

Complexity

Written by Jody LePage and Robert LePage

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Prelude

At issue only how

And when

As in the casting room

Where you bring the torch tip yellow-blue

To beads and scraps of gold

Heating them to blazing red

Walls crumbling in the crucible

You stir the velvet melting into satin

Feathering the howling hissing welder's flame

Add a pinch of flux to liquid loaf

Glowing with solar brightness

Heating heating stirring ever faster

Until the precious pool shimmers for release.

Too early the golden river chokes

Too late a pit full disaster

No moment chosen without risk

You've got to let the gold

Tell you

When the time is come.

Cal and Josh

‘This could be *it!*’ Cal thought. ‘Or at least something that could really help.’

The biology professor had just finished the day’s lecture. But Cal sat transfixed, oblivious to the class-ending commotion going on all around him. Then with a jolt, he packed up his laptop, grabbed his coat and headed for the door. Moved as quickly as he could through the crowded hallway. His mind racing.

‘Life begins with molecules passing molecules to each other. Giving. Helping. A phase transition. Like Josh is always talking about.’

Back in their junior year of high school, Cal and Josh had studied the Atomic Theory of modern chemistry. The following year they were introduced to the Standard Model of particle physics and learned about the forces that hold the protons and neutrons together inside atoms. Quarks had fired Josh’s imagination, inspired him to read everything he could. He knew from the start of college that he would major in physics.

Since then, Josh had gotten into String Theory. He hadn’t told the quark story for a while. Yet, as Cal headed across campus for the library, he could just picture his roommate launching into that beloved tale of the beginning of the Universe.

“Before time, before any events that we can know,” Josh would start, “most physicists assume a primordial sea of chaos. Wave-particles of matter emerging only to be annihilated by anti-matter. Every ‘this’ met with a ‘not-that.’ Maybe such a frothing no-thing-ness going on forever, or maybe something else, until... relationship.” Josh often paused at this point.

Then with a quick bite of his bottom lip, “It’s likely, given the ambient energy associated with the first moment, the earliest entities to attempt engagement with each other, were... well... Picture one big as the sky. The other small as a beach pebble. The larger of the two assumes the top position, relegating the other to the bottom. With such imbalance, information easily gets sent downward, but nothing goes upward. The relationship proves untenable. In less than a millisecond, the Top quark rapidly decays and they both fall back into non-existence.”

Josh would get so into the story, you’d think each time he told it was the first. “An infinitesimal of that first moment later, there’s another attempt. This time the difference in mass is much less. And it seems to physicists that the larger is trying to attract the smaller, putting on the charm so to speak. While the less powerful is acting — well, strange. Not knowing how to respond. This second attempt at what could matter, dubbed the Charmed and Strange quarks, lasts only slightly longer. Then, they too, fall back into non-being.”

Here Josh's eyes would signal his favorite part. "As the first hundredth of a second draws near, another generation of quarks emerge. This time, the quarks are nearly equal in mass, and most significantly, we find them in groups of three — as if dancing together. 'Up' quarks are passing the 'gluon' particle to 'Down' quarks and other Ups; while Downs are passing the gluon to Ups and other Downs. With each exchange, they transform into one another's red, green, or blue color charge. Or putting it another way, the Up and Down quarks are sharing a common energy field. The dynamic we call the 'Strong Force,' effectively binding them together."

Hoping that he hadn't lost anyone, "Creating relationship on the basis of sharing proves so stable, that the sets of three are able to draw the attention of the Higgs particle, which gives them additional mass. Within minutes, the two Ups and one Down clusters — which we now call protons; are joining with the two Downs and one Up — which we've named neutrons, forming nuclei. They in turn are attracting electrons. As these formations — the first atoms — pull together, they create space around themselves. This permits the photons, carriers of the electromagnetic wave, to ripple out. Space continues to expand. The Universe is well underway."

"Why do the Ups and Downs get into three-way relationships rather than simply pairing off?" Cal once asked.

"Good question. It turns out that the Ups and Downs don't require the total amount of energy that the gluon particle makes available for their bonding. That excess energy we've come to call, the 'weak force.' It permits the positively charged protons to hold together with one another — without it, of course, they would repel each other. With it, they can form the atomic nuclei."

"It's an interesting example of how the unexpected, the wondrous, can happen during phase transitions," Cal remembered Josh saying. Which is why he couldn't wait to talk with Josh about this biology lecture.

What Cal liked most about Josh's quark story is that it went contrary to the belief that competition is the name of the game. If the universe is founded on relationship, equality, sharing, reciprocity... it might explain why humans have evolved democratic political cultures and why — despite all our cynicism — we can't live without love.

"Are physicists actually saying *that*?" Cal remembered asking.

"Well, no. Not exactly. I like to focus on the activity of the quarks, particularly the success of the Ups and Downs — the stability of their relationship — because of that story's larger implications. But most physicists don't go there."

Professor Kensington had carefully avoided any hint of the implications too, Cal noted as he entered the library, swiped his ID and passed through the turnstile.

'Maybe I can do something with this stuff for credit,' he hoped. 'Maybe not, but...'

Up in the stacks, Cal added to the volumes cited in the lecture by browsing the adjoining shelves. He left with as many books as he could squeeze into his backpack. Outside it was beginning to snow, but Cal barely noticed. All the way home he was thinking about what he wanted to ask Josh.

Their friendship had begun the summer Josh was going into eighth grade, Cal into seventh. One morning, Cal happened upon Josh — both knees badly skinned and trying to walk his wreck of a bike — at the bottom of Emily Hill. Josh, tall with black curly hair and glasses; Cal, dark blond and slightly shorter, soon became “inseparable,” their parents called it. By the time they were in college, they’d played on the same sports teams, worked the same summer jobs, camped, fished, double-dated and traveled together. Everything from their tastes in rock and roll to their favorite eateries conspired to keep them that way. Most importantly, they agreed on how the world should be, could be. All people fed, housed, clothed, cared-for and able to labor in meaningful jobs for the good of themselves and others. That is, equal access to education and all types of work. Equal participation in the making of laws.

They also had their differences. Cal was an Aries, fire. Josh, an Aquarian, air. Cal ignited new ideas and possibilities. Josh searched. Start talking with Josh about the weather and three sentences later you might be exploring the philosophical implications of imaginary time. Start talking with Cal about the weather and you’d soon be out in it.

In college, Cal had changed majors twice: from political science to history, then to comparative literature. He thought he’d like to teach high school when he finished. He was taking this biology course to meet requirements for graduation.

Josh had been awarded a work-study position by the Advanced Research team in the Physics department. He had impressed several professors his first year with the heater he built for the lab where he worked. A not-too quiet fan behind a metal coil he’d wound himself and connected to a rheostat feedback loop assembly with a temperature sensor that he liked to brag demonstrated some thermodynamic principle. It always made Cal laugh.

What wasn’t funny was how worried they and all their friends were about the world. No one could ignore the problems anymore. The weather had been making sure of that for years.

When Cal got back to the apartment, he stood at the front doorway for a minute. Swirls of snowflakes appeared then disappeared into the night. Down the street, the winter branches — the same but somehow never the same — swayed in the street lamp. The sidewalk was turning white.

“Hey, Josh,” he called as he stomped the snow from his shoes.

An irritated, “What!?” came from down the hallway, followed by a moment of silence, then, “Wait. Wait a second. Oh, shit — forget it. Hey, did anyone ever tell you that when your roommate is studying you’re supposed to keep it quiet?”

“Yeah. Ahhh. Let’s see. You did if I recall. Like a coupla’ hundred times.”

In years past, crumpled paper wars, flying paperclips or rubber bands would have followed. But Cal and Josh had matured since those days. And besides, with only four weeks left in the semester, things were getting serious.

“Sorry Josh, but —”

“Can it wait ‘til tomorrow? I’ve really got to get this paper done. It’s due first hour.”

“Okay. After class?”

“Sure. Oh, there’s pizza in the fridge.”

“Hey, thanks.”

Josh swiveled back to his monitors. Cal returned with a slice of pizza, headed for his room. And some serious reading.

Phase Transitions

“Grande mocha,” the counter person called to her co-worker.

Cal had stayed up almost all night reading. He scanned the room. A few regulars. No one he really knew. And no Josh. Not yet.

“Four fifty-seven, please.”

The coats, hats, scarves and gloves winter demanded added to the challenge of negotiating the maze of tables and scattered chairs. Jazz floated between the almost too loud waves of conversation.

After unwrapping, Cal opened his laptop and picked up where he’d left off.

III. Cosmic Scale Phase Transitions

- 1) Supersymmetry ? > the Universe
- 2) Protometabolic activity > life
- 3) Prokaryotes > eukaryotes
- ? Water > land
- ? Symbol making > language - culture - technology

Cal’s mind shifted. He remembered the biology teacher who was so obsessed with the fact that, “cells repair themselves,” but had never explained why doing so was such a big deal. Now Cal understood. In order for cells to self-repair, they must somehow *know* what they look like. Or what their neighbors looked like. It was evidence of some kind of consciousness, the use of information on the cellular level.

“And why not?” Josh was always asking. “Why not mind inseparable from matter? Some kind of panpsychism would help explain how we can be aware of the world at all. And if it’s true, then our understanding of the Universe needs a serious upgrade.”

Last night’s reading had been frustrating. Authors would allude to that conclusion, but hold back from spelling it out. Write all around the elephant in the living room without ever stating what it was. Always on the verge of what never got said.

‘But if science is unable to say anything about what’s possibly gone wrong,’ Cal thought, ‘we’re in trouble.’ He blew a stream of breath through his tightened lips and refocused. Continued his scrolling, cutting and pasting. ‘All the conveniences and every latest device yet to be imagined won’t amount to anything, if—’

The sound of chair legs dragged across floor tile broke his attention.

“Hey.” It was Josh’s smiling face.

“Hey. Where ya’ been?”

“Somebody put in a bad IP and the backup failed.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah.” Josh had taken his coat off and was searching through his ever present shoulder bag. “We’re okay now. Let me get a coffee. You need anything?”

“No, thanks.”

Cal had cleared the table by the time Josh returned.

“Okay, what’d you want to talk about?”

“That course you took last year. Complexity Theory. But first, I’ve got to tell you about yesterday’s biology lecture.”

“Sure. Let’s hear it.” Josh poured a packet of sugar into his bowl-sized coffee.

“Okay, so Kensington starts her lecture by describing what’s happening like five billion years ago, nine billion years after the Beginning of the Universe.”

Josh nodded.

“The earth is enveloped in an ultraviolet haze of gaseous vapors. There’s volcanic eruptions, asteroids, lightning... all that stuff. But slowly the fiery shower subsides. Temperatures drop. The heavy cloud cover condenses, turns to rain and Earth gets oceans.” Cal leaned closer to the table. “Then, maybe a billion years later, in some of these waters, oily droplets form. Well, the walls of these droplets let some things pass through. Yet shield whatever’s inside from the turbulence going on outside.”

“K,” Josh encouraged.

“Within the safety of the droplets,” Cal continued, “long chain polymers, a kind of complex molecule emerges. And not long afterwards, they begin engaging one another. Passing molecules back and forth.” He paused. “That in itself is cool. But here’s the best part. When polymers encounter a chain that doesn’t have all the pieces to participate — like they’re missing a string of information or something — they give those molecules what they need, so they can play, too.” He looked at Josh. “Primitive metabolism. Inclusion, giving turns out to be the first step to life on Earth.”

“Hmmm...” Josh slowly shook his head. “Sorta’ like — ”

“Your quarks, I know. Wait ‘til you hear the rest. About a billion and a half years later, these first living cells have moved onto the land and developed into a multitude of bacteria. But they’ve done so by getting the carbon that they need from the carbon dioxide in the air and leaving behind the oxygen.” Cal took a sip of mocha. “Can you guess what’s happening?”

Josh raised his eyebrows.

“Their consumption is producing an environment that’s poisonous to just about all of them. Oxygen.” Cal answered himself. “The whole web of life on Earth is on the edge of disaster. Hanging in the balance.”

The ambient noise of the coffee shop had ceased to exist.

“But get this. Among the various bacteria, there’s a peculiar minority that have been playing around with the oxygen. They’ve learned how to make use of it. And among the majority, there happens to be a group of Sugar-making Swimmers — descendants from a symbiosis between Thermoplasts and eel-tailed Spirochetes who had developed a kind of sexual replication.” Cal surprised himself at how well he was remembering the terms.

Josh had stretched his long legs out to the side of the table. He was seldom out of uniform — khaki pants, loose fitting shirt or sweater and loafers. He compromised in winter by adding socks.

“Okay, so the Swimming Thermo-Spirochetes meet up with the Purple Oxygen Breathers and offer them the sweets of their fermentation labors, the shelter of their mobile homes and the delights of their reproductive activities — in exchange for the secret of using oxygen and not dying from it. Result — they get together and create something never seen before. The nucleated cell. Highly complex and —”

Cal read Josh’s face.

“What?”

“Be careful,” Josh warned. “Even if there’s consensus out there about these evolutionary steps, the way you’re talking makes the bacteria sound too much like present day humans. Which suggests the whole thing’s about us — like we’re the apogee of life.” Josh sat up. “But I get your point. The bacteria get beyond the crisis by joining together. Sharing what they do and have with one another.” He smiled. “Like the quarks.”

“Exactly. And this gets us to what I wanted to ask you about.”

“Ask away.”

“I need to know more about phase transitions.”

“Macroscopic behavior of systems crossing brinks and changing qualities.” Josh recited from wherever he had memorized it.

“Right. Well, Professor Kensington applied the term to the complex molecules learning metabolism. And to the cells acquiring a nucleus. But she says there’s debate about whether or not the emergence of life forms from the sea represents a phase transition. So why not?”

Josh thought about it for a moment. “Well, it’s probably because biologists don’t consider leaving the water for the land all that dramatic of a change. It’s not my field, but I imagine they’re seeing it as an adaptation rather than a real symmetry break.”

Cal put a hand to his brow then dragged it across his face. “Hmmm. So what qualifies as a phase transition?”

“With a phase transition,” Josh sipped his coffee, “the end condition is an almost inconceivable outcome of the pre-existent one. Your story about the Purple Oxygen Breathers and the sexual swimming sugar-makers, for instance. Not to encourage you in your anthropomorphizing, but how they solved their problem would have seemed impossible, even to them, before they did it. Know what I mean? They effectively created a new being.”

“Yeah...” Cal said. “But could you tell me again how phase transitions happen? If you’ve got the time.” He checked his mocha. Empty.

“It won’t take that long.”

Cal’s eyes lit up. “Thanks, Josh. Let me get a refill.”

Josh laughed. How anyone could drink two espressos in a row without their brains imploding was beyond him.

Cal returned. Passed Josh a napkin.

“Thanks. Okay. Complexity Theory. Well, let’s start back in the late sixties, when computers were still huge things and slower than snail mail. You’ve got this guy, Lorenz. A meteorologist doing research at MIT. He’s thinking if he can program his computer with all the known laws for pressure, temperature, dew points... he can create a virtual world and significantly improve weather prediction. So he sets the whole thing up, watches the developing weather patterns and starts to think that he’s getting somewhere.”

“One morning, though — I don’t know, maybe his computer froze up during the night or there was a power outage or something. Anyway, he comes in and the thing is down. So to get the project up and running again, he takes the last values from his printout, puts them back into the computer, gives it the ‘Go,’ and leaves.”

“But when he comes back,” Cal interrupted, “instead of the patterns he expects, the weather has gone completely crazy. Totally not doing what it’s supposed to do. After checking everything, he figures it out. Because his printer only goes out three decimal places and his program six, it has to be the missing fourth, fifth and sixth decimal values that he wasn’t able to feed into his computer. The butterfly wing effect.”

“So you already know this story.”

“Yeah, well, you told it to me like ten times last year.”

“The point is,” Josh leaned his head to one side, “it’s not a metaphor. A butterfly wiggling its wing in South America could actually affect the weather over Texas. Microscopic change can produce macroscopic effects. A small, seemingly insignificant

action, anywhere in a complex dynamic system — some people call ‘em networks — can cascade up through the various levels and alter the whole system.”

Cal pulled out his laptop, opened a new file and started typing.

Josh pushed his cup and saucer to the side. “And it’s that way for any non-linear complex dynamic system, whether you’re talking about three or more billiard balls, the solar system, units of supply and demand, species in an environment, societies... you name it. And —”

“Wait. Let me make sure I understand these terms. Complex is obvious. And dynamic means in motion and changing over time, right?”

“Correct.”

“But what exactly do you mean by non-linear?”

“Non-linear. That means you can’t line up the elements of such systems in a simple cause and effect sequence. In a non-linear system everything affects everything else — the causes and effects are involved in feedback loops. You know, when the cause brings about an effect but that effect also influences the cause.”

“Got it.”

“Okay, so Complexity Theory suggests that to study these kinds of systems, instead of asking ‘what,’ you really need to ask, ‘how.’”

Josh could also read Cal’s face.

“Like when I add cream to my coffee, how does it change from swirls of white in black to a consistent brown?”

“Yeah, how does it?”

“In ways that demonstrate characteristics of complex dynamic systems — such as sensitivity to initial conditions, self-organization, emergent behavior, self-similarity, unpredictability —”

Suddenly, Josh’s coffee cup with its remaining coffee went clattering and splashing across the table, finally smashing into fragments on the floor. Cal grabbed his laptop just in time.

Someone trying to make their way through the muddle of tables and chairs —

“Oh, man! I’m sorry.”

Several heads turned as the background din of conversations paused. Only the jazz continued uninterrupted.

Josh was up in a flash, then back with a rag from the barista. Cal had already done the best he could with their napkins. The man whose backpack had hit the cup was picking up the pieces.

When they'd settled back down, Josh continued. "As I was saying, whether it's sand grains cascading down the sides of a sand pile, stock market fluctuations, commuter traffic... patterns emerge from chaos. And the really interesting thing is that the emergent patterns are not imposed from above or outside, but come from below by way of the interactions among the agents of the systems. The constituents themselves respond. And by way of their networks, create the order. That's what they mean when they say complex systems are self-organizing. That's a key point, self-organizing."

Cal brought a hand to his mouth, typed, then looked up.

"Okay. So the next thing. In every complex system you've got these feedback loop relationships —"

"Bam-bam-bam-bam!" The pounding clean of coffee grounds at the espresso bar broke through Josh's words.

"What each member of a system does affects its neighbors," he continued. "Those neighbors, in turn, affect the member that affected them, as well as their own neighbors — and so forth. So a small fluctuation at a local level can cascade through all levels of a structure and completely transform the pattern."

"Every time?"

"No. Not every time. The outcome's not predictable."

"So a particular agent could do something and nothing happen?"

"Well, yes. Chance is involved. Freedom. Since you can't predict the response of free agents to a stimulus, you can't predict what's going to happen. Every action — or call it a perturbation, fluctuation, instigation, whatever — meets with conflict, indifference or resonance. If there's enough agreement, you get a transition."

"Which is why I'm thinking this is so important," Cal interjected. "But I can just hear people, like my dad, saying, 'So? Where does that get you? If everything is so complex that nothing can be predicted, what does it matter?' How would you answer that?"

Josh leaned over the table, glanced around the room, then whispered over the din. "It matters because it's evidence that the Universe is not determined. Nature, our nature, all of nature, none of it is fixed. It's free. We're free." He raised his eyebrows and sat back again.

A loud rush of steam from the coffee machine frothing another cappuccino mixed with the conversations and the on-going jazz.

"I'd also tell him that Complexity Theory is a valuable tool because it suggests where systems are going," Josh continued. "And the place it sees all of them going is toward the edge of chaos."

Cal dropped his arm on the table. “How can that be true? Doesn’t chaos threaten the very existence of a system as a system?”

Josh nodded quick affirmatives. “It does. And something more. Chaos not only threatens the existence of the system that evolves to its edge, but it also threatens whatever other systems that might be entwined with that system.”

Cal looked stuck between his initial bewilderment and a new state of disbelief.

“Look, here’s why,” Josh sat up. “An organization, an organism, an individual, a whole species... any complex dynamic system utilizes a certain set of solutions in response to a set of problems. Maybe it’s balancing pretty well between equilibrium and openness to new possibilities. But every system is inextricably bound up with other systems; and those systems are also evolving and changing. Anyway, however it comes about — maybe the initial solutions weren’t the best, or even if they were — eventually they begin to fail. The system arrives at the edge of chaos. It’s what the system does when it reaches that threshold that makes all the difference.”

“It creates a phase transition.” Cal’s enthusiasm suddenly returned.

“Well, remember what I just said.” Josh frowned. “It’s unpredictable. You’re not always going to get a phase transition at the edge of chaos. You have a couple of other possibilities. You can attempt to retreat from the edge by clinging to earlier failed solutions. Which won’t work. Or you can just continue on and go right off the edge. *Or* you can create a phase transition.”

Cal added to his notes. After a few seconds, “How about some detail on that?”

“Well, going straight over the edge is what happens when agents of a system fail to respond to what’s going on. Maybe they don’t recognize the crisis. Or there’s nothing they can do; or maybe there’s something they can do, but for whatever reason, they choose not to do it. What follows is that uncontrollable events begin cascading through the system. Leading to complete dissolution. They perish.”

“Hey, you skipped the first option,” Cal peered over the top of his laptop screen. “Like a typical professor already, Josh.”

Josh chuckled.

“Okay. The possibility of attempting to retreat from the edge. Now that scenario is interesting because you might have some members of the system recognizing the need for change and pushing in the direction of a phase transition — but meeting with obstruction from others canalizing the system.”

“Canalizing?”

“That’s the term they use for one of the strategies employed by agents trying to force the system back into old solutions. It means controlling the flow of information. In

a human context, that could be leaving important information out, introducing noise into the system, disempowering the agents urging change, stuff like that. In the end, that option produces the same result. Extinction.”

Cal caught up with his note taking. “Then there’s a phase transition,” he prompted.

“Right. So first of all, keep in mind that a phase transition means *radical* change. It’s not just a re-structuring or an adaptation.” Josh asked with a look whether Cal understood. “A phase transition is beyond a revolution. It’s a complete transformation. Like your nucleated cell story.”

“A metamorphosis?” Cal suggested.

“Well, no. Because the emergent pattern, the solution, isn’t programmed to unfold the way a caterpillar is programmed to metamorphose into a butterfly. Like I said before, in a phase transition, the solution is *created*.”

Hands poised over the keyboard, Cal asked, “So how does a phase transition work? I mean, you know, like how does it happen?”

“Here’s how. When a successful system arrives at the edge of chaos, it opens its doors to its inherent potential by searching through all its possibilities — alternatives available because of diversity preserved on the individual level.”

“Like the Purple Oxygen breathers.”

“Exactly. Alternative solutions may have been around all along. Tolerated, maybe even nurtured — just not the prevalent pattern. But now those minor fluctuations that represent the new solution meet with unprecedented assent and — Vroom!”

Cal looked up. “Let’s say a system runs into the — uhhh,” he glanced at his screen, “a canalizing problem. Especially if there’s a hierarchy, some constituents exercising power over others. How does it get past that?”

“Of course I know where you’re going with this.” Josh took a sip of his coffee. “Okay. So when a system arrives at the edge of chaos, those in the upper levels are not insulated from what’s threatening the agents at every other level. And, at the same time, they’re as free as any other member to choose an alternative. Everything can change when it becomes clear that anything less than a phase transition will carry the system over the edge.”

“Hmmm... It seems you just keep coming back to the point that — even for a phase transition — the system depends on what the agents are choosing. Wherever they’re located.”

Josh nodded.

“So what you’re saying, really, is that it all comes down to freedom. But... that leaves everything so wide open... I mean —”

“Has to be. Without freedom, how do you explain the horizon of possibility that the Universe expresses. Cal, just think about the variety of flora and fauna in the world. The wonders out in space. We haven’t even seen it all yet. And then there’s your own experience. What does being **you**, mean?”

“Okay. But what about survival of the fittest? What happens to that?”

“Nothing happens to that.” Josh looked puzzled. “It’s a question of *what* proves to be fittest. Fitness in the old way often becomes the opposite of fitness when a system reaches the edge of chaos.”

Cal typed something. Scrolled a bit. Then, “I think you’ve given me what I need — at least, to get started. Listen to this.”

Josh tilted his head.

“The humans, a species with a fairly evolved brain, come up with a sign system — develop language. The acquisition doesn’t represent a phase transition. More like a great adaptation. Maybe even the human brain develops through interaction with the sign system.”

“Feedback loop relationship,” Josh qualified.

“Anyway, the sign system gets elaborated through culture, becoming more and more complex. Mathematics, science, the Industrial Age, technology. Human population explodes. We completely transform the appearance of earth. Megacities. Expressways. Pipelines. Satellites — ”

“Global warming. Forests and oceans dying. Premature disappearance of entire species. Weapons of mass destruction,” Josh added.

“Yes, because all along we’ve been institutionalizing competition and keeping hierarchy in place with violence.”

“And now we arrive at the edge of chaos.”

“Right,” Cal said with dead seriousness.

They both fell silent for a moment.

“But luckily,” Josh raised a finger, “we never completely stamped out alternative narratives — love, equality, cooperation. In fact, we’ve always cherished them, even though we run our world on the opposite. We do have the equivalent of Purple Oxygen Breathers.”

“The question is,” Cal replied, “what else does it take?”

“Excuse me,” a voice interrupted from the next table. “I couldn’t help but overhear. And when you asked that last question, I just had to say something.”

Dreadlocks asymmetrically framed the speaker's deep brown face.

“You guys might be interested in the Complexity Theory group that's been meeting for a couple of months now. Last week a history professor gave a presentation suggesting an answer to that very question. He cited the proto-democratic structures born of the eighteenth-century revolutions. Explained that the Age of Democracy left the real political power in the hands of a small sector of society, but democratic ideals nonetheless informed those constitutions. He believes that the right of the people to reformulate their systems and institutions are implicit — sometimes explicit — in those very documents. Which could provide important gateways to a phase transition. You should check it out. There's similar CT Groups at a bunch of other universities and colleges. Ours meets every Thursday. Room in the Commons. Here's the address.”

The speaker rose, handed them a napkin with the address and disappeared through the café door.

Ann

“I can’t believe it!” Ann said aloud as she watched the last of her visitors pass under the exit sign, listened to them rumbling down the concrete stairwell. “Just can’t believe it.”

Her mind reeled back to another scene. Lee and Earl waiting for her in the lobby of the dorm earlier that morning.

“Hey, Ann.”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“How you doin’?”

“I’m doin’ all right. What are you two up to? I’m sure this is no chance meeting.”

“Well, we got something we thought you might be interested in.”

“And what might that be?”

“You tell her, Lee.”

“Well, what it comes down to is that there’s this theory.” Eyebrows raised, Lee hesitated.

“You’ve been waiting here to tell me about a *theory*?”

“Complexity Theory. They’ve been using it in mathematics, biology, biz ed, a lot of different fields. And now people are connecting it with the kind of changes we’ve always been talking about. The thing is, this theory says that what looks impossible can happen. That it’s happened before.”

“Yeah, the impossible happening is actually a natural thing. It’s called a phase transition. And it could happen again.”

“What could?”

“A phase transition,” Lee and Earl said in unison

“A what? Hey, it’s eight o’clock in the morning. You guys been up all night?”

“No, listen. Seriously. Sometimes when things look really hopeless, like at the edge of total destruction, a whole new pattern emerges.”

“It’s happened throughout the evolution of life on earth. And this time it’s the humans’ turn.”

“People are saying that we’re ready, that we could move to a whole new level. See things, do things completely differently.”

Anne set her backpack down.

“So like everybody tomorrow morning is just gonna — What people? Who’s saying this?”

“From what we’ve heard, it’s mostly students right now. And professors. Like there’s this brother at Berkeley, a history professor. He says we could use Article V of the United States Constitution as a focal point. Call for a Constitutional Convention. Totally re-construct our political and economic systems.”

“Yeah, real democracy. Real equality. The whole thing could come true,” Lee concluded.

“C’mon you guys. You can’t expect —”

“C’mon yourself, Ann. Okay, you gotta go some to believe it. But what if it’s true?”

Ann picked up her backpack and started walking for the door. She had an eight-thirty and didn’t plan on being late. Earl and Lee fell into step with her.

“Yeah. Get with it, Ann. Groups are forming. Everybody’s gonna be talkin’ phase transition real soon. Train in the station.”

They crossed the lobby, pushed open the double glass doors and stood together outside.

“Check out this website. See for yourself.” Earl pulled out a small multicolored notepad, scribbled down a web address and handed Ann a purple note. “You might wanta pass this on to some of your white friends, too.”

“My white friends?” Ann stopped in her tracks. “Have you two gone completely mad?” She examined their faces. “You messin’ with me?”

“Would we mess with you, girl? About something serious like this?”

“Look, whatever you... I gotta go. Really.”

As Ann hurried to class, she had glanced at the address, folded the note and put in her pocket. Now, back in her room, she dug out the paper. The address from Earl matched one of several given her by the delegation that just left her room. And left her in shock.

“Building a movement with white people,” she said aloud. “After all your efforts to persuade me that we need to work separately! ‘Even activists working for change,’ you always said, ‘are still white in a racist world.’ And now *you* want to include them... I wouldn’t have thought... Okay, maybe Jamal — with his Bob Marley. *One Love* and all that. Yeah, Jamal and his friends. Reggae lovers. But the rest of you? I... And most of you don’t have *any* experience trying to ally with white people.”

Ann did have that experience. She’d been there all too often. The only black person in the group.

“Even if they know, on an intellectual level, that there is no such thing as a homogenous black community or point of view. When they want to know what black people would think, you’re it. And you’re supposed to be grateful to be included at all.”

Ann stuck a tack through the two bits of paper and pinned them to the bulletin board above her desk.

‘Meanwhile, you’re putting up with — oh, nothing blatant — merely all those little remarks, facial expressions and gestures that imply disrespect. Then, if you say anything, it’s like, “I didn’t mean it *that* way.” And it really isn’t intentional. Usually. But whatever the intention, it hurts. I’m so tired of it. Just might refuse this time. Except...’

It was time. Past time. Ann automatically changed clothes and put on her running shoes. Stretched her calf muscles, then moved through her floor stretches.

‘Except that they’re talking about real change. And I know the white students they’ve recruited so far. Sarah, Ben, Kelly, Lisa, Travis, that whole group. They actually recognize that they’ve benefited — even if they would not have chosen it — from the unfair advantage a racist society gives anyone who happens to be born white. “Take whatever position you have,” they say, “and turn all the power it gives you to the purpose of changing the system.”’

‘Yeah, I know their white recruits. Being one of the few blacks on campus willing to spend time outside class with whites.’

Grabbing her keys, Ann headed out for her run. Echoing down the concrete stairs.

‘Because I just happened to grow up surrounded by almost nothing but. Starting with white parents. Couldn’t have kids, so they adopted us. Both of us. Oh, we’re glad they did. Our mother dead and no other family left. So we became the black children of white professors in an out-of-the-way white college town. Mom and Dad did feel kind of bad that we ended up so removed from any black community. But they believed that the most important thing for us was to feel loved, secure. Which we did. We certainly did.’

Ann hurried through the lobby. Out into the sunlight. It was four blocks to the path. Nice warm-up.

‘Terry and me, that was all we knew. The only black... Well, most years the college did admit a black student or two. Mom and Dad would always invite them over. But we were children. And our playmates, our friends, their parents and our teachers. All whites. That was it. All there was. So we were like, “What’s the big deal?” When we were younger anyway.’

Lots of people out. Going to class, to early lunch. Air heavy with the smell of food. Ann’s stomach growled. ‘Patience. We’ll get there.’

‘Oh, we knew about racism. You can’t be black in this society and not become aware of that. Mom and Dad tried to prepare us. Because you encounter it, no matter who your parents are. But we went to private school. And *our* friends looked down on racists. *Our* social circle was polite, highly educated. That dreadful history — slavery, lynching,

segregation, all those horrors we learned about in school, saw on TV, in movies — seemed almost unbelievable. So remote.’

At the path, Ann checked her watch and started her run.

‘When I got older and wanted to know about our mother, Mom and Dad told me what little they knew about her ghetto life... and death. Her people must all have been gone, too. Or they would have taken us in. Mom and Dad seemed quite sure about that.’

‘Watch your stride, now. You want to go the distance. We’ll see when we get to the bridge.’

‘Meanwhile, I was noticing the subtle signals. From certain teachers. Or that guidance counselor. Or parents of guys who asked me out. And my friends, they just... Well... No white person can really know what it feels like to be black in a racist society. Not even Mom and Dad, of course. So all I had was Terry. And you can’t lean much on your little brother. At graduation, there I was. Covered with honors, surrounded by friends, but deep inside, feeling depressed, isolated. Couldn’t wait to get to college and meet some black people.’

Her left knee interrupted Ann’s reminiscences. ‘Look where you are, girl. Get off the pavement.’ She assigned one thread of attention the task of staying on the softest surfaces along the path.

‘What a shock college turned out to be. At home, people knew me. Knew I was always at the top of the class. Knew I wasn’t going to steal their purse. Here it was anxiety in the elevator. Security following you in stores. Teachers undervaluing your work. Assuming you only got into college because they lowered their standards. Which never enters their minds with legacy admissions. Party boys telling me what an advantage I’ll have finding a job because I’m black and a woman. Discrimination in reverse — an article of faith maintained only by careful avoidance of actual statistics. And I am so tired of it.’

‘What’s this? The new shoes?’ She stopped to give each shin a few light blows with the side of her fist.

‘But this movement they’re telling me about — if it’s real — is tempting. They’re talking language, cultural systems, mentalities. My field. Which I’ve said for a long time holds keys to making change. They’ve got something new, too. New to me anyway. Narratives from physics, microbiology. Stories that say it’s “only natural” for matter — and therefore, human beings — to move in the direction of cooperation, love, freedom, democracy. Even to take a giant step, a seemingly impossible leap in that direction. A phase transition. Like the transition to life on earth. New narratives. A credible plan. And God knows we’d better do something soon.’

Shins settling down. Knee, too. ‘Good. Just watch that lateral movement.’

‘But working with white people? After all we’ve been through over the fact that I have white friends. That and the way I speak. Oh, it was painful at first, getting snubbed. But I resolved to keep being myself. Spoke up in class. Wrote for the paper. Grew a ‘fro. Now all the blacks on campus are friendly. Even those who grew up in the ghetto. Which is pretty amazing.’

Lakeside now. ‘Watch out for those clouds of gnats.’

‘Because my background is like unreal. Fantasy. I’ve known nothing, really, of what most black people go through. Including most of those who made it here to college. Like worrying about money. And not just money for school. They’re worrying about their families not being able to pay the mortgage, the rent or the utility bills. About brothers and sisters dropping out of school. Getting stopped by the police, arrested, thrown in prison, gunned down in the street. Living in conditions I can scarcely imagine.’

Up ahead, decision time. That little detour through the woods. Soft path, but...

‘Because Mom and Dad did want to keep us away from anything like that. They even worried about my friendship with Tanisha. Especially when they heard my first attempts at Black English. Until I brought Tanisha home. Then, of course, the professors fell in love with her. A miracle that she befriended me really. The things I talk about can sometimes strike her as trivial — to the point of being offensive. But she has that captivating way of telling me what’s what. The teacher. She could really contribute something to their group. But she won’t join.’

Ann took the detour, picked up her pace. ‘Beautiful in here. Dark and so deliciously cool. But a little scary. Reminds me of that Kurosawa movie. But then I could outrun most guys.’ Out of the woods into the dazzling sunlight.

‘No, Tanisha will not join their group. Because you don’t have to be stung more than once to make a policy of avoiding bees. But I don’t know a single black person who’s never been stung. And some of my friends have been through so much. Avoidance is a rational thing. If you have a choice.’

Bridge now. ‘Turn back for a respectable three? Or go for the five? Go. Let’s go.’

‘Okay, so I have a very different experience. But even if I could magically transfer that, what good would it really do? Because I’m not so sure myself anymore. True, there’s a basic trust that comes from being sheltered and oblivious. Established when you’re little and you don’t grasp what’s going on around you. But that trusting impulse has gotten me stabbed in the back more than once. Which is why they were starting to persuade me. Then they come at me with this. And here I am wondering how I could help them get along with whites. How could I? I wish I could talk about things I’ve studied.’

She passed by the swampy place that smelled like something rotting.

‘European history, for one thing. The unbelievable cruelty of whites toward whites. They enslaved *each other* for centuries before they started enslaving blacks. And after that, a brutal class hierarchy. Beatings, torture, sexual abuse. Constant wars. Kings, aristocrats and later the bourgeoisie, tiny groups with their exaggerated display of wealth and leisure. While the masses who worked literally went hungry, cold and miserable.’

“‘Yeah? Why should we care? Do *they* care about people going hungry, cold and miserable in the ghetto right now?’ Oh, I can just hear it. I hear you. I really do. Which is why I’ve never said any of this at the table. But now, I wish I could.’

The beach. The other fork in the path.

‘Because this history left white people with family lore about things their ancestors went through. Like the potato famine. Or how their nationality was mistreated as immigrants. Or those bloody labor struggles. Which helps explain how some whites can think their ancestors were just as oppressed as ours. And feel — whether consciously or not — that *they* are oppressed right now.’

‘Oh, I can just hear you on that one, too. The whole table in chorus. “Yeah right. Like I’m *so* sure.”’

‘But whites do feel oppressed. Because in a way they *are*. The old European tradition of hierarchy still has force, even here in the United States. You’re born to a certain social rank. Which narrows or expands the array of opportunities that open to you. Readily, anyway. And what about politics? It’s totally obvious that political offices and influence go to big money. Which leaves out most whites as well as blacks.’

Turnaround point. Ann circled to the left, started back.

‘But how could I ask Tanisha to think about whites being oppressed? I wouldn’t. Except that now this all-black delegation asks me to help form a coalition with whites.’

Left leg getting tired. ‘Careful, girl.’

‘But there’s another side to the coin. Because whites are not all that sold on *this* world. They may go along with it. And they may believe in upward mobility. But they actually benefit unevenly. And even if they feel favored, which most of them don’t, they still aren’t really happy. Don’t feel free. Oh, they might not admit it unless you catch them with their guard down. Because there’s so much confusion about what happiness is. What freedom is. Confusion that serves a purpose.’

‘Which goes back to European history again. And how the revolutions that led to what we call democracies were compromised by those who really didn’t want anything like democracy. The people are out there in the street demanding freedom. So you tell

them that's what you want, too. Grab this powerful word and turn it to your own purposes.'

The bridge again. One and a half miles to go.

'Besides, controlling the people by force takes too much effort and doesn't work that well, anyway. So get the people to police each other by social pressure. Police themselves by internalizing norms. Exercise social control in microtheaters. Schools, workplaces, families. Language. Call it democracy. Let them vote. But just control what they can vote for and how they think.'

'Slipping into lecture mode, girl. Which is exactly the problem. I'm going to teach my friends? The people who've been teaching me? No way. I knew nothing, still know very little, about what's going on in real life. What it's really like out there. My knowledge comes from books. Most of them written by white men. Yeah, but some of it can be used for change. I'm certain of that.'

'Like the language stuff we've talked about at the table. Racist vocabulary. Like "black listing." Grammar rules that make relationships of domination and subordination seem natural. Subject/object. That mental habit of sorting everything into pairs of opposites. Either/or — but with one always *over* the other. Good/evil; white/black; male/female. Everybody at the table is interested in this. Because we internalize it, too. Absorb the very mentality that oppresses us. Until we develop enough awareness. "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery," Jamal is always quoting. But we never talk about the effect language and cultural systems of social control have on white people.'

'When it may be that the more privileged you are, the more your mind is bound by those mental chains. Understanding this could help us work with whites. Because unconscious racism may not be as hard to cure as it might seem. You can change cultural systems. Like language. We're doing it all the time.'

'This is it. Time to kick.' Ann concentrated on running hard now. Checked her watch as she crossed the finish line. Walked a few wide circles to start cooling down. 'What a feeling!' She headed back to shower before going to the cafeteria.

"Here she is!" The whole table seemed focused on her arrival.

"Hey, Ann. Are we glad to see you!"

"Our expert on white folks."

"Girl, where you been?"

"Running. As I always do before lunch. What's up?"

"We need your expertise, Ann."

"Yeah, and fast! There's this meeting tonight."

"Everybody's going and we know we —"

“Tanisha, they actually persuaded you? What could they possibly have said?” “The magic words, that’s what they said. ‘Phase transition.’ Which means change. Deep, wide, serious change.”

“So much change that ‘revolution’ is too small a word for it.”

“Yeah, like no more racism. No more poverty.”

“Don’t tell me they didn’t convince *you*, Ann.”

“No. Yeah. They did. But I had to think about it. During my run. You know you all... I figured they’d *never* get you and Malcom to go along.”

“You underestimate us, girl. Okay, we’ve been doing our own thing, engaging in our own activism, when it didn’t look like anything really could be accomplished working together. But for real change, we’re sure enough ready to risk getting dissed by some oblivious white kids.”

“And this looks *very* real. Did you check out the net?”

“Didn’t have time.”

“It’s more than just this campus. It’s nationwide. Spreading like wildfire.”

“Something’s going on. Something big. Everybody, every kinda people involved.”

“And so we hope you can... We all know from experience that the more understanding you have, the less likely you are to get angry when...”

“When somebody disses you.”

“So, of course, we thought of you, Ann. You not only grew up with ‘em, but you got your A’s in all those history courses. Literature, languages, too.”

“Yeah, and that other course you talked about: Intercultural Communications.”

“Yeah, that’s what we want. Intercultural Communication. The mini-course. You’re the professor. But you’ve only got time for one session before the first exam. Can you do it?”

“Well, I... Yes, I think I can.”

Jenny, Sheila and Courtney

“I’ve been dumped!” Jenny wailed as she burst through the front door. Traded in on a new model”

Sheila book-marked her place, jumped up and helped Jenny take off her heavy backpack. Jenny sank onto the couch, crying and talking at the same time.

“I thought it was strange when he didn’t come over yesterday. Didn’t even call. Told myself it was just mid-terms. Since I was so busy, too. Then after my exam today, I went to the library. And I saw him in a study room with this other girl. They’re all over each other... And I’m like... just staring. I can’t believe it. So then he comes up and pulls me into the hallway. Tells me it’s over. He’s found somebody new. Just like that. It’s over. After two years together. She’s a lot prettier than me, too. I... I can’t handle this, Sheila. I can’t.”

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry to hear this, Jenny. Ohhhh.” Sheila sat down next to her distraught roommate, put an arm around her. “I know it feels like you can’t handle it. But you can. You’ll make it through. If I could, you can.” Jenny sobbed. Sheila kept talking. “Oh, I’m — I know how much it hurts. I really do. But... Jenny, anybody who would dump *you* has got to be stupid. You’re not just pretty, you’ve got brains, personality. You’ve got... You’re so much fun. And you care. You care about the whole world. You’re... Everybody loves you.”

“Not everybody. Not Luke. Not anymore.” Jenny pulled away, turned to face Sheila.

“Which is why I say he can’t be too bright,” Sheila continued. “Besides, if he was going to trade you in, you’re better off finding that out now, rather than later. Better to know *before* you’ve sacrificed your career to putting him through grad school — or having his babies.”

“Babies! Ohhh, my...” Crying too hard to talk, Jenny leaned back into Sheila’s shoulder.

‘Error,’ Sheila scolded herself. ‘Mentioning babies only makes it worse. Be more careful.’ She hugged Jenny with both arms and waited for this wave of weeping to subside.

“Sorry, Jenny. I sure didn’t mean to make you cry harder. I —”

“Just want to help. Thanks, Sheila.” Jenny pulled back again, wiped her eyes and nose, looked into Sheila’s face. “And I’m sorry, too. Bawling when you’re trying to study. But you know how it is. And how I feel about babies.”

“Yeah, me too. I should never have said the word. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Sheila. It’s mine.” Jenny put her face in her hands. “But what?” she asked into her palms. “What did I do wrong?” She let her fingers slide down to her chin, then drop. “What did I do? Or not do?”

“Hey, you can’t put the blame on yourself, Jenny. It might not be anything you —”

“Yeah. But it probably is. I’m not perfect. I know that.”

“Who is? But you can’t say it’s all you, like Luke did nothing wrong. I mean, the guy must have lied to you. And I still say it’s better to find that out sooner than later. If you couldn’t trust him...”

“He did turn out to be a good liar,” Jenny admitted. “He’d been seeing this girl for two weeks. That’s what he said. Two weeks! And I had no idea. I thought he just had some papers to finish up or something.”

“Jenny, I’ve got to tell you — I can’t *not* tell you now — I always had my doubts about Luke. Of course, I never said anything. Because I knew you just wouldn’t be able to hear it. But he tried once to put the make on me, too.”

“So what you’re really saying is that he’s a jerk and I’m better off without him. Maybe you’re right. But I’m still in love, Sheila. That’s the problem. I can’t just suddenly say, ‘Take him. You can have him. I didn’t want a jerk like that anyway.’ Can’t turn it off that fast. And what you’re saying just makes me feel worse. I mean, like what’s wrong with me? Doesn’t my brain work? I fell in love with a jerk.” Jenny reached for the throw pillow and let her upper body fall away from Sheila. She half-lay on the couch, hugging the pillow and sobbing again.

“Hey, the most intelligent women in the world fall in love with jerks — like all the time. You’re in good company.” Sheila’s tone fell flat. This was no time to lighten up. ‘Okay, so let’s try getting serious,’ she thought.

“Hey Jenny, remember that course we took last semester? All that stuff we thought was so interesting about gender identity and sexuality?”

Muffled weeping.

“Remember how we... Jenny, are you...?”

“I hear you,” Jenny said into the pillow. “But I wish you’d just let me cry.”

“Okay. You cry. I’m here though, if you need anything or decide you want to talk.” Sheila went back to her chair and her book. She couldn’t concentrate too well with Jenny crying her eyes out, but wasn’t about to leave the room. ‘She could need me any minute,’ she figured. ‘And how important is a mere exam, compared to a friend’s whole life in crisis?’ Sure enough, it wasn’t all that long before Jenny’s sobbing lessened, then stopped.

“Sheila?”

“What, Jen?”

“I’m sorry I like told you to shut up before. I’m just... I don’t know.”

“Well, I do know. Been there. Remember? No need to apologize. You feel like talking now?” Sheila closed her book.

“Yeah. You were trying to say something when I cut you off.”

“I had started talking about that course. You feel like hearing that?”

“Sure, anything. Just talk.”

“Okay. Remember how we both felt like something had been lifted off our shoulders when we learned that masculinity and femininity aren’t biologically determined. Just sets of ideas, that actually vary from culture to culture. Remember that?”

“Of course.” Jenny sat up and reached for another tissue. “But what —?”

“Do you remember the part about how women are programmed to be attracted to whatever their particular culture says is masculine?”

“Sure. I got an A in the course.”

“Okay, so women fall for whatever’s masculine. And in our culture... Like how masculine is it to be emotionally attached? Or faithful? You’re joking, of course. So, men —”

“Wait a minute, Sheila. Women are unfaithful, too. I’ve seen it. You have, too. Seen couples where the girl drops the guy because she found somebody better looking. Or with more money, better prospects. Look what happened to Drew.”

“Sure. Women do it, too. But that’s —”

BZZZZZZZZZZT. BZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZT.

Sheila jumped up and grabbed her wallet off the coffee table. “Gotta get that Jenny. I ordered us a pizza. Mid-term time. So forget cooking!”

“Hey! Hi, Courtney. I thought you were —”

“Hi, Sheila. Looks like you’re getting a pizza delivery, too.”

“2906A. Somebody order a pizza?”

“Yeah, I did. How much?”

“Let’s see. Seventeen eighty-nine.”

“Here. The rest is for you. Come on in, Courtney. Maybe you can help me eat this. I doubt that Jenny’s gonna want any.”

Courtney spied Jenny crumpled on the couch.

“Jenny! You’ve been crying? What’s the matter?”

“Jenny just found out she’s been dumped,” Sheila answered, as she set the pizza down and offered some to Courtney. “Luke’s got himself a new girlfriend. Jenny’s in shock.”

“Dumped? Oh, no. I’m sorry, Jenny. That’s awful. Poor girl.” Courtney bit into a slice of pizza, twirled the cheese threads. “God knows you’re not alone,” she went on. “It’s broken hearts unlimited out there. You’ll get over it though. Most everybody does. Mmmm. Hey! This is good! Am I the only one eating? Sheila, have a slice while it’s still hot.”

“I don’t feel much like eating. Go for it, Courtney.”

“Jenny, you look terrible!” Courtney had taken a chair across the room where she could see Jenny better.

“I feel terrible.”

“What you need is to go out and buy something. That’ll cheer you up. There must be something you really —”

“Courtney! How can you even...? Can’t you see this is serious?” Jenny fled the room and slammed her bedroom door.

“Sorry, Sheila. I’m... But I actually *was* serious. That’s what I’d do. Time-honored method. Learned it from my mom.”

“Well, obviously it’s not the thing for Jenny right now.”

“Sorry. Guess I’d better go. Seems I’ve only made things worse. Tell Jenny I said I’m sorry, okay?”

“Okay. Bye Courtney. Just pull the door shut. I’ll go see how she is.”

Sheila knocked on Jenny’s door, then went in. “Hey, Jenny. Courtney’s gone. Said she was sorry.”

Dry-eyed for the moment, Jenny sat up on the bed. “I guess I’m sorry, too — for slamming the door. But I still can’t believe she said that.”

“She actually *was* serious. Trying to help. Said she learned that from her mom.”

“Yeah and I learned it from my Aunt Jenny. My favorite aunt. You met her.”

“The beauty queen, right?”

“State finalist. Yeah, Aunt Jenny fulfilled every little girl’s dream: prom queen, beauty prizes, fairytale romance, marriage to Prince Charming — right out of high school.”

“And she said the same thing Courtney said? About buying stuff?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s Aunt Jenny’s answer to just about everything. Buy, buy, buy. I’ve always adored her, you know. Loved that buy-mad stuff, too, when I was younger. Thought it was way cool that she knew every item on every rack of her favorite stores. I

mean, she had it all memorized. Back then it was malls. She was always buying me stuff, too. So I... But later, when I really started thinking about things, I'm like, 'What a waste!' Not just the money, but Aunt Jenny herself. Because she's so smart. Could've done something important. For the world, I mean. And it's not that she doesn't care. She just believes you can't do anything."

"But Jenny, don't make such a big deal out of it. I don't think Courtney was suggesting full-time consumer escapism. Just an emergency measure."

"Yeah, but... Okay, I know she meant well. Courtney always does. She's sweet that way. I'm just all over the place emotionally right now. In no mood for company."

"I know. I really do know how bad you feel. Wish I could do more about it. Hey, I've gotta run or I'll be late for class. Exam review in history tonight. Can't afford to miss it. Can you deal with being alone?"

"Yeah. Might be just what I need."

Jenny was standing in front of the full-length hallway mirror when Sheila got back. "Courtney was right. I do look terrible. But even when I haven't been crying, Luke's new girlfriend is so much prettier."

"I don't agree."

"What? That I look terrible?"

"No, that she's prettier."

"Oh, so you saw them?"

"Yeah, and I totally disagree with your assessment. Totally. Oh, she obviously spends more time and money *trying* to be beautiful. The make-up, the hair, the clothes, the nails. And her looks do send different signals than yours. 'Here I am, boys. My only aim in life is to be your toy. So don't worry, you'll always feel smarter and more important.' You never wanted to be like that Jenny."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's one of the reasons he chose her over me. Her kind of beauty, those signals. That's what guys like."

"Not all guys, Jenny. I've got brothers. I know."

"But weren't you telling me earlier that all men are alike? You know, unfaithful. Just before Courtney —"

"Jenny! Okay, I know you're in the worst possible state of mind. So I'll just ignore the gross misrepresentation of what I said. But has your broken heart totally erased your hard drive? How could the girl who got the 'A' forget that talking about masculinity is *not* saying all men are alike?"

“Sorry, Sheila. I’m pretty messed up right now. I guess I took it that way because I was like defensive. Defending, I don’t know, Luke, I guess. Myself, too, in a way. So I didn’t want to let you make your point.”

“The point that our culture defines masculinity as just about the opposite of loving. Power. Conquest. Not emotional. Not vulnerable. And there’s vulnerability when you’re in love, right?”

“But men do fall in love. I’m sure of that. Luke was in love with me. I know he was. He wanted to marry me. I’m certain he... You can’t say men don’t love.”

“Of course men love. Human beings can scarcely live without it. All I’m trying to say is that the more a guy identifies with this culture’s version of masculinity, the more he struggles — consciously or not — against being in love.”

“Where’s all this stuff coming from, Sheila? You’re sounding like the big feminist all of a sudden.”

“Me? Don’t worry. I’m not becoming a feminist. No, no. I’m just trying to convince you that it’s not all your fault. Because girls are programmed to get turned on by more masculine men and go cold around the less masculine ones. So it’s not your fault for falling in love with —”

“A jerk. Then it’s not really Luke’s fault either,” Jenny cut in, “for being a... for being the way he is.”

“Exactly. That’s another reason I’m bringing this stuff up. Because it actually helped me forgive Bill. Because, male or female, nobody asked you to think it over and decide whether you really wanted to buy society’s gender ideas when you were little. They just fed it to you like the baby food spooned out of those little jars.”

“My mom made our baby food, ground up stuff in this little grinder thing she had.”

“Is that a hint that I should stop trying to pull you out of the pit? Just sympathize?”

“Sorry, Sheila. I know you’re trying to help. And I do appreciate it. I really do.”

Jenny struggled to hold back another wave of tears.

“And if sympathy is what you need, I sure can sympathize. Totally. Remember when I went through it freshman year? I don’t know what I would’ve done without your shoulder to cry on. But I think it might have been different if we had already taken that course.”

“Maybe not.”

“Hey, if you want me to stop talking...”

“No, I... I’m not just being contrary. I know it’s important, what you’re saying. I tried so hard to communicate that stuff to Luke. He totally refuses to recognize that we’ve

been gender programmed. Thinks masculinity and femininity are biological... universal. We talked, er — actually argued about it several times. Got totally nowhere.”

“Figures.”

“Maybe that had something to do with him falling out of love with me. My cousin Pam, when I tried to tell her what we were studying, she was like, ‘Get that stuff away from me. Nothing turns off a guy faster.’ Now my mind keeps going back to that.”

“If it was that, Jenny, you don’t want... Well, I know I don’t want a guy like that. If he can’t grow with you. I think I’ve grown from learning this stuff.”

“Yeah. But... what I’m trying to say is what good did it do me, anyway?” Jenny’s lower lip started quivering. “It’s one thing to study gender construction on an intellectual level, but it’s another thing altogether to overcome the feelings your own programming generates. That’s the problem. You’re trying to reason with me, Sheila. And I’m still in love. Love that my lover no longer returns. And I want babies so bad. Reason can’t touch that stuff. It’s emotion. Feelings.” Tears were streaming down her face again.

Sheila resolved to stop trying to talk Jenny into feeling better. For a while at least, she would just let her cry. ‘You have to let the tears out.’ But she knew from doing it herself that you can let crying go on too long. ‘Cry all the time for weeks and just feel worse, not better. Jenny was right about reasoning, though. It just won’t work when you feel like that.’ Sheila remembered the moment when Jenny finally pulled her out of it. It was with a counter-emotion. A feeling so strong that... ‘That’s what worked. Maybe I can return the favor. But not now. Gotta give the poor girl time to grieve.’

Jenny cried on and off for a week. She didn’t go to class, didn’t go out at all. Didn’t eat the food Sheila brought home and prepared for her. Not even the chocolate cake Courtney baked from scratch. She didn’t comb her hair, didn’t change clothes, didn’t wash.

“Girl, you’re starting to stink up the place,” Sheila finally said, throwing open a window to a rush of cold air. “You’ve got to get out of those clothes, shower and brush your teeth — for my sake, if not for your own self-respect. And if you ever want to get a comb through your hair again, you’d better get on that, too.”

Jenny mechanically obeyed. Felt better for it. All cleaned up, she even ate some of the avocado and cream cheese omelet — a favorite of hers — that Sheila ran out to get from the restaurant on the corner. While she was eating, Sheila tried again.

“Try to get ahold of yourself, Jenny. If you don’t start going to class, you’ll trash your grade point, obliterate your hopes of getting into grad school.”

“I don’t care. I try, but I just can’t care about that kind of stuff right now. It’s... it’s a question of values. Like my values have changed. Well, shifted. The emphasis has

shifted. Things like achievement, success, even my career, just don't feel that important to me. Love is what matters, all that really matters. Love."

"Yeah, but what do you mean by love? My friend Jenny can't be talking about love on the small scale. Not just you and your lover, your family and friends, your tiny little world and that's all. Not Jenny. Not the Jenny who opened my eyes to a much bigger love. Love with a capital 'L.' You completely changed my life with it — in just one conversation."

"When was that?"

"Back when Bill broke my heart. I had been crying for weeks, just couldn't stop sinking. Then one night you turned the tables on me. You started crying."

"Oh yeah, I remember. But I—"

"You shed real tears that night about... Oh, you talked about it all. All the creatures whose habitats we're destroying. Polar bears, honey bees... Even species we've never even named. Endangered, going extinct. Just for profits. Those were your exact words — through tears. You cried about war, too. The human beings, families and friends behind terms like 'collateral damage.' And world hunger. Children searching for food in garbage dumps. Parents who — Oh, you went on and on. Homelessness. Racism. The pain of not being able to get your family out of the ghetto no matter how hard you try. You covered a lot of ground. The whole mess we're in. Tears streaming down your face, like they are right now."

"Yeah. I remember. Of course. You were just... Like you'd gotten so wrapped up in your own pain that you'd completely forgotten the really big stuff. I thought you were wallowing..." Jenny pulled the last tissue from the umpteenth box Sheila had bought for her. "That's why you're reminding me of what I said, right?"

"Well, er, not exactly. It's more that, when you said reasoning couldn't help, I remembered how you helped me. So I hoped that maybe those feelings — your own feelings — could pull you out. You still feel them, don't you Jenny?"

Jenny closed her eyes for a long moment. "Rhetorical question, right? You know how I am. Like last semester, when I finally made the move to change my major. So I could do more with my life, make a career of working for change. And my parents... You remember how hard it was to hold my ground on that. I really..."

She looked into Sheila's face. "Okay, I know you mean since Luke dumped me. Do I still care? As much as ever. Maybe more. Because I'm really feeling how important love is. It's not like romantic love is opposed to love for the world, you know. Love between equals. That's exactly what the world needs. Love without power trips.

Romantic love is one way we glimpse what that would be like. Another can be friendship. Thanks, Sheila.”

“No problem. Are you gonna be okay while I go to class?”

“Yeah. See you later. And thanks again, Sheila.”

“Hey, no problem.”

Jenny was at her computer when Sheila got back. Courtney sitting next to her.

“Hi, Sheila.” Life had returned to Jenny’s voice. “Hey, what do you know about this Phase Transition thing?”

“Not much, I’ve been —”

“Too busy studying and taking care of me, huh? And I was too busy bawling. So Courtney had to show me this. You’ve got to check it out. Something’s going on. Something big. Like a movement. A...”

“A phase transition,” Courtney contributed.

“A what?”

“A phase transition. They got the word from physics. Microbiology, too. A lot of different fields. Complexity theory. It’s about how change happens in any kind of complex dynamic system. A phase transition is like a complete transformation. So great that the new state would have seemed impossible in the prior state.” Jenny made eye contact with Sheila, smiled.

“But in fact, it *has* happened,” Courtney interjected. “Like when life began on this planet.”

“And now it’s humanity making the changes we’ve all been wishing for, but considered impossible.”

“Yeah, realizing ideals like democracy, freedom, compassion.”

“And love.”

“Come, see for yourself.”

Identity Forum

Paul opened a site he'd bookmarked last week. Chose the Discussion section. Then the category, Identity.

Bud2626

Okay. Seeing ourselves and our interests as separate, I agree it's based on faulty data gathered by senses that perceive only a narrow range of what's going on. And if being a man means you can only think of woman as "other," that's a problem. Like racism. But Connor21, your solution that we need to give up masculinity. I don't think so. I mean, "viva la difference." Right? Diversity is what makes life worth living.

Gary0102

Ditto, @Bud2626. Maybe masculinity is tied to destruction, competition and violence. But cutting it out of my identity? How do you even do that?

JimmyT

Maybe not cutting it out, but redefining it? If masculinity isn't biologically determined, if it varies from culture to culture, can't we rework our version? Seems to me we change our culture all the time.

Mendocino98

I'm sick and tired of everyone saying that masculinity is violence. I consider myself masculine but I'm not violent.

Morpheus

Hey, we've been through this before. Let me copy and paste it for you.

Masculinity is a set of ideas that each individual male relates to in his own way. Depending on how he was raised, what his father was like, older brothers, friends, classmates, teammates, co-workers, etc. And in this culture there's definitely a link between masculinity and violence, like the mayhem in football, video games, etc. Open your eyes.

Drumel

F**k you!

‘Obvious troll,’ Paul mused. ‘Site must not have a moderator.’

Gary0102

Okay. Let’s say I do understand that our idea of masculinity doesn’t fit with a phase transition. Then what? Like I have no trouble letting go of identification with being white, but masculinity, not easy.

Mack_M

You probably never had to think as much about being white as you’ve had to think about being a man. For some reason, you have to work at being manly, or at least not appearing effeminate. Maybe that’s why I feel as strongly attached to that part of my identity as I am to my beautiful blackness. If I give up masculinity, what’s to fill the vacuum?

AmyInAtlanta

It’s not like re-imagining what it means to be male is going to mean giving up anything except powering over others. Or that it will make everyone the same. Of course we want to keep diversity. It’s what makes the beautiful beautiful. But male or female we can imagine ourselves as naturally loving, cooperative beings.

Mariner

Any comparative religions course will show that every religion known advocates love and cooperation. But that’s had little effect on our behavior over all these centuries.

AmyInAtlanta

Exactly. Our Purple Oxygen Breathers. Surely you guys have heard that much of the Complexity Theory stuff that’s going around. The phase transition that brought about nucleated cells. Right? And we now know from scientific studies that love and cooperation have been a very important part of our physical being all along. It’s just a matter of learning to tap that neglected side of ourselves.

Gloria08

We also have an identity connected with the position of the sun, moon and planets at the moment of birth. One that builds on our connection with the universe and our equality with one another, yet distinguishes each of us as individuals, too. @Mack-M, it can more than fill the vacuum.

Geogle

Oh right, Gloria08. Like we should all loop back into superstition. Astrology? Go visit a dozen Astrology websites and compare what they're forecasting for you for today. If there's free will, you can't predict.

Gloria08

I'm not suggesting prediction. Just a description of personality based on the moment of birth. It's as verifiable as any other psychological profile. Have you ever seriously looked into it? The point is, if the descriptions fit, then there's grounds for an identity based on connection instead of separation.

Simon

I'm not interested in being pigeon-holed into a set of expectations. Sold a bunch of inevitabilities. It can't be identity at any cost. We don't want to replace what we've got with something worse.

Geogle

You got that right, Simon. Astrology is problematic to anyone who believes in freedom. Birth order is more important.

Gloria08

Recognizing that a dimension of personality is connected with the time of birth doesn't conflict with freedom. We're free whether we like it or not. People choose how to use or not use their inherent gifts or their inclinations. Personality is complicated. There's environmental factors, conditioning, culture; and then there's free will. Plus the connection with the Universe at the moment of birth. These and things we probably don't even know about yet are all in play.

Miromax

What exactly is the causal factor that's producing these supposed moment of birth effects? Until you can establish that, it's unscientific.

Frankielee

Last year I did a study on the navigation skills that homing pigeons have. Inspired by my cat who found her way home more than a year after escaping me at the veterinary clinic ten miles away. It wouldn't bother me if we didn't know exactly how astrology works. Superstring theory insists that there's more than four dimensions. I would be interested in seeing the kind of descriptions Gloria is talking about. So I could judge for myself.

Mirach

With you Gloria. Most academic studies on Astrology begin from a mindset trying to disprove it. But if we really are a part of the Universe, and we need to rethink our identity in order to save the planet and live in peace, we're missing the boat if we don't look for a more sustainable identity where we might find it. Wouldn't the principle of self-similarity suggest that the parts, in this case — we ourselves, reflect the whole?

Jason

Like the universe has personality? Or the solar system or something?

Gloria08

You've got to judge for yourself whether the descriptions fit what you know about yourself and people you know. Draw your own conclusions. Here's a site that I like a lot.

Paul copied and pasted the link. Went there.

Elliott

‘No VIP lounge, of course,’ Elliott grumbled to himself. ‘What can you expect of an airport that doesn’t even have air conditioning?’ The sweat running down his back felt like crawling insects. ‘Surely they’ll have air at the hotel. Where the hell is Jessman anyway? He was supposed to pick me up at two. Don’t the clocks work either?’

Realizing that pacing only made him feel worse, Elliott sat down. Stared at the worn linoleum. Tried to get comfortable in the plastic chair. He was irritated about this whole trip. Out of nowhere, officials in this country had declared that they could not finalize any manufacturing agreements except in a face-to-face meeting with one of the corporation’s highest ranking officials. The head of state considered it beneath his dignity to put his signature next to that of an underling like Jessman. So Elliott had been obliged to travel here — just when the kids were coming home for spring break rather than going to Florida. Elliott had insisted that the family get together — since Alex would be away this summer. Now he himself would miss half the week.

But there was more to it than that. This was one of the countries, one of the cities, that Alex’s college had chosen for its summer global ecology program. And Elliott’s trip would make the firm’s operations here a likely topic of conversation when he got home. Which might ruin what precious hours they would spend together. Sometimes he wished the kids had stayed spoiled, selfish and greedy like they used to be. Focused only on the latest device, fashion, vacation destination... Happy that they’d been born to a position where they wouldn’t have to work too hard to succeed. Never thinking about the rest of the world. Other kids in their social circle were still like that. But not Alex and Sandra. Not anymore. They’d both grown so passionate in their opinions, too. He couldn’t bear arguing with them. Because they were right. In theory.

“But that’s not how the real world works,” Elliott said aloud, automatically looking around to see if anyone had heard.

‘How could they have seemed so cynical before and sound so naively idealistic now?’ he asked himself. In a way, he was as proud of that metamorphosis as he was of how articulate they’d become. But they put him on the defensive. Made him feel like a hypocrite.

“Kids,” he muttered.

Elliott had made fathering his number one priority. His own dad had been driven by an insatiable desire to expand the business. Dreamt of listing the family name on the fortune five hundred. The old man hardly knew his children. At age eleven, Elliott had resolved to behave differently when he had children. And he kept that resolution. He always made time for the kids, despite the demands of his career. He gave orders that he should be interrupted whenever Alex or Sandra phoned, no matter what he was doing. Of course, he could more easily get away with unconventional behavior, since he was the son of the firm’s founder. But even with that advantage, he could easily have fallen into neglecting his family. He felt a constant pull in that direction — the sheer competitiveness of corporate culture. But Elliott believed that children needed their father. And he adored his own daughter and son.

Alex would turn twenty this year. He’d held his own in sports all through school, had a great sense of humor and lots of friends. Also did well in academic courses, especially the ones he liked. He was terribly enthusiastic about his global ecology major. And now he’d grown long hair and a beard. Which made him look more handsome than ever. Elliott could admit that, but worried a little that the kids seemed to think the Sixties so ‘cool.’ Sandra had influenced Alex that way. She’d gone pretty granola in her last year of high school. It was really her boyfriend, Elliott figured. He expected her to get back to normal after they broke up. But she did just the opposite. Now that she was about to graduate and go job hunting, Elliott had persuaded her to get a haircut and buy the proper interview clothes. But he couldn’t do much about the kind of job she was seeking. Sandra had majored in social work and wanted placement with the worst-off people she could find. ‘A little too serious,’ Elliott thought, ‘but a wonderful human being, the kind of person you could trust with your heart. And one of these days, someone’s going to take her heart away from me. But where in this world is she going to find —’

“Mr. Burns!” It was Jessman, moving as fast as his short legs could carry his heavy middle. One of the locals hurried along with him.

“Sorry for the delay, sir,” Jessman panted as he approached. “We got stuck in traffic and just couldn’t get here any faster.”

“Come on, Jessman. You lived in the big city long enough to take traffic into account.”

“Yes, I did, but this — ”

Elliott’s attention had shifted from the excuses to the man standing behind Jessman. ‘Don’t chew out a manager in front of an employee,’ Elliott reminded himself. He forced a smile, shook Jessman’s extended hand and handed his carry-on to the other man.

“Did you have a good trip?” Jessman ventured, as they walked toward the doors.

“Bearable. Considering that I would never have chosen to come here.”

“Sorry about that. But it will prove worth it, believe me. Everything’s already been negotiated. And what we’re getting! Wait ‘til you see the numbers.”

It was flatteningly hot out in the sun. Hotter yet on the black surface of the parking lot. Even worse in the car.

“Turn on the air conditioning for God’s sake!” Elliott barked at the driver.

“He can’t. It’s out. I’m sorry. I tried all week to get it fixed but just couldn’t make it happen. I did find a mechanic who believes he can do it. But it takes time to get parts, you know. We should have it by...” Jessman peered out the front window, hoping the now gridlocked traffic might show some sign of movement. “Well, you’ll be gone by then.”

“Open the windows, then, damn it! And get us off this fucking highway!”

The driver looked at Jessman.

“But — ” Jessman began.

“You heard me!” Elliott roared.

Jessman nodded. The driver complied. Took the first alternative route that headed toward town. Jessman returned to crowing about the terms of the agreement. They rolled along quickly at first, then slowed as they entered the outskirts. Elliott had never been to a country like this. Well, Jamaica and other places where they had isolated tourist resorts and you could avoid the rest. He much preferred vacationing in Europe. Teased his friends who traveled in the Third World. Now here he was. On streets where motor vehicles met carts and wagons hitched to — what were those? Oxen? And donkeys. And men. Men pulling taxis on foot or pedaling bicycle-like rigs. The noise, the stench of

garbage, animal waste and a noxious chemical smell were almost enough to make Elliott order the windows shut. Jessman kept on talking, as if he didn't notice that Elliott wasn't listening.

They drove into an area where the streets looked like they were piled with trash. "Don't tell me the sanitation workers are on strike," Elliott mumbled under his breath. Then, as the car passed slowly between the piles, he realized that these were people's homes. And it *was* trash. A shantytown made of refuse. Scraps of metal, wood, plastic, cardboard. Lots of used packaging material cobbled together to form roofs and walls, with people moving in and out of openings that served as doors. In one doorway, a ragged madonna tried to feed her baby with an empty-looking breast. The car was barely moving now. Elliott took a long look at the naked and nearly-naked children sitting around on the ground, some of them dreadfully skinny, others looking swollen. Showing no sign of that kid energy that fuels playing and running, laughing and squealing. There was a group of children playing, though, just ahead in some kind of stream running down one side of the street. 'God, it's an open sewer!' Elliott realized in disgust. Almost immediately, these more active youngsters had abandoned their sewer and were clamoring at the car window. One of their little hands touched Elliott's face before it pulled back to avoid getting caught in the closing window.

"Sorry. Tom here is a little slow on the draw," Jessman apologized, looking rather smug. "They'll do it every time. That's why I never — that and the stench, of course. Never."

All four windows were now shut. The car ground to a halt. The driver laid on the horn as more and more begging children surrounded them. Elliott examined their faces. No baby fat. Skin wrinkled as if with age. 'But they'll never actually reach old age,' Elliott figured. 'They're dying already. And if I can see it, what must their parents feel?' The children began to recognize that they'd get nothing and fell away from the car, some rejoining those who had not gotten up to try. As he watched others returning to the sewer, Elliott felt as if the spot where he'd been touched was crawling with something. He'd had enough of this scene.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "Why aren't we moving?" The truck in front of them stood still. Horns were blowing.

“Maybe somebody with an animal that won’t budge. Or a vehicle broken down. Who knows?” Jessman’s tone of resignation said it all.

“So? We just sit here? At least send this man up to see what the problem is.”

“I —”

The traffic began to move again, ending the discussion. Jessman went back to chattering about the agreements. Elliott listened for a moment, then returned to staring out the window. He felt as if his head would burst if he didn’t get some air — but dreaded even the thought of being touched again. He could still feel the spot. ‘God knows what that hand had on it.’

The car picked up speed. Now they were driving alongside a river. People bathing in it. Women pounding laundry on rocks.

“Open the windows,” Elliott commanded. “I need some air.”

This time, the air that came in carried a strong sulphurous odor. Elliott gagged.

“Okay, close them, dammit. Close the windows,” Elliott gasped.

Jessman refrained a little too obviously from saying anything. Then he returned to his favorite topic. Elliott tried to listen, but just couldn’t. His mind careened from one mad thought to another. ‘Have I died and gone to hell? Is this some hideous nightmare?’ He didn’t have to pinch himself to know. ‘Will I make it home alive? God, what about Alex? I can’t let Alex come here.’ But Elliott couldn’t tell Alex what to do. Not anymore. He had never ordered the kids around if he could reason with them, even when they were little. And now it was out of the question. Elliott had stayed friends with them all through adolescence by listening, letting them make their own decisions. ‘No, Alex is coming here. This summer. What will he think?’ Elliott knew only too well.

The car came to a stop in front of a sprawling one-story unpainted cinderblock building. ‘This couldn’t be the hotel,’ Elliott thought.

“What are we doing here?”

“Well, since you can’t check in for another hour, I thought you might like to see the factory,” Jessman replied.

The smell that had gagged Elliott by the river greeted him as he stepped out of the car. Jessman seemed to think nothing of it. He led the way to a small door on the side, unlocked and opened it with a flourish.

A wall of noise greeted the two. “This part of the building houses sewing and assembly,” he proudly announced, raising his voice over the din. Inside, the sulphurous smell was upstaged by other fumes. “That’s the glue,” Jessman nearly shouted. “Won’t hurt you. You won’t be here that long anyway. It’s actually that production stage that I’d like to show you.”

Elliott followed Jessman as they made their way past row after row of workers. All were seated with backs bent low, eyes focused directly in front of them, hands busily feeding small pieces of cloth into the incessant clatter of hundreds of sewing machines. Sweat dripping from their foreheads. Beyond the crowded work benches and farther down the factory floor, Elliott could hear the thunderous pounding of what he guessed were the dye cutting machines.

When they reached the destined doorway, Elliott looked back. Along the side of the building, only one high window was open. At the front wall — Elliott thought it the front because that was the direction most of the workers faced — a closed door and no windows. Jessman was talking and pointing out something about the workstations.

“Why aren’t more of the windows open?” Elliott called.

“They don’t open. Built that way.”

“What about the doors, then? Why don’t you open the doors? A person could breathe better in here if you did.”

“If you want, we can open them.” Jessman walked quickly to the middle of the back wall, unlocked the padlocked chains and swung the barn-like doors open. As the air poured in, Elliott felt as if he would at least survive the tour.

“We normally ---- because ----- You have no ----”

He could only hear half of what Jessman was saying.

“They’re desperate. ---- for centuries. Everything, anything ---- If we ---- stealing equipment and ----- leave the line, too. Some ---- home and ---- children, right ----- their shift. That’s one reason we prefer ---- But any age, they’ll just ----- if we leave the doors open.”

Elliott wondered how they could have any HR problems with so much supervision. There were foremen all over the place, several of them yelling. Jessman

called one man over and instructed him to lock the doors again when he and Mr. Burns left.

“Looks like an awful lot of supervisors here. Isn’t that expensive?”

Jessman opened the steel door and with a gesture of his hand, invited Elliott in. Its thudding slam closed off much of the noise.

“No problem. True, they do get paid a little more than the others. But even then — Well, actually, everybody here gets paid more than the going local rate. So we’ve got workers lined up competing for these jobs. When we fire somebody, if they’re insubordinate or can’t make their quotas, we replace ‘em in minutes. Yeah, we pay a tiny bit more. But it’s nothing, nothing compared to what we were paying workers in the United States.” Jessman laughed.

Elliott narrowed his eyes.

Jessman rattled on. “And they don’t expect benefits either. It’s just the rich who get health care in this country. Always been that way. And no retirement. They work pretty much ‘til they die. Most of ‘em don’t live to retirement age anyway. The labor laws here... We can work ‘em as many hours a week as we want without paying overtime. Don’t have to worry about safety or environmental regulations. For practical purposes, there are none. And the agreements we’ve negotiated this time will keep us free of anything like that for twenty years. The savings are —”

“You don’t have to sell it to me, Jessman. I’m well aware of our reasons for locating in places like this.”

Before they’d walked ten feet into the gluing department, the full force of the noxious fumes overwhelmed Elliott. Burned his eyes, constricted his throat and made him feel like vomiting. Unable to speak, he leaned against the wall and shot a look toward Jessman.

“You don’t want to see the molding room?”

“Not without a gas mask,” Elliott gasped. “Get me some protective gear.”

“Of course. I’ll get you a mask. But most of the men who work in there never buy one. They do have some trouble with their eyes but — really, those fumes aren’t that bad.”

“Buy? You sell the masks?”

“Sure. But like I said, the workers in there don’t use ‘em anyway. They do buy gloves though. Operating here, we make money in so many ways. You’ll see once you look at the numbers.”

Now Jessman seemed to register, for the first time, the look written all over Elliott’s face.

“You must be tired from traveling. We could go to my office, if you like. A lot more comfortable. It’s got air. And I have those numbers for you to look at.”

Elliott nodded. As they made their way back, Elliott turned his attention to the workers. ‘Amazing how fast they can work in this heat,’ he marveled. ‘And how they manage to sew that fast, run those presses without getting their hands... Well, some of them apparently hadn’t managed. But then, that missing finger might have come from a non-work-related accident.’

Once outside, Jessman led him past a group of cheap prefab buildings.

“What are these?”

“Bunkhouses. A lot of our people leave their homes in rural areas and come here to work. We put a roof over their heads, the single ones, that is. No married couples, no kids. No hanky-panky. We keep the men and women separate. Two of these buildings are for women, one for men. We hire more women. Easier to control, you know. I suppose you might think it an unnecessary expense, housing ‘em. But we slapped these buildings up so cheaply. And it helps keep ‘em on the line every day.”

The office building was the first normal-looking space Elliott had seen since he’d gotten off the plane. Good walls, air conditioning, carpeting. Elliott washed his face in a clean restroom with all the amenities, then joined Jessman in his office. Large windows offered a view of the river — which looked beautiful even if you knew about the smell. Gazing at the moving water calmed Elliott’s jangled nerves.

“Nice office,” he remarked, as he sat down in a comfortable leather chair, separated from Jessman by a considerable expanse of desk.

“Would you like a soda? Lemonade? Iced tea? A beer? Something a little stronger?”

Elliott chose iced tea. “Extra ice, please.”

Jessman pushed a button on the phone and gave the order. Within minutes, a local man wearing a white shirt and tie brought the drinks. Elliott went over Jessman's numbers, making an effort to look impressed. Anything to stay a little longer in this comfort. Even if the hotel had air conditioning, they'd have to get back into that car. And pass who knows what on the way.

When they finally did leave the office and drive into the crush of buildings, people and vehicles, Elliott tried hard not to look at everything with Alex's eyes. He was relieved to find that the hotel afforded a surprising degree of luxury. An acceptable meal in a tastefully decorated restaurant. A well-stocked bar. A large room with a good shower and a refrigerator filled with bottled water and cans of soda. Television, if only two channels. A square of fine chocolate wrapped in gold foil on each pillow.

Exhausted, Elliott undressed and crawled into the crisp, fresh-smelling sheets. He let his muscles relax into the excellent mattress. But just as he was falling asleep, something suddenly snapped him wide awake. It was Alex. Alex's face. Wearing that expression of righteous indignation and a touch of... what?

'A feeling that I've betrayed him.'

Yes, it was definitely betrayal. 'He doesn't want to feel it, though,' Elliott told himself, 'doesn't even want to think it. But...' But Alex was coming here and would see.

'They won't tour the factory,' Elliott tried to assure himself. 'Something like that wouldn't be part of an ecology trip.' But the plant did harm the environment. Elliott knew perfectly well why the river near the factory stank. In any case, the professor would certainly talk about the impact of multi-nationals on the ecological picture. 'The firm isn't the only multi-national in this country,' countered Elliott's tired mind.

'Dad, that's beside the point!' answered the imagined Alex. Elliott could hear his son's every argument. In fact, the group might tour a factory. He had heard Alex talk ecology enough to know that how people make a living was considered part of the picture. Poverty, too. 'They might go through that very shantytown on the way. Or other shantytowns...'

"And now that I've just been here, just seen the place," Elliott agonized aloud. "He'll —" Elliott stopped himself, shook his head and went back to thinking silently. 'And Sandra will ask about the people we employ. Oh, yes. She'll be concerned about the

poverty, about the children. Like the ones I saw playing in the open sewer. The one who touched me. Sandra will want to know how they live, what we're doing about it. And I'll have to tell the truth.'

Elliott tried not to lie to the kids. He didn't volunteer information he knew would upset them. But when they asked directly, he preferred not to lie. Especially now. They were in a phase where honesty really mattered to them. They would indignantly point out any lies and half-truths they heard in the news. They were still angry about their high school history books. Lies they had believed. That's what really irritated them. And Elliott wouldn't risk lying to them about what he'd seen here.

'And then what?' Elliott closed his eyes but couldn't sleep. He argued in his mind with Sandra and Alex all night long.

At 5 a.m., he got out of bed and opened his laptop. As he typed, he talked out loud.

"Let's see. Start with pay. It should be equal in buying power to that of workers in the United States. Equal benefits, too. Medical insurance. If they don't have enough doctors and nurses here, the firm will bring them in, build and equip a clinic. Great! And retirement pensions. Not a 401K plan. We really should go back to pensions for our U.S. workers, too. Make quick note of that."

A couple of clicks, two windows open, then back to the most pressing task. Elliott had to get the new set of agreements keystroked, shaped up and printed out before the meeting at ten.

"Okay, benefits. Vacation pay, sick pay, family leave. Ummm, don't forget hours. All overtime voluntary, with time and a half or double time just like you have to do when you manufacture in the United States. Oh, and onsite childcare. That would help the women Jessman said were running home to check on their kids. We should really have that stateside, too. Some other corporations do."

Deadline or not, Elliott could not remember when he last had this much fun.

"All right. Now the plant itself. First, insulate it so we can keep it air-conditioned. And put in a top-of-the-line ventilation system. And decent lighting. Have a plant engineer upgrade safety features on the machines — and make sure the workers use them. And the right masks — and the other protective equipment, too. Free, of course.

Unbelievable, charging for that stuff. Okay. We should have an ergonomics expert look at the workstations. And we've got to do something about that noise. Then there's the whole question of pollution. Air and water. We'll have to get some engineers over here to figure out what to do. Solar panels. Air filtration. Recycling. Can't forget the dormitories. Umm, re-vamp — no better, we'll rebuild them. And then we'll..."

Seventy-two hours later, Elliott drove up the winding driveway, ran up the steps of his home and unlocked the door. Alex and Sandra came running to greet him, as they always did.

"Hey, Dad! It's about time."

"Welcome home, Dad."

After many hugs and kisses, Elliott stepped back and showed his two children and his wife the biggest grin they'd ever seen him wear.

"Wait 'til you hear what I — er, we really. Let me tell you what we just did."

Patrimonial Treasures

“What!?” Charles awoke with a start. “What’s going on?” No answer.

The noise was coming from Chantal’s room. Couldn’t possibly be the maids. They would never be cleaning at this hour. The whole staff knew he liked to nap before dinner. So... Chantal? What could she be doing?

Charles lowered his recliner, exasperation mixed with curiosity. Soft slippers and deep carpeting muffled his footsteps as he made his way to the door that connected his room to his wife’s. During this marriage, it was kept locked — one of many unwritten arrangements. Charles never entered Chantal’s room unless she clearly indicated that she desired his presence.

Still, the marriage had gone rather well in Charles’ opinion. Considering the age difference. And the way the children had behaved. Children! Julie and Paul were both in college now, not that many years younger than Chantal. That had been their problem. Chantal’s age. Certainly not feelings for their own mother. She had never cared much about them — other than her obsession with raising them for their social class. Put them in boarding schools as early as possible. Sent them away every summer. Charles had scarcely known the children until after the divorce. Still, when he told them he was marrying again, they reacted negatively. Treated Chantal with all the hostility two adolescents could display. It had taken her three years to win them over. She was thirty years younger than Charles. But no one could call her a gold digger. She had her own fortune. All of it earned rather than inherited. Charles’ grandparents would have objected to that. And to her middle class background, as well as the crass publicity that came with being a supermodel. Her face had been everywhere. And Charles had felt his ancestors’ disapproval reaching down through the centuries. As if they were still alive.

Charles pressed his ear to the door between his and Chantal’s room. ‘What’s she doing, for God’s sake?’

Charles saw more of Chantal, now that she was working less. She had relaxed, too, no longer feeling the need to prove herself. She could even joke that, in her profession, a woman in her late twenties was almost over the hill. That, of course, was ridiculous.

Her beauty still utterly enchanted Charles. He delighted in seeing her here, in this replication of the old family chateau in France. She inhabited these rooms, moved through the museum-like furnishings with a grace that made Charles feel he was living a medieval romance. And the triumph of having her on his arm in public! As if Charles didn't already have every reason for pride. But money and family didn't signal manliness. Centuries ago, Charles' ancestors were warriors who seized wealth and power by force. Now men of his class were considered wimps. With Chantal on his arm, however... She wasn't a brainless beauty, either. She had a real appreciation of the family history. Loved reading and talking about serious matters. And she spoke French.

Charles padded over to the other door of his room and down the hallway to Chantal's. He knocked, announced himself and heard a muffled invitation to enter. Chantal was in the depths of her closet. She was throwing shoes out into the room, making a gigantic heap in the middle of the floor. The wide canopied bed was piled high with evening gowns, dresses, suits, skirts, blouses, everything.

"I'm getting rid of this stuff," she declared, stepping out of the closet.

"Time for a whole new wardrobe, is it?" Charles responded with a knowing smile.

"No, that's not it." She brushed a wisp of hair from her face. "It makes me sick to have all this superfluous luxury while other people — children — are shivering in the cold, going hungry. It's just not right, not fair. That's why I'm getting rid of it. And you certainly won't see me replacing it."

Trained all his life to maintain composure, Charles did not show his astonishment. 'This from Chantal? She who would only look at the most expensive line of anything? Her gowns, furs, jewelry, shoes, even the jeans she was wearing. Her Manhattan residence and furnishings. Her cars. Her... Chantal concerned about poverty? About rightness? Fairness?' The incongruity might have made Charles laugh — except for the seriousness of her tone, her face. 'Did she really think...? True, she had spent enough to feed a family for a year on any one those evening gowns. But...'

"I don't think you'll have much effect on poverty by reducing your wardrobe," Charles calmly observed.

"Oh, this isn't all I'm doing," Chantal asserted. "I have my attorneys and accountants working on the larger stuff. It's just to feel better in the meantime that I'm

unloading these personal items. My clothes, my cars, my apartment in the city and... This is where you come into the picture, Charles.”

“You’re unloading me, too?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Not necessarily, anyway.” Chantal’s smile and the touch of her hand took a little of the sting out of her words. She led Charles by the hand around the pile of shoes and across the room. “I have to ask you about these,” she said. She stopped in front of a full-length mirror.

Charles felt what was coming, felt it in the pit of his stomach, even before Chantal touched the switch that moved the mirror. She opened the safe and pulled out the worm-eaten carved wooden box that contained the diamond tiara that Charles’ ancestress, the Countess of Untel, had brought from France — and the leather case that held the diamond necklace, bracelet and earrings. “It’s these I want to ask you about,” she said. “I know I can do whatever I want with anything I bought or you bought for me. But these and the other pieces that have been passed down. You gave them to me. But... Well, are they mine to...”

“To unload?” Charles’ tone of voice said as much as the look on his face. “How can you even ask me that, Chantal? What’s going on?”

“That’s the trouble with you, Charles. You have no idea what’s going on. You’re a good person, not in the least bit mean-spirited, not even a snob really — despite your fixation on your illustrious family history. But that’s just it. You’re buried in the past, Charles. You don’t know what’s happening right here, right now. And something big is happening. Have you spoken with your kids lately?”

Too shocked to answer, Charles sat down on the bed between two piles of dresses. Chantal’s question about the jewels had stirred a tumult of feelings unlike anything he’d ever known. An effect heightened by the realization that he had not in fact spoken with Julie or Paul for months. Too absorbed in his work to return their calls. Overwhelmed, he watched Chantal’s lovely face change expression — to what? Pity? Suddenly, she smiled — not the camera smile, but the private one that said something like, ‘Believe it or not, I love you.’ She moved the dresses aside and sat down next to him.

“Listen Charles, everything’s changing. It’s the only way we’ll have a planet to inhabit and be able to live in peace. What’s happening is a change as big as the

emergence of life on earth. The kids are calling it a phase transition. Talk to them about it. And decide what you're going to do. You're part of this moment, too." She reached out and gently turned his head so that their eyes met. "Oh Charles, we could... you and I, we... But wait. I don't want to put that kind of pressure on you. You really have to decide for yourself. That's the only way it can work. Because it's all about freedom. The free choices of individual agents in the system. Julie and Paul can explain it to you. We'll just suspend the question of the patrimonial jewels. Otherwise, I've finished with this room for now. Tell Randolph that I won't be here for dinner. I'm going into the city. You know where to reach me."

Charles had forgotten to tell Randolph that Madame would not be dining with him. And it didn't help that the perfect butler removed her place setting with the utmost discretion. Charles ran his fingers along the linen-covered edge of the long table. He had dined alone in this room many times before. Tonight, however, the solitude weighed on him. Alone in the immense space of this house. Except for the servants, of course. But the social distance between him and them was so great that they might as well be in another world.

Charles yearned to talk with someone, anyone, about the confusion of thoughts and feelings cascading through his mind. After watching Chantal's car disappear down the long drive, he had phoned Julie and Paul. The two conversations had illuminated — and seconded — Chantal's words and actions. Charles felt as if he faced the most formidable challenge of his life. He took one last sip of wine, then rose and left the table.

As always, he climbed the stairs to take his coffee in the library, passing the full-length portraits of his ancestors on the way. Charles, the family historian, had enhanced the display with gold plaques engraved with each patriarch's birth and death. Father at the bottom of the stairs in his business suit and tie, 1922-2001. Then grandfather posing in a tuxedo, top-hat and cane, 1896-1966. Great grandfather looking the man of leisure in smoking jacket and ascot, 1870-1934. And so on to the top of the staircase, great, great, great, great, great grandfather, 1789-1854. Charles' favorite portrait hung in the library. An 18th-century oil painting of the first family member to come to the United States, the Count of Untel. From above the sculpted stone fireplace, the dashing young aristocrat,

sword ready at his waist, ruled the room. The artist had given him fiery eyes that danced with the real fire burning below.

As a child, Charles had played at sword fighting and performed imaginary daring deeds beneath this portrait. And years ago — he could no longer remember exactly when — he had begun a mental conversation with the portrait.

‘I have the feeling you know what I’m thinking, Monsieur le Comte,’ said Charles to the portrait. ‘And you ask how could I even think such traitorous thoughts? Me of all people! After all these years of devoting myself to the cause. Preserving the historical artifacts and documents of the family. Getting the degrees, establishing my authority, staking out a position in the historical debate. Exposing the horrors of the Revolution. Not difficult to cast all that violence in a bad light....’

Charles took a deep breath. Rested his hand on one of the gargoyle-like sculptures.

‘But that’s not why you left France, is it, Monsieur le Comte? No, you departed before the bloodletting began, appalled by the signs of change you saw everywhere. Signs such as the Enlightenment fever infecting your own class. That new kind of authority that came from presenting persuasive ideas in a reasoned discussion. You and your friends could see how that threatened kings’ and fathers’ rule. You wanted nothing to do with it. Didn’t wait for people to start talking democracy. Or to see what would happen after the mob seized the Bastille. You packed up your family and headed for Spain, well before the guillotine.’

Charles stopped the mental conversation for a moment. Randolph entered the room with the coffee tray and placed it on the inlaid 18th-century table next to Charles’ chair. Examining his butler as if he’d never seen him before, Charles spoke just as Randolph turned to leave.

“What about you, Randolph? What do you think of democracy?”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“You heard me, Randolph. What do you think about democracy?”

“Think, sir?”

“Yes. Well, maybe ‘feel’ is a better word. What are your feelings about democracy?”

“Sir?”

Charles had never before asked Randolph anything of the sort. And the perfectly poised butler momentarily looked quite unsure of himself. His body language and face showed such discomfort that Charles relented.

“Never mind, Randolph. I’ll ring if I want anything.”

“Yes, sir.”

‘You see,’ Charles resumed gesturing to the portrait after the door closed. ‘There’s the problem with hierarchy. You can’t get reliable information. Randolph is a man of intelligence. I’m sure he has thoughts and feelings about democracy. But would he tell me? Certainly not. Same with a political system based on social hierarchy, where only those at the top get to govern. They can’t do it well because they don’t have accurate information. The steeper the pyramid, the worse it gets. Even businessmen realize that now.’

Sitting down, Charles sipped the coffee Randolph had poured and sugared for him. ‘But how could you have recognized it? You couldn’t. Precisely because you didn’t have enough information. And if anyone had dared contradict your beliefs, you wouldn’t have listened. You didn’t want to see anything wrong with the Old Regime — or anything good about the least hint of democracy. That’s where I differ with you, Monsieur le Comte. Differed with you all along, I guess, but never realized it. Until a few hours ago.’

Charles stopped to savor his coffee, noticing the nuance of flavors, the aroma, the warmth and shape of the cup in his hand. Then he returned his attention to the portrait.

‘Strange that you came here, Monsieur le Comte. Came here just as this new country, the United States of America, was enshrining democratic ideals in its Constitution. Of course, you meant to return to France as soon as they restored the Old Regime. And you did go back, when the monarchs and aristocrats of Europe won their war against the Revolution. You expected to reclaim everything — the seigniorial rights, the lands, the manors, the Paris hotel and, most important to you, the old chateau with its medieval turrets. But the restored king didn’t dare put everything back as it had been before. He let the commoners keep some rights — and much of the property they had bought during the upheaval. Including your chateau. You swore never to set foot in France again.’

Charles opened the pearl inlaid ebony box on the table, took out a cigar, then put it back. Chantal had never said so, but he sensed that she didn't like to kiss him when he smelled like cigars. And he might still see her tonight. He had never really liked smoking them anyway. He reached across the tray to pour some cognac, swirled it in the snifter, took a sip. He turned to look at the portrait again.

‘What a haven this democracy turned out to be for anti-democratic men like you! You yourself never realized it. You kept aloof, associated only with the handful of other French aristocrats you found here. Even refused to invest in anything but land. But your son and his sons increased the family's wealth exponentially. Shipping, banking, mining. They didn't believe in democracy any more than you did, but found they could get along with it. They got what they wanted in the way of legislation. Such as the clause that permitted wealthy families to buy draft exemptions during the Civil War. Instead of risking life and limb in horrible battles, your great grandson profited handsomely by producing war materials. After the war, it was railroads and heavy manufacturing. The newspapers they bought — along with campaign contributions — helped persuade politicians to resist the growing pressure for industrial regulation and labor laws. For a while anyway, your descendants had no problem playing along with the idea of a government of, by and for the people.’

Charles got up and walked over to the window. A full moon lit the carefully sculpted artifice of the French garden below. Charles' eyes moved beyond the garden, sought the wilder, darker tangle of woods further down the drive. He opened the window, felt the wind's chilly caress. Continued the conversation.

‘But things had changed by the time great grandfather died. Democracy had made concessions to other social classes — middle-class reformers, even workers. The ban on labor unions had been lifted. Russia had gone Communist. Scandinavian countries had adopted Socialist policies. And President Roosevelt was talking like a Socialist here. Take it from the rich and give it to the poor — that's what his New Deal amounted to in the eyes of our family. And the hundred or so other families that had gotten used to running this democracy.’

Charles shivered. He shut the window, looked through the glass at the garden, turned and walked back to his chair.

‘I’m sure that you would not have shared grandfather’s admiration of the Fascists. Too common. But all that mattered to him was that Fascists and Nazis suppressed Socialism. So he and his friends plotted to do the same here. Seize control of the government, oust Roosevelt and rule through a dictator. They bungled it, however, when they chose the wrong man to lead the coup. True, General Butler had the popularity to rally WWI veterans. But money and power couldn’t shake Smedley Darlington Butler’s commitment to democracy. A commitment incomprehensible to men who had no personal experience with it. They just couldn’t grasp it.’

Charles stopped squarely in front of the portrait, looked up.

‘This is where I differ. With them — and with you, too, Monsieur le Comte. Because I must admit that I do cherish democracy.’

Charles sat down in his chair, crossed his legs.

‘As a specialist in political culture, I can at least partly explain how that happened. In my case, it began with Mom and Dad. You would object to calling them that, of course. But they encouraged informality. They wanted to be “modern.”’

Charles refilled his cup with the piping hot liquid. Held up the insulated carafe for the painted eyes to see.

‘You couldn’t begin to imagine the benefits, the refinement of comforts, that modernity would bring. You hated everything modern. Tentacles of the democratic monster, you would have said. You built this place with every inconvenience of the old chateau. Mom and Dad modernized it, made it livable. And they very consciously raised us differently than grandfather’s generation had raised them.’

Charles stepped over to one of the bookshelves.

“I still have their copy of Dr. Spock... Mmmm... Somewhere here.”

He pulled a well-worn book from the shelf, held it up.

‘There was one of these among Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’ things, too, when they went up for auction. Yes. This little book discredited, “Do as I say just because I’m the authority and I say so.” Mom and Dad reasoned with us, even as toddlers. Not just our family. A whole generation changed. Even parents of our class raised children that way because they felt the effects of a democratic political culture. You can’t isolate people completely, you know. Especially in a society so profoundly caught up in entertainment

media. Mom and Dad went to the movies, listened to pop music, memorized the words of all of their generation's hits. And danced. Oh, they loved to dance. As we did later to rock and roll.'

Charles was on his feet again. He started singing out loud. "Gimme the beat, boys. Free my soul..." Eyes closed, he swiveled his hips, gyrated his whole body. Played air guitar to the imagined music.

'Rock and roll, Monsieur le Comte. Freedom! Oh, we know we're not really free. But we've gotten free enough to have a sense of what really free could mean. We know we want more freedom. Down with tyranny in all its forms! The microtheaters, too — the rules, the pressures. The words. Yeah! Kick out the jams!'

Charles danced faster now. Stretching out his arms. Shaking it. Grinding.

'Oh, you couldn't have imagined moving your body — even feeling your body — like this. But it's not just the rock and roll era. It was already underway in the jazz age before Mom's and Dad's generation.' Charles sat back down. 'Everyone wants to keep up with the times, have fun. With people. Yes. Unlike you, Mom and Dad wanted to rub elbows with people. Know what was going on. During the war, Dad insisted on going to the front even though Grandfather had secured him a clerical position. Dad went over there and got to know all kinds of men. Bonded with his mess-mates. Learned through experience that people's real worth has nothing to do with social class. Meanwhile, Mom worked as a volunteer for the Red Cross, helping as people gave blood. The empirical refutation of one of your most hallowed beliefs.'

Charles stood up, started pacing, looking at the floor.

'You felt so certain that our "blood" was better than that of other people. That's how you could consider heredity a valid basis for unequal rights. But science has disproved your hereditary principle. Human beings are something like 99% alike genetically. Even if we come from opposite sides of the globe. Which vaporizes the foundation of your hierarchy.'

Making eye-contact with the portrait, Charles stretched out the fingers of both hands, imploring.

'I wish you could understand. I truly believe in democracy. On a deep personal level. I love it. I've wedded it. Despite having set out to argue your case against the

Revolution. But now I really understand what democracy is. Or should be. Not the sham where a small group manipulates and uses the people. But a system that would truly tap the as-yet-untapped riches we have in our diverse points of view. All the talent we have yet to cultivate. In order to find the best possible solutions for the problems we share as human beings and as inhabitants of this planet. And now my son Paul tells me that democracy is the political equivalent of what makes complex systems work. Cells, societies, the Universe itself. Participation!

“I have this feeling,” Charles said aloud, “that if you knew what I know today, you — yes, even you Monsieur le Comte — might do what I’m about to do.”

Stepping back, Charles looked deeply into the fiery eyes of his ancestor. “Yes, I feel sure of it.”

Beaming, Charles spun around to his desk and picked up the phone.”

The Janitor's Closet

The janitor's closet. Someone had left its door hanging open. Ellen didn't have to see it to know. She could have identified the smell in her sleep. Floor wax, cleaning solutions and a touch of ammonia. Long ago, as a preschooler, she had associated that odor with something exalted, important. Daddy's work. That, of course, was before she had any idea what was happening in this world. Before she heard other kids make unkind remarks. Before she realized where Daddy's work put him on the social ladder. The janitor's closet. Once Ellen had thought of it as a wonderful place. Now she hurried to shut the door. Before anyone else noticed.

Down the corridor and to the left. Yes, there it was. But this time, Ellen stopped ten feet away, transfixed. After what seemed an eternity, she turned and retraced her steps. Leaving it open. Forgetting why she had entered the corridor in the first place.

Absorbed in her thoughts, Ellen drifted through the leather furniture and cherry wood paneling of the law office waiting room. She passed the smiling receptionist, opened the door with her name on it and closed it behind her. Looked out the window on a panorama that no longer thrilled her. Through the glass walls of her thirty-third-floor corner office, you could see the city on one side, the lake stretching off into infinity on the other. Clients, out-of-town attorneys and first-time visitors found the view dazzling, spectacular. But Ellen couldn't get her kids to come here anymore, even when they were hanging out downtown. And long hours had made this space just the same old... At the moment, however, she was feeling something quite unusual. Confused. What the hell was going on? Something was affecting her kids, her clients. And now it seemed it was getting to her, too.

She dialed Vern's number. Maybe he could make sense of it — or at least make fun of it. She and Vern had been friends for nearly thirty years, ever since that summer the firm hired them. Tokens. The only woman and the only black. Realizing how much they had in common, they had joined forces. Laughing at the ironies, helping each other with the work, offering a shoulder to cry on when their marriages broke under the strain. Raising a toast at each other's second weddings. Vern's had lasted. Women, it seemed, could more readily accept that kind of ambition in a husband. After fifteen years with the

firm, Vern had left to become a partner in a black-owned firm. Ellen had stayed on, fought her way to the top of the hierarchy. Hers was now included in the firm's name. She and Vern still met regularly for lunch, went to the same parties and visited each other's homes at least once a year. Now Ellen telephoned Vern, as she always did when she needed to talk with someone who truly understood what drove her.

"Vern, Ellen here. How's it going?"

"Ellen! I was just going to call you. I'm okay. How you doing?"

"Well... Actually, I'm kind of... er, stymied. With work and... But business first, right? I've got an unusual question for you. Have you ever set up a cooperative? Not from scratch, but converting an existent business into a worker-owned and operated cooperative? I know this must sound really odd..."

"The only odd thing is that you seem to have read my mind, Ellen. I was going to call and ask you the same thing."

"Oh, great. Listen, I've got two of these cases on my hands. I saw the first client yesterday and talked with another on the phone today. Never dealt with this before. And I must admit I don't know what's involved. I've got the paralegals working on it. Interesting that you have one, too."

"Not one, Ellen, three."

"Three?"

"Yeah. Two small business owners, retailers actually, and a man with a medium-sized machine shop. They all want to transform their companies into cooperatives. And not just in name. The real thing. Workers fully sharing in decision-making and profits. Open books. Cooperatives! Hello? What year is this?" Vern paused. "And it seems to be a trend. Eric — you remember Eric Franklin? Well, Eric called me today with the same question. It's weird."

"Too weird for me. For the first time in I don't know how many years, I'm feeling lost. I don't get it. And something else. I've had all these Estate Planning clients wanting to dismantle their foundations, terminate their trusts, undo everything we've done to protect their wealth. And you know my clients, Vern. My core clientele. Some of these women have clawed their way up the ladder, broken through the glass ceiling. Seen their

success as fulfilling some kind of sacred mission. And now they seem equally determined to throw it all away. Can't talk them out of it either."

"Uncanny! I've had nearly a dozen of the same requests. Mostly from black entrepreneurs. Clients, like yours, who made it to the top against the odds. Saw their success itself as helping all black people. At least improving black America's statistics. Which is not to say I find it less strange that several of my white clients are effectively telling me that they want to hand their money over to the taxman. I contacted the Estate Planning network I belong to. They told me it's happening all over. Did somebody put something in the water or what?"

"You'd think. In fact, I have to admit that something seems to be affecting me, too. Vern... this morning, I stepped out of the office and noticed that the janitor's closet was open. I smelled it."

"Of course, those of us whose —"

"Yeah, that's why I called you. So I realize that the janitor's closet is hanging open and hurry around the corner to close it. You know. But as soon as I lay eyes on it — I... I don't know, I... It was as if... Kind of like I was seeing it the way I did when I was five years old. But not exactly. Something really strange happened to me right there in the corridor. I mean, I didn't want to close it anymore. Left it open."

"That might be a healthy sign, Ellen. Seems to me. But you... What's your take on it?"

"I don't know. I'm confused. My kids. They're home from college. Yours must be, too. Right?"

"Yeah, it's great."

"So the kids were talking last night about this big change they say is happening. A phase transition, they call it. Seth went on and on about Complexity Theory."

"Hmmm, interesting. My kids are talking Complexity Theory, too. And one of my clients is into it. Corporate management theory. Flattening hierarchies. Horizontal structures instead of vertical."

"Yeah, but my kids are insisting that it means all of humanity could make — is making — this incredible leap to a new level where we'll save the planet, treat each other as equals. I know it sounds ridiculous..."

“Ridiculous? That’s just what I said to Nicole and Junior. They answered that it’s characteristic of a phase transition to look impossible — hence, ridiculous — when you’re still in the state that precedes it. What I’m trying to say, Ellen, is that after arguing with them for three days, I’m beginning to think they could be right. I mean, we all know we’re headed straight towards planetary disaster. And that’s truly ridiculous, isn’t it? Isn’t it a lot more reasonable — and more intelligent — to change direction?”

“But, Vern... It’s...”

“I know, Ellen. You fought hard. You overcame enormous obstacles to get where you are. So did I. But wouldn’t we both rather see the kind of world they’re describing? If it were possible? No doubt in my mind.”

Heartland

Recently constructed homes set amidst cornfields dotted the edge of town. The feed co-op with its gravel drive defined the city limits. The new regional high school, three car dealerships and the shopping center with its superstore spoke of a thriving community. You were soon down to twenty-five miles per hour on streets with curbs, sidewalks, manicured front yards and tall oaks.

The pharmacy, the hardware store, post office and bank were all located within five blocks of the corner of Second and Main. Its stoplight dated back before the interstate went through. Downtown also featured a remodeled four-story office building with a dentist, a gift shop and one of the two town bars. A once proud furniture store had been transformed into a youth center. Across the street, Margie's Restaurant, run by the same family for three generations, hosted the morning ritual for several dozen townsfolk. It was the kind of place where you were welcome to serve yourself your own first cup of coffee, especially if you noticed that Sheryl was busy taking other people's orders. From counter to booth, Margie's was where you went to find out what was happening.

"The way I see it, there ain't much of an alternative. If the roof's leakin,' you get up there and fix it. You do whatcha gotta do."

At Margie's, regulars had their regular places. The mechanics from the garage sat in the corner booth.

"It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. Take a world where some people have everything — nice cars, big houses, any kind of food you want — while other people are goin' hungry, don't even have safe water. And the one group starts seein' how the other group's livin' — 'cause of television, the net and all that. Somethin's gotta give. For one thing, you're not gonna be able to build a wall high enough to keep 'em out."

"You're, right, Carl. You know I've been saying that same thing ever since 9-11. Last night I was helping Heather with her homework and we were on this website. Nearly a billion people in the world are so poor that they don't get enough to eat. A thousand people, more, starve to death every day. If I remember, I think it's like a child every ten seconds. You can't expect people to be reasonable when they're watching their kids starve."

“Or get sick and die. That epidemic would never have got outa’ hand if there’d been some infrastructure over there.”

“Yeah. Then let some guy come along and tell ‘em it’s all our fault. Get ‘em riled up. Tell ‘em God wants ‘em to do it. You know they’re gonna’ fall for it. At least some of ‘em. They’re desperate. Make sure everybody’s fed, got jobs, healthcare, a roof over their heads and the world will be a lot more secure, believe me.”

“What irritates me is that *we* can see it clear as day, but the politicians don’t seem to get it.”

“Too busy linin’ their pockets, I say.”

Occasional customers sat wherever they felt comfortable. Which could bring a doctor or a lawyer into the conversation.

“Hey, Steve, you tell us. Do they think we don’t know what’s going on up there? Come on, I can read. I understand what I’m seeing on TV. Taking our tax dollars while the corporations and the one percent pay nothing or next to it. Tell you what — if the corruption had a smell, we’d have done something about it long ago.”

The table burst into approving laughter.

“I hear you, Dave, I hear you. But just remember, you’re talking about my kid brother, too. You and Joe grew up together. He’s no worse a person than the rest of us. You heard him last time he was home. It’s not that easy to get things done.”

“Yeah, and that’s exactly why we need this Convention. It’s the same as down at the garage when somebody brings in a mess — like that guy who never changed his oil. We tell ‘em straight out, ‘Sorry, but you need a whole new engine block.’”

“Well, that’s what I’m thinking this Convention idea is about. And I’m all for it. And you know my brother Joe will help do it, too. If this Presidential candidate gets elected, especially if it’s by a good margin, Joe and other state legislators — all over the country — are going to file their petitions.”

Margie’s wasn’t all that big a space. Sometimes conversations spread across the room. And when the people sitting at the counter turned and joined, you’d just about have a spontaneous, albeit unofficial, town meeting.

“I never did want to pass this sorry world off on the kids.”

“None of us did, Irene. And for the first time, I think we can do something about it.”

That was Shirley. She owned the local beauty shop. And she was a talker. Want something spread around town? Just tell Shirley.

“People tend to put up with a lot before they reach a point —”

“Yeah. And, we’re there.”

“I don’t know. It kinda’ worries me. If it’s a Convention to rewrite the Constitution... I mean, what if they get carried away and start throwing out things we want to keep? Or if the delegates get manipulated by some group of smooth talkers?”

“Granted, Larry, there’s a risk. Every kind of change carries risk. But this climate situation’s got to be addressed. Some of those computer models that have us going right over the edge. And Washington’s just not taken it seriously. Besides, did you read the proposal we’d be voting for? It states, ahhh — hey, Marge. You got a copy of the paper with that Proposal layin’ around somewhere?”

“On the shelf above the coffee maker.”

“Thanks.”

After a pause and a shuffling of papers, “Here it is. Three-quarters of the states have to ratify whatever they do.”

“The whole thing’s informed by mandates,” another voice added. “The new Constitution is only going to get approved if it sticks to what it’s charged with doing. And the first mandate is to protect the Bill of Rights, plus a list of similar rights we’ve come to expect. If they do something else, it’s not going to stand. You’re not gonna get that many states to go in for throwing everything overboard. We’re not going backwards here.”

“You think this Convention Proposal can win?”

Charlie always had a good word. “Hey, how’s that old song go? ‘Chance in a million is better than none.’”

“Look around you, Tom. It’s happening everywhere. You hear what those high school kids are doing with the vacant lot down on Third? Turning it into a park. I gave ‘em some money. It’s the least I can do.”

“All my life, I never thought I was going to be able to make a difference. Now my son keeps telling me, ‘This is history, Mom. History. You can do something. *Everybody* can do something.’ It just tickles me. I never knew him to work so hard on anything.”

“I think some of those *As If Your Life Depended On It* television ads are great —”

“Good as any Superbowl ad. Some are really funny.”

“Better, ‘cause they’re trying to get us to do whatever we can for the world. Do our part. Not just buy stuff.”

“Last week I stumbled on a radio talk show. When I realized who I was listening to — well, I never thought I’d ever hear anything close to what was coming out of that man’s mouth. Advocating altruism. Actually using the word. Saying it.”

“And did you see that special last week about the millionaires that are tackling world poverty?”

“Yeah. And unless I got it wrong, that group that was originally organized to create off-shore tax shelters for themselves. The amount of money they’re pulling in from those bank accounts is unbelievable.”

“Honey, with all the unbelievable things going on, I could just about believe anything.”

*

Why they chose his church, he could only guess.

“Pastor.”

“Yes?”

“We have several visitors who would like to speak with you if they could.”

“Sure, send them in.”

The pastor put his computer to sleep. Began straightening his desk.

“Here we are,” the secretary held the door.

“Welcome.” The pastor stood to greet his guests. “Beth, I think we’ll need one more chair, please. Thanks.”

“Jim, right?”

“And Mike.” He shook each hand. “Glad to see you.”

“Thank you, Pastor Wilkins. This is our friend, Pamela.”

“Hi, Pamela.”

The four sat down.

“Well, what can I do for you?”

Mike was in his late forties. A church elder. His great grandfather had helped put up the first building. “Well, Pastor, we’ve come to talk with you about — ” He paused, glanced over at Jim. “Well, we’ve been noticing something about your sermons lately.”

“Yes?”

“Well,” Jim came to Mike’s assistance. “It sounds to us like you’ve taken on a theme.” Jim had been a church member since his parents had moved to town some thirty years ago.

The pastor swallowed. This was his first assignment since divinity school. And except for last year’s controversy over introducing a weekly youth service with electric guitars and drums, things had been going relatively well.

“...everyone to take a stand,” Jim was saying. “I mean, not that you haven’t always been preaching that but —”

“I hope I haven’t upset anyone.”

“No, on the contrary, Pastor.” Pamela belonged to one of the other churches in town. But in a small community, ‘Everybody knows everybody,’ as the saying goes. “Over the last three years, you’ve earned the respect of most everyone in town.”

“To get back to the point, Pastor,” Jim said. “We were talking about your sermon last Sunday. The one about stepping out of line and how small acts can have big effects. Well, that got us to thinking...”

The pastor brought his hand to his chin. He remembered the inspiration for that sermon. At last month’s ministerial meeting, discussion had turned to the perennial questions facing ministers everywhere, “Why is modern life so compartmentalized? God over there — the workplace, marketplace, business world, even family and friends over here? Why does it seem we live our lives as if there were no God at all — except for that forty-five minutes on Sunday morning. Or a Tuesday evening?”

One of the ministers at the meeting, Pastor Kleist, had earned a doctorate in psychology before entering divinity school.

“It’s all about the connections we make or don’t make,” she had begun. “We’re constantly linking perceptions of others, nature, our memories, experience in general with our understandings, expectations, interpretations. It’s a natural process; but one that is susceptible to will or choice.”

“Oh,” Pastor Keenan responded, “you mean personal ways of looking at things. Points of view.”

“Well, yes,” Pastor Kleist replied. “But what we need to keep in mind is that culture encourages the making of certain connections and discourages the making of others. Now that’s helpful because we’d all be re-inventing the wheel so to speak, if we didn’t have culture carrying information about what works and what doesn’t. Some cultures, of course, encourage more connections with the Sacred than others.”

“You mean, more than ours,” Pastor Jamison suggested.

“But something new seems to be happening. Culturally, I mean,” Pastor Stone observed.

Suddenly Pastor Wilkins realized that, here and now, Jim was waiting for a response. “Well, I’m honored that you should want to stop in and tell me that I’m doing something right,” he smiled broadly. “Of course, I do try my best. Though I don’t always know how much influence I actually have.”

“So back to why we’re here,” Pamela prompted.

“I’m sure you’re aware, Pastor,” Mike picked up, “of all the talk about a phase transition and now this movement for a Constitutional Convention. We’d really like to know what you think about it.”

“And not just you, Pastor,” Jim quickly clarified, “we’d like to know what everybody’s thinking about it.”

The pastor raised his eyebrows.

“So we’re wondering, Pastor,” Pamela said, “if you could make the church hall available for a series of open discussions.”

“We know,” Jim quickly put in as he moved to the edge of his chair, “that the church doesn’t take political stands. Christ said ‘My Kingdom is not of this world.’ But maybe Christ was talking about the way the world has been up ‘til now. You know,

everything based on everybody just taking care of themselves and their own little family.”

“Instead of a larger love,” Pamela added. “Which is what I understand the Phase Transition and Convention are all about. Love one another. Isn’t that what Christ told us to do.”

“We wouldn’t announce that the church was taking a stand one way or the other,” Mike continued. “Just that the community would have a place and time to get together and air all sides of the issue.”

The room fell silent.

“This is very interesting,” Pastor Wilkins cleared his throat. “I’m sure you know that the area churches have been working together for many years now. Once a month, Pastors Keenan, Stone, Kleist, Jamison and myself get together for our Ministerial Association meeting. Last month, after we finished business matters, this Phase Transition topic came up. And as it turned out, we all wanted to do something.” He read the expression on their faces. “Pastor Stone is already working with several other ministers in his denomination, drafting a plank to be offered at their national conference this summer.” Leaning forward he asked, “So what exactly do you have in mind?”

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The two town bars were another matter. For years, the proprietors had been locked in a rivalry over who could book the better band. Some Saturday nights had customers migrating from the one to the other looking for that something magic to happen. Like the time at Harmony’s when everybody just got up and started snake-dancing. Or the night at the Ironrail when everyone went on singing, “Hungry Heart,” ‘til there wasn’t a dry eye in the place. Weekend after weekend passed less memorably, of course. But these days, something utterly unexpected was keeping the humdrum at bay.

Both were strictly union bars. Everybody knew that. If you didn’t like politics, you didn’t go. But if you worked at the plant, or had a relative who did, you stopped in every now and then. If you were interested in the latest gossip, it was Harmony’s. If you

wanted to talk with your shop steward, informal like, you went to the Ironrail. That's where the first meeting took place.

One warm summer evening, three people from management crossed the threshold. Dressed down, to be sure, but everybody recognized them. Two were from the board of directors, the other from human resources. A half dozen heads turned. You had to wonder if the union leaders hadn't been expecting them. The place was way too crowded for a Tuesday.

People say it was Old Ed, looking like he was speaking into his beer mug, but loudly enough for the whole bar to hear, who broke the silence. "Some guy tells me he's got a problem with sittin' down and dealin' with a situation we're both facin,' I don't need to know much more to figure we ain't seein' things with the same set a' eyes."

Everybody could read the expressions on the faces of the newly arrived, 'Well, there's our welcome.'

Luckily, that first moment turned out to be the worst. Tim, rep for the steamfitters, broke the ice. Within a half hour, people were crowding around the several tables pushed together in the center of the room, taking turns talking. It began with airing some strong feelings. The company people listening.

"We're only dollars and cents to you guys. Replaceable parts. You take us every way you can. Now you say we matter? How we supposed to believe that?"

"And what about your company cars, business lunches, trips, executive insurance plans, bonuses, golden parachutes, profit sharing, salaries five times ours... As if we aren't working just as hard as you are. And you able to fire us for insubordination or lay us off at the drop of a hat. How do you think that feels day after day, year after year?"

"Look, if we pushed you, it was only because we were being pushed ourselves. Our jobs were never all that secure either. You think we liked working in an environment where everyone was ready to stab you in the back?"

"We had nothing to say about policy. Everything came down from above. And it was always the bottom line. That's all that ever mattered."

"Stickin' us with 401's while you set yourselves up with real retirement plans. Where's your excuse for that?"

“Listen, we’ve heard these things a thousand times during negotiations. We were on opposite sides of a wall. It’s how every corporation operates.”

More gumbling and a loud “get off it,” followed.

“Maybe you don’t know,” it was the one from HR. “There was more than one board member who kept bringing up the ROI of moving production to Southeast Asia.”

“Okay. Okay,” a regular, wearing a Bruce Springsteen tee that night, raised both his hands. “Obvious we’re all gonna’ have to let go of the past if there’s going to be a future at all.”

It took another half hour to get down to the purpose of the visit.

“Last week we spent three days at Corporate Headquarters. To make a long story short, some high-ups are totally behind this Constitutional Convention idea. And they want to make our company a model for a new environment. The point is, they’re looking at turning ownership of the plant over to everyone who works here. And they want your ideas and input. How you’d see that from your side. That’s why we’re here.”

Pin-drop silence.

“What?!” Someone finally asked.

“It’s in the proposal for the Constitutional Convention,” a voice from the back of the room contributed. “Under one of the mandates there’s a whole list of possible new models for workplaces.”

“You’re probably going to be seeing a lot of corporations making moves like this on their own,” one the executives stated. “We’re on the verge of a whole new world.”

No one knew exactly what to say next.

“This is our chance to work out the details,” the HR manager said. “Together.”

“Obviously, there’s a lot we need to discuss.”

That first meeting lasted past midnight. Back at the plant, talk at breaktimes would never be the same. Nothing was the same.

The unheard-of was also happening within communities of the town's more recent arrivals. Davonne's family had come to the United States several years after the war in Vietnam. During the war, her village had cooperated with the CIA. Afterwards, they narrowly escaped being killed. Following a series of nightmare refugee camps, they finally found their way to this town. Government agencies had originally located twenty families in the area, now there were nearly thirty.

At parties, community help projects, weddings and funerals, the people spoke Laotian. This evening, Davonne spoke English because of the young people in her audience. She had made a special effort to reach out to high school and college students.

"For many years," she addressed the small group assembled in her living room. "We have been saying how it hurts our hearts when we go back to visit our relatives and see how our villages are not like before. How the people now follow the ways of wanting to buy things. How the young people want to leave, go to college in Japan or Australia, make lots of money, drive a big car, have a big house. Never return. Not caring like before."

Noticing how the young people in the room were squirming, Davonne quickly added, "I'm not saying that all the old ways are better. I, a woman, maybe would not even be standing here before you talking. And our young people like the freedom. More freedom. But some of the old ways — the ways of caring..."

The Asian Committee had arisen with the need to help one another. Not only did the group sponsor English classes, but volunteers also explained the laws, assisted with filling out forms and negotiating the bureaucracies for green cards, visas and citizenship. On occasion, they provided material support. In general, members of the Committee did everything they could to help individuals living in a new country to comprehend the dominant customs and adapt to ways so foreign they were nearly unimaginable.

"Certainly you are hearing about the big changes happening," Davonne continued. "And being citizens of this country, I think we have something important to contribute. We must send some delegates to this convention. We could tell everyone how we lived. How it is not the things someone can have, but the things someone can do for others that brings happiness."

Davonne was creating a website. A website of her people's memory. To publicize values she believed could help everyone.

“Many of us can still remember the villages where we grew up. The person who helped others became the leader. Leaders never took more for themselves. Always the leader was listening, serving, returning more than was given to them, sharing with those in need. Never increasing their wealth. Their reward was respect from the people. They are the example for how leadership in the whole world could be.”

“Sounds just like my neighbor, Milt,” a member of another audience would say later, when Davonne was campaigning to be a delegate to the Convention. “He's the leader on our block because he's always doing everything for everybody else. It's just spontaneous. He's the one.”

Davonne had gotten the idea for a website from links that were appearing on the home pages of Native American websites. Several nations had begun sponsoring guided camping trips into remote reservation areas. One description explained, “Deep contact with Nature can foster the awareness of the mystical inter-relation of one's inner being with daily events and encounters. Respect for the trees, plants and other beings, the wind and rain can open the heart to the Spirit living in the world.” Programs of weeklong stays at lodges were also offered. From the Kwakiutl, you could learn about potlatch, a sacred ritual of giving. Iroquois women, traditional leaders and providers of their people, were sponsoring conferences on gender roles. “The Earth our Home” seminars by the Lakota included studies in mythology, storytelling, dancing, drumming and vision quests. The offerings went on and on.

Felipe had never visited such websites. Truth be told, he only surfed the web when he could get to the public library. The way he learned about the Convention was from a friend at the Maison Blanche restaurant where he worked. What got him interested was something he had heard on the radio. After the lunch rush, the dishwashing room always went quiet. And his employer didn't mind if he listened to the educational station while putting the final touches on the silverware and glasses.

One afternoon, he happened upon an interview with a lawyer versed in Constitutional Law. The interviewer asked the guest how a new Constitutional Convention could do any better than the first Constitutional Convention. “Which after all,” the host pointed out, “over a single summer produced the foundation for a government that has lasted for over two hundred years.”

The lawyer began with one word, “Values. It’s all about values,” he said. “The original framers of the United States Constitution were eighteenth-century white males who saw no problem with denying women the right to vote, believed themselves physically, culturally and morally superior to Native Americans and Africans. They scarcely realized how they were compromising their best aspirations — equality and freedom — when they endorsed slavery and the taking over of the continent. Theirs was obviously a very different set of *values* than ours. For example, they valued property rights so highly, that the First Convention gave only property owners the right to vote. The Andrew Jackson generation changed that. Just as we should now change the Constitution to express the values shared by our diverse, twenty-first-century, postmodern population.”

Felipe was intrigued.

“Since everyone will be given an equal voice at the new Convention,” the lawyer stated, “marginalized citizens can inform a new Constitution with values that will make the world a better place for everyone.”

The host pressed his guest to be more specific. “What values are you referring to? How exactly could our country be made any better than it is right now?”

“We don’t have all the answers to those questions yet,” the lawyer replied. “Because so many groups and individuals have never been given a chance to offer answers.”

Felipe could not get the program out of his mind. He began to sense that his life had greater significance than he had previously believed. For the first time, he felt as if he belonged.

Felipe’s grandparents had come from Mexico. For years they’d traveled back and forth across the Texas border for “Peisca” — the name his family had long ago given to the harvest time. Going from farm to farm, bringing in the corn, cotton, watermelons,

potatoes. Sometimes traveling to California to help pick oranges, always returning to Mexico. Their children, however, stayed on in the United States where they'd been born. During World War II, one of Felipe's uncles became army buddies with a landowner who invited him to live and work on his farm. Years later, when Felipe's uncle was given the chance to buy the farm, he invited his brother to help out — that was Felipe's father.

Felipe spent his boyhood summers beneath the same unblinking sun as had his grandparents — weeding, cultivating, blistering, sweating. Encouraged by his parents, he graduated from the local high school. But no better job ever materialized. And the factory never seemed to have an opening. So Felipe left home for what he hoped would be greener fields. At first, he visited his sister just outside Houston. She worked forty hours a week for a big name bank. Struggling to raise four children on a teller's wages. All she could afford was a one bedroom apartment in a hard part of the city. Felipe moved on to stay with one of his brothers in a trailer court on the outskirts of Santa Fe. Then spent four years with another brother doing seasonal agricultural work. By the time Felipe returned to his home town, he'd worked apple and pear orchards in both Oregon and Washington State. And he'd learned a lot.

Thinking about a new world, a better world, Felipe asked himself, “What is it that really makes people happy?”

From where he stood, Felipe believed that happiness was connected with family. Oh, his own family did their share of bickering. But family still meant everything to him. As far as Felipe could see, even though there were many different kinds of families, they all had some things in common. Feelings of attachment and belonging, caring and the willingness to help one another.

‘If everyone thought of everyone else as family,’ Felipe concluded, ‘then the meaningful jobs, fair wages, healthcare, decent housing, education — all those things that the children of the privileged can take for granted — would be made available for everyone. Willingly. And across all borders.’

Felipe decided that he would work for the Calling of the Constitutional Convention. And run as a candidate for the Convention itself. Not for just La Raza, his people, but for all people. And he would campaign on a simple theme, “Felipe Corazón for the Family of the Earth.”

Sunday Morning

The words, “Your Sunday Morning,” splash across the television screen, then slowly fade, as three men and a woman sitting at a round table come into focus. The show’s theme music plays in the background. The camera closes in on one of the men.

“Welcome to Your Sunday Morning,” he says in a deep voice as the music ends. “I’m Edward Roberts and I’ll be your host for the next half hour.” Roberts is wearing a navy blue suit, white shirt and striped tie. “With the Convention getting underway and the country abuzz, we’re honored this week to have three distinguished guests offer their observations.”

Ambient lights brighten as the camera pulls back to capture the entire set.

“Our first guest is Senator Alexa Handlin, majority leader of the Senate and sponsor of the Bill calling for the Constitutional Convention. Welcome, Senator.”

In a close up, the senator’s silvery hair frames her face. She wears a serious look. The camera draws back.

“Our second guest is retired Five Star General Claude Stemper. Recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, General Stemper served on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Thank you for coming, General.”

The General, with pursed lips and several nods, acknowledges his introduction. Ribbioned bars and medals cover the front of his uniform.

“Our third guest this morning is Paul Sampson, acting CEO of Galt Global, a conglomerate of communications and integrated media, which a year ago controlled twenty-seven book publishers, two hundred radio stations, three newspaper chains, two cable news networks and numerous cinema and recording entertainment interests. We also thank you, Mr. Sampson, for being here with us this morning.”

“Honored.” Mr. Sampson, also wearing a dark suit, adjusts his glasses.

The camera jumps to an overhead, wide-angle shot.

“Senator Handlin, I’d like to begin with you, please. What’s your take on the progress of the Convention?”

Senator Handlin leans back from the table. “Well, I’m your ‘wait-and-see’ kind of person. I certainly hope, of course, that the delegates can hammer out the details.” The

camera moves in. “But I’ve been around long enough to know that it’s going to be anything but easy.” She punctuates her observation with a quick raise of her eyebrows. “No matter how widespread the enthusiasm at the moment, there are difficult issues involved.”

“So,” the host picks up. “Do you believe that support for the Convention doesn’t run all that deep? That it may dry up, once the difficult issues come up for debate?”

“No. I wouldn’t go that far. First, we all know what’s at stake here. The Convention is dealing with critical issues that we really should have done something about long ago. Issues that our economic institutions have so far been incapable of addressing. No. I’m certain that the Convention will continue to generate intense interest and support.”

The senator raises an index finger. “Furthermore, the Convention is linked to the Phase Transition movement. A movement powered by the people themselves. That sentiment does run deep. Which probably contributed to both chambers of Congress passing the Bill in less than two weeks. The only real question among my colleagues was whether or not the people could define the limits of the Convention. Most of us concluded that in a government of, for and by the people, it only makes sense that the citizens have the right to determine what issues they want to address. Then the Supreme Court made its ruling. And although the Court used the term ‘innovative’ to describe the petition process, their unanimous decision was perfectly clear. Once two thirds of the states’ legislatures had applied to Congress, failure to call for the Convention would have violated the Constitution. There were nearly a thousand friend-of-the-court briefs arguing for the legitimacy of this Convention — and only a handful opposing. Given the polls, the proliferation of local actions that daily news shows have dubbed butterfly-wing stories, the engagement of the media in general... I think this whole thing is still snowballing. And then there’s the international support. Our European allies —”

“Thank you, Senator,” the host cuts in, “we’ll try to get back to you on that. But before we get away from the Supreme Court ruling, I’d like to turn to General Stemper, if I could.”

The General turns slightly toward Roberts.

“General Stemper, what was your reaction to that Supreme Court ruling?”

The General leans forward slightly. “It didn’t surprise me. Not at all. Of course, the men and women in the armed forces take an oath to uphold by the Constitution of the United States. And the duly elected President serves as our Commander in Chief. Well, talk about duly elected...”

With a quick glance at the other guests, he continues, “Over ninety percent of eligible voters casting ballots — and more than eighty percent of them in favor. That’s something none of us should ever forget. So once the Convention candidate won, was sworn into office and the petitions began flowing in from the states...” The General gestured with an open right hand.

Roberts glances at his notes. “But one of the mandates for the Convention calls for unilateral disarmament. Do you think that’s realistic, General?”

“Realistic? Certainly. Think of the alternative,” the General frowns. “I’ve stated my position on this issue more than once. In accord with Admiral Dural, Generals Betts, Waverly, Fulton and others. Ever since the end of World War II, we’ve been spending no end of dollars on military strategies. We have the most sophisticated weaponry, the most effective command systems and best trained personnel in the world. Yet the terrorist attacks have clearly demonstrated that this approach is antiquated.” The General’s tone grows urgent. “The old strategy of escalating the threat of violent retaliation cannot protect us from individuals bent on wreaking havoc. A complex society such as ours has too many points of vulnerability.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence falls over the scene. “If we want to ensure national security,” the General picks up, “we need to think differently. Only by providing security for everyone can we guarantee our own. That means everybody’s got to have their basic needs met. Food, shelter, clothing, clean water, healthcare, meaningful jobs. Those of us who’ve spent time in the Third World know this from firsthand experience. Eradicate poverty, take care of one another and we can all disarm. Yes, I firmly believe it can work.”

“Thank you, General.”

Roberts now turns from General Stemper to face Mr. Sampson. “Our final guest this morning may be able to shed light on business trends that seem associated, in one way or another, with the Convention.”

The camera focuses on Paul Sampson. He unfolds his arms, presses his lips together.

“Mr. Samson,” Roberts begins. “You’ve spent most of your life expanding your hold on mass media markets. Yet in this past year, you’ve given away more than half your holdings. State governments, municipalities and various non-governmental groups have suddenly received pieces of a media empire once valued in the billions. Could you explain to us, please, what exactly you are up to? What do you mean by all this transfer of private property to the public sector?”

Mr. Sampson nods. “Where to begin?” He takes a deep breath. “In the Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln stated that we are a country dedicated to the proposition that all men —” Sampson pauses, “that all people are created equal. Yet with some of the people earning multi-million dollar salaries while others are struggling to make ends meet... Some privileged from birth... Well, several years ago, I stopped buying into the excuses. Started asking questions. Particularly, what would it take to move closer to a world with the kind of equality we revere as an ideal — while preserving the liberties of a free society?”

Checking the faces of the others at the table, Sampson begins again. “First, I had to admit that private ownership of the media works against true democracy. The news and entertainment media are analogous to the nervous system of a living body. As the decision-makers in a democratic society, the people are like the brain. They depend on the information they get from the media to inform their choices. But if the media is controlled by private interests, they’re going to get a particular spin on things. It’s as if one body part, say the right hand, determines the information flow. And that hand only cares about itself. So what do you think is going to get through?” In a startling gesture, Sampson stares for a moment directly into the camera. “There was a time when I defended that arrangement. Not anymore. It failed to bring us the world we want and brought us to our present situation. Pushing into the edge of chaos.”

“Well, that’s quite a... well, an indictment, Mr. Sampson.” Roberts looks a little taken aback. “Yet, it does help explain similar actions being taken by others on Wall Street. All the same, what about the media owners and wealthy political campaign donors

who don't see it that way? What about their First Amendment rights of free speech — not to mention property rights?"

"It's hardly surprising to hear you say that." Sampson gives Roberts a fatherly smile. "We who controlled the media taught you to equate 'free speech' with the right to buy and sell access to the public debate. Which leaves some people with a lot more freedom than others; and most people with free speech only in theory. Of course, we never told you what to say straight out. But anyone in media knows that all it takes is a friendly phone call." Sampson adjusts his glasses. "That kind of thing is what the kids are now calling 'canalizing.' I didn't think of it as anything more than strategic free market competitive practice a few years ago. But today... today, I believe there's a chance to create that better world, update our understandings of democracy itself."

"At this point," Roberts suddenly says, "I'd like to open the discussion to the panel. Would anyone like to comment?"

"I think Mr. Sampson's point is well taken," General Stemper says immediately. "If the world perceives that we're moving to live up to our highest ideals and begins to feel effects of that change — we'll get the window we need to set things right. People everywhere will love, not hate us."

"Exactly," Senator Handlin adds. "And it's not that we're talking about giving up a middle-class standard of living in order to accomplish that, either. As I understand the economics, we just need the upper classes to make some adjustments as to how they understand privilege and responsibility. We need some well... some self-sacrifice. Some leadership. We all need to be real live saviors."

The camera narrows to a close-up of Sampson.

"It seems you're all very positive in your forecasts," the moderator observes. "What about the obstacles?" The room falls silent for a moment.

Senator Handlin speaks first. "Well, as I said earlier, it's not going to be easy. We see a lot of people who seem to have turned around on a dime. But learning to feel secure in a whole new identity may take time. We're so used to evaluating ourselves on the basis of money and power, or other such criteria. I suspect that, for some, it's not going to be that simple to drop their psychological dependence on old notions of separation and hierarchy."

“Especially if one of those notions about yourself involves your manhood,” interjects the General. “The old ideas of masculinity. We’ve been grappling with that ever since we admitted women into the military. I’m sure you remember the problems we were having in every branch of service. Years of reported and unreported sexual assaults and rape. But there are other obstacles as well.”

“Such as?” The moderator’s sweeping look invites comment.

“Such as whether or not altruism is a realistic expectation,” Sampson ventures. “More to the point, are people going to work hard if the Convention sets caps on personal property accumulation? Right?” He looks around the table.

“Well, if you had even talked about something like that ten or fifteen years ago,” Senator Handlin replies, “you would have been branded a communist, a socialist, or a utopian-nut or something. But when you’ve got serious economists, even the pope and other religious leaders joining a widespread popular movement criticizing capitalism — and now individuals such as yourself, something quite new is already happening.”

The music that began the show returns. The ambient lights dim. A spotlight picks out the moderator.

“It always comes to this time,” Roberts says. “And always too quickly. I want to thank our guests for their candid and informed discussion. And until next week, from all of us on the production staff and crew, we wish you a good — ”

Powered by the People

No one could pinpoint when, where or how the movement had started. But everyone agreed that once the young took up the ideas, energy for a Phase Transition cascaded. College, high school and grade school students flooded social networks with their disbelief that adults could have allowed the world to go on the way it had for so long. Postings went viral. One eight-year-old tapped the motherlode with her simple meme, “History has not been good. All these wars and ough!” You didn’t have to study history that much to agree. Slavery, colonization, genocide. Mass starvation, ecological destruction. Brutal dictatorships. Or manipulation that made a mockery of democracy. Young people everywhere reached a similar conclusion. Such a pathway led to ruin.

At the same time this new movement highlighted another side of the human story. The inextinguishable flame of human love and compassion. Anyone could cite the evidence. The self-sacrifice of parents, care-givers, firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel; the dedication of teachers and clergy; the daring of artists and entertainers; the often thankless labor of factory and construction workers, farmers, garbage collectors, truck drivers, cleaning staff, cooks, waitresses... the universal soldier. And so on. Even the good intentions of the misguided entered into the positive side of the equation.

Many of the older generation had been raised to believe that goodness was a moral choice that worked against “human nature.” Now youthful leaders asserted that human goodness was “natural,” the very force which made life possible. Adults’ wholehearted response seemed to confirm the premise that a kind of “instinct” for cooperating and giving made desire for the needed changes more probable than anyone had imagined. For the change in the air was no less than a shift from old world programming that had institutionalized selfishness — to a new world that would cultivate and institutionalize loving one another.

In the United States, a step toward that new world had taken the form of a new Constitutional Convention, as provided for in Article V of the original U.S. Constitution. The electorate had chosen a President whose sole platform had been the calling of a Convention with a specific set of mandates, such as the creation of a new economic

system based on cooperation and caring. Communities had then chosen delegates they trusted to fulfill those mandates. As the Convention got underway, people's transformation of themselves inspired and encouraged the delegates. What was happening outside the hall was as important as what was happening within.

In homes, apartments, dormitories and barracks; in cars, buses, commuter trains, planes; workplaces and classrooms; grocery stores, cafés, restaurants and bars; in newspapers, talk shows, novels, museums, movies, sitcoms, music on the radio — in every microtheater imaginable — people were stepping beyond the boundaries previously set in their minds. Revisiting ideas of self, others, the world. Pondering what got them out of bed in the morning. Reconsidering their definitions of success. Reviewing what they wanted to leave as their legacy. Re-evaluating the significance of their lives — every day, every hour. From smallest acts and thoughts to future plans and dreams. Was it love or fear?

As the Convention shaped the legal basis for realizing the goals of the mandates, many problems cried out for immediate attention. One of the most stunning mass actions swept the nation's metropolitan areas. It began with groups of college students contacting churches, neighborhood improvement organizations and such in the nation's urban ghettos — asking what they could do. Almost overnight, people of all ages and all walks of life were inundating these organizations with offers of money, food, clothing, equipment, construction materials, vehicles and time. Doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers, social workers, architects — professionals of every kind — gave of their expertise. Skilled workers such as plumbers, carpenters, masons and electricians began repairing buildings, furnaces, appliances, elevators. Initially skeptical, ghetto-dwellers soon embraced this help in transforming their world. Suburbanites drove into neighborhoods they used to avoid, where they joined in weeding community gardens, cleaning buildings and streets, revitalizing parks, installing playground equipment and mentoring young people.

Suddenly, every city had living spaces for the homeless, food for the hungry, free health clinics, improved schools, high quality clothing for those who needed it. Best of all, these actions revitalized local economies and brought job opportunities.

“It’s the miracle of the loaves and the fishes!” exclaimed one pastor with tears in his eyes.

Once the Phase Transition got going, it perpetuated itself. The pleasure people felt fueled an explosion of activity. Momentum grew. Volunteers all over the nation echoed those who described such experiences as “the greatest joy” or “the deepest satisfaction” or “the most fun” they had ever had. It was as if human beings were rediscovering how much they delighted in getting together to accomplish something. They’d become the teams they’d previously cheered. As corporations jettisoned competitiveness and ceased practices designed solely for profitmaking, consumers began buying and promoting their products, in what they called “reverse boycotts.” Investors bought heavily into such companies’ stock. People played with the possibilities. Gone was the boredom that had plagued routine daily life. You were never sure what might happen next. Except that it would surely be good.

Ideas moved in waves across the country. With competition falling out of style, more people were hearing and appreciating, instead of putting down each other’s perspectives. People were reading, forming discussion groups, signing up for night classes. College professors and administrators responded, quickly setting up new courses and facilitating access. They also arranged for students to get credit for participating in aid projects at home or abroad. On many campuses, departments such as history, philosophy, psychology, art and literature engaged in collaborative projects with screenwriters, filmmakers, TV and movie producers.

Hollywood leapt at the possibilities, the more so since evaporating interest in the old formulae had caused box office receipts to plunge. Moviegoers now shunned violence and indicated their preference for another kind of sexuality. The season’s only hit was deliciously sensual, a garden of delights that exemplified sexuality’s connection with the many faces of human love. Romantic love, love of Nature, love of the larger community, love with a capital “L.” Courage, daring, endurance and heroism remained in vogue, but with a focus on a different set of challenges. Overcoming obstacles to understanding, to forgiveness, to freedom, to bridging differences and getting together.

The new trends transformed television. One star-studded miniseries dramatized the emergence of democracy in Europe and the United States. Beautifully filmed and

brilliantly acted, this production gave viewers a vivid sense of how almost all of the people had lived — exploited and oppressed — under the tyranny of kings, queens, czars, emperors and the aristocratic classes that those regimes had fostered. The series explored the relationship between the political culture of Old Regime Europe and such worldwide abuses as the slave trade and colonization. It shed light on the wild fury and the passionate ideals of the revolutions that swept Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. Later segments carried the story of democracy through such key moments as the Civil War in the United States, the World Wars, the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the worldwide youth revolt of the 1960s. The series sought to help viewers form their own answers to the pressing questions of the day — What is freedom? What constitutes fairness? What would true democracy look like? How can democratic societies ensure that citizens are equipped to think for themselves?

News presentations changed, too. Reporters and anchors revealed their social background, tax bracket and political party preference on station websites. And mentioned the availability of that information as they introduced themselves during broadcasts. They also disclosed where they and their editors stood on each issue covered. Stories included contextual information and thoroughly explored the implications.

Once the Convention began, radio, television and live streaming provided gavel-to-gavel coverage. Associated activity flooded the web. Churches, unions, social clubs, civic groups, schools, organizations and hundreds of thousands of people posted their ideas and linked together with one another. Libraries and public buildings hosted kiosks where individuals could express their points of view. Search engines sorted Convention sessions by topic, associations, keywords and issues.

Interest in the Convention surpassed anything anyone could remember. It wasn't difficult to imagine why. Up to this time, humanity had never faced so great a crisis nor had so many reasons for hope. Never before had so many people tried so hard on such a grand scale to realize humanity's highest ideals. It was a great leap of faith that inspired and demanded everyone's best.

Convention

Reverberating with what was happening in other countries, the speeches, dancing and music on the eve of the second U.S. Constitutional Convention expressed a great Spirit of Hope. It reminded some commentators of the feeling that had encircled the globe, albeit less powerfully, on Millennium Night years ago. On day one of the Convention, audiences worldwide applauded the inaugural reading of the mandates. Within three weeks, the addition of delegates had resolved all issues of fully inclusive representation. Two weeks after that, committees specific to each of the mandates had formed.

The plenary council quickly approved priority for the Committee on the Environment, as they were charged with immediately addressing the crisis that was extinguishing life forms. The Committee on Economy took up the task of replacing a failing system based on competition and exploitation with one informed by cooperation, sharing and sustainability. The Committee on Human Resources would concern itself with ensuring real equal opportunity for everyone. The Committee on Justice and Internal Security would seek to create a new justice system, replacing prisons with rehab and caregiving institutions, while focusing on eliminating the causes of crime. The Committee on Global Security would work towards worldwide disarmament, Peace on Earth, by addressing the underlying causes of conflict — poverty first and foremost. The Committee on Government and Politics would take action to end the undue political influence of the wealthy and create a truly democratic form of government.

With the help of experts and testimony from ordinary citizens, the committees set out to prepare their proposals. Each was given twelve weeks to produce an initial presentation for review and voting by the delegates at large. Everyone agreed there was no time to waste. So the Convention gave itself only nine months to complete its work. At first, many commentators predicted that the Convention would never meet such deadlines. By the end of the eighth week, however, it looked as if all the committees would report early.

Extraordinary behavior speeded up their work. No one had anticipated experts setting aside old habits of competition and agreeing so readily, cooperating so fully.

Many past disagreements had revolved around whether changing the world was necessary, desirable or humanly possible. Now a near-consensus on the need for profound change made it much easier to reach agreement on ways to proceed. And “reality check” testimony from individuals involved proved extremely useful, often clarifying a point with brilliant economy of words.

The Committee on the Environment reported in a short six weeks. Experts in the field had known for years how human activity was destroying the environment and how to halt and repair the damage. Much of the technology had also been available and developing. Like other industrialized nations, the United States was just a few steps away from a fully renewable, non-polluting power grid, for instance. All that had been lacking was the will to do it what needed to be done.

Corporations had indicated a changed attitude even before the Convention. Lumber companies, for example, declared a moratorium on cutting down virgin forests and turned their attention to planting and recycling. In response, a grassroots movement quickly emerged and tackled one of the tougher issues: what to do about the people who would lose their jobs when corporations stopped their destructive activities. A Seattle-based group morphed into a nationwide organization raising funds and finding jobs for displaced workers. Many found it particularly satisfying to engage in restoring and sustaining the very ecosystems their former employers had damaged. The Convention’s Committee on the Environment took these local efforts a step further by proposing a nationwide public works program that would employ the displaced workers in efforts ranging from project management to IT to infrastructure renewal. By the time the Committee on the Environment reported, it was clear that the Committee on the Economy would fund the program.

The Committee on the Economy ran ahead of schedule almost from the start. Nothing did more to quicken its pace than the wealthiest citizens’ willingness to do everything they could to replace so-called free-market capitalism with a new economic system. They had already demonstrated good will before the Convention began. First, by disproving speculation that the stock market would crash as investors withdrew from United States corporations. And then, in an even more surprising movement, producing a wave of self-taxation that poured immense sums of money into the treasury. The

Committee on the Economy could begin its work with more funding available than anyone had imagined — and with a profound sense that all social groups were on board.

The beginning of Economy's first two-hour session exemplified the mood.

"The Chair recognizes the delegate from Oregon."

"We, from a state where mountains reach the heavens and forests touch the sea," the Oregon delegate began, "and in the spirit of community that has inspired this second Constitutional Convention of the United States of America, move that Article One of the new economic system shall read: 'All citizens shall be guaranteed the right to food, water, shelter, healthcare and employment.'"

A hand waved furiously in the middle of the room as Oregon sat down.

"The delegate from Minnesota wishes to comment?" asked the Chair.

"Wishes to add. Minnesota wishes to add heating and clothing suited to weather conditions to Article One."

"Don't forget air conditioning," interjected another delegate.

"Clack! Clack!" replied the gavel. "Minnesota has the floor."

"And air conditioning," said the Minnesota spokesperson, with a slight bow towards the Texas delegation.

One week later, Economy reached agreement on a way to shift ownership of all essential utilities — water, electricity, gas, oil, transportation, telephone, as well as media and communication systems — from the private to the public sector. Owners would be encouraged to make this change voluntarily; and the Committee expected most would.

Before week three of their general sessions had ended, the Committee on the Economy had passed the shortened workweek proposal. Full-time employees would move to a thirty-two hour, four-day week, with no cut in pay. A measure that would both increase employment and better balance work time with home, family and personal time. Businesses that needed help with this would get tax breaks or federal grants.

Although economic issues proved less contentious than expected, obstacles did arise. Both expert and "reality check" testimony indicated a marked mistrust of the federal government's ability to get anything done effectively. Delegates cited many concrete examples of failed centralization. This was a fundamental problem since most of the proposals under consideration relied heavily on national administration. As the

discussion bogged down in the following weeks, a well-known career politician and political strategist requested permission to testify.

“I have a confession to make,” he began. “We deliberately cultivated the idea that the federal government can’t do anything right. I myself instigated several such campaigns.” He ruefully shook his head. “It was politics. Political gamesmanship. Oh, we knew that once the journalists started digging they’d find plenty of evidence the government wasn’t working well. Because it was our own cronies who were profiting from such things as \$800 hammers. But the corruption and inefficiency we’ve had in the past doesn’t add up to some kind of principle that the federal government can’t be trusted. Civil Service employees are your neighbors. No different than you or me. They’re fully capable of getting it right, as all of us are now trying to do.”

An even more fundamental issue was how to change the economy while satisfying the undeniable human thirst for freedom. Some delegates argued that everything should be done voluntarily. They pointed to the changed behavior of wealthy people. Others noted the efforts of small and medium business owners who were already replacing hierarchy with democracy in the workplace. But economists and industry leaders were almost unanimous in opposing a purely voluntary approach. They cited the out-of-control character of the old economic system. One year inflation, the next unemployment. Stock market up, stock market down. The constant threat of recession. The Great Depression. Committee members found these arguments persuasive, but remained extremely concerned about freedom. So they aimed to write proposals more as guidelines than dictates.

During week four, the Committee took up the problem of income disparity. No one contested the need for reducing the difference between what a full day’s work brought the lowest paid and the highest paid members of the workforce. A white-haired psychology professor from Stanford argued that, with the Phase Transition, cultures would no longer be programming people to desire advantage over others and its symbols. Consumerism would soon be losing its grip on people. Personal fulfillment would prove so much more motivating. Differences in pay would not be necessary at all. Everyone could be paid the same. Most delegates did not find that idea entirely satisfactory, since it

left a key question unanswered. How could you reward individuals for extra hard work, unusual effort, special skill, doing more or for doing less-desirable work?

A team from MIT proposed a plan with different salary levels. Their plan ensured everyone in society a subsistence wage, whether they worked or not. That wage would be doubled as a base rate for everyone who did work. Using hypothetical figures of 25,000 units for subsistence and 50,000 for workers, the team suggested a maximum salary of 100,000 units. There would be three Categories in which a working individual could receive even higher rates of pay. Category One rewarded merit in all occupations with 10,000 extra units for Good, 20,000 for Very Good, 30,000 for Excellent. Category Two added to the base remuneration for those doing less-desirable work. The team cited sanitation and sewer workers as exemplifying the higher-paid of two levels in this Category. That level would qualify to receive an extra 20,000 units. The other level in Category Two carried 10,000 additional units for doing work not being chosen enough to meet society's needs. Category Three had the same two levels of immediate addition to the base for work that required extra training, extra effort or extreme responsibility. The proposal cited physicians, pilots, bus drivers and teachers as examples.

It took the Committee several weeks to wade through and integrate "reality check" testimony on some of these points.

"In my job," stated one worker, "it really doesn't matter much if I make a mistake. It's no big deal. One of my co-workers down the line might have to fix it, or the thing might have to be scrapped and done over. But I sure don't want my doctor making mistakes like that. Or the guy flying the plane I'm on. There's some jobs where it really does matter. Where there's no second chance. And those people should be paid more. The ones who have to, you know, really pay attention and be careful every second."

A surgeon testified, "My work requires a great deal of training and carefulness, it's true. However, when you see someone hardly able to walk into your office one month, and back to normal a few months later — because of what you were able to do — well, what words can I use to describe that? But the person who hauls away my garbage... doing that kind of awful work deserves a special compensation."

"I could have gone to college," said another witness. "I had the brains. But I just didn't want to study. I liked partying. Still do. My job isn't very fulfilling. But I don't

have to worry about it after punching out, either. The trade-off is okay with me. But I figure that people who do choose to put out the effort ought to get some kind of compensation. If they want it. They can turn down the extra pay if they enjoy their jobs so much.”

“Clack!” the gavel sounded. “The Chair would like to make an announcement. We’ve just received notification that the Committee on Human Resources has completed and approved its list of proposals.”

Thunderous applause.

Macro Level

The prime-time special opens with the familiar image of planet Earth. As the camera slowly descends, the distinct outlines of continents emerge. In the next instant, scenes from the world's major cities unfold one into another. The introduction ends with the two hosts standing behind a long curving desk. A map of the world behind them.

“Tonight, we continue our series on the latest Phase Transition developments by bringing you up to date on The Heart Project,” the first begins. “We’ll start with a little background.” A hint excitement colors the speaker’s voice.

“The Heart Project, or ‘Heart’ as people have come to call it, began as one of several programs commissioned by the Second Constitutional Convention, here in the United States. Heart was inspired by the proposition that if we could explore the atom, communicate almost instantaneously all over the globe, even grow organs, we could also feed, clothe, shelter and care for everyone.” The screen flashes through images of the CERN accelerator, a silver-clad astronaut standing on the moon, a bio-tech laboratory. The camera returns to the studio.

“Stage One of Heart took place in two steps,” the second host continues. “Initially, funding was dramatically increased for the many NGO’s, UN and governmental programs already operating all over the world. This first step was followed by a series of meetings at the United Nations with representatives of those organizations. The aim being to coordinate and improve pre-existing efforts.” Scenes of crowded discussion rooms and hallways. Then, the garden outside the UN Building and the celebrated sculpture, “Let us Beat Swords into Plowshares.”

“Guided by these meetings, administrative centers were set up at strategic locations around the globe.” Bright blue spots of light appear on the map behind the hosts. “Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and the Middle East, Central Asia, India, Southeast Asia, Central and South America, the Pacific Rim and Eastern Europe.”

“During Stage Two,” the first host picks up, “These administrative centers brought together individuals from all the countries and cultural groups of the particular regions.” A multicultural image sequence — buildings and offices, the smiling and serious faces of

office workers — cascades. “These administrators refined strategic goals and set up networks of local offices.”

The camera shifts back to the studio. “Nightly for the next week, we’ll be reporting on Stage Three of the project — implementation of the plans of action.”

Planet Earth returns to the screen. The sphere of swirled clouds and blue slows. The shape of Mexico and Central America come into focus. Closer up, a coastline magnifies into a sandy beach. The camera moves inland, panning from a high point of view. A deep green jungle canopy hugs the lower slopes of a rugged mountain range. Beyond, a desert terrain stretches to the horizon.

“We begin tonight with our close neighbor.”

Now the camera follows a rustic road, which transforms into a highway that leads to an expressway. Suddenly you’re gliding over rooftops of an enormous city, then hovering over an outlying section of the megalopolis. The sound of a descending helicopter grows louder, until at ground level, it falls silent. The camera makes a three hundred and sixty degree sweep of the scene. Solar paneled quonset huts in neat rows cover half the area. New two-story adobe-like structures fill much of the other half. Between the two, a construction zone bustles with activity.

“This used to be a shantytown that extended for miles.” A reporter dressed in a tan jumpsuit stands near a row of the quonset huts. “Home for a million and a half people.” Archive footage of the former shantytown shows tin roof and scrap-wood hovels. Cardboard boxes. People in rags. Mud. Open sewers. Horrendous poverty.

“Exploitative systems — slavery, colonization, then economic imperialism — forced people to live in conditions like these, generation after generation. For centuries,” the reporter explains. “Until the Phase Transition began, there was little hope it would ever end.”

She points toward the new huts. “The Heart Project first replaced the shantytown with these temporary lodgings. The huts all have electricity, water and far more comforts than what the people here had before. It took only twelve weeks for all these temporary shelters to be put in place. The idea was to provide immediate relief while permanent new homes were being built.”

The focus shifts to the construction zone. “Much of the work is being done by the people who will live in these homes,” the reporter observes. “Even without access to quality building materials, they could always dream. They’re skilled builders and know exactly what they want. Heart Project workers assist as needed. They’re the ones in uniform.”

After focusing for a few seconds on a group of the construction workers, the camera slowly lifts, then glides across rooftops of a newly finished neighborhood. As it focuses on one of the adobe-like houses, you can see someone looking up from the sidewalk. It’s the reporter. “The Rivera family has invited us to a quick tour of their new home,” she begins, walking up to the front door. “Theirs is an interesting option among many models that are available and under construction here.” She knocks on the large wooden door. It swings open.

“Bienvenidos.”

“Victor Rivera?” the reporter asks.

Victor smiles. “Si. Please, come in.”

Inside, a small open-air courtyard, half of it a garden. An elderly man is working amid vegetables and flowers. Children are playing in the open area. Two gray haired women sit on a bench in the shade of a balcony that runs along three sides of the building’s second story.

“My whole family lives here,” Victor beams. “That’s my father, tending his vegetables. These children are mine, my brother’s and my sister’s. We each have our own apartments upstairs. My wife and I live in that corner over there. My sister and her husband in the middle. And my brother and his children over there.” The camera follows his gestures. Then returns to Victor.

“My brother’s wife didn’t live long enough to see this. Neither did our mother. My father and his sister share one of the downstairs apartments. My in-laws are in the other. That’s my aunt and my mother-in-law resting in the shade. They’ve been working in the big kitchen preparing our evening meal.”

Victor opens a door to his left. “I don’t need to show you the apartments. They are much like you have in the United States. What I really want you to see is this.” They enter a large room with a long rough hewn dining table and chairs. “We can all eat

together — the whole family — sit down at the table. And now that we have jobs, we can afford enough food for everyone.” A close-up catches the joy in Victor’s face.

Now the scene shifts to a bird’s-eye view of a seaport. Bright sunlight sparkles on the water of a harbor filled with ships. The camera cuts to dockside and a wide concrete pier. Overhead, the long arms of cranes are swinging shipping containers from the deck of an aircraft carrier to a long line of waiting tractor-trailers. In the distance, you can see flatbed railroad cars loaded with odd-shaped materials crawling away from the area. The noise of engines, horns, whistles, calls of workers, occasional loud bangings and thumps blend into the background.

A man drives up in a jeep-like vehicle, turns its motor off and jumps out. He’s wearing a tee-shirt with “Semper Fi” in bold red letters. Combat fatigues are tucked neatly into his heavy-duty black combat boots. He removes his narrow brimmed camouflage hat.

“Welcome to Alpha Section of the port of Acapulco,” he says over the din. “We’re part of the Heart Project. And proud of it. It’s an operation of massive proportions.” The camera moves past his shoulder to the ship behind him. Then rises overhead, where, looking down, you can see several more piers with freighters unloading at each.

“No military, no country, no one has ever attempted anything like this in the history of the world.” The focus returns to the soldier.

“We’ve named the operation here, ‘Friend Next Door,’” he continues. “The destination of almost all of these containers is Mexico City, located 265 miles inland. That’s our present target area and will eventually serve as the regional distribution center. We’ve already built homes for at least a million people there and temporary shelters for several million more.” The pride in his voice turns so gentle that it seems an unusual fit with his muscular arms, angular jaw, closely shaven, tanned face and short cropped hair.

“Within the next year, we expect to have constructed permanent housing for everyone who needs it up there. Two, three and four family homes with plumbing, electricity, air. Most of the people didn’t want single family homes, you see. And we build ‘em the way they want ‘em. In the end, it’s less expensive — but that’s not the point.”

He shifts uneasily from one leg to the other. “For me, personally, this has been an emotional experience. I mean, I joined the military right after high school because my parents couldn’t afford any more education for me. Got good training in the service. I stayed on ‘cause I figured I might end up unemployed if I left. But I always felt kinda bad about being, well, a hired gun, it seemed to me. I’d gotten deployed to places where the people were all skinny-looking and ragged. You’d see ‘em burying little kids. And you couldn’t do anything about it. Couldn’t even talk to ‘em. You just feel so helpless. But what we’re doing now, this is great. Me and my platoon, we even learned to speak Spanish. And we’ve gotten real close, too. With the people, you know. Making real friends. So like I said, it’s emotional — but in a good kind of way.”

He unfolded his arms and put one foot up on a step of his open-topped vehicle, an arm over the front windshield.

“Anyway, we do what we do. Our main task is providing logistics, materials, assistance. In this region, that’s meant housing, food, farm implements, healthcare and medical supplies, machinery, technology, infrastructure, job skills training... We initially had to bring in a lot of our own engineers and support staff. Won’t be needing ‘em much longer, though. The local people are already taking over.”

He wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his forearm.

“We meet once a week with local representatives. They keep us updated as to what they need. They say, ‘Computers.’ We get ‘em. They say, ‘Roads, a school, a hospital, a television station...’ We get it built. That’s why we’ve been able to accomplish so much in so short a time. Input from the ground up. The local people are directing the whole thing. Even here at the port. Very smooth. Me and my platoon, we’re scheduled to be out of here in another month. Know how many people we’ve trained to operate one of those?”

The camera follows the nod of his head to a huge bright yellow forklift.

“Hundreds. This is gonna’ be an important port for a long time to come. And I’m gonna’ miss the friends I made. I’ll be back, though. They made me promise that. Friends are forever.”

The camera lifts higher and higher...

Geopolitical Miracles

The camera moves slowly through narrow streets, medieval looking stone walls — panning left and right, highlighting offerings of small shops lining the way. Souvenirs, pottery and brightly colored clothing fill the shelves. Silvery dancing mobiles. Sunlight falters a moment, then returns as the camera emerges from an archway.

“Ten years ago, people would have said, ‘Impossible,’” observes the narrator. “The two sides seemed just too far apart. The conflicts irresolvable. The violence unstoppable. Mutual retaliation producing endless hatred. International peace efforts always failed. Historians, tracing the struggle back into the past, offered little hope.”

The narration pauses as Middle-Eastern music, oud and doumbek, grow louder. A group of young men and women, wearing jeans and sunglasses, moves subtly to the rhythm as they make their way down the street. Women carrying baskets smile as they pass.

“As the Phase Transition went global, however, the people here surprised the rest of the world. Rose above that history, dissolved their hatreds, set aside notions of revenge. Monthly, weekly, daily, each person worked at creating a personal path to Peace. ‘We chose Love,’ they say in this region, ‘and Love showed us how.’”

At a triangular corner, men with untrimmed beards bow reverently. The music gives way to the laughter of children as the video lingers over a group of youngsters gathered in play.

“Today the citizens of Israel and Palestine are celebrating what’s come to be called ‘The Miracle.’ It was only five years ago to this day that a unified Jerusalem became the capital for both their sovereign nations. A city now renowned for tranquility and friendship. Like so many other places once torn by strife. A living inspiration for Peace on Earth.”

As the camera continues along the winding street, it begins shifting up and down — hopscotching from deep green curtains here, to azure ones wafting there. From someone standing and waving in a doorway to smiling faces at an open-air café.

“How Jerusalem?” the narrator asks. “That’s been the question on everyone’s mind this week. We think that part of the answer may have to do with the symbolic and

religious contours of the city itself. From time immemorial, Jerusalem has served as the capital of the Holy Land. Shrines, mosques, temples, synagogues and churches fill every quarter. It's here you'll find the rock where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. It's here that Christian pilgrims honor the place of Christ's crucifixion, his burial and resurrection. Here you'll find the Wailing Wall, one of the holiest of Jewish sites. It's here that the Prophet Mohammed ascended into heaven. Theologies of forgiveness, understanding, trust, compassion, and hope inhabit the very streets. Yet religions divided Jerusalem for centuries. It was during the opening years of the Phase Transition that people reclaimed its sacred character. It's now a city united. The city of "The Miracle."

Suddenly, a blend of rock n' roll and Middle-Eastern music with a touch of reggae rhythm replaces the narration. The screen fills first with a shrine of incredible artwork and architecture crowned with a golden dome. Then comes a great stone wall where people are bowing and praying. And finally, steps leading to an enormous atrium, beneath high arches supported by tall pillars.

"Behind me you hear the refrain of what's become a theme song for the ceremonies this week," the narrator resumes.

Dancers in long lines holding one another's hands come snaking down the street. People out on balconies are playing cymbals. Ringing bells.

The narrator's voice slips under a great wave of sound — music, tremolo, cheering, singing.