Oh, don't give me that look. I can say what I want. I'm a crazy old lady. And besides nobody cares what I say. The know-it-all girls at the bank sure don't care. They look at me like I'm some sort of alien from another world. They'll get old too, just watch and see, and they'll forget things... The fish, by the way, was superb, thanks to the cook and to my grandson the fisherman."

"Mother? You're drunk," remarked Olivia.

"And the wine was superb dear," Agnes said and drank the remaining wine in her glass in one gulp.

Stan's girls kept looking at Agnes. His wife looked nervous.

She looked at Stan and said, "It's getting kind of late, I should take the girls home."

"I'll come with you. I don't have my car here so I need a ride." Stan thanked Gloria's mom and dad for the wonderful dinner and me for the fish and, after they all said goodnight, left.

Olivia was about to say something to her mother but I squeezed her hand and she backed off.

Fred spoke up and said, “We’d best go too, we need to take Agnes home.”

Olivia whispered in my ear. “Best not to say anything when she’s drunk like that because one never knows what she might say?”

They also got up and left.

“Man, what just happened?” Oscar asked, looking at me.

“Nothing happened. We’re all people with different peculiarities which sometimes get in the way of our socializing. That’s all,” I replied.

“Are we still friends?” he asked.

“You and I say all sorts of things to each other and we’re still friends, right?”

“You’re right man. I tend to over think things.”

“We should go too. These people have been on their feet all day working hard. But before we go we should offer to clean up,” I said. Oscar agreed.

When Gloria’s mother came back Oscar asked her what we could do to help clean up the place. She told us to put the empties away, which amounted to two beer bottles and one wine bottle, and put the full bottles in the fridge. Then, while Oscar took the dirty plates back to the kitchen I mopped up the floor, separated the tables and put them in their original places.

After that we thanked our hosts for the food and said good night. On the way out Gloria’s mom gave us each a hug.

It was bitterly cold outside and the weather was getting ugly. Oscar suggested I take him home to the service station and go straight home to the base. I agreed.

The drive was treacherous but I was familiar with the road and made it back safely.

I immediately went to the fireplace and started a fire; not because it was cold but more for my comfort. I got my bottle of rakia out and drank while thinking about the things that had transpired at the restaurant. I watched the flames dance as I drank.

I found it difficult to live without people and awkward to live with them. I often wondered why that was.

I got up the next day with a headache. I realized I hadn't drunk much water. I nursed the headache sitting inside by one of the windows watching the snow fall and the bitter wind whirl it around.

It snowed on and off for the next five days.

It stopped snowing on the sixth day so I decided to call Oscar and see how he was doing. He wasn't there. No one answered the telephone. I called Fred, no one was there either. I called the restaurant, same thing.

I decided to call Gloria. Thank God her school answered the phone and put me in touch.

I asked her if she knew what was happening. She told me there was a power outage in town. Some sort of accident had taken out both the electrical grid and telephone lines. I asked her how everyone was coping without electricity. She told me they were probably at Joe's farm. Joe had a wood stove and a fireplace.

I felt good after talking to Gloria. It was nice to hear her voice after being isolated and alone on the base. She sounded more mature and confident. It seemed she had lost some of her shyness, but not her humility.

I felt anxious after I hung up. I couldn't sit around any longer so I got dressed in my usual winter gear and went to start the beast. It started without problems but I noticed I hadn't filled its tank with diesel fuel.

I drove it to the pumps and about half an hour later the tank was full to the top. That should last me a while, I thought and then drove off into town. I took my time driving along the back road and made sure the snowdrifts were cleared. The beast was a powerful machine and capable of moving mountains of snow.

Three and a half hours later I was in town. Nothing was open. I drove around looking for someone to ask how to get to Joe's farm. There was no one around. I then saw a young lady wrapped in a blanket looking outside from her living room window. The moment she saw me she ran outside and asked me where everyone was. She said she'd arrived in town a few hours ago and found it a ghost town. I asked her how she had gotten here. She said she drove, the highway was cleared of snow but there was a giant avalanche along the adjacent hill which swept down all the hydro and telephone poles. That's what the snow removal crew working on the road had told her.

I asked her if she knew where Joe's farm was. She said she did and was willing to take me there.

I helped her board the beast's cab and she remarked how warm it was inside. She took the blanket and her coat off and set them on one of the seats. She was a young and beautiful girl. I estimated she was younger than me.

She came over, shook my hand and said, "I'm Emily."

"I'm Peter, nice to meet you Emily," and then asked how she knew where Joe's farm was.

"Joe's wife and my mother are sisters."

"Wow, what a small world," I said. "So, you and Joe's daughters are first cousins, are you close?"

“I was close with his oldest daughter when we were young but then I moved out of town to work and lost contact. I usually see my family during holidays when I come to town. I came back to spend Christmas with my parents but I don’t know what’s going to happen now without electricity.”

She sat down beside me as we slowly drove down a country road plowing the snow as we moved along.

She stood up, pointed and said, “This is my Uncle Joe’s farm.”

I took a wide sweep over the bridge to make sure I didn’t hit the sides and parked the beast in Joe’s front yard.

Emily jumped out and ran towards the front door where she was greeted by a pile of people. It looked like the entire town was there.

Oscar ran over and said, “You’ve got to take these people to the base. We’re packed like rats in here. We won’t be able to last too long.”

“Let’s load them up on the beast. I can pack about twenty-four in here,” I said.

“There are more than that here,” he said.

“Then I’ll have to come back,” I replied.

“What if you plow the road? If you do that they can drive themselves to the base.”

“I’ve already plowed the road all the way from the base to here,” I said.

“I’ll speak to them and get them to go to the base on their own. I’ll also speak to Stan and we can organize a convoy for those who don’t know where the base is.”

“Get them to bring food, clothing and bedding material. Also, whoever doesn’t have a ride, can ride with me in the beast. I’ll go back to the base and wait for you there.”

Oscar went back inside and a pile of women and children came out and climbed on board. Emily, her parents and brother, Joe’s wife and three daughters and a whole bunch of other women and children I didn’t know got on. Emily sat beside me again and I asked her to keep the children quiet and entertained. There was a lot of chatter and the women asked a lot of questions. I asked Emily why Joe didn’t come with us. She said he had to stay here and look after the farm animals but he was going to be okay.

When Emily was busy with the children Joe’s oldest daughter came over, sat down beside me and said, “You have a mighty powerful machine. What do you call it?”

“I call it the beast,” I replied.

“Why?” she asked.

I pressed on the gas hard and it roared like a beast. “That’s why,” I said.

When Emily saw her cousin talking to me she called her over and asked her to help with the children.

“I think my little cousin likes you,” she said, “and she’s jealous of me being around you.”

“Do you think so?” I asked. “I just met her today.”

“Well, it’s not you, it’s me. She’s always been in competition with me.”

“Are you sure about that? You’re family and you shouldn’t be in competition. Also you’re adults now...” I said and smiled.

She left and went to see what her cousin wanted.

As soon as she left another young woman came over with her infant in her arms.

“Is it going to be much longer? I need to breast feed my baby,” she said.

“I’m sorry dear,” I said. “The trip will take three hours but I see no reason why you can’t breast feed your baby right here and now?”

“Well I don’t want people to think I’m some sort of weirdo exposing my breasts in public.”

“Just sit here beside me and feed your baby,” I said. “If anyone complains I’ll toss them off the bus.”

She thanked me, whipped out her enormous breast and shoved it in the baby’s mouth.

When she was done she thanked me again and went back to her seat.

Emily’s cousin came back and asked me if I had enjoyed that and I asked her what she meant by ‘that’.

“I know men love large breasts. I just wanted to know if you liked it.”

I didn’t know what to say so I said, “For God’s sake, she’s a mother with a baby that needed feeding. What was I supposed to say?” I then made the mistake of looking at her chest.

I would have to say this was the most unusual trip I’d ever taken but finally we had arrived at the base.

I drove the beast inside the underground parking lot and left the big door open. I escorted everyone into the big room and sat the women around the big table. I then took Emily and her cousin to the kitchen and showed them where the dishes and ice cream were. They brought ice cream for everyone. I showed the mothers where the washrooms were and the beds they would sleep in. It was chaos

everywhere but Emily and her cousin seemed to have a handle on the children.

I needed a drink badly.

“Does anyone feel like a drink?” I asked.

Several women nodded including Emily and her cousin.

I went down to the kitchen, got a bottle of rakia and about half a dozen juice glasses. After I sat down I filled them a quarter full and said, “Ladies help yourselves.”

Emily tried it and made a face.

I then realized that these women had never had a drink like this before so I said, “Ladies, take it easy with this stuff, it’s really strong. Sip it slowly.”

Emily’s father and a couple of other men wanted to try it too so I sent Emily to get more glasses from the kitchen.

By then the first cars began to arrive, among which were Oscar, Stan and his family, Gloria’s mom and dad and Fred, Olivia and Agnes.

Oscar told me that he and Stan had informed other people about the base and had invited them to come up.

Oscar then went back and asked those who had come with him to bring their things in and find a place in the building to set up for the night. Those who had brought food he asked to put it in the refrigerators or in an appropriate place.

Not many brought food. They couldn’t prepare anything without electricity and we hadn’t told them that we had a kitchen where they could cook their food.

I put Emily’s cousin in charge of coordinating things around the kitchen. I asked Emily to find space for people to sleep. She gave the beds to mothers with babies and to the older people.

I took Gloria's mom and dad and showed them the kitchen with the ovens, stoves, grills, fryers, walk-in freezers and big walk-in fridges. They were quite impressed and told me that they knew how to use every piece of equipment.

I then asked them to prepare dinner for about sixty people and ask for help if they needed it.

I was going out of my mind trying to do everything for everyone but then Agnes pulled me to the side and told me to stop fretting.

"Sit down and have a drink with me," she said.

She wanted to know where I'd gotten the rakia so I told her she'd have to speak to Oscar, that he and Peter Sr. had gotten it from somewhere.

"It's good stuff," she said. "I wouldn't mind getting some for myself."

She then yelled at Emily's cousin and asked her to bring something greasy to eat from the kitchen.

When Emily's cousin came back with a bunch of fried breakfast sausages I grabbed her by the hand and said, "I'm sorry but I don't know your name."

She smiled and said, "I'm Sylvia."

"Thank you for the sausages and for everything you're doing. And, by the way, I'm Peter."

"I knew that," she replied.

Agnes piped up and said, "This is my grandson you know. This is his place."

More people started to arrive and Sylvia and Emily escorted them in, put away the food they'd brought and found a place for them to sleep.

Oscar, who was keeping count, said we had about sixty people and that should be it. We'd gotten everyone settled and dinner would be served in about half an hour.

Agnes asked him about the rakia and he went and got her a bottle and told her to hide it. She was sleeping with Olivia in one of the rooms, so she hid it there. Fred was sleeping in the waiting area by himself.

When Oscar got back I asked him if he had any ideas about how we were going to entertain all these people. He suggested we get the television working. That way we could get the news, TV programs, movies and even sports.

Since he had installed the television for Peter, I suggested he get it working.

Minutes later we had television, but only local channels.

After that Oscar built a fire and had most of the old people sitting around it.

Agnes refused to let me do anything and kept me sitting with her drinking and eating greasy sausages. When Olivia saw me glued to her mother she came over and told her to let me go.

To my surprise she did. "Go and talk to one of those beautiful girls over there," Olivia said, pointing at Sylvia and Emily.

"Yes mother," I said out loud and left.

Emily who was watching us overheard our conversation and came over. "Is she really your mother? You have such a young mom."

"She's my step mom," I said. "She was my father's wife."

At about the same time I heard Gloria's mother calling. I went downstairs to see what she wanted. Emily followed me. Sylvia said dinner was ready and they needed volunteers to deliver the plates and asked Emily to gather everyone at the big table.

I went back up and got Olivia to gather some of the younger people to help the kitchen staff deliver the food to the big table. Sylvia took control and had everyone hopping.

About ten minutes later the food was delivered and everyone was sitting around the table. Unbeknownst to me we had the town's mayor and his family as guests. Stan spoke to me privately and said that the mayor wanted to say a few words and asked if it was okay.

After I said yes, no problem, I thought to myself that this guy is the mayor and when he finds out this is a base God knows what he might do.

So, in his speech, after introducing himself he spoke about the power outage and how he was working very hard to coordinate county resources to restore power so that people could return to their homes by Christmas day, which was three days away. When he was done he thanked me for opening the base to the general public while the emergency lasted. He then spoke about the history of the base which he had learned from his grandfather. His grandfather was a young man when he served in the army and trained on this base. He also thanked me for maintaining the building and the memories of the fallen soldiers with this great display of military flags, symbols, uniforms, guns and ammunition.

Everyone turned their heads to look at the big displays. I too looked at them with admiration which, until that moment, I had been taking for granted.

Everyone then turned their heads and looked at me. I smiled sheepishly and bowed my head slightly.

Dinner was noisy, plentiful and good. Everyone was talking but quietly. Emily and Sylvia had good control of the children at the far

end of the table. They were able to relieve the mothers so that they could eat in peace.

The rakia I had drunk with Agnes earlier had worked on me and I felt calm and relaxed.

The girls got ice cream for the children and for some of the women. Agnes opted for ice cream instead of rakia. I looked at her.

She whispered and said, "I'm already plastered, if I drink any more it will put me to sleep. Besides I want to know what the ladies are gossiping about."

When everyone was done eating they started leaving the big table and sitting in small groups around the smaller tables in the lower part of the big room. I saw Gloria's mom get up and start to collect the dishes. I went over to her and told her that she didn't have to do that. She had done enough for everyone already.

She looked at me with teary eyes and said, "Thank you, God bless you."

After that I didn't have to say anything. Gloria's mom went and sat with Olivia while Sylvia and Emily summoned the older boys and girls and gave them their first lesson in clearing tables and washing dishes. Not a single dish was broken.

As I watched the boys and girls go up and down the stairs carrying dishes, Sylvia came over and said, "Thanks for the opportunity. I always wanted to be a leader. Also thank you for allowing me to get closer to my dear cousin."

"You're welcome. And thank you for your help. So, you're telling me you solved the 'boy' problem with your cousin?"

"Yes, as long as I keep my hands off you. We agreed that you're off limits to both of us."

"So, let me understand this, you both want me but none can have me?"

She made a clicking sound with her mouth, smiled, winked and said, "That's correct!" She then went down to the kitchen to see what was going on.

After Oscar went and brought rakia and glasses for those who wanted to drink, he sat down in front of the fireplace and stared at the flames.

I went and sat beside him and said, "At the rate you're giving it away I won't have any left?"

He knew what I was talking about and said, "You don't need it, and you're better off without it. I just don't know what I saw in it. It almost ruined my life."

I pat him on the back with my open hand.

He looked at me and said, "I should be with my own people at home in the village. I miss them very much."

"Me too," I said, "I should be home with my grandparents," while seriously considering leaving this place and going back to Toronto. I felt like telling Oscar everything but that would have been selfish on my part, putting his safety in jeopardy. I had to figure this out on my own first before I told Oscar. I figured he was the only person I could trust.

The base seemed to take on a life of its own with the chatter of children. With Sylvia and Emily on duty the place worked like a well-oiled machine. In the meantime both Oscar and I kept staring at the flames while sitting in front of the fireplace...

We followed the same routine for the next two days.

Early on the third day, Christmas day, I heard a loud roar coming from the big room. I ran down through the stage and heard the television blaring. The reporter said electricity had been restored in town.

The mayor called everyone to the big room so that he could make an announcement. He stood on the stage and told everyone that they had two choices, they could leave now and go home, or they could stay here and spend Christmas and have their Christmas meal in the base.

A younger child, a little girl yelled, “Will there be pie with ice cream, I like pie with ice cream.”

Everyone laughed out loud.

The mayor looked at me. I shook my head “yes”.

“Yes, little girl, there will be pie with ice cream.”

All the children began to cheer.

The mayor then said, “The children have spoken. It’s unanimous, we’re staying here”

No one objected.

The mayor then came over to me and Oscar and asked, “Can we pull this off?”

“We don’t have any pies,” I said.

“Do you have a phone?” he asked.

Without thinking at all I said, “Yes, up here.”

I escorted him through the stage and into the office.

“Nice tank!” he remarked before he started dialing.

I went outside to give him some privacy but the mayor spoke so loud I could hear him in the garage.

He called the local baker, a relative of his, and asked him if he wanted to make some easy money. He asked him to bring everything he had.

“Bring enough pastries like pies, cakes, sweet buns, Christmas bread, as well as ice cream and cream for coffee for about sixty people and deliver it to the old military base at the quarry,” he said. He told the man to also bring his family there to celebrate Christmas with him.

At the end he told the man that the mayor’s office was going to pay for everything from the township’s emergency fund.

When we returned to the big room the mayor made an announcement and told the people that the pies and ice cream were coming and they were a donation from him.

There were cheers, especially from the children

I didn’t say anything.

When I came back and sat next to Oscar all I could hear was the commotion coming from the kitchen. Everyone was hard at work preparing our Christmas dinner.

“They’re busy cooking our Christmas dinner,” said Oscar. “They’ve apparently got the fryer working and are making French fries. I don’t know what oil they’re using but you won’t have any left by the time they’re done. You won’t have any food either. And don’t tell me it’s okay because it’s Christmas.”

“It’s Christmas!” I said. “What, you’ve got something against Christmas?”

“They’ll eat your food and you’ll never hear from them again, especially from the mayor. You watch and see, the headlines will say mayor saves Christmas and your name, your contribution, those burning over the hot stoves won’t be mentioned. Not even the names of the beautiful girls doing the hard work.”

“What, you don’t like the mayor?” I asked.

“No I don’t. He mistreated me and then had the nerve to look me in the eye. That bastard waited until it started raining and sent the cops on me to evict me from under the bridge. He did that to me several times and left me out in the rain to get wet and cold. He’s not a nice person and I don’t like him.”

“Just give it a few more hours and it will all be over,” I said.

“I guess you’re right,” he replied and we both went back to watching the flames in the fireplace.

About an hour later farmer Joe arrived with the baker.

“It smells mighty nice in here,” he yelled out loud. His two younger daughters ran over to greet him. His older daughter, looking reserved, also greeted him.

“I’m looking for volunteers to bring the pies and ice cream up here. Do I have any?” Joe yelled with a big smile.

Every child yelled, “Me, me, me...”

Sylvia and Emily rounded up the usual suspects and sent them to the indoor parking lot to bring the goodies to the kitchen.

I grabbed Sylvia by the arm and said, “Please make sure everything is washed, cleaned and put back in its place before you leave. Make sure the beds are made with clean sheets. Leave the used sheets and towels outside the rooms. Thank you.”

She gave me two thumbs up and ran outside.

I went and sat with Oscar again staring at the flames until they called us for lunch.

And Oscar was right, the mayor took over everything and everything that was done he made sound like it was his contribution and his idea. Only Sylvia and Agnes looked repulsed by his attitude. I was

so turned off I didn't even listen to what he had to say during his Christmas dinner speech.

As soon as we finished eating, Oscar and I went back to the fireplace. Oscar added more firewood and watched me cringe looking at the good old boys and girls whooping it up, drinking all my booze and eating all my food like it was theirs.

Oscar was right, it was Christmas but I was livid. I told myself to be patient and this too would soon be over.

People began to leave and never bothered to say thank you or goodbye.

When the mayor and his family left Oscar came alive again and came up and sat at the big table. Our old friends joined us and, to my surprise, Stan apologized for how the mayor had acted but said he had no choice in what he did if he wanted to keep his service station operational.

Agnes piped up and said, "Someone ought to put a bullet in his head. I see you have enough guns here. I'll do it."

I looked at her surprised.

"Well, didn't she tell you? He came on to my Olivia and then denied the whole thing calling her a liar."

"I remember that," said Fred. "I saw him forcing himself on her and I went in to help her. He threatened me too. I told him she was my friend but he didn't care. He told me to keep my mouth shut if I wanted to stay alive. Now he walks around like that never happened! Who invited him here anyway?"

"He invited himself," said Joe. "He invited himself to my place even though he'd made a move on my daughter. She was home alone during one of his campaigns and he tried to force himself on her. Good thing I arrived when I did. I told him I would shoot his ass full of salt if he ever showed up here again but then here he was with his whole family.

Emily's mother asked to be excused. "We need to check on our home and make sure the water pipes didn't burst," she said and asked Joe if he would drive them home.

"I can only take six in my van," he said.

Emily and Sylvia said they'd hitch a ride with me so Joe took his wife, two daughters and Emily's mother, father and brother.

Olivia, Fred and Agnes thanked us for everything and wished us Merry Christmas and they too left.

Stan's wife and daughters were also getting anxious and wanted to go home so both Oscar and I said we understood and told Stan to go.

After everyone had left I told the girls my truck could only hold three so one of them would have to sit on either my lap or Oscar's.

They had a good laugh. Oscar wasn't amused with my nonsense.

Emily said, "I'll drive and Sylvia can sit on your lap or his," pointing at Oscar. Oscar looked at her and she quickly apologized.

"What's with you girls?" I asked. "What's with the rivalry over men?"

Sylvia said, "I love her like a sister but I don't understand her."

Emily said, "Look at her, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Every time she came around my boyfriend would go wild over her and would want her. I hated that."

"Well, how is that her fault?" I asked Emily.

Oscar piped up and said, "All of you please grow up. Blood is always thicker than water. Your cousin is far more important to you than any jerk that comes along. And you," he said loudly pointing to Emily, "do you think those jerks care about you? If they did they wouldn't have looked at other women. They are simply selfish jerks

not worth your time. You are a beautiful and smart woman and you should be way past that nonsense. Your cousin is your kin and you should love her and not see her as your rival.”

“Oscar, take it easy man,” I said. “The girls are just having fun.”

“He’s right,” said Emily. “I admit I’ve been a jerk too. Look at Sylvia here, she has sacrificed her life looking after her family when she could have married any man she wanted and I, I’ve got the nerve to disrespect her. Now that I think about it, it sickens me.”

“Dear ladies, I’m too tired to have a philosophical discussion with you so please, allow me to drive you home. It’ll be a little tight for the four of us in the truck but we’re friends. If you want to take something from the left over stuff or do something before we go please do it and let’s go.”

“No, we don’t need to take anything, we ate enough to last us a couple of days,” said Sylvia. Emily agreed.

We then got into my truck and I took them to town. We dropped Oscar off first, then Emily and then Sylvia.

Sylvia jokingly said, “I would invite you in but my parents are home.” She then said, “Please drop by sometime and take me out to dinner or even to a movie.” And with that she walked away.

I drove back to the base. It was late in the evening when I arrived.

The next day I spent cleaning and doing laundry.

Weathering the winter blues

The weather turned bad after I returned from town on Christmas day. I did everything I could to keep busy. I even watched television but wasn't happy with the crap they put on. Television could be a powerful teaching tool. One could teach people what's really essential instead of forcing on them things they don't want or need and make them watch unrealistic things that have less to do with life or improving lives and more to do with promoting commercial products and corporate agendas.

Television has become, or maybe it always has been, a tool for selling products and dummifying down people instead of making them smarter. Almost everything they try to do on television they claim is for me. Almost everything they say to me is about me. How do they know that? They don't even know me.

They say it's my weather, my news, my entertainment... Did I ask for it? No! So, how is it mine? Why is it for me?

They say it's for me but they only show me what they want to show me. What about the stuff I want to see and know?

I often argue with the television but it doesn't help, it still does what it feels like. It's insensitive to my needs and I find that offensive. That's why I watch it as little as possible.

Even when I watch the news they only tell me what happened, what someone did. But I want to know why, why did that someone do that. Television rarely ever tells me that.

They say a husband killed his wife. They say when he did it, where he did it and how he did it, but rarely do they say why he did it. I want to know why he did it. What was his motive, his reason for doing it? If that was made known other women could avoid the same thing happening to them, maybe.

Unfortunately television tends to omit that. Why? I don't know why!

There are so many channels and if properly employed each channel could teach different things. You could have one channel with a teacher teaching math, another teaching geography, another teaching science, history, culture, languages, cooking and so on. Difficult subjects in school could be taught over the airwaves so that children who have difficulty learning in school could learn them. They could be made simpler if taught by an expert on television. Things about Canada, important things, the kinds of things new immigrants need to learn could be taught on television.

But no, the most important thing we learn from television is how to buy products we don't need and spend money we don't have.

If I sound angry it's because I am. Television is an idiot box. But I have to admit, no one forced me to watch it, I did that on my own. Enough about the television!

In my boredom I drank a lot of rakia. I then thought about my liver. I thought about all the women I had met, my opportunities to live with one of them...

The funny thing about being alone is the more isolated I became the more I wanted to be isolated. My anxiety about meeting someone grew higher as I became lonelier. I wondered how people coped with loneliness and how they managed living alone. Unfortunately I never heard them talk about that on television.

I regularly went to the shooting range and fired a few shots. My aim didn't seem to improve. It was like trying to play the guitar without being able to read music and with no one to show me how to pick the strings. Everything I did sounded wrong.

I went fishing on a regular basis and became sick of eating fish.

I found the telephone wire I promised Oscar I'd look for but I hadn't told him about it yet. I felt depressed and I didn't want to talk to anyone or have anyone know that I was depressed.

I called my friends less and less. Besides, they were all busy with their jobs. I called Gloria regularly but, it's seemed, it was always

the wrong time. She had a nice, soothing voice. I liked listening to her, even for a short time. She seemed to have integrated well into school life and I didn't want to distract her from it so I tended to listen far more than I talked. I spent most of the night on New Year's Eve on the phone with her. I hoped it was okay and I that I hadn't imposed on her too much. She told me she would stay on the telephone until someone came to use it. No one wanted to use the telephone on New Year's Eve. At busy times each student was allowed only fifteen minutes.

I told her many things about the base during our conversation and promised to take her for a tour when she came back to town. She told me her mom had told her about the big kitchen and how impressed she was with it.

“My poor mom, that's all she knows about in this world. I feel sorry for her.”

Gloria was nice and I hoped she'd stay that way.

I wanted to know more about Jean and how she was doing. The thought of what I had done to her haunted me like a reoccurring nightmare. Unfortunately I had no means of contacting her other than to drive to the reservation.

I wanted to call Sylvia. I could have got her number from Gloria's mother but I didn't. I hardly knew Sylvia, plus she had her hands full with the farm. I didn't want to bother her. Emily for sure had gone back to work and I didn't know her parents. I decided I wasn't going to bother them or her.

I even considered calling Maria but every time I tried I chickened out at the last minute.

All these things were happening to me, I concluded, because I was living alone and away from human contact. I vowed this would be my first and last winter here, if I survived it. I wanted to go home to Toronto but I had to find a way so as not to put my friends in harms way. I also had to leave under good terms and tie all loose ends.

If I left, I was going to leave the base to Oscar and his people but I had to find a way to pass it on without creating attention or causing problems.

I ran out of rakia sometime in late January. It was too treacherous to drive my truck to town and I didn't want to drive the beast just to get my fix of booze so I decided it was time to quit cold turkey.

The hardest part about giving up drinking was not the cold sweats or the alcohol demons, it was the boredom of having nothing to do and nothing to quiet my mind.

After a couple of days of tearing my hair out I decided to take a shot of the firewater I had been carrying around for months.

Moments after I gulped it down it gave me such a rush and a focused mind that I got hold of the tank and I tried to lift it. I felt very powerful as I grabbed the back of the tank and tried to lift it up. I watched images of my life flash through my mind at an incredible rate. I managed to revisit everything important I had done in a matter of a few short moments. And, even though I couldn't budge the tank, everyone I saw in my mind was happy and smiling at me.

Then, suddenly, I was on my ship alone, spiraling out of control and crashing down. I saw myself die but I wasn't dead.

Sometime later I found myself lying by the tank on the garage floor unable to move. Every part of my body was paralyzed. I was aching. I had terrible pain everywhere. I felt very calm and serene like I had fought in a battle and I had won.

All I had to do now was heal my wounds and I would be fine.

My priority was focused on getting healed and I was at peace lying there on the dirty cement floor. I had to get well and nothing else mattered. I wasn't thirsty, hungry, bored, or anxious. I was just happy to be alive lying there immobile. My mind refused to allow me to think beyond that.

What was the most important thing in my life today, I asked myself. The air I breathe was the answer. If there was no air to breathe I would die in a matter of minutes.

What was the second most important thing in my life today, I asked myself. The water I drink was the answer. If there was no water to drink I would die in a matter of days. I wasn't worried, I had plenty of time.

What was the third most important thing in my life today, I asked myself. The food I eat was the answer. If there was no food to eat I would die in a matter of a week or so. I wasn't worried, I had plenty of time.

What was the fourth most important thing in my life today...

"Stop it, stop it," I heard myself yell. "I'm not a robot powering up after a crash. I'm a human being and my priorities vary according to circumstances.

I tried to do something impossible under the influence of a powerful drug and strained every muscle in my body. I'll pay for what I did with severe pain but I will recover. I was warned about the effects of the firewater but I guess I didn't want to believe them.

Hours passed before I was able to move and every time I moved I felt shooting pains everywhere. Eventually I dragged myself to my bed. But, despite the excruciated pain I felt every time I moved, my mind seemed to be clear and free of anxiety and clutter. I kept going back to the three most important things and kept thinking I would be okay for the moment as long as there was air to breathe.

I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up I was feeling wonderfully refreshed until I tried to move my arm. The pain was still there but only when I tried to move. As long as there was air to breathe I would be okay I thought. There was plenty of time for everything else.

It felt really good to be alive even though I was still paralyzed and couldn't move. I wasn't worried at all that I was alone and there was

no one to help me. I didn't want anyone to help me. I wanted to do it myself. My mind was free of all clutter and that was very important to me at the moment.

I tried to figure out what had happened and the only thing I could think was that either the firewater or the crazy stunt I had pulled trying to lift the tank must have flushed out all my fears and inhibitions and now I was free at last. I had to find out which it was so I pledged I would vigorously exercise once I got well and see what happened.

Another thing I learned in this state was that I was able to turn on and off my mind. Once turned off I was able to sleep no problem.

I thought of my friends here, in Toronto, and even on Ostikon and all I wanted was to be with them. Just to be near them, watch them and listen to them. This was very unusual for me I thought, but not so unusual for a person who had had a traumatic experience. I liked the new feeling. I didn't know how long it was going to last but I liked it. It gave me the confidence I needed to be a sociable human being again. The psychological walls I was surrounded by had fallen.

I looked at my watch, it was late evening. I forced myself out of bed and made it to my desk. I decided I liked my pain. I telephoned Gloria and got her on the line. I asked her if it was okay to talk and if she had the time. She said she had plenty of time as long as she wasn't kicked off the phone. I enjoyed listening to her telling me about the things she was learning. I told her that I missed her very much and how I wished the weather was a little better so I could go and visit her. She must have sensed I was a bit too mushy and wanted to know if something was wrong. I told her I had hurt myself trying to exercise and all I could think of was her.

"Your pain reminded you of me?" she asked.

"No, my dear girl, my pain reminded me of my love for you."

"Oh, that's so sweet... You'd best find yourself a girlfriend. I recommend Joe's oldest daughter."

“Your mother told you about that and you didn’t say anything to me all this time?”

She didn’t answer.

So I said, “No, no, not her it’s you that I want.”

“My mom told me how you were looking at her,” she replied.

“My dear Gloria, I’m a man and it’s in my nature to look at women. I’m like a soldier ready to salute anytime a young and beautiful girl passes me by. I can’t help it, God made me that way.”

“I love you too,” she said. “But I have to go before they drag me off the phone. Call me!”

The next thing I did was look at Maria’s business card. I wanted to call her now that I had the confidence to do it but it was late and the consulate was closed.

I decided to call Olivia with hopes of getting Sylvia’s number. Olivia answered the phone. I told her I was feeling lonely all by myself up here and decided to call her. She was happy to hear from me but was wondering why I was calling so late and if something was wrong.

Other than me being bored to death and being alone, I said there was nothing else. To my surprise she said she knew exactly how that felt and that before I had appeared in her life, that’s exactly how she was.

“That’s why I love you so much, silly, you changed my life,” she said.

After that comment I had a new appreciation for Olivia, before that I thought she was infatuated with me and I told her so.

“You silly boy,” she said. “You think so highly of yourself. Now tell your mom what ails you? Is it a girl you want to meet?”

“No, I just want to kiss you. I truly love you and want you to be my step mom forever. Now, do you happen to have Sylvia’s telephone number?”

“As a matter of fact I do. I was with her a couple of days ago. We got together at the restaurant and she had some nice things to say about you. She is, however, disappointed that you haven’t called her. She likes you, you know.”

“Thank you mom, now the number please?”

After she gave me the number I thanked her and said to say hello to Fred for me and hung up.

I was in pain but I was cooking with gas. I wanted to call everyone I could before I lost my confidence again.

I knew it was late but I dialed Sylvia’s number anyway.

Joe answered the phone and said, “Farmer Joe speaking.”

“It’s Peter James Jr., is Sylvia home and may I speak with her?”

All I heard after that was him yelling, “Sylvia, it’s for you, it’s Peter James Jr.” and then he put the receiver down on a hard surface.

I heard voices in the distance but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. Moments later I heard fast moving footsteps and hello.

“Hi Sylvia,” I said. “How are you doing? It’s Peter.”

After an uncomfortable pause she said, “I’m fine, I’m so excited you called. I don’t know what to say.”

“I called to see how you were doing. I know you’re busy and forgive me for calling so late. I figured you would be home by now, I know you work during the day.”

“If I can be honest with you, I am so happy you called. It’s lonely here on the farm and I hardly see anyone my age. Our customers are old men and all they do is ogle me. I’m getting sick of it. I need a break. So, how are you doing? Done anything exciting lately?”

“No, not really, I’ve been cooped up in the base all alone and it’s driving me mad. I’ve got no one to ogle and it’s very depressing. But believe it or not, I’m in high spirits today but I don’t know how long it will last. The winter is brutal here.”

“Oh, you poor soul. I thought I had it hard but I do go out once in a while; not with men but with my female friends. I could go out with men but it would complicate things, if you know what I mean.”

“So, if I understand you correctly, if I come to take you out you’ll turn me down?”

There was a momentary silence and she said, “You’re trying to push my buttons aren’t you? Always with the jokes, that’s why I like you.”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met and to hear you say that warms my heart,” I said.

“Ah, that was the sweetest thing anyone has said to me.”

“Unfortunately we must remain friends only because things could get very complicated for both of us,” I said.

“I understand,” she said, “but my offer for you to take me out sometime is still open... as friends, of course.

And with those words she hung up on me.

I decided I’d had enough phone calls for one day.

I made my way to the sink and had a drink of water before I went back to bed.

Even after those phone calls I was able to turn off the chatter in my mind and go to sleep.

The next day I woke up refreshed. It was very unusual, I thought, until I tried to move and felt excruciating pain. I only felt the pain when I tried to move so I decided to lie on my back and try a few things. I squeezed my hands open and closed and felt pain in my forearms but as I continued doing it I felt less and less pain. I did the same with foot movements and leg raises. It was painful but felt good, like things were healing.

I continued to do light movements until my whole body felt warm and I was able to stand up. I drank more water. I wasn't thirsty until I watched the water run from the tap. I went to the kitchen and pulled out a couple of frozen slices of bread. I bit at the crust and found it tasted delicious. Bread had never tasted so good.

I had no appetite or desire to eat frozen bread but every little bite I took tasted delicious.

I slowly ate both slices and felt satisfied. It was an unbelievable feeling. I felt like I was another person. I wasn't anxious and time passed very slowly. There were no noises in my brain and everything was serene like it should be.

Was I dead? If I was, I was happily dead.

I looked outside. It was a clear and sunny day and, except for the snow, it looked like early morning on a summer day. I imagined how beautiful this place would be in the summer surrounded by the green mountains and showered by the warm golden rays of our yellow sun.

As I slowly and painfully made my way around I felt a certain energy emanating from my being.

"If I'm not dead then God must have plans for me," I thought.

It was seven thirty in the morning and I was sure Oscar would be up and wouldn't start work until eight, so I decided to call him.

When I told him it was me he said I must either be drunk or in some sort of trouble. First I don't call him for a week and now I call him at dawn.

"I'm not drunk or in any trouble. I just pulled a lot of muscles trying to exercise and now I'm sore all over and can't move."

"Baby!" he muttered.

"I just called you to tell you that after searching for a long time I finally found the telephone wire I thought I had. I wanted to catch you before you started work and hear your voice because if I call you when you work you give me the boot telling me you're too busy to talk."

"You're right man, but that's how it is. We can talk anytime but when work has to be done it has to be done. And thank you for finding the wire. How long is it?"

"That I couldn't tell you but it's a huge spool. You can look at it when you come up."

"How are you finding it up there all alone?"

"Well, I ran out of rakia and its been tough since then but I'm managing. I think I'm going to start exercising regularly as soon as my muscles heal and that, I think, should relieve my boredom. I think the weather might also relent a little and if it does I'll come down and see you. How is everything with you?" I asked.

"Oh, we're doing well. Stan looks after the service station, his wife does his books and I do most of the service calls and repairs. We also still get together at the restaurant with our friends but only a couple of times a week."

"Well say hello to everyone from me and talk to you again soon," I said.

And with those words I hung up on Oscar. It was nice to hear his voice and know that he was doing well.

I waited until it was ten o'clock before I telephoned Maria. I knew she started work at nine but I didn't want to call her that early.

The consulate secretary answered the phone in both English and Italian. She had a beautiful voice with a slight Italian accent.

When I told her who I was she said, "Ah, you are Peter James, our hero, we have been expecting your call. Seniors Maria will be delighted to hear your voice."

"Thank you," I said and she patched me in.

"Ciao Peter, how are you doing? So nice of you to call, I was wondering if you were ever going to call," answered Maria.

"Ciao Maria, it's nice to hear your voice. I've been busy lately, spending time with my friends. We also had a power outage here so I opened the base to the public. Some people even celebrated Christmas here. I'm doing fine, thank you."

"Well, I have to tell you... You're a sensation in Italy. When the girls returned home victorious every newspaper and television was there to greet them. They wanted to honour you for what you did for them so they wore the military uniforms you gave them. The Italian's went nuts over the uniforms because the girls looked like their beloved partisans who had fought in World War two. I also want to tell you that the girls kept your secret. They didn't tell anybody you gave them the uniforms, so you don't have to worry about that. But they did tell the press that you rescued them. They said a hermit, who looked like a grandfather but turned out to be young man, came and saved them from the savage cold. They talked about the ice cream you gave them which was a bit funny. Eating ice cream in the middle of a bitter winter – well, it really is funny... Anyway if you ever find yourself in Italy please let me know. You have a lot of friends there who would love to see you and have you as their guest. Anyway, I'm sorry I have to let you go, my ten o'clock appointment is here and I don't want to let them wait too

much longer. It's been nice talking to you and thank you for calling.”

And with those words Maria, the Italian consul, hung up the phone.

I found my conversation with Oscar and Maria therapeutic. My focus on them seemed to lessen my pain. But, despite my pain and discomfort I felt calm and at peace.

After I drank a lot of water I decided to go to bed again. I closed the door to the office, which I usually don't, and turned off the lights.

Even though it was the middle of the day it was pitch black in the room. I lay on my back in the dark staring up. It was also very quiet except for the air circulating that warmed the room and made the air breathable. The pressure of my weight was causing me discomfort in my back. I was able to quiet my mind however and thought of nothing.

I must have fallen asleep and was dreaming. The next thing I remember was being back in my village going up to the village square where a number of men were sitting down on lawn chairs, the kind we didn't have in the village, waiting for a celebration to begin. I didn't know what the celebration was about by my father was there. I asked him if I could go back home, get the rifle, fire a couple of shots and that should help start the celebration. I don't know why I asked that. I don't remember what he said but I do remember him looking at me. The men sitting on the lawn chairs were talking but I couldn't hear their voices.

The next thing I remember was walking on a road up the mountain with a number of young men and women my age. We were thinking of making a film about a story that took place during Ottoman times. After we got together at a place where two roads met we began to discuss the various scenes we were going to film. At that point I asked who was going to write the script. My childhood friend, who in my dream was an adult in his late twenties, distinctly and loudly said, “YOU ARE!”

I figured it was my idea to do the film so I accepted the task of writing the script and we began to walk back to the village. But before we reached the place where we were going to film the last scene, I turned into an old man. Then, suddenly, all the people involved in the making of the story turned into actors and actresses and were wearing authentic late nineteenth century folk clothing. The Ottoman thugs in the story, who were terrorizing the village, were also wearing authentic clothing and carrying swords, pistols and rifles. The story was no longer a story, it was real life.

According to the story, six Ottoman hoodlums regularly came to our village, attacked our women, broke into our homes and stole our food and drinks. They then took everything that they had grabbed to this particular spot on the hill where they camped.

No one was safe in the village as long as they were there. So, according to the story, we decided to kill them. The way we would do it was set a trap for them, ambush them, murder and bury them where no one could find them. But we had to do it in such a way that no one, other than the few accomplices, would know about it. No one else could be trusted.

Being old, having worked in America and having experience in warfare I was chosen to come up with the plan to murder them. It was a simple plan. We would send a young lady up the road to deliver food to the workers in the field, she would pass by a spot where they could see her and stop to pick some flowers. When she saw the hoodlums running for her she would turn back and run and hide in a secluded hole we had dug for her. When the hoodlums ran past her thinking she had gone down the hill, four young men and myself would jump out from behind the rocks and attack them; first with spears and then with knives. We could have used more hands but we couldn't trust anyone else. If we failed in our attack at least the young lady would survive. But there was no chance of that, the four young men were strong and determined and all four had sisters who had been assaulted by the hoodlums. We all wanted them gone. We made the spears and hid them. We also hid the knives behind the rocks where the attack was going to take place.

We knew which house they were going to rob the next day because we had left the front gate open. We had also left a lot of rakia lying around. We wanted them good and drunk when we attacked them.

The girl did her part masterfully like a well-trained actress. But when we rushed them, instead of fighting fiercely like we expected, they dropped their weapons on the ground, knelt down and began to apologize tearfully. Everyone felt sorry for them, including the girl who came out of hiding, except me. I told them that this had to be done as planned or we would suffer unimaginable consequences.

I asked my men to take their weapons and tie the legs and arms of the hoodlums and lay them face down. I then took one of their swords and told my men and the girl to look away and, one by one, I cut off their heads. Then we buried them and hid their weapons where no one could find them. We also cleaned up their camp and made it look like they had never been there. The girl delivered the food to the people who were working in their fields and returned home like nothing had happened. After we disposed of the bodies we each went our separate ways and returned to the village at different times. No one was the wiser.

The next thing I remember was being in a dark room. This time I was much older than before and my eyesight wasn't very good. As I focused my eyes I saw a baby. It was an infant which couldn't talk yet. It was a boy. He looked at me and let out a loud laugh. His blanket fell off. He was stark naked.

A young woman walked into the room. I assumed she was his mother. She was a beautiful woman.

"I just came from the funeral," she said.

"Who died?" I asked.

"Peter James," she replied.

"Who is Peter James?" I asked.

"You're Peter James."

“How did he die?” I asked.

“By your own hand, you killed him!” she said.

I ignored her comment because it made no sense.

“Who is the little boy?” I asked.

“Otsiron,” she replied.

“Who is Otsiron?” I asked.

“You are. And he too will die by your hand. It’s his destiny to die so he will die. The question is will he die like a coward running and hiding or will he die a hero fighting? I think you will choose to kill him fighting like a hero. Too bad there’ll be nobody to tell his story.”

“Who are you?” I asked her.

“I am the woman,” she replied.

“What woman?”

“I am all the women you met and wanted that you will never have.”

“Why not?!”

“Because that’s your destiny,” she replied.

“You make no sense. If I am Peter James who is now dead and I am the little boy who will die by my own doing then who am I; the person talking to you? And why am I here?”

“I don’t know why you are here but you are the creator and weaver of your own destiny...”

“YOU MAKE NO SENSE!” I yelled out loud.

Suddenly I jumped up in the dark and realized I was still in bed and it had all been a dream.

The pain all over my body was excruciating and I was drenched in sweat.

I slowly got out of bed and went for a shower. The hot water felt good on my sore muscles. I was thirsty but not hungry. It was dark outside. I checked the time and it was past ten o'clock at night. I had slept close to twelve hours. Suddenly I was hungry, very hungry. Eggs came to mind; fried eggs many of them and bread. Not bread, I had to avoid bread. I'd had problems with wheat in the past; it made me tired and my muscles ached.

I went to the kitchen tossed six greasy breakfast sausages in the pan and added four eggs as they started to fry. I was running out of eggs.

I ate everything and I felt good and relaxed. I went to the fireplace and started a fire. I then got a thick blanket, sat on it and stared at the dancing flames.

I couldn't shake off what I had dreamt. What the woman said made no sense. I knew very well there was no woman in my dream. It was my own mind telling me something, but what?

It seemed like I was caught in a time warp in my dream where the past, present and the future existed at the same time and where reality and imagination were intertwined.

This is what you get for screwing around with powerful and dangerous drugs, I told myself. I was told many times that I should be careful with the firewater and only use it for emergencies and not for relieving boredom. But did I listen? No! I could have been crippled. Anyway, what's done is done; in future I had to avoid abusing it.

I couldn't avoid the message in my dream. I knew it was only a dream but what did it mean? What was the woman trying to tell me, that there was no future for me? Or was she telling me I could make my own future?

The more I thought about this the more I thought I needed to go home to my own family in Toronto or even to Macedonia. If I could make my own future then that's what I was going to do. I was tired of sitting around in this place and constantly lying to people. I wanted out.

I must have fallen asleep again because the next thing I remember was waking up at six o'clock in the morning stiff as a board. The fire was out and my pain had started to localize. Only the muscles I had used to lift the tank were hurting now. There was hope for me yet.

I got up and started walking around in the base, going around in circles from area to area in an attempt to relieve my stiffness. It was working.

I went back to thinking that my health and wellbeing were a priority and everything else would come later.

I walked around for hours, first slowly and then, as the pain subsided, I walked faster and faster until I was jogging. I could feel my heart pounding but my pain lessening.

I decided to stop jogging and do some push-ups. The first five to ten were excruciating but after that I did more until I couldn't catch my breath anymore. I must have done about forty five to fifty before I fell to the floor. I turned over with great difficulty and tried doing sit-ups. I couldn't even do a single one. I decided to quit exercising for the moment.

Surprisingly my head was still clear and, despite the pain I was feeling which had begun to be more tolerable, I was calm and had no worries. It was a rare feeling.

As the days passed my pain subsided, and the better I felt the more I wanted to leave the base and go home to Toronto. I began to exercise on a daily basis just taking Saturday and Sunday off to recover. I began with one repetition of exercises a day doing push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups and various floor exercises including running

inside the base. A week later I increased the exercises to twice a day and a week after that to four times a day.

Sometime in mid February when the road was plowed I went to town, did some shopping and visited my friends. I told them that my grandparents wanted me to go back home to the valley this spring for planting season and that I would think about it. I wanted to break the news to them slowly. I wanted to tell them that I was considering leaving because I was needed at home in the valley.

At the same time I spoke with Oscar and wanted his advice on what to do with the base if I had to go away. I was hoping he would offer to take it over and look after it in my absence but I wanted it to be his idea.

I was slowly planting the seeds that I was going to leave but I played down the situation because I didn't want questions asked.

As the weather improved I started running outside and sometimes ran up the mountain to the peak where the road descended to the other side.

In about the middle of March Oscar asked me to go with him to his village and visit his people. We took the telephone wire with us. Oscar figured it was enough to connect the village to the highway but, as it turned out, the telephone company had a line installed to the limits of the reservation so we used much less wire than we expected. Also, we used no telephone poles. We hung the wire off living trees. The boys climbed tree after tree and tied the wire to existing branches. Apparently it was okay to do that. The telephone company didn't care how the wire was installed beyond its jurisdiction.

We also found we could use more than one phone extension at no extra cost so we purchased three telephones. One was supposed to be a backup but the man from the telephone company, who delivered the telephones and showed us how to install them, told us that the phones rarely broke down. They were military grade. I paid the man in cash for the three sets, the installation fee and for the first month of use. At first he refused to take the cash but then he

accepted the money and gave us a receipt. He realized the Indian's didn't have bank accounts or personal cheques and cashed their government cheques at the post office. There was no bank in their village.

Oscar's people installed the wire the same day we arrived. By evening we had all three extensions connected and working. We installed all three telephone sets and put them in the lodge.

Oscar called Stan and had him call back to test the phones. All three phones rang at the same time but the ringers sounded a bit weak so Oscar disconnected all ringers and connected the line to a big bell outside the lodge where a lot of people could hear it.

We tried the phone again and it sounded perfect. The quality of the line was also good considering how far we were from the central switch.

Everyone came over and admired the telephones.

Oscar gave me a piece of paper with the number written on it. He then said, "Now you can call your girlfriend from the comfort of your home."

Jean jokingly objected saying, "And who says I'm his girlfriend?"

"What makes you think I was talking about you?" protested Oscar.

Everyone had a good laugh and after that Jean said, "I'll be happy to receive your calls."

Up until then I had been avoiding Jean. I was too busy to talk to her on account of the phone installation. But when we got together in the lodge to have supper she came over, sat beside me and grabbed my hand. She then made an announcement. She told everyone that the village now had a telephone line that everyone could use to contact their relatives and friends. She told them that I had donated the wire and paid for all the initial costs including the three telephone sets. She told them Oscar was going to pay for the

monthly costs of the line but they would have to pay for their own long distance charges.

One of the women wanted to know why three telephone sets and if people could make three separate calls. Oscar explained that only one call could be made, which created a bit of confusion.

Jean then said to the woman, “You, your husband and daughter can all talk to your son at the same time like you’re sitting next to one another, except that you can’t see him.”

There were a lot of whispers and excitement. The woman who had asked the question said that this was very thoughtful and a really good idea.

I looked at Oscar’s mom and dad and they both looked happy. I assumed they were happy with how Jean had handled things.

“You’re handling things like a pro,” I whispered into Jean’s ear.

“Yes, I do almost everything the chief does now and I get along with everyone. I even take advice from everyone, especially the chief. I want you to know that I’m happy, plus I want to discuss something new with you and Oscar. Let’s do it after dinner, after everyone leaves.”

“Okay,” I said.

She smiled and squeezed my hand and then let it go.

After everyone had left Jean asked Oscar, myself and Oscar’s parents to stay behind.

She told us that she had started a school to teach the younger children their native language and some other rudimentary subjects like arithmetic, reading and writing but was concerned about the older children, especially the boys who were getting restless sitting around doing nothing. She wanted to do something for them and asked for ideas.

Oscar said he could teach them auto mechanics, welding, soldering, house wiring and even ask Stan to open a few auto mechanic apprenticeships. But all these things had to be done in town. Oscar even suggested maybe one of the girls might want to learn bookkeeping from Stan's wife; she could sure use the help.

There were some problems with bringing boys and girls into town. For one where would they be housed and who was going to prepare their meals while they worked? Also, they would need to be supervised by an adult who would be responsible for them.

Oscar's place had plenty of space but Oscar didn't want to impose on Stan, plus he didn't want to be responsible for supervising teenagers while he worked. He often had to go on calls and on emergencies, at which point he would have to leave them unsupervised.

They all looked at me. I said I could look after them for a month or two at the base but I was planning to go home to the valley for the planting season.

To that Jean said, "Let's do that then for a month or two and see what happens after that. If you don't mind, I'll come down with you and have a look at the facilities before I make my final decision. Could you accommodate one more person in the base for a short period of time?" she asked and looked at me.

I looked at Oscar and he gave me the okay.

"I would love to have you in my home as long as you don't mind being alone with me," I said.

"I don't mind it at all," she said and everyone else seemed to agree.

"Okay then, it's all settled," said Oscar's father who looked at Jean and added. "You three can work out the details." Then he and his wife left.

"I think I'll sleep here tonight and see how it feels to sleep on the floor," said Jean and went to get a blanket and pillow.

After she left Oscar said to me, “After all we’ve done she still doesn’t trust us. She probably thinks we’ll slip out and leave during the night.”

“Oscar,” I said, “have some faith.”

“I know her better than you; trust me when I tell you she doesn’t trust us.”

“Well, what can we do to prove to her that we aren’t going to abandon her?” I asked.

Just as I said that Jean walked in and wanted to know what we were talking about. Oscar didn’t say anything.

“Is it true that you think we’re going to run away on you?” I asked.

“Well, he did before,” she said.

“Jean, if we’re not going to trust one another we might as well quit now. I haven’t known Oscar as long as you have but I can assure you he is the most honest and decent man I’ve ever known and I can assure you he is not going to abandon you. But, at the same time, you must respect his wishes and mine.”

“Okay, but I still want to sleep here,” she said, covered herself with the blanket and stopped talking.

The next day we were awakened by Jean delivering our breakfast. She and Oscar’s mother brought us three plates of pancakes with maple syrup added to them and three forks. Jean ate breakfast with us.

We didn’t bother to ask how she’d gotten up and snuck past us without being detected.

After they delivered the food Oscar’s mother left.

When we were done eating our breakfast Jean insisted that we leave the village immediately and be at the base before noon, if possible, because the weather man was predicting it was going to snow in the afternoon.

The storm however never materialized.

We said goodbye to Oscar's mom and dad and to Jean's parents, tossed Jean's suitcase in the back of the truck and said our goodbyes. Before we left Jean told her parents she was going to call them on the new telephone when we arrived at the base.

As we descended the hill and onto the highway Jean kept looking at me making me nervous.

Finally I said, "What is it Jean, why are you constantly looking at me? You're making me nervous."

To my surprise she immediately apologized and said, "Do you know that this is my first time out of my village? And thanks to you, it's happening."

Oscar and I looked at each other but said nothing.

It was Sunday just before noon before we arrived in town. We stopped in front of the grocery store and went in to purchase some things. After that we took Jean to Stan's and showed her where Oscar worked and lived. She saw the article with Oscar and the family in the picture. She even saw the article with the Italian girls but said nothing.

When we finally got to the base we got in through the garage, down the stage and to the kitchen. Still she said nothing.

Oscar fried some fish I had in the fridge and we ate them for lunch.

While Oscar was cooking our lunch I took Jean for a tour and showed her parts of the base including the tank and guns. She was not impressed. The only comment she made was about the size of the big table in the big room around which sixty people could sit.

“I could have the entire village sitting around that,” she said.

Given that Jean had never been out of her village, Oscar and I concluded that she had no idea what to expect and no basis for comparison and the base looked to her like the house of a big family. We figured we were going to have a hard time with her. We’d have to teach her everything.

After we had lunch I asked her again if she was up to staying in this isolated place with a man, a stranger, and if anything were to happen between us, which I assured wouldn’t, that people were going to talk. They were going to talk even if nothing happened.

She said she was okay with that and she had to do what she had to do to get this project off the ground.

Oscar then said to her, “It’s obvious to me, and none of this is your fault, but you know nothing of what it’s like living outside of the village and this world you have entered is nothing like our village. So, you’ll have to promise me that you will listen to him and learn everything you need to know from him and you will behave yourself and not tempt or annoy him. Am I clear? I am your cousin and I love you, and that’s why I’m telling you this. Now come with me and we’ll call home and tell them we arrived safely.”

To our surprise Jean agreed to everything Oscar said without a single complaint.

When they came back to the kitchen from telephoning home, they were both laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, thinking they were laughing at me washing the dishes, but they weren’t.

“We never did show them how to work the telephone. They had to find Oscar’s father to show them how to use it. I apologized and told him to find someone to teach the rest how to answer the phone,” explained Jean.

The three of us decided to spend the night at the base together. We set Jean up in one of the bedrooms but she decided to spend the night with us on the floor in front of the fireplace.

The next day we got up late and went to town. Oscar didn't want to miss any work. Mondays were usually busy days, especially this one since Oscar had been away Saturday and Sunday.

When we arrived Stan was already there but he hadn't expected Oscar to be back considering that we had to install a long phone line. But he was happy to see Oscar back.

Stan was very courteous to Jean on account of Oscar being a relative of hers and spoke very highly of him. She was quite impressed that a white man would speak so highly of an Indian.

When Stan was done with her I told him we hadn't had breakfast so I was going to take Jean to the restaurant. He asked me to bring him something back because he too hadn't had anything to eat because he'd come to work early to catch up with repairs.

We walked to the restaurant. Jean was silent. When we got in Gloria's mother gave me a big hug and then gave her a hug and wanted to know who this beautiful lady was.

I told her this was Jean, Oscar's cousin. She gave her another hug, grabbed her by her hand and took her away introducing her to every customer in the restaurant telling them that this was Jean, Oscar's cousin. She took her to the kitchen and introduced her to her husband.

Jean wanted to know if all the people in this town knew each other and were this courteous to strangers.

"No, silly, we love you because you're Oscar's cousin and Peter's friend. Oscar and Peter are sort of legends in this town. They have done great things for us. They're putting my Gloria through school and soon she will be a professional chef."

After the introductions Gloria's mom asked us if she could offer us something to eat or drink. I told her we would take four orders of fried egg sandwiches on toast. When I offered to pay she refused to take my money.

"You've done more than enough for us. Gloria told me what you did for her."

"That was supposed to be a secret," I protested.

"Well, it's still a secret but not between a mother and daughter," she said and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

On the way back to Stan's Jean wanted to know who this Gloria was and why Oscar and I were doing things for her.

"Gloria is an eighteen year old young lady who we're helping with her education. What we're doing is no different than what you want to do for your people, for those boys who you want to have skills. And, if you want to be here with me, you have to trust me and be a bit less suspicious of my motives. Sometimes things are exactly what they appear to be, and that's all. I'm not telling you to completely let your guard down and trust me but I am telling you to give things a chance before you shoot them down."

She agreed.

After we gave Oscar and Stan their breakfast sandwiches which Jean delivered to them, she went over to the bulletin board and reread the stories about Oscar and the Italian girls.

We ate our breakfast standing up in front of the bulletin board. When we were done I told Stan and Oscar that we were going for a walk to Fred's shop.

The moment we stepped in Olivia ran towards me and jumped on me.

"Olivia, we agreed you're not going to do this any more," I said.

“Yes, yes, but I wanted to make your pretty friend jealous,” she said.

She turned to Jean who didn’t know what to make of this and said,
“Who are you my dear?”

“I’m Jean, Oscar’s cousin and Peter’s girlfriend.”

“Oh, it’s so nice to meet you dear. Oscar is our friend too. But I don’t think you’re Peter’s girlfriend.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you were, he would have told me so.”

“Why? Are you his girlfriend?”

Olivia laughed out loud and said, “No silly, I’m his mom!”

Poor Jean turned red and didn’t know what to say. When Olivia saw that, she felt sorry for Jean.

“I’m sorry dear, you know how it is with boys, they never tell their mothers anything. Come with me. Peter’s friend is our friend.”

She then took Jean away and introduced her to Fred and all the customers who were in the store. She then told Jean that she was my stepmother. Olivia then got a beautiful set of earrings from the counter and gave them to Jean as a gift.

After we left, on our way back to Stan’s, Jean began to repeatedly hit me on the back.

“What are you doing?” I yelled.

“Paying you back for lying to me about how terrible the people outside my village were. You robbed me of all this...!”

“Jean, Jean, Jean, the only reason why people give you this respect is because of what Oscar and I are doing for the community here.

Did you see anyone else being treated this way in any of the places we've been?"

"No. And you're right, I've been taught that respect must be earned and I understand what all this means. I just have to keep reminding myself and be grateful for what I've got."

"Jean, I know for a fact that you and your people have big hearts and I'm certain in time you'll surpass everything Oscar and I have done, but you must have faith and always do right by people, all people, including me. I do have your interests at heart and that's why I stand by you."

"In other words, you do love me," she said.

"Yes, but at the same time I'm telling you that I will be leaving this place in a couple of months, so please let's not complicate things."

When we arrived at Stan's service station Jean was all business with Stan discussing how to train the apprentices and what possible pay they could receive for their work. Stan mentioned that there was a federal government program where the apprentices, because they are natives, could get some money from the federal government. Stan said he could fill out the paperwork and make it retroactive to January first, but he needed the apprentices to be here immediately. Jean agreed and promised to have them there in the next day or so.

She then came over and spoke to me about it. I said I would vouch for her that they had been working here since January first. If they needed more witnesses I would find them for her. After everything was agreed Jean made another phone call to the village and Oscar's father said he would get us three boys and a girl the next day before the weather changed. He also gave Jean the names of the three boys and the girl who were coming.

After Stan filled out the paperwork he went to the post office and had the lady there stamp the envelopes "January second", which was a working day, and had them mailed.

The apprentices arrived before noon the next day. We met them at the service station and got all our stories straight. We then drove to the base and settled everyone. We asked Oscar's father to stay a couple of days to make sure the boys and girl felt comfortable with us but he declined, he wanted to get back home as soon as possible. He went to bed early.

To my surprise Oscar's father was very impressed not only with the accommodations for the boys and girl but with the base in general and asked me to give him a full uniform. He said he would be honoured if I did that and would have a different appreciation of the uniform today than he did when he was in the war. He also admitted that he had destroyed his own uniform for reasons he wasn't going to discuss. I gave him access to the uniform room and he picked out a couple of uniforms. The next day he left early in the morning.

Initially the boys acted a bit strange, I guess because they too had never been out of their village, but Jean seemed to have a good handle on them. Let's say they were afraid of her and did everything she asked of them.

The girl had a kind heart. She was a bit older than the boys but seemed to take a liking to me and listened to everything I had to say.

When we introduced her to Stan's wife she took a liking to her and they became inseparable. In addition to teaching her how to do the books, Stan's wife also taught her how cook, clean, sew and look after her girls like they were her own. They also liked her.

Initially the boys took their responsibility as a joke but when they began to earn praise from Stan and his customers, who also tipped them for the extra work they did, like washing and cleaning their cars without being asked, they began to take their roles more seriously.

A couple of weeks after Stan filed the paperwork he contacted the government and demanded to know why he hadn't heard from them for months after filing for compensation. A couple of days later he received a call with an apology and they told him the cheques were on their way retroactive to January first.

The boys were doing better than expected and were getting praise from the entire town. They appreciated the attention that they were getting and Jean, Oscar and I made sure they stayed away from the wrong crowd. Jean had them on a short leash and wouldn't let them go alone anywhere. But, at the same time she looked after them well making sure they went to a movie on a regular basis and cooked for them what they liked.

By mid May, a couple of weeks before I left, Stan gave the boys a car to drive back and forth from the base to the service station and they no longer had to sit in the back of my truck. They usually left the base after breakfast, took the lunches Jean made for them and took the girl to Stan's house before they went to work. Oscar trusted them and they did repairs without being supervised. They were quick learners, did good work and loved what they were doing. They craved being praised and Oscar and Stan praised them well. They broke a few things but they learned from their mistakes.

When they were in the base they watched me exercise and were impressed with my strength and abilities. They all remembered the story of how I saved Oscar from a terrible beating.

Jean did her best to exercise with me but couldn't always keep up. She did whatever she could which was more than enough to keep active.

As the days got closer to the end of May I emphasized the fact that I was going to leave the base and everyone was getting used to it.

In mid May I went to get Gloria from school after her year was over. Jean came with me and very quickly they became friends, despite their age difference. Gloria went back to living and working at the restaurant for the summer. Before I left, Stan gave her a post dated check to pay for her second year of education.

I took Jean with me when we went to order more meat from farmer Joe and we both stopped in to visit Sylvia. When Sylvia found out I was leaving in a couple of weeks she insisted that I take her out for dinner and a movie. I told her I would be back on the weekend and

if it was okay with her I wanted to bring Oscar and Jean with us. I knew Oscar liked Sylvia and perhaps they could develop a relationship after I was gone. Oscar had no female friends.

She agreed.

By the time we were finished visiting Sylvia, Joe had the truck loaded with our order. I paid him in cash and we left.

On the way up Jean got soft on me and said, “After I treated you like crap, I know you’re going to find this difficult to believe but I have grown fond of you and I’m truly going to miss you when you’re gone.”

“I’m going to miss you too,” I said. “But fate has dealt us different cards. We should focus our energies on doing good and maybe, one day, we’ll be rewarded. But to do something about it now would make life more difficult for the both of us. We’ve made our commitments and we need to live up to them, people depend on us.”

She didn’t say anything.

As soon as we reached the base and offloaded the meat and put it in the freezers, I telephoned Oscar and told him about the double date on the weekend.

“Saturday works for me,” he said and wanted to know who he was dating.

“Officially your date will be your cousin and unofficially it will be Sylvia.”

“Okay,” he said without making any smart remarks.

I immediately contacted Sylvia and told her we were on for Saturday evening. She confirmed that it was okay.

When the boys and the girl came home that afternoon we had steak for dinner. Neither I nor Jean knew how to use the cooking equipment in the kitchen so we fried the steaks in a pan. I suggested

that Jean invite Gloria and her mom and dad some weekend and ask them to teach her how to use the equipment in the kitchen. She said she would. The steaks were fried with mushrooms, Jean's specialty. They were delicious.

Saturday afternoon the three boys and girl were invited to Stan's home for a barbecue where they were to remain until we came to get them. Oscar drove them and left the car at the service station where he waited for Jean and me.

I didn't have much to wear so I wore one of Peter's sport jackets. Jean had even less to wear so I suggested she look through the uniforms and find a pair of pants that fit her.

When she came out I noticed she was wearing lipstick which I didn't think suited her. After I told her she agreed and removed it.

"I need some decent clothes, will you buy me some?" she asked.

"No chance," I said but I had misunderstood what she was asking. She wanted some money so that she could pick her own clothes. I thought she wanted me to pick them for her.

When we cleared that up I agreed to give her money provided she went with someone else shopping, preferably Olivia or someone more experienced than me.

She agreed.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Jean and I arrived at Stan's. Oscar was waiting for us wearing one of Peter's old suits.

"Oh, cousin, you look so handsome," Jean told Oscar.

"And you, my dear cousin, you look like one of those nurses on M.A.S.H., the skinny, good looking one."

"I don't know what you're talking about but I assume you don't approve of my military pants."

Oscar didn't say anything. He went inside the service station and called Sylvia on the telephone to let her know we were coming.

Jean and I parked ourselves in the back seat of the car while Oscar took the driver's seat. We left my truck in the parking lot. When we arrived at Sylvia's she was waiting for us outside. We all stepped out and she greeted us with a hug.

She was a beautiful, strong and humble woman, the type one would feel very comfortable being around.

I asked her to sit with Oscar and she did. She didn't care who she sat with. All she wanted to do was go out with someone and be treated like a lady.

After we all got in the car Oscar drove us to the restaurant. On the way there Jean whispered in my ear. "If I were you I would have picked her over me."

I didn't say anything.

When we got to the restaurant the place was quite busy but Gloria had reserved a table for us, which was covered with a red tablecloth. After she greeted us she kissed me and Oscar and said, "Everything is on the house and we insist on it."

"Gloria you can't be doing this all the time, I have money and I'd like to pay for tonight's dinner," I protested.

But she said no and added, "If it makes you feel any better you can tip me but the dinner is going to be on the house."

Everyone agreed.

Sylvia said, "So you're Gloria, Peter's little girlfriend who everyone has been talking about."

To my surprise she said, "Yes I am."

We all laughed and then I introduced Sylvia as farmer Joe's daughter, whom she knew and Jean as Oscar's cousin whom she had already met several days ago when we went to get her from school. I then asked Gloria to sit with us and have dinner and a drink, but only one drink since she had to work.

"You shouldn't have any drinks since you're going to be driving these beautiful and precious ladies back home," she told me.

I didn't reply.

We didn't have to order anything. Gloria picked out our meal, something she had cooked for her thesis in school during her final term. It was a delicious vegetarian dish with a barbequed steak on the side. She said it was a smash hit with her professors who thought it was an ironic reflection of our modern society; a side of meat with veggies instead of the other way around.

The food was both tasty and filling.

We didn't drink much. Oscar and I had a beer each and the ladies had a glass of wine.

When we were done eating I invited Gloria to come with us to the movies. "I'm leaving in a week or so and I would love to be with you and listen to your beautiful voice."

Her mother heard me say that and told her to go with us.

I gave her a one hundred dollar tip which exceeded the cost of the food and drinks. After I gave her the money she gave it to her mother and then jumped on me, gave me a big kiss and began to cry.

"I'll miss you very much when you're gone."

I had a lady on each side as we drove to the theater and then I had a hand to hold on each side as we walked to the theater. I paid for the tickets and my two ladies held me by my arms like a couple of policemen holding onto their captive, until we took our seats. They then sat on each side of me, Gloria to my right and Jean to me left. I

put my arms over their shoulders and was the envy of every man in the theater. I enjoyed that immensely. Jean too was a good sport because she liked Gloria and they would become good friends in the future.

Oscar and Sylvia were a bit more reserved but they too would become good friends and pillars of the community.

When the movie was over we took Sylvia home first. She said goodbye to Gloria, Jean and Oscar and then spent a lot of time hugging me, looking at me and kissing me.

“This is probably the last time I’m going to see you. I want you to know that I care for you and I want you to remember me,” and then she gave me a goodbye kiss.

“How can I ever forget a beautiful woman like you,” I replied and kissed her back

After that we dropped Gloria off and she too gave me a kiss and said, “Please come back and see me before you leave.”

I said I would.

Next we went to Stan’s house and were invited in for ice cream. Who can turn down ice cream?

After that we dropped off Oscar and Jean went in the car with the boys while I drove the truck with the girl. I had a chance to speak with her in private and she told me that she liked it here and could never see herself going back to the reservation. I told her it was premature to make such a decision and she should keep her feelings to herself and take some more time to think about it.

“Look at me, this is paradise for me but still something compels me to go back home, to my roots. So please don’t say anything to Oscar or Jean or to your parents because it will break their hearts. You were sent here to gain some skills so that you can help your people and at the same time make a better life for yourself. I’m sure you weren’t sent here to abandon them.”

“People like me here and I have friends... It’s not at all the way I was told people would be...”

“Please listen to me. People like you because of Oscar who has sacrificed himself to build a good reputation for you and your people. He opened a big door for you. And yes not all people are friendly, especially to indigenous people. Ask Oscar and he will tell you. If you go out on your own without your friends to protect you people will see you in a different light. I will prove it to you. In fact in a few days from today I’ll be taking Jean to town to do some shopping, so why don’t you come with me and I’ll take you out to lunch, an afternoon show and then to the mall on the other side of town. I’ll talk to Jean and Stan’s wife about it so you’ll be free.”

She agreed.

When we got back we all went our separate ways and to bed. Jean decided to keep the military pants for herself because she said they felt very comfortable and besides, no one outside of Oscar had made fun of her and Oscar’s opinion didn’t count on matters of fashion, according to her.

The next morning after we ate breakfast which Jean cooked for us, I went looking for suitcases so that I could start packing my things. I found a couple of military duffle bags and began to stuff them with things. Then, after I did my exercises and returned from running outside, Jean told me she had called Oscar to check on the boys. Oscar had told her that a construction company boss had visited Stan and they’d signed a contract to maintain all their big machines. They also had a contract with the township so they figured they would need more help, workers to maintain their equipment. I called the village and made arrangements for three more boys and two girls to be sent here as soon as possible. The new boys would pair up with the experienced boys. Stan would look after one pair in the service station and Oscar would look after the other two pairs.”

“And the girls?” I asked.

“Oh, I’ll need one to replace Spirit and the other one and Spirit will help me here. A lot of money is coming in and someone needs to keep track of it. I also need help with the shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing, mending...”

“Oh, I just remembered I promised Spirit I’d take her out and show her the town when I take you shopping.”

“Sure, why not, we’d best do that tomorrow before this place starts getting even busier,” she said.

I agreed.

While Jean did her thing I went and put locks on three of the cabinets in the garage in which the guns and ammunition were stored. Eventually I gave the keys to Jean.

I also went to the safe and got some extra money out and gave three hundred dollars to Jean to buy herself proper clothing and whatever else she needed.

Early in the morning the next day Jean called Stan’s wife and told her that Spirit wasn’t coming to work that day because I was taking her to town on a date.

“On a Tuesday...” I heard Jean say.

“What was all that about?” I asked.

“You don’t go on dates during working days... But I saved your ass and told Stan’s wife you’re leaving soon and there was no other time.”

I didn’t say anything.

We got in the truck and I drove to Fred’s store where I left Jean in Olivia’s capable hands. This was a test for Jean and her ability to handle money and make choices. She and Olivia were opposites when it came to making decisions. Olivia was poor because she always spent every penny she had. Agnes and Fred were her

anchors. Jean, on the other hand, had neither money nor experience in spending it and would heavily rely on Olivia to guide her.

Was Jean going to allow Olivia to talk her into a spending spree and spend all her money?

I didn't want to interfere, if there was a lesson to be learned let it be learned with my money, I thought. But then, three hundred dollars was a lot of money.

Spirit and I got in the truck and drove to the restaurant. It was eleven o'clock but we decided to have lunch early so that we could catch the midday movie.

Gloria came out to greet us. I was happy to see that Spirit and Gloria knew each other and greeted each other with a hug.

We were done eating by a quarter to twelve and went to the movie at noon. There was a small line, mostly kids, who made a lot of noise during the movie. After that we went to the big mall on the other side of town and I asked Spirit to hold my hand. She didn't understand why but had no problem holding it until people started staring at us. There were other couples holding hands, including teenagers, but no one looked at them. As we continued to walk a man stood in our way and, as we got closer, spit on the floor and kept staring at us. I pulled her out of his way and continued to walk. She began to cry and I pulled her close to me. A bunch of boys began to mock us and made racist comments. One of them told me to take my "squaw" and get the hell out of their mall.

The woman at the ice cream bar was sympathetic and after she sold us a cone of soft ice cream each she said, "Don't pay attention to those idiots dear, you're welcome to stay in my store as long as you like."

As soon as we finished our ice cream, Spirit wanted to leave and go back to the base. She didn't say a word for a long time until we stopped at Fred's to see if Olivia and Jean were back.

Before we left the truck to go into the shop, Spirit gave me a hug but didn't say why. When we got inside the store Jean was waiting for us. Olivia had gone out to do some chores for Fred.

After I waved goodbye to Fred we left the store, got in the truck and drove off.

Jean immediately wanted to know what I had done to Spirit and began to yell at me. I was glad she did that because it proved to Spirit that she cared more for her than she did for me.

"I didn't do anything to her," I said but Jean said she didn't believe me.

At that point Spirit told her everything. She also told her to stop accusing me of things I hadn't done.

"The problem with you is you always assume things. You think you know everything but you don't. You never ask what's really bothering people. You've always been like this. I wish sometimes you would ask what's wrong rather than assume people you don't like are at fault," Spirit told Jean.

She then turned to me and said, "It's true you know, she doesn't like you. I think she's jealous that Oscar respects you more than her. She thinks she's the smartest one of all of us but she isn't."

"Stop it both of you," I said. "Open your eyes and look around. If you can't find goodness in yourselves how can you expect other people to find it in you? Spirit you have false expectations of people and Jean you can't recognize kindness when it stares you in the face. Grow up! I'm leaving in a few days and I'm leaving everything I have to you. What more do you want me to do? Give my life for you...? And would that change anything?"

No one said a word. We drove in silence for a long time.

Jean then said, "I'm so sorry. It's not like us to behave this way. We've been taught better. And to be honest with you I respect you more than you think. I have always respected you. But Spirit is also

right, I have been jealous of you. I recognize and accept that. I also recognize that you have helped me more than anyone else.”

Spirit apologized both to me and to Jean for spouting off.

I changed the subject and said, “So, Jean, did you find what you were looking for at the store? And how much money did you spend?”

“First, I want to thank you for understanding and being so forgiving. And second, I spent seventy eight dollars on a skirt, blouse and shoes; clothes I need to go out. I’ll wear the army clothes in the base doing chores, it’s only appropriate,” she said and began laughing. They both began laughing.

“What are YOU laughing about?” Jean asked Spirit.

“You wearing army pants,” she replied.

“With your narrow hips you’ll be wearing army pants too, so don’t laugh.”

Immediately after we arrived the women went to work preparing supper for us. Jean said she would make the announcement about the new arrivals and changes when everyone was there. I told Jean I needed some of her time to show her things around the base that she should know about, including the safe and the cabinets with the guns and ammunition.

When the boys arrived Jean told them what Oscar had told her. They not only had no problem with the plan but they were thrilled that more boys would be arriving and the new jobs they would be doing.

The only one who had any concerns was Spirit who thought she was being punished for speaking out. But after we told her the decision to make the changes was made several days before, she graciously accepted the news and her new responsibility, which was to maintain all the finances and train the new girls.

The next day or so I spent packing, cleaning and showing Jean where things were. After I took most of the things out of the safe I gave Jean the combination and left her some money.

None of the girls who were going to stay on the base could drive so Jean asked me to teach her how to drive. After we did a few lessons on the car the boys drove I taught her how to drive my truck, a standard with a stick-shift and clutch. She drove it to town with me as a passenger a couple of times, which was more training than I had when I got my license. After she passed her written test which Stan administered, Oscar promised her he would take her to do the driving test.

A couple of days before I left I gave Jean the deed to the base and the ownership papers to my truck and told her she could have both of them to use but they would remain under my name. I gave her my post office box and she used it to receive cheques from the government. I gave her my account number and told her to work with Agnes to put money in and take money out. I also told her about my lawyer and accountant and to speak with them as my representative.

All the money they received from the government and from the jobs they did was deposited in Oscar's account but Spirit kept a record of who earned how much and when. Some of that money was used to purchase food. I gave Jean permission to use the fuel from the base depot to fuel the cars and truck.

They had a farewell party for me on Saturday, the day before I left, at the restaurant where I had a chance to say goodbye to everyone. Everyone I knew was there and it was a lovely and happy occasion. It's interesting that no one asked me for a forwarding address or telephone number. They all assumed my leave was temporary and I'd be coming back soon.

On Sunday Jean drove me to the bus station and purchased my bus ticket to the valley with some of the money I had given her.

Before I got on the bus I gave her a kiss. Looking into my eyes she knew this was a goodbye forever kiss. She looked at me with puzzlement as the bus drove away and I disappeared.

Did I do the right thing? My heart was saying no but my brain was saying yes.

Deep down I knew I would never see these wonderful people again.

When we arrived at the first stop in the valley I purchased another bus ticket to Vancouver. I spent the night in the bus station and the next morning I took the early bus to Vancouver. I took a taxi from the bus station to the airport and purchased an airline ticket to Toronto. I spent the night in Vancouver airport and the next morning I flew on Air Canada and landed at Malton Airport in Toronto.

Back to Ontario but not home

I was excited getting off the plane and walking into the terminal. The food on the plane was terrible and I hadn't eaten a proper meal in days. I was already starting to miss Jean's cooking and the fresh fried fish. I'd showed Jean how to feed and catch the fish. That was her job now and she wouldn't allow anyone else to do it, especially the boys. Eating fresh fish was a treat which Jean used to reward everyone when they did good work.

Jean was an unusual woman able to learn fast and adapt. She was a capable leader and able to tame the untamable. She also had a stubborn and evil streak about her but was able to manage it well for the sake of the greater good. She was obsessed with her job and would do everything in her power to succeed. I figured she would never marry. But then circumstances might change. They always do; that's why the future is unpredictable and no one knows what will happen.

I was home now, in Toronto. I got my two duffle bags and stuffed them into a public locker. I stuck a quarter in and got my key. I looked like a soldier coming back from abroad and soldiers weren't popular in those days, especially after Vietnam. With the bags out of my hands I was able to move around freely. I went to the second floor coffee shop and had a late breakfast. The food was great but very expensive. I even heard some staff, the cooks, speak Macedonian. They were cursing like drunken sailors. I heard one say to the other that the problem with this place was that it was empty most of the time and then in a minute it filled to capacity and everyone wanted their food immediately. The other one asked what had he expected, this was an airport and when a plane landed everyone ran in here, wanted food and then ran out to catch another plane.

It was nice to hear Macedonian spoken again. I was tempted to say hello but I was certain they would ask questions.

After I paid my bill I went and walked around the circular hallway that led to the various gates marked with the names of airlines. There were washrooms available to the public and vending

machines selling paperback books, cigarettes, peanuts, gum, chocolates and potato chips. After I went to the washroom I stopped in front of a machine that sold books. There were all kinds of books, mostly romance and fiction novels. One book caught my eye. I went back to it several times and finally decided to invest two dollars to buy it. I could use it to look like I was reading while loitering around the terminal. The book was called *From Yalta to Vietnam* by David Horowitz, published by Pelican. I'd never heard of David or Pelican and had no idea what the book was about or what Yalta was. I hadn't read a book in a year but when I started reading I couldn't put it down. I even found a chapter on the Civil War in Greece. David had written about the plight of my people and the American involvement. I read that chapter several times and each time I read it I learned a little bit more.

As I sat there on a soft bench reading my book I noticed the same old man in a black and white uniform circle around a couple of times. He kept looking at me. I assumed he was an airport security guard because I'd seen others walking around in the same uniform.

I started to get nervous because I was sure the next time he came around he would ask me what I was still doing here. I had no ticket to show him that I was waiting for a flight. I was sure he would tell me to move on like I was some sort of hobo, or worse he would have me arrested for loitering and then there would be questions, many questions.

I was sure they were still looking for me. I went missing almost a year ago. After I went to the barbershop and had a haircut and shave, which cost me a lot of money, I went up the parking lot ramp and to the terminal roof.

The view from there was great. I could watch airplanes take off and land. There were two girls up there when I arrived but they left when they saw me. I figured my military pants and greenish military t-shirt scared them away or maybe they were loiterers like me and wanted to avoid attention.

I looked good clean shaven and with a haircut. Unfortunately now I looked like Riki who had gone missing. I decided I had to leave the airport but I didn't know where to go.

I knew I couldn't go home. I knew I couldn't see my parents because I didn't know how they would react.

I got my bags out of the locker, left the terminal through the tarmac, went past a number of buildings, past a couple of parking lots and ran into an older woman who was finishing her shift and heading home. She saw me pass by her and continued walking behind me past the parking lot. She went into the parking lot, got her car, drove past me and stopped. I started getting nervous but continued to walk, trying to ignore her.

"You poor boy," she said. "The army sent you home and didn't have the decency to buy you a bus ticket. My son is, was a soldier, and they did the same to him. Can I help you in some way, can I give you a ride home perhaps."

"Thank you ma'am, but no thanks. I don't want to trouble you."

"Don't be shy, it's no trouble."

I tossed the duffle bags on the back seat and sat beside her in the passenger seat.

I thanked her but didn't look at her. I stared into the distance in front of us.

"Where are you coming from?" she asked.

I looked at her and didn't say anything.

"I know you're angry and don't want to talk. That's how my son was. But please tell me where I can take you."

"Three lines north of here. You can drop me off and I'll walk home from there."

“I can take you home, those bags are heavy.”

“Thank you ma’am but I need to think. I have a lot of things to sort out.”

About five minutes later she stopped the car. I stepped out, grabbed my bags, looked through the window into her sympathetic eyes and said, “Thank you.”

She smiled and drove off. I didn’t smile back.

I felt terrible for who I’d become.

I put my bags over my shoulders and began to walk westward. Looking down at the unpaved country road, I was slowly becoming the character the lady had made me out to be, a disgruntled soldier coming home disgraced, abandoned by the army and made to walk home for miles in shame.

As I kept walking I was disturbed by random sounds of a man yelling in the distance and swearing at the top of his voice. The yelling would stop and a minute later it would start up again. Listening to that made me forget my troubles. I was curious to find out who was yelling and why. I started walking faster.

The yelling was coming from a nearby farm. There was a huge building with its door, facing east, open. The sound was coming from inside. It was magnified by the building and echoed outwards through the open door.

When I got there I saw a man in overalls vigorously pulling at a belt with his bare hands and yelling and swearing. It seemed like he didn’t notice me at all when he started complaining to me that today this stupid contraption was refusing to start.

“I did everything today just like I do every day but, for some reason, it refuses to start.”

I looked at the set up. An electric motor was connected to a pulley by a belt which drove a conveyer belt. I touched the motor and it was hot, very hot.

“Do you mind if I try something?” I asked.

“Go ahead; maybe between the two of us we can get this damn thing started.”

I pulled the belt off the motor pulley and threw the switch on. The motor worked perfectly.

“I could have done that myself,” he said. “How is that going to solve my problem?” he yelled.

“Do you have any tools, screwdrivers and pliers?” I asked.

He went and got his tool box and handed it to me.

I opened the covering plate on the motor and looked at the wiring diagram. The motor could be wired for 120 volts or 240 volts. It was wired for 120 volts.

“Has the motor tripped the circuit breaker?” I asked.

“All the time, almost every time I use it.”

“Does the motor get hot like this?”

“Yes, every time I use it.”

“Show me the circuit breaker.”

He pointed to a ganged circuit breaker in the circuit breaker box.

“You have a circuit breaker for 240 volts but your motor is connected to 120 volts.”

“Well, I don’t know what that means but can you fix it?”

“Yes, very easily.”

I turned off the power to the circuit breaker and moved one of the wires from the neutral to the phase in the circuit breaker panel and rewired the motor for 240 volts. I then flicked the circuit breaker to the on position and flipped the local switch to on. The motor worked.

The man looked at me but didn't say anything.

I then put the belt back on the motor and tightened it properly as per the instructions on the conveyer belt and turned on the motor. It started working on its own moving the conveyer.

The man grabbed his face and couldn't believe it. He kept looking at his contraption running like never before and kept muttering about the time he had wasted on it.

“I can't believe this! Can I turn it off and start it again? I want to be sure it wasn't a fluke.”

He went to the switch and turned it off and on several times and it worked every time. The motor started without hesitation or aid from him. He put his hand on the motor and he declared it wasn't heating up.

He turned off the machine and still hadn't noticed me when he asked, “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing, I don't want anything, I'm happy to be able to help, Sir.”

And that was the moment he noticed me and said, “Oh, where are my manners, I'm Mac, Farmer Mac, this is my farm here.”

“Nice to meet you Mac. I'm Peter James.”

“An Irish boy, eh? I'm Scottish.”

He then looked at me and said, “A soldier boy, I'll be damned. Going home or running away?”

“What makes you say that Sir?”

“Well, experience, son, experience. I’ve seen it all. I was one of you once.”

He looked at me again and said, “You aren’t Irish, are you?”

“Well, my father was.”

He shook his head again. I pulled out my license and showed it to him.

“A BC license, eh. You’re kind of old to be a regular soldier and guessing from your big muscles, I would say a specialist.”

“I’m sorry Sir but I can’t talk about that.”

“I understand, but aren’t you a long way from home?”

“I’m sorry I can’t talk about that either, Sir.”

“I see that you’re good at fixing things so I could offer you a job but I can’t pay you much.”

“I would settle for room and board and no questions asked,” I said.

“You’re not a criminal are you? Or a draft dodger?”

“No Sir.”

“Please don’t call me Sir, I was a sergeant in the army and I’m sick of being called Sir.”

“Okay,” I replied.

“I live on the farm with my wife Millie. We have no children. No time for them. I’d like to say that we are the masters of this farm here but in actual fact we are its slaves. We could sure use a helping hand. Now come with me and I’ll introduce you to Millie.”

He walked away into the long building and said, "I would have helped you with the bags but you seem to have the muscles for it."

We walked past a little house and into a barn. Mac stopped and pointed to a wooden stepladder hanging on the wall and said, "Use that ladder to climb on top of that platform and behind those bales of hay is a door to a room. It has a living room, a bedroom with a bed, a bathroom and a kitchen. It may need some cleaning up; you'll have to do that yourself. You can stay there."

I took the ladder and raised it in front of the platform which stood about eight feet from the ground, grabbed both bags in one hand and climbed up. When I reached the top a bunch of chickens flew off.

"Don't mind them, just put your bags inside the room, close the door and come back down. You don't want the chickens going in," he said and was startled by Millie's loud voice.

"Who in the devil are you talking to? Are you arguing with the chickens again?"

At that very moment I popped my head over the ladder and startled Millie.

"I'm talking to the devil," he muttered and said. "This here is Peter James, our new hired hand."

"I'm Millie, Mac's wife," she said. "Nice to meet you son," and muttered. "Not another soldier."

When I got off the ladder I noticed how small Millie was in comparison to me. Even her husband was small compared to me.

"Isn't James an Irish name?" she asked.

"Well, that's what my daddy told me," I replied.

"Leave the boy alone, you don't want to scare him away now, do you?"

“Okay then, I’ll go back to the house and finish cooking. I’ll set an extra plate for supper.”

“Thank you Millie,” Mac said to her and asked me to follow him.

In the corner of his barn he had a workbench and tools hanging from a board above the bench on one side. On the other side of the same corner he had wooden shelves with glass jars sitting on them with screws, nails, bolts, nuts, washers and other items in them. One glass jar had an electric switch in it, the kind we use to turn lights on and off. I reached for it because I found it unusual. Mac said something and I looked at him.

“That there switch cost me twenty-two dollars. It should have cost me two dollars, three tops. When I tried to return it they wouldn’t take it back. Store policy they said. So I keep it to remind me of one of the mistakes.”

After I looked at it I recognized that it was a 240 volt, 25 amp switch with two poles. It was the kind of switch one would use to turn on and off large 240 volt motors.

“How did you end up buying this switch?” I asked.

“Well, it came with the motor assembly but I thought they overcharged me. The other switch, the one we’re using, cost only six dollars.”

“The electrician, the person who wired your motor, did he see this switch?”

“No, by the time he came to finish the job, the switch was sitting in the jar.”

“We have to go back to the motor,” I said. “The switch you’re using is unsafe, it only turns off half the electricity and you could get a shock from the motor even when the power is off.”

“Can you fix it?”

“In five minutes.”

“Let’s go and do it then.”

We went back and after I turned the circuit breaker off, I opened the switch and sure enough it was a single pole. I immediately replaced it with the double pole. The second wire was already cut and taped. I removed the tape and connected the wire to the switch terminals and that was it.

I tested the switch and it worked as expected.

Just as I was going to say something Mac said, “As long as it works properly and safely, I don’t want to know...”

The sun was about to set when we walked into the house. It was a single storey building and was a lot smaller inside than it looked from the outside. It had a small living room, one bedroom, one washroom, a closet at the front door and a kitchen. We sat in the kitchen at a tiny table that could sit two comfortably and four tightly. One side, the narrow side of the table, leaned against the wall and I sat facing the wall. I couldn’t believe what we were about to eat. It was a chunk of boiled beef about half the size of my fist and one boiled potato with only salt and pepper on it. The meat looked pale but was nice and tender and tasty and so was the potato. Mac and Millie seemed to enjoy it.

I figured the food could use some spices so I asked them if I could plant a garden somewhere on the farm. They looked at each other and they both said sure, pick a spot and knock yourself out. They never asked what I was going to plant.

“I’ll take you to our local nursery tomorrow and you can pick out whatever you want to plant. But you may not find what you want; it’s late in the season for planting,” Mac said.

I didn’t say anything.

After we ate supper I excused myself and went back to the barn and up to my new place.

I again scared the chickens and figured this would be a regular occurrence and that I should get used to it or change my tactics.

The toilet and sink were filthy and the bed was loaded with dust; nothing a little elbow grease couldn't fix.

I concentrated first on cleaning the toilet, then the sink and finally aired the sheets and the bed, shaking all the dust out of them.

I thought I didn't have hot water but I noticed there was a small electric boiler under the kitchen sink. It was turned off. I had a shower but no hot water. I then figured the same boiler that provided hot water for the sink also fed the shower.

I had a much bigger kitchen table than Mac and Millie. I didn't have a stove but I had two hot plates. I figured the place had been furnished by someone like me who had lived there previously.

I hardly slept that night. It was hot inside because I couldn't open the window to get some fresh air.

I was up early the next morning and the first thing I did was unstick the window. I then went outside on the platform and sat on a bale of hay to cool off. I counted a dozen rats and watched them eat the eggs the chickens had laid.

I became worried that the rats might get into the room and eat my stuff so I took my duffle bags and secured them on the top shelf of the empty kitchen cupboards. By the time I came out Mac was down on the barn floor looking for me.

When he saw me he said, "Come on down, we'll have some breakfast and go to the garden centre to get your flowers."

I was expecting fried eggs but instead I was given a small bowl of porridge and a cup of watered down coffee.

I found the porridge very salty and disgusting.

When we were done eating we went outside, around the barn and Mac opened the passenger door of his pickup truck and sat down.

“You drive,” he said. “I’ll show you the way. The clutch is a bit loose.”

“Can I drive in Ontario with a British Columbia driver’s license?” I asked.

“You’re darn right you can, this is Canada and we’re British subjects. We can do anything we like. Plus we’re both ex-military.”

After a short pause he asked, “Do you have any guns?”

“No, Sir, I left my rifle and side arm at the base when I left.”

“Good, good, we don’t want to get into trouble. My stuff is also packed away. I do have a twenty-two which I use to kill vermin but my eyesight nowadays isn’t very good. I bet you’re a crack shot; you’d have to be in your profession. I know, you can’t talk about it. Turn left at the next side road.”

“Thanks. Speaking of vermin, you’ve got rats in the barn, many of them.”

“I know. I got poison and it was expensive too, but they won’t eat it. We got a cat, a young one, but they killed it. I can’t see to shoot them. We haven’t seen an egg for months; they love to eat our eggs.”

“If it’s okay, I’ll build a trap and try to trap them but first I’ll have to get them good and hungry.”

“Turn in here, this is our local garden centre and over there, that big empty lot, we have our outdoor market on Saturdays. They sell all kinds of junk there. Now I’m going in there to see some fellows, you ask one of those girls to help you and wait for me here.”

“Okay.”

I smiled at the woman who came over to help me. She was a few years older than me. I told her I was looking for vegetables and spices.

“Look around over here but most of the good stuff has been sold, we only have rejects that nobody wants. Pick out what you want. I’ll be back.”

I went through the shelves and took all their green onions, leeks, peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, zucchini, mint, parsley and thyme. I filled two large cardboard boxes with plants that looked like crap but they were healthy.

When she came back she looked at my plants, counted them and said, “Looks like you know your plants. People don’t like them because they’re odd shaped. Looks like you have about five dollars worth but I’ll give them to you for two, on account it’s past planting season.”

I gave her five single dollar bills and smiled. She took the money, smiled back and said, “It’s nice to know you’re a friend of the farmers...”

“Phyllis, don’t mess with him, he’s a soldier boy,” Mac yelled at her.

“Oh, hi Farmer Mac, how’re doing. How’s Millie?”

“Oh, you know... the same. This here in Peter James, he works for me at the farm.”

“That’s nice,” she said to Mac, turned to me and said. “Look me up sometimes, I’m here all the time.”

On his way to the passenger seat Mac looked at the boxes, shook his head and said, “You paid money for that?”

I didn’t say anything.

When we arrived at his farm I stopped the truck outside a small fenced area and asked what that was used for.

“We used to isolate the chicken in there to keep them from pecking at our crops but the coyotes and foxes kept attacking them so we let them roost up there. Keep the ladder off the platform at night. You don’t want those critters climbing up onto the platform.”

“Okay,” I said, “can I use the fenced area to plant the garden and is that tap at the end working?”

“Yes the tap works, there’s plenty of water and you can do your planting in there, I’ll tell Millie.”

After Mac left I got a shovel from the shop and began to dig the garden inside the fenced area which had been fenced some time ago with eight foot high chicken wire through which rats could get in. So I figured my next job would be to get rid of the rats.

I started digging from one end. The soil was compact and the surface was laden with decomposed chicken droppings, good fertilizer for the plants. Because the soil was very hard to dig I decided to only dig the areas where I was going to plant. I dug foot wide strips from one side of the fenced area to the other, planting each as I dug it. I planted the leeks first, about sixty of them, eighty-five onions, twenty-four peppers, twenty-four tomatoes, eight cucumbers, eight zucchini and four squash. The spices I planted beside the water tap away from the vegetables.

Initially I started watering the plants with a small metal bucket but later Millie, who was watching me through the window, came over, gave me a proper watering can, shook her head and left. When I was done planting Mac came over, scratched his head like he didn’t know what to make of the situation, gave me his twenty-two rifle, a box of ammunition and a cleaning kit.

“Now get rid of them damn rats so we can start having eggs again.”

“Yes Sir,” I said and took the stuff off his hands.

“And don’t call me Sir, I’m not your sergeant,” he replied and walked away.

I was not the marksman Mac thought I was. In fact I wasn’t even average, and besides it’s impossible to shoot a moving rat, so I had to devise a better trap to catch the rats.

Drowning rats would do it but then how do you get them to drown? I looked around and found a ten gallon green metal drum with a lid on it. I removed the lid. The inside was smooth and clean and had a yellow shine that looked like it was coated with gold.

I put the lid back and it tilted because it was heavier on one side. It gave me an idea. What if I built a tilting platform of wood or something and put hinges on it, then added bait and as the rat stepped on it, the platform would tip and drop the rat inside the drum. Then I could scoop the rat out with a net and drown it in a bucket of water?

I figured doing it this way might work but it was too messy and would take a long time to capture dozens of rats. There had to be a better way.

What if I put water in the bottom of the drum, enough water to drown the rat? And what if I made the tilting platform come right back up? It could catch a second rat and so on, without resetting the trap. It was a good plan I thought.

I went around the barn looking for materials and found a quarter inch wooden dowel rod in Mac’s shop and a large, empty cardboard box. I used the lid of the drum to outline the size of the cardboard tilting platform. I made it a couple of inches narrower so that it would fit inside the drum when it tilted. I then taped the rod on the bottom of the cardboard platform a few inches away from the centre.

I went to the shop and got a jar of large metal washers and taped a couple to the side of the drum through which I threaded the rod. I then taped the ends of the rod so that it would remain in the same position after it tilted back and forth.

After that I taped a couple of washers on the bottom of the platform to counter balance the weight of the tilting platform and bring it back up once the rat fell off. I had difficulty balancing it so I added more washers. Now it was tilting too far the other way.

To keep it level I taped a short strip of cardboard which prevented it from over tilting the other way.

It was simple the way it worked. After tilting the platform forward and dropping the rat into the drum it would bounce back and be stopped from over tilting. The strip of cardboard hitting the rim of the drum would stop it from over tilting.

It was genius. But now I had to figure out where I was going to put the bait to get the rats to walk onto the platform and tilt it. And most importantly, what would that bait be?

Then it hit me. I'd use eggs. I'd tie the eggs with strings and let them hang above the tilting platform. I found a long eight inch wide strip of cardboard. I bent the top to about ninety degrees like a hangman's platform, poked four evenly spaced holes and tied strings like a hangman's ropes. I taped the bottom end of the cardboard to the drum and then went looking for eggs. There weren't any. The rats had eaten them all.

So the trap was ready. I moved it closer to the place where the rats went up, placed a plank for them to climb up from the floor to the tilting platform and added about six inches of water in the drum. All I had to do now was get the eggs. To do that I had to stay there and wait for the chickens to lay some.

When I told Mac and Millie about my trap and plan, they both laughed.

"Boy, they wouldn't eat the expensive poison I bought for them and now you tell me they'll drown themselves? You have some imagination, boy. But don't let us stop you," said Mac and they both laughed again.

I spent the entire night babysitting the chickens. I found out that chickens are blind in the dark; no wonder the rats were robbing their eggs. I had a long stick in my hand and they backed off when I raised it. Then, around four in the morning I heard a crunching sound and found a rat holding an egg in its paws. It took off when it saw me. I went around the nests and found seven freshly laid eggs. I hid three in my kitchen and when it was light I took the four and taped them to the bait strings. The trap was now set.

The next night I babysat the chickens again and drove the rats away. But none of them went in the trap. I managed to save eleven eggs this time and took them and gave them to Millie. I must have looked like crap because Mac made a comment.

“What did you do, stay up and baby-sit the chickens all night? So, I take it your trap didn’t work.”

I didn’t say anything. I ate my porridge, drank my weak coffee and left.

I then went to my kitchen looking for a pan to fry the eggs but there wasn’t one.

I took one egg, broke it and dripped it all over the floor, up the plank and onto the tilting platform. I was determined to catch the rats.

It was Friday so I asked Mac if I could go to the market the next day.

“Take the truck and go, but if you want to borrow it again you’d best fix that clutch.”

“Okay,” I said and went out

I spent my Friday night babysitting the chickens again. This time I sat where the rats came up to the upper level. I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up it was daylight and the chickens had already gone out. I jumped suddenly and looked around. I counted seventeen eggs and no empty shells. Mac had twenty-two chickens and one rooster.

I figured the rats were either afraid to come up, were gone, or were trapped.

I quickly ran down the stairs and flipped the tilting platform. The drum was full of rats; some were sunk to the bottom while others were still swimming.

I got the small metal bucket, the net and a short stick. I then began to scoop the dead rats while knocking down the live ones that tried to climb up the net.

After I picked up a dead rat, I dropped it on the floor and whacked it with the stick to make sure it was dead. I then scooped it up with the net and dropped it into the metal bucket. After I did that several times I saw Mac walk into the barn.

“What’re doing there on the floor, I thought you wanted to go to the market?”

“Taking care of the rats,” I replied.

He quickly walked over and first looked at the dead rats in the metal bucket.

I flipped the tilting platform open and he looked at the live ones swimming at the bottom of the drum.

“Oh, my God, how many are there?” he yelled with disgust.

“Twenty seven,” I replied.

He then turned around and, while walking away, said, “Bury them on the side of the woodpile, where I buried my dead cat... which they killed.”

I waited until a rat drowned and picked it out. When they were all dead I reset the trap, buried the rats, took the truck and went to the market.

There were a lot of people looking down at the junk on the bare ground. It reminded me of the place on Ostikon in the outer zone where we went to get the firewater for my trial.

I saw a woman looking in my direction. It was Phyllis. She must have seen me. I waved at her and she came over.

“I see you’re wearing the same clothes,” she said. “Military – all you boys are the same, you love the military, you hate the military, you love the military.”

“Good morning to you too Phyllis, I see you’ve been looking for me.”

“Hah, don’t flatter yourself. Where is your sergeant?”

“He didn’t come.”

“That’s very unusual.”

I told her about the rats I’d caught that he couldn’t catch for months.

“You’ve pissed him off now? Better watch yourself.”

Phyllis was a nice lady and for some reason was stuck in this farm town without a husband and was always looking for one. At least that’s the impression I got. She figured me for a typical soldier with the usual problems but quickly changed her opinion as we got talking.

“You’re no soldier. Who are you hiding from? Are you a criminal?”

“All I can tell you is that I’m not a criminal. But I’ll need a friend to help me adjust here. Also, I can’t commit to anything because things may get complicated.”

I looked very serious when I said that. Then, moments later, I looked into her eyes and gave her a big smile. She put her head down on my shoulder and said she would help me.

“I have a kitchen and two hotplates but no dishes, utensils, or pots and pans,” I complained.

She grabbed my hand and pulled me away.

“You sure have rough hands,” I said.

“I’m a farmer, what did you expect?”

She grabbed a cardboard box from a pile of boxes and gave it to me to hold. She then asked me for money to which I made a joke of a sexual nature. She laughed, gave me a kiss on the cheek and pulled me away. Our first stop was pots and pans.

“I want a pan that will be big enough to cook for two.”

“Why two?”

“For when you come and visit me.”

“Do you already have a girlfriend and you’re lying to me?”

“No I don’t.”

“I have nothing but used stuff. They’re slightly burned but still useable,” said the lady sitting on the ground.

“What? They look like you found them in the garbage? Look how yellow and burned they are?” complained Phyllis in an attempt to drive the price down.

“Take it easy now and watch this,” I said.

I took one of the smaller pans, the one I was looking to buy, picked up a handful of moist, dark soil from the ground, dropped it in the pan and rubbed it with a piece of newspaper. I cleaned an area where it was burned and yellow. It looked shiny like new. The lady jumped up and looked at me.

“How did you do that?” she asked. “I spent money on dishwashing soap and nothing.” She then showed the pan to those who came to look.

“Here’s your pan and a matching dirty pot to go with it,” she said. “That’ll be two dollars.”

I told Phyllis to give her three dollars. The lady thanked me and gave Phyllis a dirty look.

By noon I had purchased everything I needed and put them in the truck.

Phyllis said, “You’ve been generous with everyone. Obviously you have money so how about you buy us some lunch. They have good food in a restaurant by the road a mile or so from here.

We got in the truck. She showed me the way. It was easy to find.

It was a small mom and pop restaurant. As I looked around Phyllis said, “What did you expect, it’s a small community, we’re lucky to even have it.”

After we sat down a fat lady came over and said, “We don’t have a menu, we only serve what we cook for the day. Today we have meat with potatoes and fresh bread.”

“We’ll have that,” said Phyllis putting her elbows on the table, her face in her hands and stared at me.

I looked at her. For some reason she reminded me of Ruzha. I examined every part of her face and stopped and stared into her eyes.

“Who are you man?” she asked.

“I already told you, I can’t tell you any more.”

“You have nerves of steel,” she said. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“You’re wrong,” I said.

“I’m a stranger right? So, how can you sit there looking back at me without flinching?” she asked.

“Two reasons,” I said. “One, I don’t want anything from you.”

“And the second reason?”

“You remind me of someone I used to admire but I couldn’t tell her.”

“So, this is how we’re going to play this game,” she said, looked me straight in the eyes and then said. “For some damn reason I believe you.”

We continued to casually stare at each other until the lady came with our food. She brought us two huge bowls of beef stew with large chunks of meat and huge slices of potatoes. It looked like it contained some spices and red pepper for sure. The woman then went back and brought us half a loaf of warm bread broken into large chunks.

I tried the bread first. It was delicious so I started dunking it into the stew and biting chunks. Phyllis started laughing out loud and got the attention of the fat lady who wanted to know if the food was okay.

“Look at him,” she said. “Dipping his bread in the broth like a peasant. I never expected that from him.”

“Don’t worry dear, he knows what he’s doing. That’s the best way to eat it. He must be Polish like me,” she said and walked away.

Phyllis shook her head, picked up a chunk of bread, dipped it in the broth and began to eat it. After that she couldn’t stop eating until all the bread was gone.

“There goes your beautiful figure,” I said.

“I’m a farmer,” she said. “I’ll burn it off.”

She paused for a moment, looked at me and said, “You think I have a beautiful figure? You think I’m beautiful? So, tell me what am I doing wrong?”

“I already told you, I can’t commit to anyone. I have my reasons.”

“No, not with you, with other men.”

“Phyllis, you’re an intelligent woman. I can have an intelligent conversation with you but all you want to do is have sex and dominate. You make men nervous and after they get what they want from you they leave. They want to escape.”

“You’re right you know, I never thought of it that way.”

“Stop chasing strangers. If you truly want to find a good partner stick with a local boy, show him some compassion, some smarts, and be his friend for a while before you jump into the sack with him.”

The lady came back with our bill and I gave her a good tip. To my surprise she said, “Oh, you don’t have to do that dear, we have money, we only work for something to do. When you’re brought up to work all your life you don’t know what else to do when you retire. Thank you anyway, come back again soon.”

“We will,” replied Phyllis and we left. I took her back to the market. Everyone had gone. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and said she had had a good time. She insisted on walking home alone.

“I know I’ll see you again,” she said.

“Why, because we didn’t have sex?”

“You got it,” she said. “See you later.”

When I got to the farm there was no one there. I figured Mac and Millie were probably napping so I took the opportunity to clean the

pot, pan, bowl and dishes that Phyllis helped me purchase. After I rinsed them outside I took them to my kitchen and left them on the counter to be washed with soap, which I didn't have.

After that I went outside and started working on the truck. I opened the hood. The engine was filthy with oil and dust. I couldn't get under the hood to fix the clutch until the filth was washed off. I looked around Mac's shop and found a large can of liquid hand soap, the kind mechanics use to clean their hands. I took that, a large paintbrush and a bucket of water and cleaned the entire engine and carburetor. I dumped a couple of buckets of water and rinsed the engine clean. After that I washed the paint brush and put things away.

When the engine was dry I opened the clutch. It wasn't worn at all? I checked the mileage on the truck, it registered 21,468 miles. It was an old truck but hardly driven. The clutch needed a minor adjustment and it was fixed.

I pulled the sparkplugs out, they were filthy. I cleaned them, adjusted their gaps and put them back. While I was doing that Mac showed up.

"You missed lunch, you got to let us know if you're going to skip meals. I see you're working on the truck, I hope you fixed the clutch."

"Sorry about the lunch, it won't happen again. And yes I fixed the clutch. Also, I want to tell you there are some eggs up there, what would you like me to do with them."

"Okay, you can drive the truck but I want the fuel tank full at all times, you burn it you pay for it. The eggs you can take inside and give them to Millie. Maybe tomorrow morning we can have eggs for breakfast, before church. You'll be taking us to church."

Okay," I said and finished putting the spark plugs back. I then checked the oil and other fluids; everything was okay.

I collected the eggs and took them to Millie. She didn't say anything. I asked her if I could borrow some dishwashing soap but she said no, it cost money.

I went back to my kitchen and washed everything again but without soap.

There was nothing to do to pass the time. It was Saturday evening and I had nothing to do. We had supper in silence and when I asked Millie if I could help with the dishes she said no.

I went back to the barn and started to look for things to do. There wasn't much to do. I kept thinking of Phyllis but, outside of taking Mac's truck and driving to her place, I had no way of contacting her. I didn't even know where she lived. Perhaps I could bring her here, I figured, but decided it would be a bad idea. I was beginning to think I had made a mistake settling on this farm.

First thing I did the next day was look for eggshells. There weren't any. I counted twenty eggs. I left them there for now and went into the house for breakfast.

Millie gave me one boiled egg and some watered down coffee.

I didn't say anything.

I put on a long-sleeved military shirt, military pants and military boots to go church. I didn't want to go inside the church but I was sure Mac and Millie would make me. It was a Protestant church.

When we walked in I saw Phyllis sitting up ahead on the far side looking at me. I waved her to come over. She shook her head, "no". I sat with Mac and Millie for a while. Then later I said I was going out for a smoke, even though I didn't smoke. The old sergeant was an ex smoker and knew what that was like, so he approved. Phyllis saw me and came out a little later.

The moment she came out I grabbed her and squeezed her. I said, "I'm trying to help these people but they're squeezing the life out of

me. I think I'm a patient person but I can't take it any more. Can I come and stay with you?"

"I know you don't mean that," she said. "I live with my parents, they're the same way but they're my parents. I have no choice. I can't help you. But, if it comforts you, I can tell you that a lot of soldier boys have been to that farm and they all ended up the same way."

"What do you mean?"

"They left angrier than when they arrived. Stay for as long as you can but be prepared to leave on short notice."

"I have no vehicle; will you come and see me sometimes?"

"Not a chance, they hate me."

And just as we were talking, Mac and Millie showed up behind me. Phyllis suddenly dropped her arms from me.

Mac said, "Do what you want on your own time but I don't want to see that whore on my property. I don't want you fornicating in my house."

I could have broken the ignorant bastard's neck for saying that. He was a disgrace to the military and a poor excuse for a human being. But instead I said, "Yes Sir."

"Take us home now," he said and they both got into the truck.

I looked at Phyllis. She smiled and winked at me. I smiled back.

After I dropped them off in front of their door I told them that I would no longer be eating meals with them from now on.

"That suits me fine. You'd better fix that fence by the road next week; you can have the rest of the day off today," Mac said.

“Okay,” I said and got back into the truck and drove back to the church. Phyllis was still there waiting for her parents to come out.

“Follow me but stay back, I’ll drop them off, leave the car at home and I’ll join you.”

I waited in the truck about twenty minutes before Phyllis drove out of the church parking lot. Five minutes later she pulled into a driveway, took her parents inside and told them she was going for a walk.

She walked over to my truck and looked at me with sad eyes.

“I feel so sorry for you. You’re a good man and don’t deserve this,” she said.

I smiled at her.

She began to cry.

“This is going to end tragically, isn’t it? I must be cursed because every time I meet someone I really like they leave me.”

“Phyllis, today we’re together and have the entire afternoon to spend together, let’s be thankful for that. Let’s be thankful for each day we have together and not worry about what happens tomorrow or in the future. I have no plans to leave and by the time I leave you’ll want to get rid of me anyway.”

She grabbed me by my neck and squeezed it. She was both crying and laughing at the same time smudging her face with her tears. She was a nice woman.

I gave her a hug and said, “The day is ours, where would you like to go?”

“Why don’t we go to town, it’s about ten miles from here. We can go and eat at a fancier restaurant and I’ll pay, if you like.”

“No my dear, not as long as I’m alive. No woman is going to pay for my dinner.”

She whacked me on my arm and felt my arm muscles.

“Not even the hardest working farmers have muscles like that,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Phyllis...” I said.

“I know, I know, why can’t I leave things alone and just enjoy the moment...? I think because it’s a human thing to be curious.”

“There is a saying that goes like this: ‘Curiosity killed the cat’ and there must have been a good reason why this saying was coined.”

As we continued down the road Phyllis looked down. She was sad again. I stopped the truck and asked her what was wrong.

“Just hold me for a while and I’ll be fine. She began to cry and said, “You’re smart and you can rationalize things but I can’t. I am fragile and lonely. No one here wants me. In fact they hate me. They think I’m a whore for wanting to be loved and for wanting to have some human kindness. What did I ever do to deserve this?”

“Nothing my dear, it’s your fate. Like it’s my fate to want... but never to have...”

She looked at me and said, “Why? That makes no sense.”

“I can’t tell you, please be happy for what we have and ask for no more.”

She grabbed my hand and squeezed it and said, “Okay.”

As we drove down the long road she continued to sob but was slowly coming around.

“I had a dull but okay life, until you came along... Now, I don’t know.”

I didn't say anything.

Moments later we turned right and were in the parking lot of a large mall. The restaurant was inside the mall.

"Am I going to be okay in this uniform?" I asked.

"Sure, why not," she said and slammed the truck door shut.

"We're lucky," she said. "The lunch crowd has left and the dinner crowd hasn't arrived yet because usually this place requires a reservation."

A nice young lady sat us down and asked us what we wanted to drink before we ordered. The waitress was a younger perky girl.

I turned to Phyllis and said, "You can order whatever you desire my dear."

"The waitress smiled and said 'You seem like a nice couple, are you newlyweds?'"

To my surprise Phyllis said, "Yes we are dear and we're very much in love."

"We have a policy here and have a small bottle of champagne on ice for just such an occasion," she said.

"No, that's not necessary," I said.

"Why not?" Phyllis snapped. "I'd love to enjoy my honeymoon with some champagne."

I smiled at the waitress and she smiled back at me as she left to get the bottle of champagne.

"What are you doing Phyllis, this is dishonest, and what if they ask as to prove we're married?"

“They won’t ask for that, come on, for a bottle of cheap champagne?”

“Okay then. You’re going to hate me when I leave the perky girl a big tip.”

“You’re going to leave her a big tip anyway, even if she spits in your soup.”

“Phyllis, please, you sound like a jealous teenager.”

She looked at me, smiled and said, “So, what if I am, this is my night and I’m going to enjoy it just like you said.”

The girl was prompt with our champagne, food, drinks and dessert. She smiled and we smiled back every time she came over.

“She is good, very good,” said Phyllis.

When we were done eating I left her a big tip like I said I would and kissed her on the cheek. The young girl jumped up and yelled, “YES!”

“You made her day,” said Phyllis. “How about making mine now?”

“No, Phyllis, that isn’t going to happen...”

She was quiet as we drove to her place in the dark. She walked outside from the passenger seat to my window and said, “I don’t know what to make of you. You want me as much as I want you but...”

I gave her a kiss and told her I’d a great time. She said she’d a great time too.

“See you,” I called.

“I know I’ll see you again,” she said. “And you know why... and don’t say it.”

And with that a great Sunday evening ended and I returned back to my self-made hell.

The next day I made a list of items to purchase. I drove to the garden centre, met Phyllis and told her what I was planning to do but had no idea where the grocery store was. She told me to wait until noon when she took her lunch break. She took me to the grocery store and helped me pick up my groceries. I got us a sub sandwich for lunch.

When I collected the eggs I consistently kept at least three for my breakfast before I gave them to Millie.

Over time the vegetables in the garden grew and began to mature. I decided to give the first cucumber to Mac and Millie but they refused it.

“We don’t want your damn vegetables that you grew on chicken shit. If we wanted any we would have planted them ourselves,” Mac said.

After that I fed the extra vegetables to the chickens. I frequently took some to Phyllis and she gave some to her parents and the rest to her neighbours.

My time with Phyllis was great, we managed our relationship without complications and we managed to enjoy ourselves very much. But my strain with Mac and Millie became unbearable to a point where Mac demanded that I not see Phyllis anymore or he’d throw me out and if I didn’t leave he’d call the police to have me evicted.

It was the end of September when I had finally had enough, packed my bags and left without telling Mac or Millie. It was a Saturday morning when I walked to the market and found Phyllis there. She began to cry when I told her that I was leaving.

I asked her to drop me off at the nearest bus station. She drove me out to a country road and pleaded with me to stay. I told her that this was inevitable and that was why I couldn’t commit to a relationship with her. She stopped the car and began to wail out loud. It was

useless talking to her. She cried her eyes out as I held her tight in my arms.

“Our relationship will end in a disaster if I don’t leave now,” I said.

“I can’t understand what awful things you could have done to deserve this and punish me like this?”

“Would it be easier on you if I was killed and left you with a child? That’s exactly what’s going to happen if I stay here and have a relationship with you. Do you hear me?” I yelled. “You don’t want to know what I know. Please be thankful for what we had.”

Finally she heard me and said, “I’m so sorry. I’ll take you to the bus station in the next town but I’m finding it difficult to let you go.”

She started the car and sobbed all the way to the bus station. I asked her to leave me there and drive back because I didn’t want her to know where I was going. She said she understood but kept sobbing. I gave her some money.

She gave me a miserable look.

“This is for all the things I was going to give you but never did,” I said.

I apologized for our time being cut short. She was angry at me at first because I had given her money but, after thinking about it, she took it.

“I always wanted a watch, I’ve never had one. I think I’ll buy myself one and think of you every time I look at it,” and she began to cry out loud again.

I grabbed her, squeezed her hard, kissed her, told her to drive carefully and yelled at her to go. She did.

I sat down on the curb in the bus station parking lot pulling my hair out. I felt very sorry for what I had just done to Phyllis.

I didn't know what to do. Where was I going to go? I then got this feeling that Phyllis might come back so I decided to leave the bus station and walked into town.

I walked along the main road until I reached a big restaurant. I went inside, went to the washroom and washed my face. I then went to order some food. I saw a cheese and ham sandwich on toast on the menu up above. As I stood there waiting for my sandwich to be made I heard a lot of swearing and yelling coming from the kitchen. My waitress, a beautiful young girl, came over, lifted her arms above her shoulders in defeat and said, "I'm sorry!"

The cook came over and said, "I'm sorry sir, my toaster broke so unless you can fix it, we have no more toasted bread. Please order something else."

"Sorry to hear that, can I have a look at your toaster?" I asked.

"You're joking right?" he asked, looking at me. "Please be my guest..."

To make a long story short, I not only fixed his toaster but I fixed every piece of equipment they had that was broken. I replaced the entire array of electrical sockets and upgraded the entire wiring system in the kitchen. The owner was so happy that, in addition to paying me a hefty fee, he offered me a full time job, gave me access to free food in the restaurant and a room above the restaurant.

A lot of young ladies, mostly students from the local college, worked in the restaurant evenings and weekends and I enjoyed their company. I often helped them with their homework.

One older woman about my age used to come upstairs for a smoke and I spent a lot of time listening to her complaining about her family, friends and especially about her boyfriends. She stunk like an ashtray so I stayed away from her. She often asked why I didn't want to have a relationship with her and every time I told her I was already married.

One day one of the young waitresses, a beautiful thin girl who suffered a lot from stomach cramps, came over and asked me to help her move her furniture from a home to an all girl's student residence run by nuns. I borrowed the restaurant's van on a Saturday and moved her. The room she was moving into, unfortunately, had been demolished by the previous girl and many things were broken.

When we got there she began to cry and complained to the nuns. They had no caretaker or handyman to do the repairs. She turned to me and cried in my arms. I knew she was a hard worker and was also sick. I felt sorry for her so I said I'd do the repairs immediately so that she could move in because she had nowhere to go. I worked late into the night but I couldn't finish the job. I told the nuns that I was going to take her to my place for the night but they objected.

"He's been like a brother to me for over a year and I trust him, don't worry," she said.

We came back the next day early in the morning and finished the job.

The nuns told me that they could use my skills here if I wanted to volunteer. They could offer me food and a place to stay but that was about it. I told them I would think about it.

The next day was Monday, the manager of the restaurant called me in and said he'd had a complaint about me taking the van on the weekend.

"I've been using the van to do chores for two years now and no one has complained, why now? The owner is my friend and I've helped him a lot. What does he have to say about that?" I yelled.

He got upset and told me that he was the boss here, not me. So I told him where to go. I was very angry and figured if I didn't leave right then that I'd break his neck. As a last act I took his autographed baseball bat and smashed it against the cement floor.

When I showed up at the residence and told the girl what had happened she immediately took me to see the nuns and they came through with their offer.

We were friends for a long time and with my help, over time, the girl overcame her stomach cramps, which were caused by anxiety and too much stress.

The nuns gave me a place to stay and access to a shop where I repaired and built whatever was needed for the students. I spent the next year and a half volunteering at the residence.

Besides the room where I stayed there was a large open space with a fireplace which I furnished with chairs, tables and couches I'd found in the garbage and refurbished. It was a quiet space for the girls to rest, do some reading and help each other with their homework. I had a fire burning for them a couple of hours each day after school when it was really cold outside.

I spent almost five years in isolation since I had been abducted, almost one year on the base in BC, three months on a farm, two years in a restaurant and a year and a half in a girl's residence. I helped a lot of girls with health problems, money problems, family problems, boyfriends and even with their schoolwork.

One day a man, a stranger, arrived at the residence and said he wanted to speak with Peter James. One of the nuns brought him up to my place and left.

He was very brief and to the point. "You've been recalled to Ostikon, be on top of the hill up there on Sunday at midnight," he said and walked away.

I didn't see her but a girl was lying down on a couch beside us and after the man left, she wanted to know what was going on and who this man was.

My lying instinct kicked in and I said, "I've been recalled by the military to go on a special mission about which I can't talk."

She ran over and after she gave me a hug she went outside and told her friends. Everybody knew by the end of the day.

At the same time I went over to the telephone room and called Risto Stefov, my childhood friend, and told him to come over and meet me here at the residence the next day.

He agreed and came over. I spent the entire day telling him my story from the day I was abducted to the day I was dismissed from my services at Ostikon. I didn't tell him how I got back to earth and what I'd done here. I didn't tell him in order to protect my friends. I also told him to keep all this a secret.

He said he would and I believed him.

On Saturday the girls had a party for me. I was dressed in my military uniform as each girl lined up and said goodbye.

The next day I spent packing. I made sure I had my badge with me because without it I would be nobody. I gave all my possessions, including my money, to my girls and told them I wouldn't need them where I was going. The only things I kept were some clothing to get me there and my gold watch so that I could be on the hill at precisely midnight. I burned all of Peter James's documents including his diary.

I figured once I was gone I wouldn't return. They were recalling me to either kill me for disobeying orders and leaving the base or they needed the ship and once I gave it to them they would kill me anyway. In any case I figured if I couldn't live the life I was meant to live here on earth, I wasn't going to come back.

At precisely midnight a shuttle arrived and took me away.