

The Last Free Man

A novel by Bob Martel

Upright: Disaster, upheaval, sudden change, revelation

Reversed: Avoidance of disaster, fear of change



The Tower signifies darkness and destruction on a physical scale, as opposed to a spiritual scale. The Tower itself represents ambitions built on false premises.

The lightning bolt represents a sudden, momentary glimpse of truth, a flash of inspiration that breaks down structures of ignorance and false reasoning. There is a sudden realization that one's comfort was based on an inadequate foundation of false thought, belief and action.

Chapter 1: Rescued

Do you know why millions of people are stressed out? Over half of all Americans have less than \$10,000 in savings and investments. That means that they are one illness, one auto accident or a divorce away from financial disaster. Most have no idea how they will ever be able to retire with dignity. People are not free when they struggle with economic insecurity. --- Senator Barry Sanders

It was heart rending to watch him as he struggled to stand. He had crawled out of the metal box on his own, once the lock mechanism had been breached, and the door swung free. He crawled into the mild light of the sunset; his eyes firmly closed. He forced himself a few feet from the box then sat up with his hands over his eyes to guard against the screaming white light of what might have been either the evening or dawn. He didn't know yet. He didn't care yet. He would need time to even begin to understand what had become of him. He tried to get to his feet but sitting was the best he would do that evening.

Once his eyes adjusted to the dimming light, he examined his hands and arms as far as his clothing allowed. His scarred body had been hidden in the total darkness of the locked metal box he had lived in since he was forced into it during the winter. He was a prisoner. That he was a prisoner explained the scars and the metal box and being away from home, presumably against his will. He was a prisoner of war.

He looked north to a ridge line of the nearby mountains. They must have reminded him of home or been his home. I imagined he was from a small house nestled into a narrow, wooded box canyon nearly halfway up to the summit, far enough below the ridge road he could not possibly see his home from where he now sat. Later, I studied the maps and aials our patrol had been provided. This included satellite photography that showed a box canyon and a house.

The first night, I saw him trying to come to awareness and action. He would fail. He would crawl back into the box. His little metal world would be more comfortable to him than the harsh light of the day to come and the glaring mental torture of his home within sight if it was. He was still alive but very dead for now and maybe ever. No one really knew what his imprisonment had done to his mind. One would have to be him to find out, but, of course, looking at him now, would discourage any sane person to experience what he has and will endure.

A group of us, we liked to think of ourselves as explorers of the ancient tribal region that had been a war zone for decades until a few weeks ago, came across the small camp and found him, a poor tortured prisoner, abandoned, locked in the box, fed by a nomadic clan of goatherders, some of whom led us to him one afternoon.

We were academics from major universities in the eastern United States, mostly Ivy schools. We had a troupe of British soldiers looking after our safety. They carried the weapons, a smaller group of natives carried our gear and we, the explorer group, each walked with a largish nap sack with emergency supplies, cameras, recording equipment and our journals. We all had journals.

The goatherders had been in the area for six months before the war ended and they found the prisoner in the box only days after the military left. Finding the lock to be beyond their tools to open, they began feeding and watering him through a narrow slit on the north side of the box. The soldiers in our troupe used a small explosive to break the lock. The sound must have deafened the poor prisoner. It might be temporary, who could tell, it seemed a worthy trade for freedom, so he was freed, perhaps stunned deaf, and semi-blind but born into a new life.

The discussion that first night of his freedom was about the potential loss of hearing in trade for the sight of a beautiful sunset. The prisoner seemed ungrateful. I, too, saw him that way. I reasoned that smart men had made a

wise choice for him and now he should be sitting by our fire. He was not there. He had returned to the box without saying a word in any language.

People from the surrounding area visited our camp and fire. The locals could not tell us how long he had been in there. The military had not spoken with the herders. They were from different tribes. Trust was low. They reasoned that the military was a randomly negative force in their lives. Experience bore that out.

I could not sleep that night. I sat up with the night watch, staring at the prisoner's door, waiting for him to emerge. The goatherders had left with the setting moon and our group was alone on the hilltop.

The moon set at 3 AM. The darkness was then near complete. Stars' light marked the shining paths that led away from the camp. Later low clouds moved into the region covering the stars and driving the light away completely. The sound of animals moving around the outskirts, sniffing after our food supply and maybe us too, kept me awake.

In the total darkness, he began to make sounds. I started my recorder. He clicked and howled and giggled. I imagined he was finding some memory of a happiness deferred and saw the humor in its loss. Otherwise, what could it have been?

Eventually the sun rose, and he came out of the box. The light of the first dawn he had experienced in some time lured him to open the door a little more each hour to feel the sun's increasing warmth. I wanted to cry. I can never know what he saw. I had been taught to see the world as I was told to see it. No way he could see life as I did.

As I sit here now, as I try to transcribe my notes from that first night, I find there is something missing from them, something, a realization that I imagine was building, at dawn it was dim, but later I saw clearly that there was a something growing on me. The man in the box was the last free man.

He owed nothing. He had nothing. He was unimportant to anyone. As he was, no one cared what became of him.

It took him a bit of time to learn to speak again. He spoke English. Princeton, he wasn't, but he had vocabulary. I studied philosophy. He had one. I did not.

He told me the parts of his story he chose to tell me in short bursts beginning when most of the crippling wounds around his lips had healed. His overall rehabilitation while I was with him left him with a pronounced limp. The knife cuts on his face and hands did not completely heal. These scars he would not be able to hide. They kept him in a dark solitude he appeared to take comfort in.

When he began to talk, his subject matter was of his choosing.

“Let's say, I begin talking using the words the masters taught me to use in encounters that required me to speak. The vocabulary is devised so you could never understand. I'll show you.

“Where are we? There is the vast and glorious universe we can see, and the vainglorious petri dish of Randian religious philosophy we are given to eat from, that blinds us to the meaning of the universe wherein Rand's god created all things including non-Radians. Do we see a universe of possibilities or the vast universe of commodifiable substances and real estate the damnable gods are keeping from us? One a glass always full. The other a glass always empty.”

“The last free man.” I said it to myself, trying to believe what I was saying, which, coming from my intuition, was a truth, the meaning of which lurked below the horizon of my perception. “Free.” I repeated the word, “Free.”

And again.

I wanted to question his reasoning. I searched for a meaningful one and found nothing came to mind.

“What is your name?” I asked him.

“Prisoner 167.” He answered. “There is a tattoo somewhere.” He began a search of his body, finding many things of interest. He lifted and tugged his clothing exposing old scars and more recent small wounds, but no tattoo was located. He gave up.

But this is getting a bit ahead of the story. In the first days after we opened his door, he said nothing and never attempted to tell us anything about himself even that he was hungry. I worried over him. Everyone else ignored him as one would an annoying child.

Chapter 2: First words

In Russian, it rhymes

We did not know what to do.
We knew a problem was coming.
We knew to avoid it if we could.
Yet we were never taught a way.

We did not kneel before the cross.
We did not pray before the flag.
There was nothing else we knew
Except to love our enemies.

My name is Jackson Martel. I am a journalist by trade, an explorer by preference, a geographer by profession and mathematician by academic training. I lecture in Mathematics at the university near my home in Connecticut.

I was educated at Princeton. First in Mathematics and then Geography. My plan was deep space travel via astronomical devices, but a few wars intervened. The military wanted eggheads to study war's effects on local culture, so they sent a mathematician. I guess they wanted a high-class map reader.

I called Prisoner 167 'Harry' as in Harry Potter. He has a bit of the wizard in him and a twinkle in his eye that makes him look the part. All wizards have twinkles I supposed.

Harry didn't talk much except in his sleep when he spoke to his 'little brother' with voices akin to the clicks, howls and giggles I first heard from him. I say it was his little brother because every once in a while, he would

say, “little brother,” in between the non-sense I had been hearing. No one else paid much attention to him. If anything, he was a subject of discussion rather than a part of one.

As the weeks passed and he followed us while we traipsed up and down the rugged mountains, he regained his strength. I thought he would want to escape us. I held this view until he began to talk, and I saw that all my assumptions about him failed to account for the surprise that he was an American.

Harry sounded educated. Where he got it, I have yet to discover. No one trains you to be a prisoner in a metal box, a left over from the west Asian war, several hundred miles from the nearest gas station. Maybe I am wrong about that. His specialized skills were hard to determine.

He recovered the ability to walk, but other than anything a dog could do, he did nothing.

The troupe and the eggheads followed by Harry wended our way south across whatever barrier we faced until we reached the mountains above Turbat and could see the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

We had walked a thousand kilometers, by my calculations 1,018.5 kms, since we opened the metal box and birthed Harry. The vast blue ocean stretched into the horizon was a ridiculous wealth of space without humans. The human sea we negotiated for the last 50 miles in the river valleys was reduced to a tear drop by comparison. I breathed a deep breath and said, “Free.”

I meant it as lebenstraum, you know, elbowroom as our forbearers described freedom, space for a dream. Wars were fought for it. Then I saw something else in Harry’s experience. He didn’t wonder at the vastness of the ocean. But then, he seemed unfazed by the massive human presence of the valleys below. Now, on the mountain ridge, only sheep herders would

come upon us. He was the same man. Unfazed.

It was freaky being close to Harry. Not just his physical being but the odd things the man would say just before sleep. I had decided not to ask questions at first just to see if he would initiate some interchange.

We were told to wait for transportation to arrive offshore. No one knew when it would arrive.

The first night on the mountain he said nothing, staring off to the east until his eyes closed. The second we sat in silence a few feet apart, he, of course on the stone he had slept on preparing for his dream world.

His habit was to stay awake until he could not continue and go to sleep where he sat. That was his habit as we travelled to the coast.

The second night I gave up waiting for him and asked a question.

“Harry, do you have a family waiting to hear from you?”

“Jack, do you? What I see is you among men without female companionship. You appear to have comrades but not family. As for me, well, I have been left with a starvation that creates dreams of food and eating is real as any day’s experience. I have a memory of these dreams as vivid as the one of my dear mother’s face. I have memories of conversations of course. But there were also picnics and lilacs, fishing and lawn tennis. I am hungry for it all.”

“So, I am hearing you say ‘maybe’? For me it is only two, my wife and my mother, who are left to wonder after me.”

“You seem impoverished.” Harry sat still upon a rock at the top of the highest mountain in the range facing the yet to appear sunrise. I turned to see what he was seeing. When I turned back, he was asleep.

Chapter 3: Nihilism is a sunny place

I feel like I am being followed.
I look over my shoulder
While knowing everything
Is being recorded.
How futile.

That was how it was:
Nothing ever calm,
Life always in motion.
To survive carry nothing.
Appear lost, ask for directions.

The third night on the ridge above the gulf I waited until total darkness. I could hear his breathing.

Suddenly, on impulse I spoke. It was shocking and sad. I said, “Are you afraid to die?”

I could hear his next inbreath. The wind was calming as the cold returned. He was wakening himself from what must have been a deepening slumber. The sound of the slight breeze he caused amused me. I tried to imitate his giggle.

Harry turned to look at me. He turned back and stood. He walked towards me then sat with me shoulder to shoulder. He stretched his woolen shoulder wrap across my shoulders – a gift of warmth to a brother.

“Jack, what scares me is not death but living life poorly, at least in my own estimation.”

“What do you want to do next? Our time together is ending. I will be reassigned in a few days and you... What will become of you?”

He smiled. It must have hurt him terribly as his unhealed wounds were wrinkled with scabs that reopened as required to suit his expressiveness. A bright redness appeared in several spots near his mouth. He showed no signs of pain.

“I am what became of me.” He waited until he must have realized more was needed. “Harry Potter is not my name. I sound American and, I’m guessing here, I look ugly as hell. We both know those three things mean the straight path through to a two-bedroom house in Connecticut is not my route and whoever or whatever will not likely let me get near there anyway – second amendment and all.”

I don’t remember what I was doing as he was talking. Probably looking down at my boot tops thinking what a foolish question I just asked. I did not respond. He went on.

“You know, anything can be sold. There are people near here who buy shit. Actual human shit has value. People steal each other’s shit from out of their outhouses. Believe me.”

“I have seen it in China. It’s true.”

“Yah. It is. I was raised to be courageous against all odds. Stand and deliver. There is an absurdity of hiring armed guards to watch your shit. Makes me wonder what there is to do next. What is next? Why would I want to do it? Why bother?” I sat quietly listening to his inbreath until he naturally began to talk again.

“Jack, you are very patient. When I first came to this region, I was a Christian minister. I was surrounded by Hindi and then Muslims. I had learned some local dialects well enough to get a job with State Department. I interfaced with CIA. I was rural. Traveled, preached, observed and reported. People died. Others took offense. They are not stupid. They know who’s who and

what's what. I was arrested by a roaming band of goatherders and turned over to the military in trade for what? I was not told. Maybe some shit. I was a prisoner."

By the time I heard him say this I had surmised a similar story without the minister part and the early role of the herders. As for shit anything can be sold.

Chapter 4: Anti-philosophy is over

Action for a future we want beats
Reaction to a present we do not want.
 $0 + 1 = 1$ or $0 - 0 = 0$.

“Really, it would have been better to send a troupe of robots out here. Their principle is to do no harm. But CIA... not so much. More like to do no good.” He shook his head in disbelief. “When I was captured, we were setting up bombing runs on the hamlets along our path into the mountains, the ones you found me in. I was subtracted when I was captured, and the runs went elsewhere as random as that.”

“I don’t get it. You are CIA. You had a job to do. You were doing it. Where is the problem?” As soon as the words left my lips, I knew I had asked another dumb-assed question.

“Jack,” he said. “Rethink?”

“Yes, please, thanks. Give me a few seconds. OK. I have worked near CIA before. Not a bunch but I have an opinion. I went to Princeton. We are the good guys.”

“Not good, Jack. Try again.”

He was sitting on the summit rock. I was leaning on my bag watching the Eta Aquariids. We had waited for several days for a Navy assist to extract us. I figured since I had flinched at our last exchange, I would be done with him or he with me. I sat and wondered as the sky shower continued.

“Jack, if I say I love you does that make you my enemy?”

“What?” Being shocked at his speaking out, I missed the question.

“If you are not my enemy, do I not need to love you? Must you not love your brother?”

“Uh.”

“I hear ‘maybe.’” he chuckled and giggled randomly. “How about this: Nothing says we should hate anyone: not the sinner, not the thief. No one. Did I preach that? Did I say love your neighbor or even yourself? Nope. It is not in the CIA’s manuals. Not a one of them.” He fell silent. I was engrossed in the meteors. I had nothing to say. We fell asleep on the rock.

When I woke, he was still asleep. The morning dew had covered us both. The blanket we shared sparkled in the first light of dawn.

Chapter 5: Vision

“Yur on yur own. Good luck.”

The American Dream defined by a father for a son.

Once we got the message that our transport had arrived off the coast, we packed and hiked. Hours later we reached a small stretch of beach, fenced compound and the military marine transports that took us to a submarine. When we boarded the transports to the sub my tasks changed, and I lost track of Harry. I tried to remember the last moments I saw him. It could have been at the gate of the compound to the transports. No, he was gone from my mind by then. I'll settle for he wandered off during our decent from the mountain tops somewhere near Meer Gurab or the border with Iran. That was what my report said.

There was great excitement when the group finished its reports on the effects of the last Asian war. We were taken to a small carrier where we prepared for our return flights to DC and our release from our military's custody. Months ago, when I was recruited for this mission, I had no idea what we would face. The political situation was completely unknown. Security was a matter of men at arms. I could walk and carry fifty pounds, more than that had to be someone else's business. Teamwork was, as I taught it, the most valuable asset and we have as the greatest nation on earth.

Life returned to normal for me. I was back in Connecticut. My wife had been busy. The interior of the house was repainted and redecorated. She bought a new padded chair for my study. The old one had become too uncomfortable to bear up any longer.

After a week of rest, I began to socialize again in the academic circles I had been absent from for almost a year. It was great fun. A year away refreshed my curiosities about the others. Within minutes it was me who was boring. I had no stories I could tell from the experience of the war zone. Secret, hush

hush, and all that.

The normality that returned to my life made me restless. During that summer when the school term ended and I was left to work on my journalistic writing, life took on a sameness you could count on. The mail delivery was five days a week at near eleven o'clock in the morning. Often enough I was standing at the mailbox waiting for Hank the mailman to bring the daily load. The result kept me busy with perusing the catalogues he delivered. No one wrote real letters anymore what with email and texting.

It was Hank's birthday on Friday. When he showed up, I was waiting with his present; the cream filled chocolates his corpulence required according to his gleeful exposition, the same one he delivered year after year, nearly word for word. I bought them for him year after year, so I deserved it: the repetition. I took his offering of paper stuff and headed back inside to avoid the now gathering heat. Having completed the only actual task I had for the day I tossed the stuff on my desk and took a nap in my new chair.

My wife woke me as she came home from her law office for lunch. She always hooted at her entrance. It gave me about twenty seconds to gather my wits before she burst into my study. She sniffed the air and said, "You are not back to normal yet."

"Hi to you too." I said. She walked to me and kissed my cheek. Geraldine K. Martel esq. was in her corporate uniform of a grey suit with a red cravat and black heels. She is an attorney. At times she dons her gym clothes and goes wild. But not in the suit.

"What's in the mail today?" She asked.

"Haven't looked. Too busy." She saw the pile on top of my closed computer. She turned to smirk at me. She picked the pile up and pushed it under her arm.

“Busy taking a nap.” She smiled, grabbed my hand and pulled me to the kitchen. “I want to feed you and I have a surprise for you. At least I think it’s a surprise.”

I was hungry.

“What do you mean not back to normal?”

“Smoking. You haven’t taken it up again since you returned. I rather like the smell of cannabis on your breath. It explains that look in your eyes I have never understood.” As she said this she shuffled through the catalogues. “Ah, Spiegel’s.”

The cook had prepared our meal from Jerry’s wishes. Jerry, Geraldine, always wanted lunch and her descriptions of her desires took a page sometimes to fully express her wishes. I ate olives, goat cheese with crackers and had a beer. She ate the other 20 plus lines of her description. The cook was well paid and very valuable.

As we ate, she paged through the catalogue emitting various judgments about what she saw. Clothing was an emotional subject for her. As she grunted, howled and ah’ed over each blouse and summer coat, I stared over her shoulder.

My thoughts were about being boring. My day had nothing conversational to compete with a picture of a coral-colored undershirt. I searched the trees outside the house and the lawn I hadn’t stepped on in years. I searched my memory for something I could say. I wanted it to be important and life changing. I needed a change. The maid would soon enough ask if I should be buried or watered. Left to her own, Jerry might have had me recycled.

“Oh, some news.” I surprised myself at speaking. “I am leaving again.”

“News?” Jerry never left the page. Her eyes and hands struggled against the

clock of her next appointment. "Write often." She said, then, "Wait. I have that surprise for you."

I had no idea what could have motivated her. "I received a courier delivery for you at my office." She had risen and was speaking as she scurried out of the kitchen headed towards the front door. She talked about how weird it was to get something unusual. "The poor secretary didn't like the special delivery with the oddly colored padded envelope it is enclosed in."

Once she handed it off to me, she returned to her food and wardrobe fantasies. I was ready to grab any ring to get off the merry go round. I looked at the return address. Karachi. I looked at her looking at pictures of jewelry.

"I am leaving for Pakistan this afternoon. I will be gone until I get a life."

"That's wonderful. I am so proud of you."

"Cancel the coffin order."

She wasn't listening.

"Buy the coral undershirt. It will go with your skin." I wanted to insult her, but it wasn't her I really wanted to insult. The problem was bigger than her or me for that matter. I stood and left the room to pack. I had to go.

Chapter 6: Little Brother

At La Guardia, I searched the boards for flights to Karachi and found none that moved me. I opted for a beer and bought the latest ticket I could find for Europe so that I could have access to a lounge. That accomplished, I sat at a bar and pulled the envelope from my carry on while the bartender poured a tap beer for me.

The envelope was green and faded red. It was addressed to me care of O'Shaunessy and Clair, Jerry's law firm.

When I opened it there was only a 3 x 5 card inside. It had one line of type on it. 'Paris. German Embassy. 8-10. Little Brother please save me.' Today was 8-9. I put the card back into the envelope and the envelope back into my carry on. Nice, I thought, a little adventure. Next was a kiosk where I changed my flight to the earliest to Paris. I had to run to the gate to make the boarding.

As I hurried to my gate, I remembered the reference to Little Brother. It was Harry. That first night after we rescued him, he repeated the 'Little Brother' reference over and over. It began to bother me. Harry was odd but in my experience for each thing he did there was a reason.

On the flight to Europe, I watched Indian Jones' movies. I was drawn to the hubbub of the crowd scenes where the commotion visually and audibly satisfied my definition of excitement. Thrust into a near melee would I make it out alive?

As I fell asleep in my seat after the Indiana Jones movies, I could hear the crowds. When I woke, I could see Harry's face as if he had been in my dreams. It had been almost two months. I hoped he was at the embassy when I arrived. The plane arrived in Paris at midnight local time. I sought the nearest bed.

I wished I knew more about Paris. The language had been my second, yet time away from using it made my attempts a laughable plagiarism of French. I was happy not to have to encounter my mother in France. She would have blistered me over my mispronunciations.

After a proper breakfast, I found the German Embassy. I bought a newspaper from a stand nearby to ground truth the date. It was August tenth. I checked the 3 x 5 again. All seemed in order.

There was no question but that I should enter the building. My view about entering guarded spaces was the same as entering the first gate of hell. Once the journey began there was no telling what was next. I knew little modern German and with my French so poor I was left with English which at least matched my passport. Caught with little useful experience at what I took as the spy game, I thrust forward, acted lost and waited until I was offered help. I was shunted to a waiting room off the main lobby. I was being examined by invisible forces. I knew enough to know that.

Soon enough a vice-someone in charge of this or that entered the room with a few sheets of paper in his hands and offered me a seat next to the desk that took up one end of the room. There were introductions. He asked me how he could help me.

“Is he here?”

“Who?”

“Harry Potter.”

“One moment please.” He rose, indicated we would never see each other again, and left.

Ten minutes passed. Twenty minutes passed. An armed guard entered the room through the exit door, the one I had entered the room by. The door

was closed behind him and secured. A door behind me opened. Two more security personnel entered and stood at attention.

Another guard filled the doorway with his rifle across his chest in an unmistakable gesture. I sat at attention if there is such a thing. The guard in the door stepped forward and another man in shackles stepped forward behind him. It was Harry.

I rose, Harry said, "Sit." I sat. The guard behind Harry took two steps forward and looked around the room. Satisfied he turned and unshackled Harry. Harry rubbed his wrists momentarily, observed the guards' behavior and expended a deep breath.

"Jack." He said as he walked the distance between us. "No touching. Stay seated. Say nothing."

I had no baggage with me. Nothing in my hands once the 3 x 5 card had been surrendered to the Vice something when I first entered the embassy. Harry had nothing as well. He sat at the desk's main chair as if he owned it. He looked me up and down.

"Back at your old game. You are so clean and ironed I hardly recognized you. Me? Well, let's say I made a bargain with the Germans. You for me. Now they have you. The question remains if they will release me. I assume what you tell them will determine our fates."

"You are full of shit, Harry."

"You wish ... or do you? My suspicion is that life among whitey is way too boring to keep you once you've seen Afghanistan and walked to the Arabian Sea. After that no one has a home or even a family to cling to."

I thought he was going to offer to change places with me. He, the prisoner, I the egghead. Maybe I wished it. He didn't.

“Harry, things look difficult for you. The chains...”

“Jack, lay back and relax.” He smiled. I noticed his scars had healed and that he looked well fed, even loved, a little. “I am a conditional prisoner and conditionally free. That is the German rule. If I am who I say I am, I am – free. You are my witness. Tell them what you know of me, and we will both walk through the front door.”

This story made sense to me. I was as committed to his longevity as I was to mine. I told him so. He laughed, the first I heard of that from him.

“You’ve made progress.” I said.

“At what? Losing my mind?” He looked into my face as if he was recognizing me for the first time. “Sorry. You made it here on scant intel. I have to give you an A on craft if only a C on style. Thank you for your effort.”

“It doesn’t look as easy to free you this time.” I was thinking about the trap we were in. Unlike Afghanistan we could not just walk away. Harry laughed.

“No explosive needed. Just good words. Stay away from questions about my past. Whatever I said was not observed. Stick with what you saw.”

A military officer, an interrogator, entered. He indicated that Harry should move. He did to another chair set by a guard to be near mine. The officer sat in the main chair. His manner said I am in charge. His uniform said I earned it, his medals on full display.

“Monsieurs,” he began. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Jackson Martel. I am LeFleur, a Captain in the Republic’s security forces responsible for high level illegal entries into France. The German attaché has asked me to determine a solution to a citizenship problem since France would likely be the host country for Mr. Potter given what we know. Please refer to me as ‘Sir.’”

Neither of us could hold back a titter. Harry pretended he was coughing, and I sneezed. That was a trick I had learned as a child trying to avoid parental beatings. The captain seemed nonplus by the display, that was pretty much how it went with daddy too and explained my fear of him.

LeFleur shuffled his papers. He took a few notes onto a pad of paper he would soon bury under other papers and never to be recovered during our conversations. He ordered tea from a guard and waited quietly until it arrived.

“Monsieur Martel, you first. I understand your mother was a French citizen.”

“She still is.”

“Of course. She is a member of La Sûreté du Francois?”

Mother has never been clear about her place in the world. It could have been true, but I remembered Harry’s admonition about making stuff up from one’s imaginings.

“She was a pastry chef as I was growing up. Her rolls were wonders of butter and flour. They literally melted in your mouth.” I could hear Harry hmm under his breath. Too much he warned, perhaps. Or he was hungry.

“The Congressman she shielded from the IC, because he was special, built and set a bomb that killed two police officers in Washington DC. His name was Major General Jonathan Branch. Did you know him?”

I knew him to be my Grandfather, father of my mother. But I did not know him. I shrugged. LeFleur grew anxious by my silence.

“The question, sir. Try to respond, s’il vous plait.” He regathered his focus. “Did you know?”

“No. I know nothing of which you speak.”

“Thank you. Let me shift to Harry Potter.”

“Sir, is Harry Potter your name?”

“Jack gave me that name. I have no recollection of my true name.”

“What is your birth country?”

“No recollection.”

“Your citizenship.”

“Ditto.”

“Ditto?”

“Même. Same as the last answer.” I offered. Harry acted uncaring.

“Ah, ditto.” He made a furious note. “One ‘t’ or two?” I held up my fingers. “Thank you. I love learning crazy things like that.”

“Captain?” I interjected into the silence following his grammatical reverie.

“Perhaps I can help. As you know I came at the behest of my friend, the person we refer to as Harry Potter. My testimony refers to the circumstance of our meeting and his conduct over the few months I traveled with him. I assume you are holding him until such time as you can determine where he belongs in the world. I also assume he entered the German embassy in Iran or Pakistan and threw himself at their mercies to gain an escape in the hope of returning to his home. His memory is a problem. My personal belief from my time with him is that he is an American citizen and should be returned. I would be willing to be his custodian if I can and if he needs one.”

“Thank you for your testimony.” The captain looked somewhat rejected. He searched for something in his pile of papers. Perhaps his note pad. He pulled a sheet from the others and wrote on it as he spoke. “I will begin to move Mr. Potter to your quarters in the city. He does not need to suffer but you will have to remain in Paris until we can secure some sort of diplomatic travel credentials. I will keep your passport until his status changes, and you may go to the US.”

The captain rose and we three shook hands before he departed. Another German Vice Something entered and asked us to sit for a while longer until arrangements were made. Within minutes we were headed to the door under his escort.

Outside Harry made us stand on the sidewalk for a few more minutes.

“Why?” I asked. “Shouldn’t we go in case they change their minds?”

He said nothing at first. He stood near the curb looking up at the embassy. “See the two people across the street behind me? A man and a woman.”

I looked and there was a couple standing directly across the street. They were talking and pointing into a store front window.

“So.”

“You stay here and watch them. I will walk to the end of the block. They will become confused. He will follow me. You cross the street and ask her for directions to the airport. She will hail a cab. Get in. Pick me up.”

“What if you are wrong?”

He said nothing. He walked away.

Like clockwork, the man followed him leaving her to stare into the window. I crossed the street. As I approached her our eyes met reflected off the glass. She turned.

“Tell him he is full of shit.” She wasn’t particularly angry. She was cute. Her makeup was a bit Goth in an I’m still huggy kind of way.

“The airport. How do I get there?”

She hailed a cab.

“Ask the driver. But do not forget to tell him.”

“He is full of shit.”

“Good. He needs to be reminded. It helps him.” She shook my hand. “Bonne journee.”

I got into the cab. We stopped for Harry.

“What did she say about me?”

“You’re full of shit.”

He laughed.

“How did you know?”

“I am good at my job.”

We planned to leave France for the US via Great Britain. While we were at Charles de Gaulle Airport waiting for our London connection he disappeared. That was twice he had disappeared when I was thinking other thoughts. No surprise. I might have been able to find him but why?

My personal note from the day said I should never trust him again. I planned to return to Hartford and the professor's life. I had tired of the intrigue and wanted some life force to follow. Then it dawned on me that he might know that address and I should find new lodging. I flew to Atlanta from London. I knew no one there and had never visited that fair city. It was a natural, I imagined the spy people would say.

As I waited for my flight, I calculated my escape.

Having access to funds is the first step. Secure your money resources by moving them suddenly and often until no one will follow it. I had a rule of thumb about this kind of activity. The 5% rule: Move it often, taking 5% each time. Twenty moves and it is gone. Sum the amounts adding the 5% and moving and so on until it is all back together but elsewhere and undetectable.

Second, do not contact your 'loved ones.' You are free if no one knows your name, or if they do, then they don't know where you are from. If someone knows both then you can be found. There is a third one: A lone white man with funding can be undetected for as long as there is no intersection with government in any form including driver's licenses. Every form completed is exposure but more than anything this exposure can burn you. How do I know this? When you do missions for State there are workshops including the 'if detected and must become undetected follow these rules' workshop.

As I prepared to escape Harry's detection, his image and my memory of his words kept my mind busy. I had never heard anyone speak the way Harry did. He insisted I was responsible for the actions I participated in. Face it. Princeton academics were CIA. We were the 'good guys.' Harry had a different view which I was left guessing at. I saw his actions. I heard his words. But still... well, I am his brother in all the senses of teamwork. If he was feeling badly, I could understand. He spent last winter in a metal box instead of watching dronography of bombing raids on the hamlets he had

targeted. He missed the young child he smiled at and who smiled at him as they became a twisted burned corpse being bothered by flies. Some choice, but not his choice at all, according to me. He said it was.

Chapter 7: A new man

As soon as I figured out how to get false credentials made in Atlanta, I moved to Amsterdam. When I entered the flat I rented. I was a new man. I had a new name, an occupation as a writer, which I was but with no paying buyers at the moment. "I am working on a book." I said but then who wasn't. No fame. No trail. I was at home again for a while.

I bought a small house on the edge of a thicket with a view of the Atlantic. It was nearly surrounded by a tall hedge mixed with an acre of Blackberry brambles that looked extremely uninviting. The hedge in front was trimmed enough to let the ocean views and sounds into the house. That was why I chose it.

When I remember back to the day I moved in, I marvel at how massive the data collection system must have been. My check for the house had just cleared a new account under a false identity the day before and yet there was a black car outside my gate. It was parked behind the moving van that carried my files for my book and a replica of my comfortable chair.

"Oh, no." I said. It was Harry. He looked very good for being ugly as hell. "Aren't you the surprise of a lifetime."

"An annoyance, you mean. Be honest we'll get along better."

"Excuse me. You are annoying. I suppose I should ask what the hell you want with me?"

"Good question. You are my oldest friend. I have known you since the box. We have worked together twice to free me from restraints. You are at least lucky for me or better you are god."

"You sir are a bullshitter extraordinaire." I had a dim memory of saying something like this to him only to realize his assessments were more

accurate than mine. I decided to change my approach. "I'm OK with the god part. Then what?"

"Jack, I am so hungry I could cry. Hop in the car. Food is a quarter mile away."

"But my stuff."

"Nothing of value. Ask them to stop by the bar-b-que restaurant at the crossing with the key and all's good."

Of course, I trusted him. I was hungry. He had a car and offered nearby food within minutes. Who wouldn't?

That night was an experience of a lifetime. I wish you knew Harry, in person. It's the only way to know him. He turns one's torments into a windless lake.

"Harry, why are you here?" I asked as the dinner we had ordered came. The flurry of activity lost his attention. First, they delivered the beer and the wine. They made us taste them and cooed when we nodded yes to each of their choices. After we all enjoyed the beer and wine experience, we were joyfully confident in the rest. We talked through their explanations of each dish. All of the talk was random. A few times one of us would lean over and smell the dish and give the thumbs up signal which I fear today that they misinterpreted. This is research I hadn't done. In any case, it took time to get his attention again. I hoped he would remember my question.

No matter. Harry drank too much. I felt he relished the beer more than his good senses. I had no idea what the state of my house was, so I set him up at the inn attached to the restaurant and drove his car home. Around 6:30 AM he knocked on my windows until I let him in.

"Sit down, Jack. It is only me, your brother in arms."

"You mean trouble."

“Trouble? I don’t ...”

“Brothers in trouble? What’s to get.”

“I see. Is that how you feel?”

“Harry, come in. I’ll make coffee.”

The basics about Harry included that he was a highly trained propaganda officer with assassination experience. He loved operating in country. He loved solo. He loved running to save his life. He failed at times with that last thing and became a prisoner. I suppose, considering that I could be said to have saved his life that his life belonged to me. If he kills, then I have killed. I get that way of thinking. In that vein, I am glad to keep him close to watch out for his, you know, inventiveness.

He told me his mother was still alive. If I knew his name, I might find her for some purpose. At least I could look for him there at her home if I needed to find him when he didn’t want to be found. According to him that information was locked in his broken memory.

As I watched him from my chair at the table, he roamed about my new home inspecting everything that drew his attention including hinges and door locks, windows and window jams, I was amused by his behavior. He went into the basement looking for who knows what from which espionage check list. At 7 AM he found me in the kitchen with a cup of Americano I made from my only box of kitchen material that I had purchased in Amsterdam. I only had one cup. He hated coffee. Good for me.

“Place looks pretty secure. Good firing range. I am not sure about the power supply. Buy a generator.”

“Sure. Seems right.”

“OK. What’s on your mind? Sanity was short lived, and you seemed interested in something I should hear about. So, go on.” I had dressed myself and was brushing my hair when he said, “Tell me. I can take it. I can even guess it.”

“Harry, you are as crazy as I am and that for sure is saying something.

“That’s not a question.”

“Yes. You are 100% right.”

“No, I meant ask me a question.”

“Sorry. Harry, are you as crazy as I am?”

“Yes.”

“Feeling better about it?”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on mine, looking for some hint to disbelieve me. I had been trained. He never saw it.

The house had two bedrooms. We set up a guest bed and he stayed. I kept with my plan, pretending to be invisible. I consider that he found me twice and once within 24 hours. I decided it was a matter of specificity. He was looking for one person. The data system was fast. Searching everybody for a specific quality yielded too many possibilities to be so fast. I told him this and he told me to count on their relentless pursuit.

“If they are looking for you, they look until they find you. I saw some math on this you’d probably love. It was beyond my analysis level, but it calculated the timeframe for one person to find a needle in a haystack and it was less than two days.”

Harry knew some crazy things. Sad thing is he was proved to be not quite so crazy after all.

Chapter 8: Running

I moved two weeks later. Harry helped with the packing and loading. We traveled in his car following the van. We were headed over the alps to Italy. About a hundred miles in, we abandoned the car and headed north again by bus and train. The van had instructions to go to the next town and ship everything to Connecticut. They did. We went by train to Denmark and then by ferry to Sweden.

It was September. Four weeks had passed since the German Embassy thing. That led to Amsterdam and now to the wilds of Sweden. Winter was just beginning. We moved every week or so. The madness grew. Winter threatened to run us off our rails.

The unsettled life was indeed maddening. We had both led periodically chaotic existences as 'agents' doing unfriendly things to the people around us. I had a firm grasp on my past, but Harry claimed to not know much about his. There was his story of the minister turned infiltrator targeting bombing raids on peasant dwellings. Other than that story and the lawn tennis story nothing had come out of him. Nearly a month had gone by with almost constant companionship and conversation, yet I learned nothing more about his history. This fact made it difficult to trust Harry. I was feeling a little paranoid. I decided to challenge him for information.

"Harry, how is your memory coming? Anything new?" He was sitting at the table under an overhead lamp. The table was in the middle of a large room. On two sides were our individual bunks. On the third a small kitchen where we cooked most of our meals. The fourth was a door and two windows, one on each side of the door. We had been there for five days and were planning our next move. The table was covered with maps and check lists we relied on to make moving smoother each time. He looked up from a map of Russia.

"Nope." He managed to the question about his memory.

“Nothing?”

“Yup. Nothing new.”

“I’ve been thinking...”

“Bad idea.” He smiled at me and gave me a just kidding gesture. He wasn’t one to tell jokes, but he did like to make me laugh and he did like to tease me. Apparently, I was an easy mark for teasing. He enjoyed it, at least.

“Says you. Look at this from my view. They are looking for us even though we make no threat to anyone nor do we possess some hellacious secret they do not want known. As far as I can tell no one is after us with the exception of you. At least no one is after me, and how would anyone know to chase you. No one knows who you are. How could they?”

“Bad thinking, Jack. Worse than when we were above Turbat.”

“No one even knows your name. So why you?”

“It is about opportunity. Patriotic citizens, both men and women, have dedicated their lives to keeping other people safe. Those people being kept safe are of more value than the patriots who are so dedicated. Every step we take is being watched, records are being kept. You know this is true. It is as simple as observe and report. That is what the patriots do.” He spoke calmly. His hands were folded on the tabletop. His eyes were fixed on mine.

“Where does that get us?”

“Given the foregoing it doesn’t matter what we do. They will never tire of following us. It will be over when they are waiting for us at our next new residence before we arrive. This is the height of their game. They will consider our arrest a blow to terrorism because they always do.”

“That’s fucking sick. You accused me of bad thinking. What do you call that?”

“Wisdom.”

When he answered, I knew that his memory must have returned. He knew who he was when he was captured. He remembered to speak English. He thought he was wise instead of naïve. On the other hand, his judgment was better than mine. He was skilled at disappearing. He could find me no matter where and how difficult.

“Harry, remember my house outside Amsterdam?”

“Nice place. You miss it?”

“Ah. No. I wasn’t there long enough to get acquainted. But I wonder if we could return to Amsterdam. Maybe we could split up, travel alone and meet there in two days. I’d like to see it again and get a fresh breath.” I must have smiled at him because he smiled.

“I see. If I go on my own, it won’t be me following you and for a couple days you can be free or so you think.” Smiled then he rubbed his facial scars. “They itch.” He said. “OK. Nothing makes sense so your idea is as good as any. Count me in.”

That night after he fell asleep, I crept out and headed for the airport in Helsinki. From there I flew using my real identity to Connecticut and home. No one had missed me. Nothing was new. I went to my study where my pot supply is kept and there he was.

“Gotcha, Little Brother.”

Chapter 9: Goodbye Harry

Harry had a sense of humor. That was Jerry's opinion, which she contends answers all the questions. "Harry has a complex of some kind due to extreme stress and near-death experiences."

She came up with this early in the morning, while we both waited impatiently for the coffee to be ready. Harry had not risen from the guest room.

"Hmm. Well doctor, do you recommend a glass of milk before bed?" I smiled. "You seem tense yourself. I recommend a back rub once a week?"

"That sounds nice. Do you have time?" She grimaced in pain, then smiled in supplication. "The right shoulder." She rubbed her neck.

I settled her into a cane backed chair and started in on her knotted muscles. She cooed and moaned then deeply exhaled. I had forgotten I liked to touch her.

"Jer, how did I get into this. I save a guy's life and now I cannot get rid of him. But he can get rid of me if he needs. I was thinking this is a game of catch and release or like the cats play, pretend to lose the mouse then start the hunt over."

"From what you have told me, your description seems accurate enough. Meanwhile he motivates you to run. You definitely saved someone interesting."

Jerry and I had been together since high school. We were happy because we swam in a sea of tranquility. Nothing changes. The holidays and birthdays. Every anniversary of a memorable moment meant another small party and champagne. Smiles, hugs and handshakes punctuated the usual high-spirited banter.

We were living in the first house we bought. That was twenty years ago. My memories were of the clear spring day with lawn tennis ... Could that be it?

As we finished the coffee, it hit me. "Darling, I think I've got something."

"Should we move to the bed?" She had a seductive voice. A kind person who I wished paid more attention to me.

"Uh. Hmm. I'm conflicted but up for it. But I meant Harry."

"You want to sleep with Harry? So, unlike you."

"You are teasing?"

"Jack, you are a hoot."

The morning was sublime. Harry came down when I had made coffee. Jerry was bathing. I stood staring at Harry wondering what will happen next, when he told me.

"I have decided to strike out on my own." He half grinned, half smirked.
"You aren't free to outrun them."

Since this was a piece of highly desirable intel, I had to slow my breathing until I was composed again. "That's too bad. I was just getting accustomed to you."

"That's the whole point. You are beginning to lose your edge. You are dependent on me, so I am off. I can't take care of everyone and everything you represent." Harry grabbed and squeezed my shoulders. "Tell the wife thanks." He was out the door.

I toasted his departure as Jerry entered the kitchen dressed in her gym

clothes. She looked out the window.

“Is that cab for him? Is he gone?” She asked.

“Yup and yup.”

“You will miss him.”

“I will work on it.” I grinned. “There my pain is gone.”

We laughed a giant laugh and grabbed each other for an early morning jig. We risked everything on that outburst. Jerry couldn't stop laughing. I was out of breath.

Chapter 10: Ice Cream Got Me

I lectured in Mathematics. I was the dreamy one. I dreamed up my math like Ramanujan did. My students were mostly female. We worked well together. Intuitive conclusions have no rational basis, so the boys tended to stay away.

My mother tried to talk me out of taking positions that assumed women were a form of entertainment. Though her point might have worked well in most areas of life, my students were fond of intellectual discussions which we all found entertaining.

I learned everything I ever learned about women from my mother. I should say my mother lived next door. I only had to follow a discrete path through a small wood that separated us. She would call me and demand an audience. I went out our backdoor and into hers. She liked that path because it would 'keep them guessing' as she would say on occasion.

When I married Jerry, my mother offered me a graduate school level course in being a good husband. She laughed about how as I was near ending the hunt for a PhD in Mathematics, I could take on being pleasant to Jerry.

Soon afterwards, my mother hailed me by phone and requested my presence in her kitchen.

"Jack." My mother said. When she said my name, it was in a form that implied stature. It was elitist. That is my guess. As I learned more of the world, I found it confusing and sought truth and therefore Mathematics. "When are you sitting for your PhD?" Mother insisted as only mothers can.

"That was last week."

"Did you kill them?"

"Of course, Mother, I am your son."

“That is true.” She looked up into the light above the kitchen table. After my birth she sat for Picasso. Her fame was immense, and it never stopped. I admired her for her ability to keep our household together after Father was assassinated in Libya. He was in the wrong place. There are a number of things that are true. These were among them. Our life was dangerous. We are born and raised into this life.

The game my parents and I played is best played without limits. It is a full contact sport. It has a huge budget. The possibilities of over playing were infinite. There were no rules, no do overs. One acquired enemies just by surviving confrontations. Age expectancy was measured in a unique way. An army at war sees death as affecting the young, the peaceful world favors the young. In this world where the game is played, longevity is measured beginning in a player’s 50’s. The young died in droves to provide safety to those who were essentially senior citizens.

My classroom was shared with three other associate professors. We were all in our 30’s and 40’s. Our Mathematics educations differed. There was emotional disagreement. “Fuck off and die” is not a rational argument, yet it was offered as one - by me. That there wasn’t much comradery might have been the source of our problem in morale now that I think of it. My mother would have none of it.

I was happy to have assigned missions so I could leave. During those interludes, Mother would invite my math mates for tea and regale them with tales of her father in Malta during the Great War, very hush-hush. Then there was her husband. “Betrayed.” She would say as she described the bomb that took his life. “Massive.”

I didn’t get another mission as the months clicked by. Harry. Where was he? I stared off into space looking for a future that had some adrenaline in it. I gained weight. Between my front door and the entrance to the campus there is a malt shop. Need I say more. In that store were millions of calories.

Maybe trillions. I stood in line every morning studying the lengthy list of options for consuming more. I never regretted it for a minute until I heard "Jack."

My body said, "Run." I expected gun fire. I ran like hell carrying all that accumulated ice cream until I couldn't. I stopped to meet my fate and there he was. As I struggled to regain my composure, I studied his posture for apparent weapons. He closed the distance between us then stopped beyond knife range. He looked at my eyes. He showed me a gun. Said, "Drugs." He pointed it. He shot it at me.

"Don't worry. You'll live. Just a bit of a rest." I assume I fell to the ground. I have no memory until the moment the doctors brought me back from a drug induced coma. My eyes roamed as much as possible. I had a good look at the ceiling of what I hoped was hospital room and thought this is the ninth ring of hell.

Chapter 11: Drugged

Again, I was raised an optimist. That I was wrong to think it couldn't get worse became rapidly clear.

"Jack."

"Yes, Harry."

"Glad you are back with us. It was touch and go for some time but there you are, hiding inside your head." He waved at me as if to taunt me. I had been through this before. It was a stress test measuring my resistance to torture during interrogation. I thought I passed it the first time.

"Can I talk to the doctor?"

"What doctor? It is just us. You are inside and I am outside."

"My head?"

"Yes, good point." Harry looked better than the last time I saw him. His facial scars were relaxed. It might be makeup, I thought.

"Harry."

"Yes, Jack."

"You said I am inside."

"That was me."

"What am I inside?"

"And what am I outside?" Harry was grinning. "Remember the forces we

were escaping as we traveled around Europe. They caught you.”

“And you are still running?”

“Yes. I found you. You were a prisoner in body and mind. I freed you.”

“Thanks.” That was difficult for me to say. As we talked, every muscle in my body had confirmed what I had suspected that I was shackled to a metal bed with no pad. I could not move my head to see but I was betting I was naked with wires attached to my extremities with metal clamps. Harry was that way. A professional all the way. “What was the drug you gave me?”

“A near fatal shot of heroin. How were your dreams?”

“Wild.” I did not have a moveable limb, nor did I have any reason to move. My training had taught me that heroin was a serious means of turning the enemy into a momentary friend. I loved Harry.

Chapter 12: The CIA catches up

When Harry released me from the bed, I had agreed to escape my mental prison by following him into his world. He had explained it all to me how he had lost faith in anything but the persistence of cruelty. How the world was reordered, and the powers were anxious to consolidate their control over all of us. I recall asking him if we had any friends. He said not even each other. I believed him.

That was when things definitely became worse. Harry told me not to worry. As we left the building with the metal bed and shackles, he told me we were in Turkey. I don't recall if he told me how we got to Turkey from outside Yankees Malt Shop in Connecticut. He said he had a safe place for us. He helped me out the door into a cab. We rode for a distance, and then the cab stopped. We left the cab for an elevator to his 'safe place.' It was a two-bedroom third floor apartment. The view overlooked the crowded city street below. I called my wife to leave a message on the landline. She might worry I thought. Harry looked at me like I was a crazy person.

"Do you know how comfortable a prison cell in the US can be? We are in Turkey. To get there to that warm room and three squares will require you to spend months with rats and hunger in some hell hole in Ankara." He handed me his Glock, put on his coat and left.

I sat there stunned that Harry who had saved me now left me alone. What was the gun for? Was I supposed to choose death by my own hand? I examined the Glock. There was no clip. I emptied the chamber. There was one round.

I put the round back in the chamber. I spent the next ten minutes at the window overlooking the street below. Cars were passing by and as I watched several of them parked across from the apartment building. Then at the ten-minute mark, two police jeeps with a 30-cal machine gun mounted above the driver lit up their rotating red and yellow lights and blocked traffic in

both directions. The police exited all the various cars on the block and before a minute passed, I was feeling trapped.

Then I saw Harry speaking to one of the Turkish police officers. He pointed in my direction and then the officer pointed. Harry shook the officer's hand and walked away. I had to give it to him that I had forgotten the meaning of treachery. Once he cleared the police blockade, he waved up at me and offered a come and get me gesture.

Harry was complicated.

I left the room and headed for the rear of the building hoping for an escape route. I pressed the up button on the elevator. It arrived empty and I sent it to the roof. When it was gone, I pried open the elevator door and climbed down the shaft ladder. In the basement was a door that opened to a tunnel. The tunnel ran for two blocks and a trap door led to the surface. He was there. Harry said, "Good. Let's go."

I still had the Glock in my hand. My thoughts turned to putting the one round to a better use when he pulled a clip from his coat.

"Here. You may need every round to get out of this mess."

Considering all of my mixed emotions, emptying the gun in him would have settled most of my problems. He must have seen the look cross my face.

"I am unarmed. It is you or us." He smiled without pain. "Your control officer is on the next block. I am headed that way. Come on."

Chapter 13: Harry explains it to me in slow motion

We waited in a private room in the US Embassy in Ankara. No one had disarmed me, so I felt better about my potential futures. My so-called control officer proved to be a cab driver who took us out of the police cordons onto the path that led us to this relative safety.

Harry was sitting in a large leather chair. It had that darkened skin – a sign that much nervous sweat had been shed by prior occupants. He had nodded off. I watched him for a while. Nothing else was happening. My thoughts were limited. I had been trained to sit still and avoid signs of nervousness. Training tells you to be in control of your emotions. Harry excelled at this.

Just as I was about to try the door and look for food, a tray with bowls of Chorba and glasses of white wine was wheeled into the room. Harry stirred and we shared dinner together again.

After a few spoonful's and a few sips, we settled into an old way we had become comfortable with. He talked. I listened.

“You know, Jack, we live dangerous lives.” He swallowed a bit of Chorba. “That’s what attracted me to the work. You? You are not like me. You are part of a group of families who have been spies since the beginning. Me? I am more enthusiastic. I love the work. You have no choice.”

I wanted to tell him he was wrong, but he wasn't. I was a captive. No matter how many times he might save me from a danger he put me in he saved me and yet I was still captive. But to what?

“Maybe life is this way.” I said.

“Or maybe this is the way our jailers have come to treat us. They are like the cat with the half dead mouse. She watches us then turns her head so that we can run, and the chase begins again.”

“Hmm. I’ve thought the same thing a time or two. Especially since we met.”

He was busy chewing, so I gave the discussion up and fed myself. As I ate, I considered the terms of my captivity. Of course, the people chasing us were CIA. We can get free of their eyes only for so long. Harry wanted to encourage me to fight them, but I considered our location – a US State Department controlled embassy. If the CIA had a smell, this place would stink of it.

“Jack, I can feel your thoughts.” He was standing now. He searched the room as if he was looking for something small. “We are trapped again but this time we can leave if we want to leave or stay for the next assignment. From what I learned so far is that we will be given a residence in the compound until we are prepared to be transported into the field.”

“How did you learn that and not me?”

“You are a bit deaf at times. You miss the context clues. We are both CIA. This building is CIA. You are armed. They trust us. We are being recycled from escapees into field agents again.”

“Alright, smartass, what will our assignment be?”

“I was hoping to open a public service institution in the isolated canyons of Kyrgyzstan.”

“Why there?”

“Uighurs live there.”

“Do you speak Uighur?”

“I had a class in Uighur. I learned how to order American beer in Uighur. I can

scream under torture in every language in the known universe.” Harry said this in a low voice.

“Better to not be tortured than to scream in Uighur.” I was getting upset. He straightened up. He could feel it.

“Maybe we are not tortured, if we play our hand correctly. We’ll leave a nice little library for them filled with books in English all approved by the higher ups.”

“Sounds swell. A perfect blend of useless and dangerous.” At least I knew that much. A well-dressed male entered.

We all sat in comfortable chairs. I smelled pipe tobacco and cigars. Maybe it was the context clues. Then he reached into his coat pocket and pulled a cigar case out. Wordlessly he offered one to each of us. We all had a cigar in our hands. He passed around a clipper and a lighter. When smoke filled the room, we sat in quiet. Neither Harry nor I ventured to break the silence.

A few puffs later, he opened a conversation.

“I am Station Chief for Turkey. I have read your records and I can see how you came to be here. We have concluded you are ready to reenter the field. The assignment is not in Turkey although we feel more comfortable handling you from Ankara, than in some remote village. More details later.”

We remained silent. He stood and moved to the exit door. He turned.

“Any questions.”

Harry jumped at the chance to ask, “What’s my name?”

“Harry.” He said. “I liked the new name better than the other one. Harry Potter fits you. A wizard. Humorous and apt considering how impossibly you

are still alive.” With that he left the room.

“Jack, did you catch his name?”

“Too secret to utter.”

Another well-dressed male entered almost as the Station Chief left.

“Men, let me show you to your quarters.” We rose and followed his lead as he waited for us holding the door open for us.”

He led us to two adjoining rooms. As we each chose a room, he handed each of us a two-pound manila envelope.

“Reading material. Study hard. I am your case officer. We’ll grow close. Good night. Coffee at 7AM.”

Chapter 14: The fear of capture and torture.

My room had a bed, a desk and a wet bar stocked with clean glassware, ice and a bottle of Kentucky Bourbon.

I poured a drink, placed it and the manila envelope on the desk. There was a bathroom with a standard shower. I was reminded by my own looks in the mirror that a shower was in order. I took the drink into the bathroom. When I came out a clean set of clothing had appeared on the bed. I said my thanks to the gods and once dressed I felt like a new man.

“To work.” I said out loud and settled at the desk with the manila envelope. I opened it. There was a CIA manual and nothing else. It had the standard CIA cover. The title was “Fighting the fear of capture and torture.”

I carefully read the opening paragraphs. It started with the assignment.

“If you have been issued this manual as part of your training for a field assignment, pay careful attention to the contents. It is anticipated by the case officer that your cover will be compromised during this assignment. When a field officer is identified by the locals in country several outcomes can occur in rapid succession. These outcomes include capture and torture. This manual is designed to aid in avoidance and escape and to provide a guide to mental training required to maintain mission secrecy. The other outcomes such as live fire, hand to hand combat and suicide are dealt with elsewhere.”

After walking to the wet bar to refill my drink I settled into the meat of the manual. At mid-night I went to bed.

My dreams were all chases. First, I was chasing then I was being chased.

When I woke, I was soaking wet. In twenty minutes, I was searching for the dining room when Harry came out of a room at the end of a hallway. He was

reading from a manual and practically ran into me.

“Oh, Jack. Good morning. I think you missed breakfast. Maybe they will take pity on you.” I moved to go past him. “Oh, Jack. You are holding your Glock. Rough night?”

I said something mundane and pushed by him to try my luck with the cook. The dining room was a mix of bar and café. Small round tables with four chairs were scattered around the room. No staff were visible. I sat at a table to relax and wait. I gave up and found the door to the kitchen. Inside I found a bowl of fruit, I took two apples and a cup of coffee and headed out in search of Harry.

For an embassy in a hot spot, I expected more humans. This was more like a fraternity. I followed voices I could hear and walked into a meeting of serious looking people. They stood alarmed with one of them, the Station Chief, waving his hands and demanding a reason for the intrusion. Then he must have recognized me holding two apples and a cup of coffee.

“You. Private meeting. You are to be in room 16. Top of the stairs to the right. You are late.” He was pointing all the time to his right. I made it out the door and followed the arm to the stairs.

And there at the top of the stairs was room 16.

Chapter 15: The New Job

“Kyrgyzstan?” I said in disbelief.

“Yes.” Said the case officer with a straight face.

“Why there?” I demanded.

“People need help.” He said.

“Oh. Sounds exciting.”

“You missed the intro.”

“Yeah,” Harry spoke for the first time since I joined the meeting. “Let’s talk cover so I get the picture related to our homework.” As he ended. He waved the manual in the air.

Case took a deep breath and let ‘er rip.

“You are two ultrarich, probably gay men, traveling, searching for a missing relative. We have clippings and a birth certificate, pictures, a webpage. You will carry US diplomatic passports to give you the most power, but it will also gain the most attention.”

Harry listened with a short smile, not his usual wide-open smile. I knew something was up. He got to the point and in the same manner launched himself into his argument.

“So far, what I have discerned from your open is that we want to be caught and since Kyrgyzstan is not known for its liberal views on sexual preference, I am assuming we may suffer physical harm even death.” He paused to take an inbreath. “I am guessing you hate us.”

“As you well know, we cannot reveal the true intention behind your mission.” The case officer investigated a file that indicated he was silently reading the intention to himself from a printed page.

I blurted out “What?” They turned and looked at me for a second or two, then returned to their conversation. Harry first.

“Jack and I spent most of the last year on the run while you were comfortable in this boys club dreaming up some shit to try to earn your salary. I am a betting man and I bet we are to be captured while we are in the capital, Bishkek. We will be brought to the man and accused of being spies. We will offer tribute in some form, like a ... I don’t know.” He paused to find a word.

Case interrupted him and said the word. “Library.”

“Yeah, that’s it, I made you say it.”

I was on the floor holding my sides and trying to keep the two apples down.

“You two are crazy as shit.”

“Sir,” I said in between convulsions. “Let’s rethink.”

I saw Harry’s point. He knew what could not be known because it was so ordinary. He had the mission nailed except for the rich, gay, relative parts. He got the library, so he won.

Case had been here before. He was unruffled. “The mission is the library, and the process will establish a relationship with whatever is in that country. I assume tribes and all.”

“Reminds you of Afghanistan?”

“Yea, Harry, like that.”

Harry said, “No. We won’t do it.”

“Why?” Case was having a moment. “We get an employee running the library. It becomes an extension of this station. Those people are all over the region including China and Kazakhstan. They talk. We learn.”

“That’s some rugged turf.” Harry had softened his manner having made some points. “Have you been there? They all have smartphones. They do not need a physical library. What happened to your research section?”

“Budgets.”

“I want a mission in this region. So does Jack. We are a team. We travel separately. There used to be a way to get involved in a country so we could do good. A library full of books in English is bullshit.”

“How did you know that?” Case was beginning to turn difficult. Harry was done with him.

“One and one make two.”

“What are you adding together?”

“Your errors.”

This whole situation was becoming uncomfortable. On the surface we were assigned to this station for a mission in the region. That seemed to include Kyrgyzstan. The plan was nearly what Harry guessed. What is hidden is the reason for Harry’s concerns. Below the surface was sketchy.

“OK.” Case was coming with a new idea. I could feel it. “Give me five to talk to Station.”

He stood and was leaving but suddenly turned back to grab his files. We laughed. He gave us the finger.

Harry wrote a note which he tore from the corner of the pad in front of him. He crumpled it into a ball and threw it at me. He smiled, pointed at me, gave the I see you sign and pointed at the paper ball.

Getting his meaning I picked it up and read it. It was in modern German. "Lass uns gehen." We left, and I followed him to the Bar slash Café. No one saw us. When we entered the bar, it was empty. He kept moving into a small hallway behind the kitchen. There was an exit door that led into the street outside the compound. We were free.

As we moved through the mid-morning light, I was looking for a cab. He was looking for cameras, or so I thought considering his scanning the heights.

I said, "Cameras?"

"Nah, I don't mind being seen as long as I am not attacked from above."

We stopped at a small inn a few hundred yards from the Station.

"Beer." He said.

We ordered. He was quiet.

"What's with that door in the embassy? Anyone could use it."

"Prostitutes use it often."

"Ah. How can that be a secure embassy?"

"It isn't. If there is one it is elsewhere."

“What can we trust?”

“Maybe me. Less likely you.”

Chapter 16: Prisoner Again

We were standing in the Manas International Airport in Bishkek. We had just disembarked from a flight from Lebanon's Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport.

What I had learned from not escaping Turkey immediately in favor of a slow cargo ship headed for Beirut was that time to rest came in spurts. It took almost 36 hours to move to the port at Mersin, Turkey, a port on the Mediterranean, and to find births on a cargo ship heading south. Harry never went straight to any destination. At the time I thought we were escaping Turkey, but we were headed to Beirut.

Harry didn't really speak much when we were moving. We were used to being on the run, so we kept our needs slim to avoid conflicts. Conversation was unnecessary, even dangerous. When we reached Mersin, we bought new clothes and a bag to carry them. We searched for a ship. I asked what kind. He said one with showers.

We found her in a small harbor. She had a bad reputation for being grounded but that's not sinking. Her name was *Efe Murat*. Named after someone's daughter. We each had our own room but shared the shower.

"You first." He said.

"Why not you?"

"I itch, but you stink. You first."

"I'll do it." As I was washing, I wondered if he would be out there when I got out. He wasn't. The ship was underway so if he was abandoning me, he would be onshore otherwise I'd show up. What I knew of him said he was examining every inch of the ship for dangers he would have to deal with. He

didn't return. I was hungry. I left for the galley and one of the three squares we were promised by the purser.

As I was sipping a glass of red wine waiting for the bacon and eggs with French toast, he strolled into the room.

"Jack. We can sleep. This is a two-day voyage. We might not sink, so sleep well. Enjoy the food." He grabbed a cold bagel and hit the door.

I did not see him again until Beirut. I had wondered if he would leave me, so when we entered port, I stood on the deck while the gang plank was installed. He could not have gone around me unless he used his skills as a swimmer.

While I was waiting, I noticed a cab drive up and park at the base of the plank. Harry walked by me. "Come on we just have time to get to the airport. I'll explain later."

Two days on the *Efe*. One more in a plane and we would be in the airport in Bishkek. Why we went there was a closely held secret known only to Harry.

As we stood in the airport, I wondered what would be next. He headed toward the bathrooms. I could have guessed. With my satisfaction of at his choice, he then proved me wrong. A pay phone. He negotiated a call, talked for one minute including waiting and hung up.

"Jack, I will be honest with you. We are both in a world of shit. I just called Station. He was not happy. He begged me to come back and work it out. I told him I was not into theater and if he was real, we should meet again in five days in Stockholm."

"Where in Stockholm?"

"At the Stockholm Concert Hall. I bought tickets from Lebanon and his is at

will call. It's Ravel's Bolero. He said it was his favorite."

"Harry, could you fill me in? Why have we abandoned the plan in favor of running?"

"And why are we in a remote country with a constitutional republic for governance, looking for the only nationless tribe here, so that they will play along with a plan to steal information from the Chinese? That is the better question." Harry looked as if he was bored with all the problems he was facing. I couldn't answer his question. He wouldn't answer mine. End of conversation.

We never left the airport to officially enter Bishkek but boarded a flight to Stockholm. As we walked towards the departure gates, he handed me my tickets.

"You already bought the tickets?" I was shocked. He nodded. I went on. "You have a plan. Doesn't seem to be on the CIA agenda."

"How could you know if it is or not."

"Well, Harry, I'm a bit ..."

"... in over my head." Harry laughed. "But I think that is what makes you a prisoner. You are not thinking well or making good decisions. You cannot be free if you are hiding from pursuit."

We were through the boarding line and walking across the tarmac headed for an Aeroflot jet headed through Moscow to Stockholm. When we found our seats, he was in the front of the cabin and I in back. We would not talk for the ten hours of the flight. That would make over 18 hours in the air with little respite.

In Stockholm nothing weird happened. We had separate hotel rooms. He

didn't hide from me. We had four days to idle while waiting for Bolero to fill my ears. I was excited about the concert. It would be the highlight of my travels with Harry. Short story, we talked. On night two, he broke the news to me.

"Jack, I know you have some interest in finding out my estimation of our problem."

"I enjoy traveling, Harry. You know that. As it is, this has all been very entertaining for me. I am torn between being apprised of what happens next or wait for the surprise of what happens next. Do you have a recommendation?" As I was talking, he was nodding and smiling. I made note of that for later consideration. What did it mean?

"Given that I have nothing better to do than cart you around the world to entertain you, I have to honestly say the ride to Lebanon was the most fun I have had in a while."

I was surprised at that. On that leg of our journey, I was bored. He was hiding. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks, as the saying goes. I realized I was being fooled into keeping Harry entertained. If I could abandon Harry I would. Yet I feared I would only to be imprisoned again.

After some reverie on his part into his memories of sailing the Mediterranean in a broken-down cargo ship, he went on to the substance of his revelations.

"Jack, there is little more I can do for you except negotiate your surrender to the proper authorities."

"How is the food there? Better than the jail in Ankara or a Federal prison for prisoners with security clearances?"

"You are funny." He smiled and reached for my hand in a comforting gesture.

“The *Efe Murat* reminded me of my metal box where you and your friends so rudely made me homeless. Despite the obvious difficulty of living there I was secure. Now? Well ... one can only die once. I was watching the news in my room in the German Consulate in Paris. In Colorado, there was a foiled mass shooting. The kids attacked the gunman. One had a baseball bat. A 14-year-old boy said, ‘If I was going down, I would fight to the death.’ It gave me courage.”

I sat mulling over his meanings. Home is a metal box. He will fight if he must. A near death experience was in my future.

“Harry. I am having trouble following you. In two days, we’ll be in third row seats with Station sitting between us.”

“He may be by himself. We won’t know until tonight when a squad of GRU comes to say hi.”

“Think so. Where are we safe?”

“Work that out. The people in Ankara did not have our best interests at heart. We had been taken to a faux embassy where the normal rules of order were ignored. What does that tell you? Run. We ran. Now? I rattled their cage. They are here looking for traces of us. They would call every hotel in this city to find us. It’s 5 PM now. We will lock and load in an hour and out wait them. Forearmed and all that.”

“You know I am feeling that I might need that Glock. Do you have it?”

“You cannot board a plane with a loaded firearm in your baggage. You lost it in the faux embassy bar. I saw it on a table, and I left it on the *Efe Murat*.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Explains why you lost it.”

I did as he asked and prepared myself for attack. Neither of us had weapons beyond our hands.

“Harry, how did you imagine we would prepare?”

“Well, Jack, the idea that I am most fond of is living through a direct contact with a team of fully armed GRU agents. If they intend to kill us, we should run. But they might have other things in mind.”

“What? A few hands of Bridge?”

“Oh, Jack. You are ruining the suspense.” He moved to the window in the room and searched the neighborhood from our third-floor vantage. He saw something he liked. “We’ll wait there.” He pointed at the building directly across the street.

He said nothing else. We grabbed our stuff which filled a small bag and left our rooms. He told me as we descended the stairs that he would not leave explosives in the room for fear he would kill an innocent. By the time I thought out what my position was we were outside at the back door of where we were staying.

“Simple maneuver. Take the first cab you see and go home to your wife.”

“What? No. Let’s stay with your plan.”

“You aren’t fit for this work. You think too much about the wrong things.” We walked shoulder to shoulder until we reached the first cab outside the hotel. “This one is yours.”

“No.”

“Suit yourself. Don’t get in the way.”

He went across the street in a group of other pedestrians. I stood on the curb watching him. He turned the corner in front of me and he walked back in my direction but on the other side of the street. Then he was gone. How did I lose sight of him? A wizard, indeed.

I waited in the street hoping I could find where he went and saw a narrow alley between two buildings. "Ah. Can't fool an old hand." I said that but under my breath. I waited some more and then I thought I sensed he was watching me. I saw him or he let me see him. Whichever. On a fire escape in the alley about four stories up. He had a view of me and probably our rooms.

There was no defense for my choice of strategy. I just stood there with my back against the building watching people come and go. Cabs would arrive people got out. No one interesting. Then a black Mercedes. I saw it somewhere before: it was an S600. Black windows in a black body. Sold as a security vehicle. It had no plates.

Two women got out and went inside the lobby. I followed them towards the front desk. My cell went off. Damn. It was Harry.

"Harry."

"Jack. Run like hell they are behind you." I turned slowly and saw two men waiting for the women. They wore trench coats, actual trench coats.

"No thanks." I said in the Swedish I knew. "My car is running fine." And rung off. I thought I was very clever. The women left to go upstairs. I turned to leave as if the agents were unknown to me. They moved to the desk and inquired about 'en amerikan, en Jackson Martel.'

The clerk had never seen me before. I left the lobby without hearing my name again. I found a cab and left for the airport. On the flight to Heathrow I

listened to Ravel.

Chapter 17: Now I get It

Harry had been right. GRU sent four agents. They didn't need a fourth for bridge.

The flight to Connecticut took almost 12 hours. I hardly slept. The supply of alcohol was endless, but alcohol and sleep do not go together. I was afraid to lose my senses, so I drank coffee and stayed as alert as possible. My one recreation was to walk the length of the cabin. I was looking for him, but I doubted he could be on this flight. He wasn't.

When I walked through my front door and entered my study, I fully expected him to be there. He wasn't.

Life returned to normal. I write that and wonder what was my current normal if not following Harry around the world. I smoked some cannabis. Jerry walked into the house for lunch and stood outside my study door.

"Jack. You are back. I want to hear everything."

"Geraldine, I am going to settle down." I saw a look of disappointment on her face so I offered her sex if that would help.

"Sounds, ah, good. Let me eat then you can eat. That good."

"Oh, yes. I am hungry for you."

She laughed. Anyone would.

That happened and life calmed down. Days, then weeks and months but not a year went by. I grew restless. My corpulence had increased by virtue of the calorie generator, the malt shop. I thought about running a marathon to get in shape. Then I thought about swimming. Then I smoked some more and

went to the malt shop for a little something.

I had become boring, I said to myself as I put on my coat. Maybe some Champagne would raise my spirits. I knew every stone in the path to and from Yankees Malt Shop. I did not need to watch my step since it was a part of my memory and not likely to be forgotten. The book I was reading was Ruiz' Four Agreements. I was hung up on the idea of truthfulness.

Jerry lived her own life. I lead my own. We married in University and decided immediately that a life without children would make a life together possible. I have never asked her to tell me what she does when I am gone. She joked about my work and wanting to know it all. I would never tell her even a small part of it. I wasn't a secret agent for nothing.

My days as a math lecturer were over. The Department couldn't count on me, so I stopped teaching. The Company had had enough of me as well judging by the silence from that quarter. I began thinking of writing. I thought about getting another PhD. I smoked some more weed and went to Yankees.

One of the reasons I love Yankees is the wait in line. A long line meant more time to imagine the taste of each of their offerings. I had been there often enough to have tasted every single one of them. I was dreaming of The Costello a mixture of a banana, coffee and an Oreo on a bed of your choice of three ice creams. Orgasmic was the word, I could hardly wait to get there to be in line for one.

I had been making this walk for going on 20 years. My town is a safe place. One reason is that the unusual does not happen here. There is no crime or poverty. That is why it was weird to see a person in rags lying inert on the sidewalk between Yankees and the Connecticut State Bank. I couldn't tell the gender. The rags hid any evidence. Of course, I walked past him/her to get in line.

I had forgotten all about Prisoner 167. But the rags were still there after I consumed my Costello. When I left I crossed the street to avoid him. If it was a him.

I stopped on my way home for a few bottles of sparkling wine.

Jerry came home. I offered to share my wine. She smelled the air in disapproval and said, "Did you see that person on our front lawn? Seems to be asleep in a pile of rags. There is a ceramic bowl nearby. Could you take a look, or should I call the police?"

"Police."

She dialed 911. As far as I remember, we had never called for emergency service before. I stood at the front window looking at him or her. I was thinking it was hard to tell which when it dawned on me who it was. Harry Potter. But why? But then, why not. I remembered his story about the kid with the bat and realized I needed the courage to find out for myself.

"Jerry. Call the troops off. It's Harry."

"Are you sure?"

"I am afraid so. Should I invite him in?"

"He is your friend. He looks smelly. If he comes this way a bath is in order."

I left immediately and walked near to him. He had taught me to start talking before getting closer than hand to hand fighting distance.

I squatted near him. I said, "Hi."

"Who are you?" It said in a nondescript voice, not Harry's that I remember.

“I had the same question.”

“One guess.”

“Harry Potter, born in the wilds near Kandahar. Saved from a dungeon and brought to the safety of my own home.”

“Nice try. Guess again.”

“You tell me.”

“Buddha.”

“Shit. I should have seen that.”

“Loser.”

“Harry come in and take a bath. I have great food and wine. Like old times.” Before he could respond the cops arrived. They bailed out of their car and ran toward him with their mace dispensers at attack level.

I stood. “Officers, I have it. He’s an old friend.”

When I think about it, I deserved what I got. They maced me and handcuffed me. Contrarily they treated him like he was a casualty of war, checking his vitals, checking for bleeding and asking him how they could help. I was in the wrong world.

The entire event took an hour. The result was that I was released from detention after I had been placed in the patrol car while my identity was confirmed.

When I was freed and was able to return to my home. They were in the kitchen. Jerry and Harry were into a second bottle. Their laughter greeted

me as I entered the dining room.

“What fun, Darling.” She said when she saw me. “How were the cops? A cheery bunch.”

“They were having a reverse day.” I was looking at him drinking my Champagne. “They should have shot him and carted him to the morgue.”

“No Darling, there is too much paperwork in Connecticut. You were an obvious arrest. He appeared beyond danger. Besides when is the last time you were maced? It was a great learning opportunity.”

“What was my lesson?” I demanded. At this point the slightly inebriated Harry joined in.

“Do not fuck with Buddha.” He said.

I didn't think this was an important area for discussion at that hour. I had been maced and arrested and now with the unmistakable odor of the back seat of a patrol car deeply implanted in my memory, I was trying to relate to two laughing drunks. Nonetheless he persisted as he would.

“Jack. We have been talking behind your back.”

“Am I supposed to say, ‘my ears itched.’”

“Did they? No. So look, you need to reup your skills. I read your file, you used to be more alert.” At the time I was over my limit for surprises and stimulation so I set this aside for consideration at a later date. Something had been revealed and I didn't quite get a handle on it.

“It's the ice cream.”



Chapter 18: I get to be anyone I want to be.

Well, no. That is stupid to think. More, you can't take a shit on your neighbor's lawn. However, you are free enough to enter agreements with banks that own your ass if you do not pay and no, again, your government which hates you will not help you by guaranteeing anything. Some say that could be different, but it isn't.

There is a point at which we have to conclude that there is no future. We talk about one as if it is guaranteed but nope; there is no future only some form of a distorted elongated present. Someone told me at a faculty meeting that the future is like a Klein Bottle. I googled it and I determined never again to sit near the guy that told that to me.

The road to the glories of Freedom is built upon the bodies of others. It is simple. The future is given to us by others or, more likely, the future is destroyed for us by others. This confusion is only an illusion. We could be free of illusion.

Harry was not an illusion though I suspected that no one was chasing us, the reality of it was clear as the light of day. When I woke the next morning, I could hear Jerry and Harry laughing in the kitchen. It was still morning. My memories of the night before yielded broken sentences about life and ethics. We decided every lesson teaches. My head hurt from drink and my throat was sore from smoke and laughing.

I tried to imagine what my wife and Harry were talking about. What were they doing making such a ruckus so early in the morning? If I didn't get up, I would never find out. As I lay there, I imagined everything a jealous husband could imagine yet I was not a jealous husband. Then memory gave me a full color video with some audio of a rousing toast to whoever invented Champagne. What was weird was that Harry looked happy.

Then it hit me. "More bricks." I said out loud. Now I knew who I was up against – a rogue. As in people without connections go wild. Think prisoner of war in a metal box for an entire winter in the mountains of Afghanistan. Harry was wild and needed to be brought into tow or he would be more trouble than good. I saw the movies. What was his name? Bourne. He is imaginary. Harry was not imaginary.

After carefully dressing, I headed down to see my fate. The laughter had continued unabated when I entered the kitchen. Jerry was holding a cup of coffee trying not to spill it while she laughed. In the other hand was a bottle of brandy. Harry was on the floor demonstrating some yoga position. The odor of Cannabis was strong.

"Honey, so sorry. We woke you."

“No. I was awakened by some fools having fun without me.”

Harry said nothing. He adjusted his yoga move until he was standing. He smiled. Somehow, watching him with his suppleness caused me to be nauseated. I turned to visit the loo. I stood holding onto the sink until I determined I must have food.

When I returned to the kitchen things had settled down. They were at the table with cups of water.

She did not acknowledge my return. “Rejection is not as important as affirmation. Affirmation is about becoming. Rejection is about stopping.” I said.

Harry was looking into her face: There was a warm smile on hers.

“Yes.” She said. “Rejection is armed revolution. But revolution ends in a worse condition by all measures and without democracy in most cases. Affirmation is Liberty on the barricades. It says you can be anything you imagine, naked breasts and all.”

I wanted her to hug me. As if by command she stood before me and with a hand behind my head she kissed me. I could feel the tip of her tongue on my lips. She spun away and announced a nap. She left the room for upstairs.

Harry left alone as we left said, “Jack. I am gone. See you somewhere.”

“Good luck.”

“This is not the end.”

“I was afraid that’s what you would say.”

Harry laughed and disappeared into the Connecticut countryside.

Chapter 19: The Next Day

Somehow or another, another day happens. We wake into yet one more. Or we don't. I wasn't optimistic. I had been through some form of grinder. My vision was distorted in a way I did not know how to assess.

Harry had become too important for me, and I hated waiting for him to appear with his next little object lesson for me.

Life had transformed from my average rut into a form of hell. Is that the Buddha? That's what I was saying every time I saw someone new.

It was a time of great turmoil. My ideas about how life worked were coming under a new scrutiny. I was attempting to understand how I could have been so wrong, so naive, so blind about what Harry portended. My sleepless nights, depression, grief and anger made living difficult. That's a bit of an exaggeration. It was uncomfortable to be so at sea. That's what I remember.

That is when I decided to use my skills to find him. I booked tickets to Honolulu. I rented a condo at a resort north of the airport. I wore a white tank top, khaki shorts with flips and a sun hat. I went to a lagoon on the Pacific. I sat in a lounge chair with one of those blue towels from the resort. I had lotion and sunglasses and the latest Clancy novel. I had a small cooler with two beers on ice and a joint of some local weed the dealer insisted was Maui Wowie.

I read almost fifty pages before I sensed someone near me. I did not need to look. I did not want to look. I felt him settle into the lounge nearest me. Being completely informed about how to act under psychological attack I adopted the position of power and ignored my new neighbor.

After a few seconds I reopened my book and read a few pages. I stopped and opened my cooler. I opened a beer and turned to hand it to Harry.

It was Jerry.

“Thanks, Hon.”

I was shocked.

“Harry sends his regrets. I came instead. He thought you were in hard times and needed an old friend you could trust. He’ll be here soon. Maybe tomorrow.”

“What else did he say?” There was no way to disguise my emotions. My imagination began connecting dots like a fiend. They were in cahoots. Maybe they were, you know, ‘together.’ Nah. Fear is my enemy. I did not care about her antics, but I cared about him. He had no love in his life. Was he stealing mine? Then again, how could something abandoned be stolen?

“He said to hug you and love you and to tell you I am yours as our vows require. He said that you were going through a transformation and needed support. He told me to tell you the truth, to not make judgements and to trust you.”

“Ruiz?”

“Yes. He said you would know. What’s that about?”

“I will read it to you as you fall asleep tonight.”

“He said that would be a good sign.”

“Who is he?”

“He knew you would ask, and he said to tell you Prisoner 167. He had a speech he gave me twice that went something like this.” Before she began, I

raised my hand and asked if we could have a time out to smoke. She laughed. I did not want to know he had foreseen this too. I took out the joint and found I had no lighter.

She touched my shoulder. I turned to her. "He sent this." She said as she handed me a lighter suitable to fire up a joint in a 20-mph wind.

"Thanks." We passed the joint back and forth until neither of us cared who had it. I threw the roach onto the sand. It was Wowie.

"What's next?" She said.

"Yeah. What's next for me?"

"Then comes creation, inspiration, freedom, reality and the release from bondage. It is truth and honesty. You come to realize that your true security and strength lies within yourself and your relationship with the Universe, and not in some false belief system or artificially created world."

"Is that what he said?"

"Word for word."

"I am getting sunburned. I declare a time out for some food and a nap." I pulled my tank top on.

"Neither of us need the food. Come on let's find some peace in our lives together."

"Is that what he said?"

"No. It's what I need."

Nothing could stop me as I packed my gear. Then I looked at her in a bikini. It

was yellow. She was near white except for a little sunburn glow. I became aroused. She noticed.

She said, "Hurry. I know a short cut."

Chapter 20: Truth has a day

In Hawaii, there is a pace to life that follows the weather. Sometimes you walk. Sometimes you eat and at other times you sleep. It's aloha, baby.

We were not waiting for him. At least I wasn't. We were lounging in bed in the early morning drinking mango juice and eating pineapple. The Kona coffee was amazing. The Wowie was indeed from Maui. The morning was from god. What was I worrying for?

"Darling, I have a secret."

At first, I wondered if I had heard her correctly. I did not want to hear about her affair with Harry. Then, I hoped it was about something that involved me. I got out of bed. She followed. We went to the kitchen. As we walked, I talked.

"I love secrets if they are kept secrets. A friend told me that secrets between lovers are always fearful or sad. I hate secrets if told." I did not get what I wanted, and it wasn't good.

"Jack, you have been thinking too much. Harry and I have been working together for almost ten years."

If one is watching a movie, then one can expect this kind of dialogue, since anything works in a movie. "You are kidding me."

"Nope." She sat up and poured some Champagne into a glass with the last of the raspberries. She pushed the glass towards me. "I knew this would be hard." She paused and I thought WTF. "You see we are all in and we all want out. Harry was lost. We needed him so we sent you to find him, and you did. You are a hero."

"In or out. Can we talk about this later? I need to think."

“It’s not what you imagine.”

“Thanks. Comforting. Are you begging me not to kill you?”

“Nowhere near that.” She was taken aback by my reaction. “Think back. How would the agency allow us to marry without a couples briefing? They wanted our collaboration to be inhouse, not available for others to see. They thought of us, you and me, as a secret weapon.”

“Except I was not allowed to know.”

“It made you better since you did not know the true mission until you had accomplished it.”

“So, I found him and got him home.”

“Yes. You’ll see who he is soon.”

Chapter 21: The next step into hell

Short story, I wanted to stop stopping. If I was to be part of a group I wanted to be there now, not later. I had to figure this out. My wife and Harry had a thing together. We were different together. We were spending time together. She did not distance herself from me; she chose a place closer to me than before. We were on vacation together. Can't remember the last one.

Harry arrived. He called from the airport and arrived by cab. He knocked at the door after he had dropped his baggage at his room. I answered. We shook hands and the rest of the evening with dinner and drinks was unsurprising. We parted at the restaurant. As he was shaking my hand, he whispered, "Tomorrow. 9 AM I'll call. A breakfast meeting. We'll go over the whole shebang until we are as one. Up for it?"

"Your wish is my command."

"If you have time for reading, check out Claude Brown. It's a path forward for us."

"What is that?" I knew but I was past my limit.

"We learn from error. Just a thought."

"Maybe you have everything wrong. That ever come to you?"

No one likes condescension. But I had to face my fate. We were two men and a woman, who meet in battle and became adept at hiding and running. My imagination demanded this.

What we needed was a motive or set of motives to act on. I am paranoid. Does that help? I don't know. Maybe that is how I balance age and wisdom

with my young and restless streak. We are armed and dangerous. We have access to funds and identities. We were in deep like Claude Brown in prison. Unlike him at that time in his life, we could roam the world. He was defining a new way of seeing each other. Think about that.

Was anyone chasing us? There is a list. I have seen it. It is a list of people to be afraid of. No, your father is not on the list, but your parish priest's name might be.

Back at the condo, I fell asleep pretty much upon seeing the front door.

Then it was light outside, and the smell of the ocean reached my nose.

The phone rang while I was trying to decide whether or not I was awake.

The next few minutes was Harry, Harry, Harry. He was at the front door.

He dumped a box of lattes, mochas and pastries on the table. Jerry and I tried variously to rise to the occasion.

"I thought you'd call to set up a 9:30 meeting."

"9 AM, I said. It's 8:58. Deal with it. Things are changing fast. Try to keep up." He pushed me into a caffeine stimulated awareness. The sugar helped sort of. The Wowie better.

"OK let's get started. I am a part of a group of ex-agents and rogues who like you are attempting to end the secret world of assassins. I have been an assassin as has Jerry." I took a long slow inbreath. He noticed. "We all have killed in one way or another. Deny it or not."

"Can I say something?" Jerry was in the midst of her own coming out, as it were. "I am not used to talking about the work if the work involves national secrets. My missions are the secrets. Telling them out of school endangers

me. If we can go on, it involves pledges to one and all. Or else I cannot be here.”

I nodded out of ignorance. Then it dawned on me. I had no idea what I was a part of. National security? My wife in danger? Me not trusted with her secrets. I needed help and no one was on the horizon to fill that role.

Chapter 22: Some of the real truth

Who is after us? I asked myself. What if Harry was making this all up? What then? How could an agent determine that a policy such as assassination is wrong? We believe in our orders. We act under orders even with extreme prejudice. If we act under orders, then we are free unless we have knowledge and then we are dealt our own hand of extreme prejudice. That's a term of art. That's real.

I wanted her again, Maybe like never before. My tame lawyerly wife is an admitted assassin unlike me. She 'killed' I wandered around doing good in the presence of evil.

I do not care about anyone else but me. In the final analysis I had been nursed into the position I held by a force which was anonymous and similarly undefined. The system allows for innocence by ignorance but it's a wink-n-nod agreement. If someone like a widow or a grieving father got all stiff about it, we could be hung or otherwise. We disappear so as not to need to fight it. We do not exist in a particular way, especially the way that leads to public trials and maybe death. The way we are includes assassination of others and finally eventually ourselves.

When we consider the bottom line, I care for me and few others if no one else does. I think about Jerry. She was warmer than ever. Last few years we said hello as the other said goodbye. She said I was a hero for freeing Harry. Wait. If she has known him for ten years, she knows his name. I had them. An inconsistency. As soon as I thought it the secret became safe behind the curtain.

The meeting went on and on. The obvious part was the presence of alcohol. Harry may have a problem at times. Mine was ice cream and of course the Wowie. More, I suppose, I should say I was a coward when alone. Someone told me I am a moon and need a sun to be seen. When I am isolated, I have no glow. I worry.

“Jack. Come back from your vault.” It was Jerry. Harry had left the room. We were in the dining area of our rented condo. Harry had been on the phone off and on. He called around until he found a delivery service. He ordered fruit juice and beer. Jerry added Champagne. Someone wanted pizza.

“It’s the pizza. I need help.” Jerry left the room at Harry’s insistence.

I stood and tried to look busy. I carried dirty cups to the kitchen and grabbed some plates and forks. When I arrived at the table two pizzas were already there. The doorbell rang again, and Harry left to collect the beverages from the hallway.

The accumulation of pleasures was taking its toll on our wits. There was much loud discussion about some issue involving how to do something or other. My thoughts roamed about the room and beyond. One thought repeated: They know the spy craft. They like to talk to each other. I stayed out of that.

The talking lasted long into the night. I remember the blissful feeling of putting my head down on the padded arm of the couch.

I woke: the room was dark. My watch said 4:30. I let my eyes find things with the available light.

I was still on the couch. Someone was asleep in an easy chair with head and legs off over opposing arm rests.

I looked on the floor and there she was. I tried to calculate whether she was closer to me than what must be Harry in the chair. Her last movements might indicate her loyalty. I needed a toilet. That was real. The rest was mental crap.

Harry had been through a lot. Life can be slow but the way he found

happiness is in the heroic. I saved a cat from a tree once. And, of course, I saved Harry. The owner of the cat gave me a hug. I remember it because she was a voluptuous woman. You remember things like that. Harry burst my bubble.

The morning was about greasy food and mimosas. Harry regaled us with his stories, real and imagined, of life as a secret agent. As the time passed the scenes become more superhero than Harry. Jerry had remained silent as Harry recapped his escape through Iran and into a French dungeon in the German embassy in Paris. I thought the story would include me.

“Wait. Where do I come in?” I demanded of him. “I flew across an ocean in a crowded plane to trade myself for you. Remember?”

“That was later. This was before we met.” He turned to Jerry. “True or false?”

“True. Jack, that was not his first rodeo.”

“Damn, I was almost famous.”

“You are famous. My story before you was a lucky break. The box I couldn’t break is the one you freed me from.”

“Thanks, Harry.” I remembered realizing she knew his real name but at this point me not knowing may be best. Imagined if I was tortured etc. I did not want to ask for fear they would tell me to be afraid. I went with the comfort of ignorance.

Evil methods given to good purposes or what can we do to those bastards to drive them into a grave took up most of the afternoon.

Chapter 23: One way or another we are all mass murderers

I left Hawaii alone in all the important ways one can be alone.

When our marathon meeting ended, there was a plan of action for Jerry and Harry, but I was left to my own devices. They had been a team and I was an extra brought on for a featured play. Harry described it as 'going long.' My memory flashed pictures of the 2500-km-long overland journey into Afghanistan and out thus savings Prisoner 167.

Flying to Connecticut from the Islands is a long journey. As the miles of ocean crawl past under foot, one is left with one's thoughts. Mine were not so fun when you come down to it. The revelations I received at Jerry's hand were nothing like the image of the lawyer fighting for the rich against the poor that I had of her since the day she passed the Bar Exam.

I suppose I should have been shocked, but I was less, far less than shocked. I felt silly for not suspecting her capable of murder. Even under orders it still amounts to cold blooded murder. I went from sleep and dreams to awake and the darkness of thought.

By the time San Francisco was behind me I had entered the final circle of hell. I had participated in every death Jerry and Harry had caused. By extension, I and they were mass murderers. From there it was a short stride to Newark and a limo to home but the moral ending, the acceptance of a role in the dream of god, was still a long distance into the future.

The Hawaiian adventure had been shocking despite my protestations to the contrary. On the final ride from airport to home I became determined to start afresh and to end the tyranny of my past.

In the study, I found a bottle of scotch I saved for the end of a heartless journey. One ice cube and a cap full in a small glass. I didn't like scotch. It was a ceremony to mark the end or the beginning of something.

The questions that lingered were about the meaning of it all. I wondered about the identity of our foe. Who would chase Harry? Who would chase me? I decided the chase was a product of paranoia after decades of action causing a deep guilt and the fear of the turn of the wheel of Karma.

I decided to just quit. Maybe someone would care. Maybe I'll find out.

Chapter 24: Siddhartha and the Siren

I had time on my hands.

My study was ringed with books. I had never looked at many of them. It's kind of an academic thing to own books for the sake of creating an atmosphere of importance. Some men had tools in their garages. Cooks have cookbooks. Not me. I have books that mean little to me. Like so much of my life of late my Study was pretentious.

My eyes roamed around the room looking for something that might engage me. I picked a few of the thicker ones off the shelves only to find I was not up for the philosophy of Aristotle or the history of the 19th century. As I put them back where they came from, I saw a much thinner book. Hermann Hesse. A book called *Siddhartha*. I recall having bought it while I was in undergrad. I must have packed it a few times to make the moves Jerry and I made until we settled on the Connecticut life.

As soon as I picked up the book off the shelf, I knew it was for me. It was unpretentious. That's when I started carrying a backpack. I put *Siddhartha* in it. I would grab the bag on my way out the door for a visit to Yankees. Yankees is not a major chain. It is a one-off. It has tables and all. It is organized but it is not the go-to place for morning coffee. They have coffee. They major in sugar.

I go in to satisfy my needs and little more. If I order something that can melt and make a mess I stay inside at a table. My favorite is by the window. If I sit there, I watch the human traffic. If not, my options are not that entertaining. Today was one of those mid-afternoons I spent at a table with a good view of the coat closet. My Glacier Supreme was gorgeous but I was bored with looking at it shrink as I consumed it, so I pulled out *Siddhartha*. The cover offered nothing as to what was within except for the name Hesse.

My thoughts roamed. I remembered having heard about this book. The

question was is Siddhartha the Buddha? Harry's face entered my mind. An easy connection to have made, considering recent personal history.

That's when things changed. The agent of change was an unusual woman, young and thin. Her makeup was black as was her hair. Her clothes were garish in a way that said I am the Siren.



“Don't want to bother. I saw you looking at *Siddhartha*. My favorite book. May I join you.”

I looked around at the crowded tables, concluded she might be able

company considering my mood.

“Please, join me.” She assented and sat opposite me with her mocha and a granola cookie. Her view was a little better. Of course, mine had been improved by her beauty.

“Sophy Yurikov.”

“Jack Martel.”

“A pleasure.” She looked hauntingly familiar. Her accent was very familiar.

“Moscow?”

“Petrograd.”

“There is no Petrograd. I prefer Leningrad. Maybe St Petersburg?”

“It is a joke. I live in the past. I am a historian. Specialize in the early 20th. You?”

“A mongrel. Mostly math. I specialize in statistics in a war zone.”

“I’ll bite. What could that mean? I thought math was context free.”

“Yeah, well. There is a line dividing one math from another. One is about ideas and the other about weapons. Think parabola and then a grenade. I’m the dreamy side of grenade. I do geography and spherical geometry.”

“Are you Buddha?”

“No. But I have seen him.”

“Good answer.”

“Are you Buddha?”

“Not today.”

Small talk consumed our drinks and culinary desires. I put Hesse back in my pack.

“You’re leaving?”

“I must. Nice chatting.” I wanted to ask about her, but it was beyond my skills. I stood. She stood.

“Can I join you?” She asked.

“Are you going my way?”

“I hope so.” She was smiling. She held out her hand. I grabbed it and we were out the door.

I said. “Which way do you want to go?”

“Someplace soft.” She said.

I said. “Your place.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me down the road towards the university.

Her enthusiasm was exciting and enticing. As we walked, I showed my reluctance.

“Sophy, we must talk more. There is a park ahead. Let’s sit a minute.”

The park had several large trees that provided shade for those apartment dwellers who need a breath of fresh air and for couples to sit to work out

their romantic fantasies before heading to someplace soft. There was a small lake in the middle of the trees. As luck would have it there was a bench in the shade with a view of the lake. It was empty. We sat.

Sophy seemed younger than I felt. I assumed she was having a temporary loss of her good senses.

“Tell me about yourself.”

“I am a bit flustered by our meeting.”

“Do you know me?”

“I have followed your career at the University. On occasion I have seen you at Yankees. My interest in you is not fleeting.”

“Hesse gave you an intro.”

“Yes.” When she talked, she did not use her hands. Me, I wave them everywhere, always. A very bad habit. “I wanted to meet you. I see you as romantic. A romantic figure.”

“How so? A forties something academic who is now without a position. This is not my best moment.”

“I am similar. No position. My undergrad degree is in psychology. I am moved by mind control technology, as in examining existing systems. Most of this is 20th century so it works for me.” At any time in the last ten years, I would have tried to move us to her place. This was the odd day. Something had changed. Jerry was paying attention to me. I was not as lonely as I had been. “I was hoping you would be attracted to me, but I think you don’t desire me.”

“You are attractive. I am charmed by you. Yet, you are right I must not leap

before I look. I hold back. Can I ask you if you truly find *Siddhartha* to be your favorite?"

"Yes." Sophy smiled as she talked about her affection for characters that have the power to transform. Either the subject or the object appeared to cheer her. Somehow her hand had found its way into mine and she squeezed so I could feel her.

"I have never read it. It was talked about in my college years. That's when I bought the copy you found me with." I wondered what to do. Jerry was in Europe. I assumed with Harry.

"I see. I know some things about Buddhism. The Noble Truths. The Great Bliss." As she said bliss, I heard a snake's voice. It was as if time became elongated and every nuance of sound became the sound of air passing through a tube. I decided it was under the influence of the sugar I had eaten within the last half hour.

"The Great Bliss." I repeated. The idea sounded like sex all afternoon. I had ignored religion as a field of study. I learned from my father the truths about how to act in life to be an honorable man. My mother taught me how to treat women. Jerry taught me most everything else. "Is that in *Siddhartha*?"

"Jack, we could read it together, aloud, in bed." I thought about being naked and then how unfun I look to myself. Then I undressed her, and she did far better in my estimation in the fun looking scale. "Do not resist a good thing." She said. I am afraid I bought her fantasy as my own. She could see my surrender. She rose and grabbed my hand again. "Let's go to someplace soft for a while."

"I will need a drink."

"I have everything including ice."

“Do you have low cal vodka?”

“No.” She laughed but never broke her stride until we stood in front of a bungalow in the faculty housing.

“Are you ready?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“Then forward to the future.”

It really wasn't an everything you could ever dream moment. There was an attempt at perfection that was lost when the first words of *Siddhartha* passed her lips. I was lost in the story and her voice. Later, I would determine that this event is the one that redesigned my future.

In the shade of the house, in the sunshine of the riverbank near the boats, in the shade of the Salwood forest, in the shade of the fig tree is where Siddhartha grew up, the handsome son of the Brahman, the young falcon, together with his friend Govinda, son of a Brahman.

We spent days and nights in the Kama Sutra. Not. Life had become as any life will be divided by sleep and awake and by the meals which settled into grill cheese sandwiches in the kitchen with bath towels around our waists.

During the part of the book where Kamala has driven Siddhartha into a tizzy of desire for her pleasures, Sophy became the temptress who offered me what Jerry was not. She convinced me to become wealthy to earn her continued affections so she can continue to teach me the art of love.

I felt myself crossing the line, a step at a time toward being seduced. I knew I was losing my mind. She said I was discovering my mindfulness. I felt I was being led away from my past and everyone in it to become free to be on my own. I would no longer need my old associates.

Chapter 25: The Return

I walked into my study after a week away. Jerry had been there. I could feel her. She sat in my chair and put her black riding boots on my desktop. She might have whipped something with her crop. She might have drunk the last of the scotch. She might have spit on the floor. Then I saw her note.

“You are lost. Harry is looking for you. I am going on a cruise looking for truth and beauty. Did you know all your books have GPS chips? *Siddhartha*, really? Say hi to Sophy for me. No, I didn’t tell Harry, or he would be standing in front of you as you read this. Ta, Geraldine.”

I looked up fully expecting him to be there on the Persian rug waiting for the attention he sought. He wasn’t there. I was a bit disappointed. Then I was a bit more paranoid. Then I grabbed my travel bag and ran to the corner as I called for an Uber to the airport.

When I disembarked the Uber at the United ticket kiosks, I expected to see him. Maybe he had lost my scent. My scent had changed. I waited at gate C17 until the flight to Honolulu boarded. Then I left the area for the Delta counter and a flight to Heathrow. I arrived at Heathrow and he was nowhere to be seen.

He would not be far behind but by his criteria, “It will be over when they are waiting for us at our next new residence before we arrive,” I was still in the game. As I walked through Heathrow looking for a flight to anywhere leaving soon, I noticed a woman who looked familiar. Of course. It all made a sort of sense. She was waiting at a gate with a flight to Spain, to Barcelona.

Somewhere in *Siddhartha* in the Chapter named *Kamala*, Sophy made a comment about how life like the situation was. She asked what I would do?

Where would you go? I said Spain.

As I got closer to her, she became more than familiar. It was Sophy. Sophy Yurikov. I walked straight to her. We kissed as friends kiss.

“Following me?” She asked.

“Thought crossed my mind. Caught you? Or did you catch me?”

“Let’s plan. This flight is about to close its doors. Coming?”

In five minutes, we were side by side heading to a very romantic city. Sophy had become Harry. She had been there waiting for me. I had lost. It took days for me to even wonder who had won.

Two weeks ago, while watching the foot traffic outside Yankees, I was considering the possibility that I was free. At the time life had taken a negative turn, Jerry was a murderer, Harry was a murderer. They had worked together for ten years. Jerry and Harry had a thing. Jerry did not tell me Harry’s real name.

Then there was Hawaii.

That added up to the end of my willingness to do what they wanted no more ‘going long.’ I want to be free but how can I be? If Harry taught me anything, it was that the very act of opening the door to his cage may have freed him but in a real way it subtracted some freedom from me.

Sophy proved the point that Harry is trying to make. By some definitions freedom for one means many others are not free. My rebellion at Yankees led to my imprisonment at Sophy’s. She had out spied me. She was at the Heathrow gate for the plane to Spain before I was. Romance or not I was caught, and in this moment, I realized that Harry had made it all possible.

She leaned up against my ear as we first saw the French coast.

“Let’s read *Siddhartha*. Pull it out.”

“Left it home.”

“Why?”

“It was bugging me.”

“Well, I liked it.” She pulled out her smart phone and thumbed away for a few minutes. “Ordered a new copy it will be in our hotel in Barcelona.”

“Nice you just told the world where I am. Thanks, I guess.” She grabbed my hand and hoped I would understand.

“I used my ID. No one knows we are together. How could they?”

I wanted to tell her but either way I was in trouble again and not feeling up to the four-continent game of tag that may very well ensue.

The minutes passed. I bought an orange juice and vodka. I passed into sleep.

I woke with a memory of what must have been a dream. She was holding my hand and speaking in a low voice about how our futures were linked and that the best idea was being together in the Spanish sun. I wondered how it was possible for so many weird things can happen to a person in such a short time. But as you might guess, it wasn’t nearly over.

The hotel was comfortable enough for a long stay. It had a beautiful bar looking out over the pool and the sunning decks. I am not a big bar person unless it’s an ice cream bar and then I lose control. Sophy read from the book every time she had a chance and I listened when my ears were willing. *Siddhartha* was a captive, too. First a captive of his senses and then his fears.

Maybe the last part was me.

As she read, I enjoyed the happy parts of their relationship. When he decided to leave their home, I didn't want to go with him. It all seemed too hard to do. It must have been in there that the idea of the Great Bliss was raised. He left and she followed. I wanted that but Sophy was not Kamala. As Kamala was reaching the point of his departure Sophy lost interest in the book.

"Let's go for a walk." She said. I felt fear and I imagined she did too. Being a hero type I rose to help satisfy her need to run from the idea of parting.

We walked along the Balearic Sea. It was a mile from our hotel in La Ribera to the shore. It was a mile of restaurants but happily there was no ice cream. We turned Northeast to avoid the sun in our face.

The sun was setting as we turned back. It was a little chilly, so we held each other to conserve heat. We watched the blazing red sky. I was thinking about people waking up in Seattle to the rising sun.

"Don't leave me." She said. "I want to be with you."

"It hasn't been ten days since we last parted. Twenty days since we met."

"Who is counting?" She had a way with her hands that roamed about and seemed to appear out of nowhere in interesting places.

"It's hard to walk while you're doing that."

"This."

"Yeah. That."

"I thought you liked it."

“I do. That’s the problem.”

She released me and spun slowly around in a 360. As she turned, she spoke. “Gotta hide it a little. I know where I would put it. No one visible for ten to fifteen minutes. Game?”

“What’s the Great Bliss?” I asked.

“You are changing the subject.” Sophy pouted. I laughed. “Since you are teasing you have to make a guess.”

“My analogy would be it’s all ice cream just a different flavor.” I offered a “hmmm” of delicious.

“I like it as far as an analogy goes, but I only have one flavor that moves me. The other option is about discipline.”

We walked a bit more before I spoke into the silence.

“I did some research. Buddha encouraged the Great Bliss. Siddhartha is going back to the river. I can feel it.” I needed contemplation. I was supposed to be running on my own. As I thought that another thought crowded it out. How in the world did she find me? I made a point of making note that if she could do that then she had bugged me with a GPS chip. To escape I needed a complete change of gear and clothes. With that I planned my next escape. I wish.

“Jack. I can see that you are no longer foolish with your trust.”

This shocked me into silence.

We walked the mile plus to our room in silence. She took a shower. I thought about how this is happening. Sophy was not as she presented herself. I had

not been questioning her while at the same time I was busy not revealing who I was. Irony kills me.

She stood a few feet from me, drying herself. As she did, she glanced at me with a look of an analyst seeking a means to understand or portray a difficult idea. I watched her struggle until I felt I had something to say.

“Sophy, I want to be clear. I was taught that when two agents meet undercover without a proper introduction there is trouble. Neither can reveal themselves to the other for fear that the other is a foe.”

“They have to go to ground to escape the other.” She smiled still naked.
“Sorry. It was my bad. I was told to watch not interact. But you are my hero. And maybe I do love you for who you are.”

“The question remains. Who are you?”

The night air was getting colder. She shivered and reached for her clothes to cover herself. I saw someone in her I had missed. There was a real person in there. I was attracted to her act but beyond that she was real.

“Let’s say we stay together and travel. I haven’t been to Belfast or East Berlin.”

“There is no East Berlin anymore. Ah, you live in the past. You want to visit the sites that made history in propaganda.”

“And you?”

“I want to live near water. I have lived on lakes and oceans, maybe a river next.”

“Can I go with you?”

“I hardly know the way. But, really, take this moment to escape what is next. Return to your world and leave mine to me.”

“That is the bargain we must make to survive?”

“Best I got with what I know.”

There was a knock at the door. I turned to her and the look on her face said a name.

“Harry?” I whispered. She nodded. “Fuck.”

She opened the door and behind Harry I could see Jerry. As Sophy pulled the door open, I grabbed my coat and took the moment of adjustment to pass all three saying, “Meet you in the bar.”

They let me go ahead. I figured they have things to say to one another in private.

Many large hotels sell clothes and bags with all the things a man or woman needs to travel. I bought what I wanted including pants, shirt, shoes and a bag to carry spares. I replaced my wallet. Everything else I carried outside and left with some homeless people about my size.

There was something spiritual about that.

I waved down a cab. “Toulouse.” At Beziers. I paid him and found another for a ride to Marseilles. I found a ship about to sail. I booked passage for Algiers using a forged passport I bought in a market in Beziers. In Algiers I changed all my gear again. And flew to Lisbon, where I rented a small condo with a view. I bought maps of the world. I gave up the internet. No one knew me.

I laid low. Ordered groceries and alcohol delivered.

I did very little except early in the morning. There was a café two blocks from my front door. They had crème Brule and cognac to add to my coffee. If there is a heaven, this was halfway. The café was on a tree lined street. The street ran east-west. The café was on the northside of the street and therefore in the morning sun. There were tables on the sidewalk kept in a cage formed by a low fence with a gate and the maître de l'instant standing at the ready to invite people in for food and drink.

The menu included raw eggs in rum, and greasy onions in three eggs scrambled. There was an item called 'a drummer's breakfast' based on the four food groups: sugar, caffeine, grease and alcohol. It was composed of a jelly donut and an Irish Coffee.

As I stood in line it felt like the old days at Yankees, like three months ago. I stood staring up at the menu written in chalk on a black board. There was an item I did not know.

Um Café de Saco it said.

"*Um Café de Saco*. What's that," I thought aloud.

"A Portuguese version of Americano. I have made them for you while you laid in my bed. Remember." I guessed Sophy. Then I turned to see Jerry hiding behind a large sun hat and exceptionally dark glasses.

I checked my watch. "You all have slowed down."

"Busy. You?"

"Vacationing."

"I watched you eat here yesterday, and I wondered why you kept coming back even to bad food."

“The irony. I’ll save you the obvious.”

“What are you ordering?”

“Maybe a game of Russian Roulette. Wanna play?”

“Jack. That’s shocking.”

“Why did men in duels pick dawn to die.”

“End a bad day early?”

“My guess too. I notice you keep looking over my shoulder. Is it Sophy with a handgun at 25 meters or Harry at 150 with a rifle?”

“You are popular. It is both.”

“For a kill.”

“Maybe not. Depends on who you want to be.”

“Dead or ...?”

“What’s left?”

I always thought Jerry was good at repartee. I wanted to hug her for her brilliance.

“I have a list. Do you have a pen?”

“Why?” She asked as she handed me hers.

“I want to cross you off my list.”

“What about Harry?”

“He is not on my list,” I said with a flourish, as I pretended to cross off a name from a list that did not exist. “Now neither are you and Sophy.”

It dawned on me that Harry had a power I could not define. I thought to ask Jerry her opinion, thought better of it. “What now? We’re in Lisbon. The language is not one of mine, but I can order in Spanish and get what I want. There are museums to visit. Not sure Harry is into the quiet of a museum. Too paranoid is my guess. Open spaces might scare him.”

“Why not ask him yourself?” I could see his reflection in her dark glasses. He was holding his rifle over his right shoulder. My training was about getting along as long as one could before getting set upon a path of no return to civility. I turned to face him. He beat me to the draw, so to speak.

“Jack got you again. Damn, we are good at chasing you.” No doubt he loved to prove he was better than I am at running and hiding and better at chasing and finding but I had him bested in a way that won the day.

“Harry, old pal, you know I see you here only because I caught you in the middle of Hell and brought you back to play the big game again. Matter of fact, I think you know I have been stringing you along. Now is not the time to tell that tale yet I cannot help but offer the obvious. Before we met you were a leaderless renegade and now you have a leader. You have chosen and now I must acknowledge it.”

Harry stood stunned. I turned to Jerry.

“Here is my ring.” I pulled it off my finger and placed it in her hand. “No hard feelings.” Then back to Harry. “We are over too. Lots of fun. Now back to work.”

Sophy was in the doorway. Her arms at her side. One hand held her pistol. I

walked up to her.

“Are we done?” I asked.

“No.”

“Then let’s see if they follow us. Game on?”

“Yes. We haven’t finished reading the book yet.”

She dropped the gun onto the floor, grabbed my hand and off we went.

Chapter 26: The Final Straw

I still had over two weeks on my condo lease. I managed to get Sophy into it without any resistance of any kind. We had a common vision. The gist is I was now in a form of slavery, captured by my senses; I submitted willingly. Gone was my investment in my higher self. I had lost the Great Bliss in favor of a life without awareness or compassion.

Sophy became my passionate reward for philosophical transgressions.

Every day we did the same things. Time passed. The lease ended and we moved on.

We went to the airport – The Lisbon Portella International Airport. We stopped at the first coffee shop in the terminal, took seats and made our order. Our plan was simple.

“Where we going?” She asked.

“Not my job.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s your turn I have made too many decisions today already.”

“The coffee will help.” As if by design the waitress brought our order. Sophy’s was a small latte with no cream. Mine was a large mocha with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Neither of us spoke while we consumed our drinks.

“Jack.” She broke the silence. Her drink was empty. “This little respite has been fun, but I fear we are steps behind our foe.”

“Me, too.” I sipped the last of my drink and stood. “Let’s make tracks in the snow.”

“I suppose you have a destination in mind.”

“Delta ticket counter. Not too stressful.”

“Then what? I don’t suppose we take the next plane out of the station.”

“Safe bet.” We held hands as we walked. I should mention we had absolutely no baggage. What we brought to Lisbon was meagre to none. “Want to get a new outfit?”

“Why?”

“We might be lucky and leave by the first plane. If not, you could shop here.”

“I could use some underwear, a toothbrush, and a hairbrush.” We reached the ticketing desk.

The ticket agent looked at us in a manner signifying that we looked lost and maybe dangerous. He spoke pretty good English, so I saved him some anxiety by telling a bit of a story. We got too drunk at the hotel last night and all of our stuff was stolen. We are not going to stay here another night so if he would kindly book us for the next flight out, we would appreciate it.

Happily, a flight to Amsterdam was up next, if we wanted Amsterdam we could stroll and catch it.

“I have a place there. You coming?”

“Ooh. Good. Yes.” We kissed. I turned to the ticket agent.

“Two.”

We made the gate as our group was boarding after stopping at two shops to get what was needed for comforts sake.

The flight was quiet. Three hours and we were in a car headed to what I had been hoping was home. Harry's face had not entered my mind. When we drove up to the house and there was no car out front his face flashed through my mind.

I asked Sophy to wait in the car while I searched the house.

He was not there. She came in and we searched for bombs, bugs and cams. None.

"Jack, can I take a shower now?"

"Give it a try. Let me check the heater."

"Do. It won't matter. Cold or hot."

While she was tending to her needs, I became reacquainted with our new home.

Chapter 27: The foes

I seldom expected news from Connecticut, but Sophy kept up on university gossip. We had been in our small world together for a month or more. She would grab her smart phone early in the morning and would grumble to herself and tell me nothing.

One morning as I had just poured the coffee, she said actual words to me.

“Oh, no. Jack. Oh, no.”

“What?”

“Very bad news. Your mother.” I have never heard bad news very well.

“Can I skip it?”

“Not easily. The funeral is tomorrow.”

“What time? Early.”

“Yes. 8AM. In Rockport, Maine.”

“Damn. Doubt I can get there.” I looked at my watch and determined I had less than 24 hours. I hadn’t looked at a plane schedule since I quit running. Because of my size I would need two seats. I called. It was high season. No openings until late afternoon. The connection to Portland was full for 24 hours. I could go on standby. The number of available rental cars in Portland were none. If I was lucky, I would only be a few hours late.

Then again who would care. She was not ‘there.’ We could not talk anyway so what would be the gain?

“I am not going.” I announced.

“I’m glad.” She stood and walked behind me to rub my shoulders. “If you went, it might stir our foes.”

She went back to her phone, and I went back to making breakfast. A minute later, “Oh my fucking god. She was murdered.”

“What?”

“It was a car bomb. The reports say it was massive.”

“More likely suicide with dramatic effects.” Don’t get me wrong. My mother was important to me. I was far from her, and she tended to operate alone so I am neither surprised by her end nor was I able to miss her.

“Don’t be cruel.”

“Maybe I’ll open a bottle of Champagne. We could toast her at 2 PM when her funeral begins.” I poured the batter into the skillet and as the pancakes cooked my thought turned to my now late-mother. As I turned one of them, I burned my knuckles on the edge of the pan.

“Ow. Shit.” I screeched.

“What?”

“I burned my hand. Any more news?”

“The police weighed murder v suicide and have launched a murder investigation. They have one or more suspects. They talk about agents of an as yet unknown country. The news brought up the bombing that killed your father. They speculate the two might be related even if they were decades apart. The Feds, as they refer to them, are being called in. That’s it.”

“Wow.” I started thinking that this was quickly becoming a movie script and I was afraid I was in it. We sat at the table in silence eating flapjacks and syrup. She barely touched hers, so I finished her leftovers. When I looked up from the task she was not smiling.

“More bad news?”

“Jack, this is bad, but you need to change your life. Truth. I want to have sex with a slender you. Work out and when you look good to me, we’ll talk about it again. OK?”

“Ah.”

“Too much for you? You said you would make money and we’d be rich. Look where we live. I hoped for more. You are hiding and dying. Get over it and let’s get with the program.”

“Is this good-bye?”

“The book. We haven’t finished it.”

“Siddhartha? OK. No more sugar. I will walk every morning, if you go with me.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes. Shit happens out here.”

“If we start now. I will go with you.”

I leapt from the table but slowly having eaten too many pancakes. I started looking for running shoes to wear. My Adidas were in Connecticut.

She saw me frustrated with my lack of options. “We are not going to run. We

are going for a slow walk and probably not far. I know my stuff so keep up and we'll be horizontal dancing in a month or two maximum."

I had some flips. They were quality therefore walkable.

She closed the door behind us, and we circled the house looking for paths into the bramble. Seeing none the next option was the road.

"Pick a direction." Sophy said.

"There is a crossing in that direction. It's less than half mile."

"What's there?"

"A bar-b-que restaurant."

"How do you know? We have never gone out."

"We have no car. The story is that Harry took me there. It seems like a lifetime ago."

"Is it good?"

"They have beer."

"Is it Saturday?"

"As in let's party. You have a card and ID?"

"Yup. I want beef short ribs with Texas double tangy sauce."

"Don't get your hopes up. This is Europe." We walked until we could see the restaurant. I hadn't been there in a year. Things change. It looked closed. No cars.

“Is it open?” I asked hoping for more calories and less workout.

“No signs of life.” Sophy had sprinted to the front door of the restaurant whose name was Benen which translates into Bones. She turned back to rejoin me as I leaned against a small tree that was straining to keep me up. ‘What time is it’

“10:30 AM local.”

“Let’s walk back home and then return to see if they open at 11.”

“Ah. I see. It will lure me to walk farther.”

“Good. It’s not much over a quarter mile to get here. Back and forth again. That’ll be about a mile, and we’ll at least be hungry. Might be 11 by then.”

I turned and trudged back home. We walked in silence each in our own head. How else? I was trying to guess what was going on in hers.

The last quarter mile was the hardest. She was ahead of me. I was not going to catch up. Her plan was to get me to perform as I might have when I was younger. My paranoia kicked in and I heard Harry’s voice telling me I was out of training and dangerous to be with. I looked around to see him. He wasn’t there. It was all in my head.

I had stopped.

“Hey, keep up.”

“Trying.” I resumed walking. “Sir.”

My watch said 11:05 when we both stood in front of the restaurant door again. It stood open. If one was looking for a sign this would be it.

We entered. Inside was a bar I vaguely recognized. There was a bartender.

The odor was the identifier for me. I was here before. My scent was missing but it wasn't a feeling. I parced the smell and found that one part that should also be missing wasn't. Mine was not there. A ghost fled before me. It was my past.

"Honey I need water. Little woozy."

She ordered in her best German, her shared language with the barkeep. In the mirror behind the bar the ghost returned. Happily, I was able to bend enough to lean on my knees gasping for air when I passed out. The distance to the floor was shorter. It saved Harry some energy.

I was grateful for the save. Harry had been standing behind me. I was busy wheezing and had not heard him. His smell had been in my nose, so I was not entirely surprised when I regained control of my surroundings again to find him next to me.

As he told me later, he saved my head from hitting the floor. I regained consciousness at a table for four and as I came back, I realized I was the fourth at the table. Standing behind me was the bartender with a bag of ice he kept on the back of my neck. Harry was across from me. Sophy on my left and Jerry on my right.

If I remember correctly, I said, "Oh crap."

Harry said, "Killing your mother was a bad idea."

Sophy said, "Jack, we are assassins. There are many more than us, but we, the four of us, are leading a rebellion against the power that protects us. Only by defeating the network can we dismantle it." She looked gorgeous. Her make-up had become more severe, darker with black outlines and a

death looking maroon lipstick. She was not the reserved Hartford grad. Obviously, even after the time we had spent together I had no idea who she was.

Jerry had not said a word. Harry only a few more. I glanced at them for cues and saw them trying to ignore my eyes by studying their hands. Sophy did not allow a long pause.

“I want to tell you a story. It’s a story about a traitor who must be assassinated for the good of all. The ultimate.” She did not have very soft features though if she acted with humor her eyes danced and her lips made long kisses as she talked.

“Jack. You might be more attentive. For the sake of our project. OK.”

“Sorry. Mind is still reeling some. I need more water.”

Harry had had enough massage and he launched into the message.

“Jack, we won’t be able to save you. We’ll follow you through the system and try to get you the best future we can.”

He might have talked on. I broke with his rant and moved onto doing the math. I added one to one and got ... At the time I was too disoriented to identify the believable elements to combine for a conclusion. It had been a weird day already.

In retrospect, there are times when life is preserved through ignorance.

If what I heard makes sense, then my mother was the head of the assassination squads. Perceived as Harry’s foe she is treated to extreme prejudice. But what does it mean that he’ll follow me through the system?

When I checked back into Harry’s speech, he was telling me about strategic

actions to protect democracy and peace.

“Are you with me, Jack? We are doing this for your own good. You realize that?”

I stood and left the bar-b-que restaurant and walked home. I locked the doors. I took a shower and then amazed myself by falling asleep. If they came to find me, I did not hear them. I hoped they would go poof in a puff of smoke and at the time I chose to believe they had.

By dinner I missed Sophy. She never cooked. I did all the ordering and food prep that anyone needed. It had surprised me on some level that she stayed in my isolation for so long.

Why the hell did Harry and Jerry show up when they did? It was most definitely a coordinated event. Sophy was in on it, as usual. Or why was she not in bed with me when I awoke? The more questions I had the more I knew what I had to do. I walked back to the bar and used their phone to call a cab.

Chapter 28: The escape route to enlightenment

I took her copy of Siddhartha. She would never come back for it if she did not come back for me. Faulty reasoning. I know but comfort in hard times comes from recovering a sense of order to tame the emotional chaos.

When I was approaching security to board a flight to Hong Kong, I was carrying only the book. There is that last chance trash can to throw your drugs and water bottles away before one goes through security. I dropped Hesse into it. I reasoned that my affections were goofy and needed work. Plus the bug problem.

The flight would take me 12 hours and I would be only halfway to my destination. I had none of the things one uses to pass the time on such a long flight. The mind does not remain idle without a smart phone or a book. For many years I used my journal as the recipient of my meditations. On this flight I would need more courage.

Long flights are going to be hell no matter what because batteries die, there is no Wi-Fi, books come to an end and the seats are uncomfortable after eight hours, period. Left with one's own thoughts is how its described. For an academic that is scary indeed. Ideas fly out of your head like bats out of a belfry after sunset. And there you are without a tool to record them and no internet to tell someone about them. Hell.

Sometime over the Ukraine, I realized what I no longer had. The ego is a tricky thing. It depends upon one's condition in life. Mine was stoked by position, mate, money and home. I could add mistress because Sophy was in my mind a possession. All that was gone.

The deception and illusion were destroyed. I thought myself ready to face truth and reality without the trappings of all those now obviously false attachments. I was free.

When I arrived in Hong Kong, I saw a flight to Hanoi. On my journey there I began thinking about our national ugliness. When I landed, I couldn't help but wonder why they were so gracious. I wondered what we had done since the war to have re-earned their affections. After all, we killed millions of them. Without mercy. I know. My father told me. I had helped build the bombs.

If we had succeeded in conquering them there would be no reparations. We stole it fair and square by deception and violence. If its conquest, there are never reparations. But we lost.

What do we imagine happened? The Vietnamese said, "You lost. Nice try. You owe nothing."

Chapter 29: The First Trial

'People are not free when they struggle with economic insecurity.'
Sanders

I walked across Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia paralleling Route 13 and back into Vietnam, looking for Buddha and finding one on every corner. Not one of them spoke to me. I looked lost. I just hadn't lost my old way. The idea of transitioning is a majorly misunderstood idea. When the word is used it is often accompanied with other words such as divorce or fired. The advice is worse. Get over it. Transitioning is abnormally painful, even chaotic.

Buddha would never talk to me until I was Buddha. Why bother? The easiest words are the most difficult to embrace. Be peace.

No wonder Buddha couldn't see me. I was nothing. I was a part of a very bad thing that was gigantic in scale. I knew men at arms who were part of the invasion and attempted subjugation of those nations. Some went back after the peace accords were in effect to make a personal peace. The Vietnamese people returned kindness for violence. Buddha could see the Vietnamese and they could see Buddha.

I left Ho Chi Minh City by plane for Tegucigalpa. I walked through El Salvador and into Guatemala. There had been no reparations for the war against these people. What did they get? Social repression, genocide, and a new bogus faith sold by dictators to reduce the possibility of a 'communist revolt.' It was just before I took a flight from Guatemala City that I decided to walk home to Connecticut.

Being on foot in the desert is a dangerous idea. Survival requires humility and the trust of strangers. I would walk the length of Mexico. If I survived it would take hundreds of Jesuses and Marias to make it so. This worked until almost six months later I reached Juarez and tried to cross into El Paso, Texas.

I had no fake ID. I had clothes but these did not 'make the man.' My hair had grown. My beard neared my chest. I was not 'white.' My skin had aged in the sun.

"ID."

"I have none."

"Your nationality?"

"Ah. Let me get back to you." I turned to walk away.

"Excuse me sir."

I turned back.

"You look in need of help. If you are a US citizen, maybe we can help." The Border guard pointed in the direction of an office building with a line of people stretching into the sunshine on a 90-degree day. "We just need your fingerprints."

"Thanks."

"No problem. Good luck."

I was an orphan. There was no one who knew me as I was. I had touched the goal: I walked across Mexico.

The border crossing was impossible without identifying myself and face a likely arrest in Texas. Connecticut was beyond reach.

This, when one has come upon the first barrier that Jesus and Maria could not dissolve, was the first trial. In retrospect, the way I saw it, it was not so

grand. The pun was fun, but the truth was not funny. The truth was that I had succeeded. Reality – the one with me as an assassin in the CIA – was over. I had to accept my truth. Deception and illusion were destroyed.

The reality I faced was the same as always. The struggle for the necessities of life was grim at times. With no one to trust for help, with no way to cross the border without signaling my presence I might have to seek the help of my oft-times employer. I had been on the road for nearly a year in either Asia or Latin America.

Staying in Juarez was out of the question. I had walked a long way and since I could not stay, I had to find a destination. First, money had to be acquired which required a bank. My ID was as real as my accounts. Once the transactions were made everyone would know where I was. A clothing store followed by a hotel room. Shower, shave, new clothes and shoes. My hair was still long but it was the new me. A cab, the airport and a flight to La Paz, Mexico where hot people go to cool off. It felt like home.

Chapter 30: The second trial – imprisonment

La Paz in its historical way was a prison at least for sailors. The winds on occasion made sailing from the local bay out the straights into the Gulf and the Pacific impossible. For Americans who would then sail up the western coast, the waves and head winds were sometimes fierce. The joy of sailing is lost to the extremes of survival. More than a few Americans made their life in La Paz rather than sail home against such odds. For them the dangers of leaving outweighed any loss by admitting defeat and staying in paradise with all your ex-pat friends.

Running was not a sport I could do or not do on any given day. My walking adventures had slimmed me down to the point I was unrecognizable. My face had thinned. My long hair and tame beard along with Mexican resort wear changed me from the anemic diabetic look to the happy world traveler.

I was still not the master of my fate. I was still running every day. I was evermore alone.

Then I remembered. The Company had established a means for repatriation. If handled improperly deaths resulted. I had heard stories.

I took a bus from La Paz to Cabo and a plane to Europe.

I found her office number online in an internet café in London.

“Geraldine Martel? This is an old friend.” A pause delivered a recognizable voice.

“We’ve been watching you. You have made no new friends. I fear for your life if you stay in the cold much longer.”

“If I come in what is my fate?”

“Hard to say. Some say there were crimes you could not face that set you to running. They say you should be brought in to face these charges.”

“I did not kill my mother.”

“Someone did and they had a reason that you share. You did not so much as try to go to her funeral. You did not love your mother.”

“Her bomber did not love her. I am not the bomber.”

“You are. I can explain.” Jerry was a deep person. But I had no time for explanations.

“Jerry, I am tired. I have to move today, and it may be a bit beyond me to sit still for an explanation.”

“Well, as cops are trained to say, ‘Tell it to the judge.’” Jerry’s voice told me how much she was not going to free me from my plight.

“Are you armed?”

“Jerry, I have practically never been armed. You know that. I am in for ‘going long’ as Harry put it. Others defend me from attack. My assignments never endanger me beyond the normal risks of life.”

“That’s what we miss in you. Harry thinks you are done for. Your mother’s death may have been your end.” She was very matter of fact normally, but her eyes would tell the larger story. Without that information I am only guessing that she was not telling me an opinion up for discussion but a cold undeniable fact.

“I see.” My mind had little to offer other than acquiescence. “Might be right. I am like an old tool that can’t be sharpened.”

“Nothing matters now. The past is just that. Passed. Onto new things. What are you up for?”

“A nap. Gotta go. Thanks for being there.”

“Call anytime.”

I left London for Cabo and back to La Paz as hot as ever hoping for a dip in the Gulf’s sometimes refreshing waters.

I imposed a strict move day habit. Today was a move day. La Paz has many hotels. I moved from one to another, away from the shoreline, uphill with a view of the mouth of the bay that was trapping me.

My room had a balcony with a small table and a chair. I was sitting on that chair watching the sun rise when I saw two men get out of a car parked below me. I hadn’t seen them drive up. They might have been there for hours.

I shook my head when I thought I recognized them. Guys from the university. I hollered down to them.

“Ralph, Bernard.” Then it hit me. Jerry sent them. They were NOCs. She sent them to arrest me.

“We were sent to retrieve you.” They lifted their hands over their shoulders. I mimicked them.

“I surrender.” I knew they didn’t take that seriously. Nevertheless, they were at my door in a few minutes. It’s a complicated hotel. The balcony is a fire escape. Their car was a piece of cake to start, and I was away. I drove a mile or so in a small mall parking lot on the edge of the desert and searched the car for interesting things.

Nothing unusual. Handguns. Long guns. A sniper rifle with scope. Comm devises. Restraining gear like cuffs. A medical kit with loaded syringes.

I grabbed a devise and found a cell number in its memory. I dialed. Someone answered. I said, "Bernard."

"No. Ralph."

"Did you bring all this stuff just for me?"

"We were told you were seriously obese and could not run even if. We thought we had you trapped."

"Oh yeah. Changes happen." I was down to 180 pounds when I hit Tegucigalpa and then I walked across Mexico. It was not training. Sugar was scarce and Sophy was right. She might actually be attracted to me. Nah. My mind was in better shape than ever. I really was writing a book. It was the only thing I carried. I bought a small computer at the La Paz Sears store and a paper notebook at a nearby stationers. He didn't need to know those things, so I did not tell him. "By now you know where your car is. It is too dangerous to let you have it back so if this phone works well enough you can hear it burning in the background. Hated to do it. Now we are all on foot and relatively unarmed."

I threw the device into the flames and walked away into the desert to watch the goings on. I had my writing gear and a pair of great binoculars I took from the car. They would allow me to read their lips.

Local cops were attracted to the very hot, almost burned-out hulk. Explosions were still occurring, so they hung back. A federal cop showed up and appeared to take control of the situation. He marched towards the car when a shell went off scaring the shit out of him and causing the locals to tell him he was an arrogant fool, pinche cabron. After twenty minutes a cab drove up at a distance. Bernard got out and with a camera recorded the

scene from a distance.

Nothing usable was left in it. Everyone left. I left. That was fun. I flew back to Europe that afternoon. They were not at the airport. Surprised me. Harry had not trained them for this mission.

I went to my house outside Amsterdam and waited for them or someone like them. I went to Bones the Bar-b-que for Happy Hour. Harry was there waiting for me. He was sitting at the bar. I sat next to him and ordered a glass of Champagne. He looked at the bar top and began speaking.

“Maybe I got you wrong. Your solo taught you a lot. Poor Ralph was pissed beyond repair. I was not shocked. Wait. I was. You are not your old self. What are you 160. You are thin but well-muscled from the chest down. Built for speed.”

“Harry. Would you please tell me what the fuck?”

“We are at war. Not against each other but the ones who run this thing. We are fighting but uncertain about the outcome as of yet. They are coming at us because their longtime leader is dead, and they rightly blame us. We must shake them so we can finish what we started.”

“Obviously you want me to ‘go long.’”

“You are recovering. Yes. We have already eluded to what we want you to do. It was ‘going long’ when we first brought it up on this very spot.”

“Prison for my mother’s death. Is it a clean prison with three squares, an hour in the sun every day? Give me hope there will be a jail break and I retire to some paradise on earth.”

“All that but I cannot guarantee paradise. No more Sophy. Stuff like that. But I will guarantee we will keep fighting the system that has made us this way.

Your gift will make an immediate difference.”

“What did you mean by ‘We’ll follow you through the system and try to get you the best future we can.’”

“I would have bet everything you didn’t hear that. You were twitching in your chair.”

“Life was hard. So?”

“I see. Makes a difference to you?”

“Do your own math. I can run forever. I have become good at it.”

“I am sitting next to you. If we just say we caught you but were forced to kill you to bring you in. That might be as good as surrender to distract our foes.”

“It makes a difference to me. I am getting bad thoughts of preemptive revenge.”

“You are funny.”

“Do you think I am sitting next to you because you are clever?”

“How else?”

“You are full of shit.”

“I’ve heard that. Any truth to it?”

“You notice that there is a new bartender. He is a great guy very gifted at cocktails. Your last two drinks have been a modified with a harmless compound known to be slow acting but will keep you still for about two hours.”

“You bastard.” He suddenly looked woozy.

“Takes one.” He hit the floor. I did not try to save his head.

When he came to his senses I was out of reach. I was determined to be free.

Chapter 31: Surrender

Relatively homeless, on the run still, I reasoned to a solution to my – the – dilemma.

As the realization overcame me that I was a character in an absurdist novel I began to feel like Camus' Meursault or Kafka's Josef K. I read the books on a camping trip to the west coast of Vancouver Island. I read them again in a train trip across Canada to Quebec City. Then read them again while living in a loft in Le Ville Vieux Quebec.

War deforms our souls. These were stories about how impossible justice is when war has set us one on another. Meursault was the one I gravitated towards. It may have been the language. Existentialism was more rewarding since one's depression is respected rather than absurdism which is just a brain fuck. Pardon my German.

Short story I left Quebec on a bus that crossed the border at Sandy Bay onto US 201. I had crossed with a new passport from Canada. I was golden. I was headed for my weed stash and my scotch. I had no hope anything remained, but one has to set goals as imaginary as they may be.

Jerry was not home. The weed was there but I bet it was replaced by them. I had none of it or the scotch. The entire scene was deadly for me. I walked to Yankees. The line was too short. That was my excuse for remaining on my sugarless diet.

I grabbed a city cab and headed for Amsterdam.

I was sitting in Bones waiting for them to show. The feeling of safety had not returned. I knew they were coming so I spent lunch time every day sitting patiently. I had finished two beers when Jerry came in and sat next me. She was silent. She ordered a Champagne. He came in and sat on her other side

and ordered a Champagne. Then Sophy sat next to me and ordered Champagne.

“Who are you fucking people, Hobbits?” I began laughing so hard I spit beer across the bar, and everyone went Oooh.

No one even touched their drinks.

“Trust issues, eh.” I sneered.

“Where you been? Canada? Crossed the border at Sandy Bay? We have always been with you. We are your friends in life who you should not lose.” Jerry was right as the other two agreed.

“We want to get right with you. We owe you big time.” Harry said

Sophy leaned towards me. “And we are asking for more.”

“Not going to happen. My view is you created this without my input which means I am not a full partner in your enterprise, yet in your plan I am to make what might be the ultimate sacrifice. At least I give up my liberty, while being falsely accused by a hidden force that will try me without public view, accused of a crime because I did not love the victim as if anyone but me could know.”

Of course, no one wanted to refute me because obvious.

I left it like that, ordered another beer and moved to a table. I could see them as they conferred, no doubt trying to figure out who should say what or do what. Harry had taught me to not be concerned about other people’s choices but use the time to rest my mind and be prepared for whatever.

While they murmured at the bar ignoring their Champagne, I was happy to let my beer get flat and tasteless. Treks through Asia and Central America

had rendered my bad habits unhabitual. Part of being free I thought.

They must have reached a conclusion, because all three stood and walked away. Not a word was said. As far as I could tell they hadn't paid their bill.

I was happy with my solitude.

After sitting for ten minutes the waitress asked me if she could help me. I suggested food. Ribs she asked.

"I want beef short ribs with Texas double tangy sauce."

"Well, it's a long way to Texas but I do have baby back ribs. We boil them until tender. We have a red sauce that comes from Argentina, I think."

"Do you like them?"

"I am a vegan, but I hear people like them. We sell an average 100 Kilos a day. Says something."

"Ok I will have some."

"Half or full order."

"Half."

"With or without?"

"Ah?"

"Beans and salad on the side. Just like Texas."

"Just ribs. Please."

“Coming right up.”

I began waiting the second she turned away her mission accomplished. My thoughts turned to anticipation first of the ribs and then the walk home and what might be lying in wait for me there. Instinct told me my friends were not done with me.

The ribs were good. The meat was so cooked it fell off the bone and melted in my mouth. Chewing was almost unnecessary. I left happy and free.

Chapter 32: The third trial – like justice, but not justice

When I look back at the way I was subdued, shackled and spirited away by the three people who claimed to be friends; I feel no emotions about the event. At the time it just seemed absurd. I was ‘chased’ to my home and captured. My captors did not explain themselves.

The story? Not entertaining. Just a typical mob snatch.

After eating at Bones, I opted to go home. I walked along the road. There was no traffic to speak of. Most, if not all, of my neighbors were farmers. They tended to stay home. Life was pastoral and except for Bones there was little but pastoral. I bought the place no one cared about. Guess it couldn’t grow a thing except its extreme hedge.

I remember a harvester headed towards me at one point. I had a pace for walking that put me into a meditation. I was there. The harvester passed me.

When I bought the house, I thought it was an interesting feature that it was surrounded by brambles into which a small arch way had been cut to allow for an entry to the house. The surrounding ‘yard’ was territory that had been kept free of the weeds by the hard work of generations of landscapers. No one could easily approach the house from any direction except through the gate.

As I neared the gate there were no sounds except the sea birds’ cacophony. No signs of life. I walked through the gate.

I hadn’t seen the Escalade as it pulled up outside behind me. I didn’t sense the two black-clad, masked assault team. I saw their legs and feet as the snuff bag went over my head.

The rest you can imagine. Only the kidnapers have a better memory.

Look. I am just like you. I had never been nearly asphyxiated before. I had never been captured and awakened in a block walled prison before. The idea of a flickering light bulb between me seeing my surroundings and total darkness scared me.

Yet there I was in a windowless block-walled room. There was nothing to entertain one's eye. A windowless door. That was the only feature besides a naked lightbulb hanging from a cord from the ceiling. The light flickered randomly. I had no watch with which to sense the passage of time. There were no voices in the hall which I assumed was just outside the door. There seemed to be nothing from which to manage a glimpse of regularity.

There are two theories of survival in such circumstances. One is about not accepting the darkest interpretation. The other is about accepting a fact-based version of one's trap so one could plan escape. Survival requires a strong mind and a strong will. The first stage is to gather sensual data. The flicker is meant to confuse our normal means of interpreting visual data. The flicker was accompanied by a sound. Very hypnotic.

The sound was the only sound. Featureless walls flickered in the light.

I knew why I was there. I hadn't loved my mother enough to be late to get to her funeral. I had chosen not to fail trying. I had a glass of Champagne with Sophy instead. The network, that was apparently its name, ran the dark ops and was demanding a prisoner in trade for the death of its leader. My mother. I don't know but is that irony?

Of course, whatever resistance to my imprisonment my wife, the man I saved from a similar form of detention and the seductress had managed to mount had not freed me. I thought about Harry in the metal box.

I decided to recite the prime integers less than 1000. I soon was lost in the next prime hunt without forgetting the ones I had found already. My father taught me mental math. It was a game we played at bedtime. I reached 167

before I must have found unconsciousness.

Sleep is difficult to measure when there are no clues to the passage of time. The flicker was making my prime finding difficult and my memory worse. I closed my eyes. The flicker became a pulse of the sound. I might have fallen asleep. I only remember the darkness and the sound.

I might have dreamed. My father's voice was reminding me about what is known as a sieve, a means to isolate numbers to test. "There are formulas for identifying primes, but they do not give us all of them. The in-betweens are harder to find. Take a block of ten consecutive numbers. Remove the multiples of 2, 3, 5 and 11. These are easy to identify. What remains may be a prime. Each must be tested for divisibility by any other primes less than the square root of the number being tested. In the case of 7, the square root is less than 3. In fact, until your possible divisor is the largest integer less than the square root has been tested you might be wrong to assume it prime."

That is what I used my mind for. At times I might have been dreaming.

At some point hunger and thirst grew to become a nagging need. I sat across from the door which had no hatch or slot through which food or water could be pushed into the cell. There was no toilet facility and of course no bed or blanket. The temperature felt as if it was dropping. I understood this increasing my fear of the cumulative result of these various deprivations.

I was debating whether or not to empty my bladder and colon in a corner when the door was jerked open. Startled, I opened my eyes and was immediately blinded by the bright lights in the hallway. I was lifted and placed in a wheelchair then belted in with restraints that kept me immobile. The journey down the hall was short and soundless except for the rubber wheels squealing on the uneven floor.

I was parked in another room and left behind by whomever had moved me.

As my eyes improved, I saw an office and in front of me a desk.

I returned to my hunt for primes. With the flicker gone, the only sound was the hum of a fan I could not see, the hunt was easier. 259 was not a prime. I reached 263 before a door behind me opened and two guards stood on either side of me. They said nothing.

A third man entered the room and sat at the desk. He arranged his papers on the desktop before he turned his attention to me.

“Mr. Martel, it appears you have fallen on bad times.” He did not identify himself. I did not recognize him, but I knew his accent. Princeton.

“And locomotives by the score! For we'll fight with a vim that is dead sure to win.” He was studying his paperwork. My words caused a change in his forehead as his eyes left the page and stared at me over his reading glasses.

“Clever of you. But this is not a trap you have fallen into. You are a prisoner of an agency of the US government. I am here to assess your level of cooperation in solving a murder case. You are the prime suspect and if I say so you will be tried and possibly executed for the murder of Jannette Martel who I believe must have been your mother.”

He stopped talking and returned to his papers. His fingers moved along the edges a piece and he grimaced as he realized he had cut his finger and a spot of blood fell upon a page.

After he wrapped his finger in a tissue, he began again.

“I have a few questions. First, why did you so gruesomely murder your mother?”

Stunned into silence by the oddity of his question, I offered him a troubled look. “I don't know.”

“How could that be? You must have had a motive. Are you telling me you cannot recall?”

“No.”

“Then you know but won’t tell me?”

“I had no motive.”

“Impossible. Perhaps we should take a break.”

“I could use a bathroom.”

“The guards will provide for you as they will.”

He signaled for the guards to free me. Standing and walking felt great. I was taken to a bathroom. My body needs met I was escorted back to the wheelchair and restrained again. My inquisitor returned and he began anew.

“Why did you kill your mother?”

“No answer fits that question.”

“Why did you hate your mother?”

Having been warned by Sophy that this was the premise for my arrest, I had spent time contemplating an answer.

“I don’t know if I did but if I did, I do not know why.”

“She was a good mother to you?”

“She never punished me, always fed me and supported me after my father

was killed.”

“Did you kill him as well?”

“I was five. I know nothing of bombs. As I remember I adored him and spent decades missing him. So, no I could not have killed him.” This answer seemed to interest him because he stopped to write on a form he had atop his pile of paper. When he was done, he began again.

“Do you know who killed him?”

“Knowledge of his assassins is beyond my pay grade. My mother might have known but if so, she never shared it with me.”

“How would she have known?”

“I can only guess.”

He looked at me as if he expected more from me. I shrugged my shoulders.

He said, “Guess.”

“He was killed in Libya. I guess a Libyan killed him.”

“Wrong”

“If you say so.”

“I do. You see we know by a means I cannot reveal to you.”

“Why make me guess?”

“Procedure.” He looked at the form he had been making notations on and made another, then turned his head up to look at me again.

“Why did you use a bomb to kill your mother?”

“I don’t know.”

“How could that be?”

“I don’t remember killing her. As a matter of fact, I think I must have been abroad though I do not know what date she died.”

“I see.”

“I might have a witness to help establish this as a fact.”

“I am confused. I was told there are no witnesses to the death of your mother. Now you say there is.” He looked at me with a scolding frown on his face. He wanted something I could not give him no matter how much I wanted to satisfy his desire for information.

“I was referring to witnesses to my innocence.”

“Innocence? Hah!” He stood up and was about to hit me when one of the guards stirred enough to distract him from his intentions. “You cannot be innocent. You did not attend your own mother’s funeral.”

There was little more to say. My inquisitor had made up his mind. He ordered the guards to take me to the courtroom and to place me in the cage. I wondered about what he could have meant but apparently the guards knew and within seconds I was being wheeled even further down the hall.

Chapter 33: The Lightning on the Tower

"Don't accept that what's happening
Is just a case of others' suffering
Or you'll find that you're joining in
The turning away ...

Just a world that we all must share
It's not enough just to stand and stare
Is it only a dream that there'll be
No more turning away?
- Pink Floyd

I stood waiting holding onto the bars that were worn and shining from the many who had stood here before me. The cage was not large, big enough for three, but it would have been crowded. I was alone. Alone in the cage and alone in the courtroom.

The only furniture in the room was the bench behind which the judge is made to stand to deliver the judgement. Unlike a civilian or even a military court there were no seats for witnesses, no table for a defense lawyer or a prosecutor.

After a few minutes a guard came in and offered me a sealed plastic water bottle. I declined.

A few minutes more and a robed figure approached the bench. He was hooded as if his identity was a secret to be kept from the condemned man in the cage.

He stood still behind the bench with an affected air of solemnity. Justice would be meted out dispassionately was the message I received.

At long last he cleared his throat and began to speak in a monotone.

“Those who find themselves in front of this court will not recognize it for what it is: the creation of a distant time. This court has no name. It has only

one function and that is to deliver a form of justice, outside of the public view. The process is simple. Those subject to this court are interviewed and if the interrogator determines that the subject is hiding the truth then the subject is given a life sentence or in the case of a capital crime extreme prejudice.”

He stopped abruptly and swung his gavel three times.

“For all who can hear. The subject Jackson Martel for the murder of a section chief of the combined FVEY Agency is condemned to life imprisonment. His sentence would have taken his life if a few friends had not petitioned for his life based upon his record in dark missions.”

He stood and walked out of the room. I was standing in the cage understanding what was said but completely confused about how this all happened to me. A bit of anger rose into my throat, but I swallowed it. I would wait to see what Harry et al could manage with their promise to save me from the worst.

The guards reentered and took me to a cell with a window that looked out onto a plaza surrounded by other windows with other condemned looking out into the plaza. There was nothing to see except the reflected light. What remained were block walls and the despair that implied.

My last trial was over. I was as good as dead and perhaps if I sat in this new form of darkness for long, I would come to wish for my end.

I was not there for long enough to reach that poverty of spirit.

Chapter 34: The River

I had no thoughts about happiness. There was only the sea of pain that I existed in. Sorrow was not my favorite emotion yet here I was and the stimulation I would need to break its grip was unavailable in the blandness and permanence of my condition.

My desire was not what it used to be. Limits had been placed on me in every way. Often desire had been some need that has led me to improve my attitude. Today, I dared to want to be free.

The cell had a cot with a bed roll. I took advantage of it to sleep for the first time in who knows how long. My dreams were about a River. A boatman with a lantern brought a man across the river. The other side was lost in fog. All I saw was that he returned with an empty boat. It felt like a passage from one state of being to another.

I woke alarmed at the disappearance of the passenger. My fleeting memory of the dream told me the passenger was not me.

The lights in the prison plaza were too bright to be able to tell if the sun was shining or not. I still had no idea what time it was or a means to estimate the passage of time.

A tray of food was pushed under the door as was a plastic bottle of water. The bottle's seal was broken. Hunger and thirst forced me to eat and to drink. My fear of poisoning did not protect me from their effects. I passed out on the bed.

I was not dead or dying. My eyes opened in time. I noted some light. A voice caught my attention. I searched with my eyes and could not focus. If there was someone in the room with me, I could not see them.

“Jack.”

That name I thought. I have heard it before. As my consciousness wavered between here and sleep, I remembered.

I said, “Yes.”

“We are here to take you to a better place.”

“We?” I managed.

“Just some friends. Friends with connections. Are you ready and willing to blow this joint?” Said a female voice.

“You sound nice. I cannot see. Vision is dim.”

“Hang. I’ll puncture you, and in a few seconds, you’ll be good as gold.” This was a male. I felt a needle enter my shoulder and then I saw them. All three of them. Harry reached out and pulled me to my feet. Jerry and Sophy had my arms and we walked, I staggered, through the open cell door, down the hall and out a door into the night air.

“Where are we?” I managed.

“Far from home. Keep your feet and we’ll get the fuck out of here.”

Nothing happened. No one tried to stop us leaving by the front door. An S-600 was in front of us and in half a minute we were racing down a road, twisting through the hills onto a highway and then at 120 km/h the car sped forward. I fell back into sleep, not deeply enough to stay totally unaware of my surroundings. I drifted through differing states of awareness. My occasional full consciousness was enough to hear my saviors as they spoke about their plans for me.

“Harry? Check your texts for news of the near future for Jack.” I decided this was Jerry who was in front of me.

“OK.” Harry said from beside me. Sophy was silent but I decided she was in the passenger seat and Jerry was driving. “New missive from HQ. We left no one aware of our escape. No one is searching yet. We have twenty minutes to the airfield and the Gulfstream is waiting as planned. It says they texted the directions to my GPS. ‘Stay on course and we’ll see Jack’s new home tonight.’”

My imagination filled in some blanks as I dreamed about finding myself once more in Connecticut. The problem with imaginations is the way we are offered hope fulfilled rather than the new dangers of an uncharted future.

Sophy spoke next with an inquiry she might have imagined I would engage in.

“Home is where the heart is. Jack wants to know where his heart is. Harry. Fill him in if you would.”

“Right. He is in a bit of a coma. Can he hear do you think?”

Jerry spoke next. “He can but he cannot move or speak. Last time I was given this drug I had trouble with my concentration so give it a try Harry. Talk slowly.”

“Jack. Here’s what you need to get up to speed.” His voice was melodic, much more than my memory told me was his normal. “Don’t worry about tracking any of this I will repeat it again when you can ask for it yourself. First, we escaped the trap that was set for you. As far as we can tell you gave nothing up to them. They were pleased to have your body to torment in revenge for Jannette’s death.

“We are headed for a haven, near the equator and Latin America. We are

travelling light because speed is required but we have what it takes on sight to keep us safe, fed and relatively happy. We even have your favorite substances. Maybe even your favorite ice cream, though that could be tricky for you since your recent travels have probably altered your appetites and your digestion.

“Short story is you will have our company as long as you need it and then it will be your choice. The options are wide open. We have made some changes to the network that condemned you. We’ll talk more of that when we have your undivided attention.”

As I write this, I am relying on the composite memory resulting from the three times he repeated it; the last time when we were sitting in what he said was the southern Caribbean watching the sunset and sipping an umbrella drink was true.

My training had taught me to avoid belief until it was required of me and so far, no one had demanded anything of me. As we flew from wherever I had been to wherever we were going my ease of being increased as did my trust that Harry was not bullshitting me, at least not entirely. As the umbrella drink proved it was valid to trust him but there could be more opportunities for disappointment.

The plane had no other passengers but us. I figured it was a Company plane so when we landed at a short unlit strip in the middle of the night everything seemed as natural as could be.

I slept most of the flight and no one offered to brief me as to our location. The strip was on the shore of a large body of water. It was a resort with a number of cabanas as one might find in equatorial Latin America.

We disembarked and the plane took off for parts unknown. We found no one around but my independent search showed we could pick our quarters and we did and then to the beach in possession of one of Harry’s special

umbrella drinks.

We lounged. I basked as nakedly as possible in the morning sun. We tried small talk, but I knew nothing that fit with their stories. No one wants to hear about walking from Chihuahua to Ciudad Juarez although the journey was challenging. There is no general interest in exactly how many steps I took. I counted them all. 507,739. The mathematician in me would say the number varies by conditions and individual differences. Other than that, not much to see there. It is divisible by 17. Thus, boringly unprime.

A few days passed and then a meeting was called by Jerry. She and I shared the same cabana. It was nice to touch someone, and I was glad that she felt good about sharing life with me again. I would say it felt normal, but I had lost the ability to determine what normal might be.

The meeting took place in our cabana with the usual ribs and Champagne spread that we were accustomed to having. Where these things came from eluded me. I didn't want to know. I just wanted to enjoy them. We sat at the dining room table.

Jerry chaired. Harry sat with his head in his hands staring down at the floor while she talked. Sophy stood behind me with a hand on my shoulder in a gesture that was at once comforting and at that moment more than a bit sensual. I would have asked her to stop touching but these meetings have always been dull and dramatic at the same time so why not just go with it.

"Jack, thanks for joining us again. You know it is optional for you and by sitting in you are buying in. OK?"

"Yes."

"OK. So, we'll hear from Sophy who did most of the work to disrupt the network enough to get you out. Then Harry will tell the tale about the assassins and their mysterious disappearance. Sophy."

“Plan was executed. Jack was not.” Sophy tittered while Harry let out a laugh that appeared to rouse his otherwise over-relaxed posture.

Jerry was not amused. “That’s it?” Harry’s head shot up out of his hands.

“That was the executive summary. Someone had to wake up Harry.” I imagined Sophy smirked at Harry as I felt her nails dig into my shoulder just enough to make me lean forward. “OK. Full truth. We ran two ops at once. The first was to monitor Jack’s moment to moment condition and to prepare a well-timed second op to remove him at a time of our choosing. We knew he would be isolated in the harshest conditions as is the standard operating procedure of the secret court. Once we knew he was in for a twelve-hour torment we began our second op which involved the removal of sufficient personnel to allow our entry and exit to be unnoticed and thus without encountering any resistance. Once we knew the court was concluded we moved to the prison and extricated poor Jack from the clutches of the network.”

Jerry watched Sophy closely for signs that she was finished. Seeing no effort to say more, she turned to Harry.

“Harry, your turn. Tell us how our plan to destroy the assassination capability of the network was accomplished.” As she talked, I began to grasp the import of what was being discussed.

“Harry, you succeeded?” I said in an astonished voice.

“Yes. It was not as easy to do as to say but they are now disorganized. It was like scattering a nest of spiders. Once we disturbed their order it was over.

“Our technique was to send them after you, Jack, in ones and twos. We waited until you left Hawaii, and as they approached you, wherever you were, we removed their weapons and gave them the order to stand down.

Bernard and Ralph, you handled in a similar way. We might have learned it from you. It was a practical plan requiring very little manpower to have the greatest effect.

“We followed you around after La Paz. They came like clockwork. Once we took their gear including their comms they were shut down. No weapons, no comms, no ID. Without identifiable leadership who in turn could identify them they are out of the larger organization and have no way to return. The entire team is down and individually they are out. No lives were taken.”

As I listened, I realized that the first step had to be the decapitation of the network which meant the murder of my mother. I wanted to ask who had made that decision, but then I knew that they had done it together. Sophy must have removed me from the scene with her seductions so that I would not accidentally be in the way.

They were all looking at me as if asking if I had a question or a comment.

“Well, all I can say is I am free thanks to you. So much obliged.”

We dove into the ribs and bubbly, consuming it all. Once done we individually headed out into the sunshine for another day of leisure.

In the late afternoon I attempted to determine where we were by circumnavigating what I assumed was an island. After walking about two miles counterclockwise along the shoreline, I came to a twenty-foot high metal barrier that brought my walk to a halt. The wall ran out into a reef and the high surf. One would need to be geared up to get by this barrier.

When I returned no one asked where I had been. No one asked any questions about what I may have found. I just kept walking.

When I passed them, I was determined to walk clockwise and after two miles in the other direction I found the same type of fence. I returned to the

cabanas and said nothing about my meagre discovery though I had a hunch they knew what was happening.

The next morning, I woke early and found a compass in the junk drawer. With that I set out overland to see what was here. It was odd that I had no encounters on the beach. There were other cabanas so more people would be expected. As I walked my thought settled on a guess of what I would find ahead. The terrain rose towards a ridgetop and when I stood there, I saw what I expected to find.

We were in China. The horizon captured the heart of the mandarin model of architecture. It was unmistakable. What's more we were in a large and unpopulated prison with cabanas and access to what must have been the East China Sea and the Pacific. It helped to be a PhD in geography and mathematics. Harry would say we are in a protected environment where no one who might be looking could find us. Nevertheless, Harry and the others had misled me. This was not the Caribbean. Nicaragua had been my second choice.

I did not like being in China. I have no trouble with the people, but the form of government bothered me. The freedom I sought was not available here. At that moment I knew that all my patience would be required to escape this newest prison.

I found Harry on the beach. He was starrng off into the break water as the ocean waves crossed the reef that surrounded the cove ahead of him. I thought he might be asleep, until without turning to look, he called my name as I approached him from behind.

“You’re prescient Harry.”

“Nope I have a biker hat on, and the side mirrors betrayed you.”

“Oh. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Donno but have a seat. The time has come, to talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot— And whether pigs have wings.”

“It is hard to take you for anything but the walrus and me a clam.”

“Oyster.”

“OK. Oyster. Nonetheless I’ve seen a few things and have drawn a few conclusions. However, I have no opinion about the wings.” I smirked as I finished, and he laughed for reasons I could not figure out. Perhaps an inside joke.

“You have been doing the basic search and research. Let me attempt to recap. You have been north and south and west. There is a fence. There is a view of an old Chinese city. and you have concluded that the sea is not an obvious escape route. It will take a plane to get out. There are no other humans around. There are no guards. They are not needed.

“Is that about it?”

“Well done as usual.” I said. “So, what is the play?”

“Want to guess? Try your luck.”

“I figure there are a few or make that many secrets or, how to put it, agendas I do not share that are affecting me.”

“More information is needed. Is that it.”

“Yes.”

“There are no secrets, only disappointing truths that are better not told. I

assume you are concerned about your future. Stop me if I am wrong but since we met your life has become infinitely less secure as you have been running going on three years now and your mother was assassinated by persons as yet unidentified at least by you.” He paused and took a long sip on his drink as if he needed moisture to aid in talking.

I watched him and as he was about to speak again, I interrupted.

“Harry, if I may be forgiven for my bluntness but why do you not tell me who you are and what I have to do with anything you care about.”

“Are you angry?”

“Did I sound angry?”

“And you do now.”

“OK. Big reveal. I had my stash, my scotch, my ice cream habit. Now I am in China in a prison that, though in paradise, it is isolation. Not even another prisoner to talk to. I make you three as a form of social service organization helping new prisoners adjust.” I was shouting. “I am sorry.”

“Did that help?”

“No. This process would include a step where you fill in the blanks such as who and why. Is that hard?”

“Nope, not hard, impossible. The court is a secret court. The network is beyond secret. Like the court it too is nameless. It has no hall of heroes. All the heroes are nameless, anonymous and beyond the reach of everyone.”

“Since they are dead.”

“Caught me. Yes, that is what anonymous means.”

“Harry, I want to go away from all of this. You three are the thing itself. I am your slave who fetches or serves the time for your crimes. A patsy as the organized crime enthusiasts refer to people like me in relationships like this.”

“You are angry again.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Caught me again. Reality, rather than the truth, is the world we must live in. This is a calculated posture. Reality is a guarded space like no other and whatever truth is told sculpts this reality.”

“Knowledge is power.” He was back in his groove and I was bored. As soon as I said it, I wished I had not.

“Way too simplified. Powerful people act without knowledge, randomly as if it was an expression of their power to be ignorant and still have power.”

What was I thinking? Harry was acting the Buddha. Explaining my life to me as if I hadn’t walked through Mexico. As if I ... What did he say? “Do not fuck with Buddha.” I calmed down. I drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled through my nose.

“Good, Jack. There is nothing like a cleansing breath. Any yogi with half a heart surely will tell you, my friend. Release of the old and acceptance of the new and you might live forever.”

I wanted to know what was next then it dawned on me. No point in arguing with reality. Live in the now. Maybe it was the pot. I was becoming a naval gazer. An f’ing Hippie. I was lost. Academic mathematician to left-wing traitor in a Chinese prison was not a good look for a Connecticut resident.

“Do you know my fate?” I asked.

“What is the saying? Ah, ‘context clues point to death.’”

“Thanks. I guess. But you know as well as anyone that bullshit grows mushrooms. Magic mushrooms.”

“You are a dreamer, aren’t you? Look, in my view you were about to be a stroke victim, in an effort to save you I went to live in a box in Afghanistan where you quote found me. I did this to get your re-education started. Now you are one of the most able and mentally trained agents in existence and I know of which I speak. N’est c’est pas?”

“Oui mais pourquoi de cette façon?”

“Your pronunciation sucks. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“My mother. So, watch it. You know what happened to her.”

We laughed but I felt better. His narrative was an unlikely story but knowing Harry had taught me to accept the unexpected.

“Jack. That was funny.”

“Surprised you could laugh at it.”

“Irony is funny.”

“Irony is sad.”

“Jack, we are leaving in the next quarter hour. You are staying. There is a future, but you might not be part of it. Depends on what happens in China. If they need this place, you may be evicted. Can’t say how that would work so uncertainty is ahead. Beware.”

“Fuck you, Harry, and the horse you rode in on.”

“Fair enough. I’ll try not to miss you.” With that he rose from the lounge chair and with the remains of his umbrella drink he walked towards the landing strip to the north. I watched him go and be joined by the women who without so much as a wave proceeded north with him. A double prop plane dipped over the horizon and landed, taxied to them. Another five minutes and I was alone.

Chapter 35: Alone

I sat in the lounge chair and the view that spoke to eternity laid before me without other eyes to mask its beauty with their insistence on the nature of the infinite. Both the sky and its meaning were clear.

Some distance off the beach perhaps fifty miles away a dark cloud moved across the horizon. The rain it spilled was visible, a curtain of gray, from cloud to sea, backlit by the bold strikes of lightning that one could imagine tearing the silence but at this distance the sound was muted by the periodic roar of an equally stormy shore break.

After an hour I moved to the cabana in search of food. As I walked in the sand with that slow trudge we all know, I had time to consider that I had no idea how food was delivered much less the umbrella drinks. I noticed something I had never seen before. Tire tracks from an ATV ran along the beach. I followed them to the cabana's door where a set of boot prints showed the path to the door. I entered.

On the dining table was a white 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper. It was a letter handwritten in outline form entitled 'Secrets Harry won't tell you, but I will.' It was signed Jerry.

"Learn. Never rest. You are drugged every day. It's in the solids and liquids. You are forced to sleep so that you can be resupplied. The umbrella drink liquid is in the fridge. If you fast two days, you can stay awake and watch how it's done. I will be back for you asap. Ta. Jerry."

It was early afternoon. I grabbed the compass and headed for the southern fence. I followed the ATV track. It led to what must have been a gate. I retreated to the nearest overhead cover in the first grove of trees. Scanning the wall and the surrounding trees I saw no cameras. I did see a tree perch. It was two planks between two branches. More than nothing. I returned to the cabana and ate the dinner. The next day I would drink the umbrella juice.

Whatever was in the food was in the drink. I experimented by not eating and just drinking. I did the reverse: I ate but did not drink. Then I did neither. The last was the only way out of the sleep.

Each morning I set out for the wall. I started out at the gate to the south and moved clockwise. It was rough going as there were no paths. I scanned above for electronics. I saw none. As I moved, I made estimates of distance and when I returned to the cabana, I made a map. I was halfway around the wall when I discovered a natural spring. I walked back to the cabana to get a container to collect water. The next day I tested it. In two days, I waited for the resupply and, like two Asian Santas bringing gifts in the middle of the night, they were there with food and drink for their only prisoner.

Another week passed. I finished my wall mapping, found another water source and then, a real score, a stand of banana trees. I began to have ideas of freedom the planning took all day for the next few weeks.

In this phase I settled into the lounge chair every morning and always with an umbrella drink for looks. I kept a small pad of paper near with the compass and my watch. I stayed out as late as I could waiting for moonrise. In a few days I had built a tidal chart and moon phase calendar. I was able to predict a major low tide, but it was for new moon night, and I could not visually confirm it. I was there for the next one visible in the day light. It was there. I was ready.

In this phase I began to swim. On the high surf days, I challenged the tide by swimming toward the breakwater against the whitewater that invaded the cove several times a minute. By the time my science had proved reliable my body was ready to go. I picked a date. I switched to spring water and bananas three days in advance of it.

My math said that at 4:30 AM, on my date, the tide would be at a severe low. When the tide was an hour from its minimum and still running out to

sea, I grabbed a small pack I had made to carry water and two bananas and dove into the saltwater. Twenty minutes of effortless swimming and I was beyond the reef into the open currents of what I guessed was the East China Sea. The water's current was going south. I went south until I cleared the wall and then headed for shore. The beach seemed friendly and in a few minutes there I was standing outside the fence, but still in China.

After checking my compass, I plotted a path to the gate and stood outside as the Santas came. There was a two-stroke code and the gate opened. They sped through the door which remained open. I inspected it to see if it had an inner lock or why did they leave it open and did they do this every night? I saw no inner way out but, in a few moments, I was able to close the gate behind them.

Against my better judgement I went back into the water, took the tide out and swam north against current, into the reef as the swells moving inland. I was back in the lounge chair when an ATV came ripping into my space on the beach.

I looked up and saw two Chinese men speaking rapidly to me about what I did not know. Even if I could guess right, I could not confirm it. I acted as if it was all normal. After they yelled at me, they went to their rig and pulled a cooler out. One went to get beach chairs and in ten minutes we were all lined up on the beach watching the sun rise and sipping umbrella drinks. I had captured new prisoners.

I called them Alpha and Beta. They called me 'Hey You.' One of them had worked near English speakers before and had been telling a story to the other when I heard, 'Hey You.' They both laughed and I had a new nickname.

I noticed the ATV was gone on the first night. I was sleeping and missed the action. But there had been a food and drink delivery and the ATV was gone.

Alpha and Beta ate the food, as I did, and drank the umbrella drinks, as I did.

Before long we were like old friends. The food supply expanded on the second night as if by magic. We had plenty.

Since Harry et al had abandoned me, I had figured out how to escape from the prison into China, but since China was approaching the definition of detention that might not have been a biggie. How to escape from China safely was the next goal.

Alpha and Beta turned out to be fishermen, if I understood their mimicking of who or what they were. They seemed to know I was a soldier. At the beginning of the second week together, Alpha drew a map in the sand in front of his lounge chair as he and Beta discussed in Chinese their experience as a navigator of a fishing boat. Not understanding even one word left room for me to use my imagination.

What I saw was a map of China with currents along the coast to the south and back north again in the outer currents to Taiwan and freedom.

I planned to make another late-night swim to the south. The night of the perfect tide I was three days into spring water and bananas. The swim was perfect. I was trained. The tide ran out. The offshore current was to the south again.

The beach was as I remembered it. I took the path to the gate. I stood on the road. The gate was open. I turned away and started at a slow run down the road away from the prison. I was alert to the approach of the ATV, but it did not pass me until after I reached the first village. It was still dark. I found a good place to hide. A good place allows for cover and a vantage point to watch the town wake up.

When the ATV went by on its return run, I was beyond discovery. I was safe but the idea of following the ATV crossed my mind to be tabled for another day. Safety is a valued condition. About 7 AM a noticeable bustle grew to hide the sounds of the birds who are everywhere before anyone else. The

first place I saw humans was a tea shop with outdoor seating. It was filling fast.

As the tea shop filled with customers, I decided to get close. I was wearing a pair of shorts to swim in and had carried a typical tourist shirt to wear once I hit the beach. I thought I could pass. I found a seat. I ordered oolong. The waiter brought it.

I blew across the cup trying to cool it for a taste test. Every once in a while, one feels the world around them because some sense for survival sent a warning to the brain saying breath slowly and prepare for danger. I did not look up from the steam of the tea teasing my nose.

Then he was standing next to me. "Harry," I said.

"Jack." It was indeed Harry. "Don't drink that. In China everyone gets the same food just different amounts. It is all drugged."

"Thanks." I said. "But I like it. I have never slept better in my life." I was not lying. He was not amused. He ordered tea for himself.

"You want to know the plan or go on the surprise; hope I live? I am guessing the later, but you might surprise me." I waited for the waiter to deliver Harry's tea. He let his focus migrate to the tea.

"I am not leaving here." I said. He was stirring his tea, staring into his cup. At these words from me he stopped and looked at me. He gave a disgusting sigh and shook his head.

"I told her this was the wrong place. You wouldn't leave." He stood up and asked me to stand with him. "I knew it: you are in better shape than me. How far can you run? Two miles? That's what it will take."

"What do you mean?"

“Watch and learn.” He pulled a pistol from his waist pack and fired eight rounds into the air. Then he yelled, “Follow. Keep up.” And ran off to the south.

I watched for a few seconds as the people near us were getting ready to defend themselves and I fled after him, into the woods and away from the town and the prison. In ten minutes, we were in a small cove open to the sea, and there was a speed boat with a crew of two – Jerry and Sophy.

We ran into the water and the boat jetted forward almost too fast for me to hold on but fast enough to beat the two cops who were chasing us. I sat in the cabin away from the spray and looked at what had become of me.

Wordlessly, I sat watching my wife and seductress guide us to the safety of a submarine. As I clamored out of the boat onto the ship, I watched a thunderstorm crashing into the water about five miles away. It was the lightning bolts that caused a sudden, glimpse of truth, a flash of inspiration that broke down the structures of ignorance and false reasoning I had relied on. My so-called comfort was based on an inadequate foundation of false thought, belief and action. My thoughts clarified. I relaxed for a few breaths. Tears ran down my cheek. I was free of the prison and free of China.

That was what Harry et al intended, but I didn't do that.

When he ran, he indeed went south. I followed the path north back to the gate. I opened it and entered leaving it open. I ran into the grove and sat on the two planks in the tree to watch the gate and what happened next.

I heard people approach the gate but from my vantage I saw no one. Once they withdrew there was no sound. I returned to the cabana. Alpha and Beta were waiting for me in the lounge chairs. I flopped down next to them and fell asleep.

When I woke Alpha was hard at work on a new map. This one showed Taiwan as the target and a path following the tidal and onshore currents south enough to turn east to connect with the stronger offshore current that drove north to the skimming the northwest coast of Taiwan.

As I watched him draw with a what might have been a meter stick, he hummed in Chinese. My grasp of the language is near zero. But it was his arm waving and pointing at the map and then the sea that told me how it could be. An idea was forming but other than inspiring me to train harder it had yet to crystalize.

I swam every day. I watched the currents and the temperatures. It would be a long swim. Depending on how the currents go the entire trip could be 250 kms. That is six times the English Channel. Context clues point to death as the man said.

The next date for a good tide and moonlight was fast approaching. I had to decide how I wanted this to go. There were options. Some were more life threatening than others. But then it depends how you want to live that determines the meaning of risk. Free was the goal. Anything less is death. Therefore, there is no risk just pick your poison as my mother used to say.

I drew lines over Alpha's map and decided to test my mettle. On the night before, at dusk, way before my 10:30 AM launch, a twin-engine propeller driven plane sailed over the hill and onto the strip to the north. The plane taxied near the lounge chairs and out popped you-know-who onto the beach.

They brought an entire picnic with chilled bottles of bubbly. It was like old times with notable exceptions.

Once the niceties had passed and Alpha and Beta had introduced themselves the food and drink were consumed to great merriment. My prisoners were in great spirits expounding on their life histories. Sophy

translated. She spoke modern Chinese. I was beyond surprised.

The subject of conversation switched from fishing to escaping. Alpha and Beta were sleepy and excused themselves. The four of us were not under the influence of the local food and drink. It was dark. We crawled up the sand to the cabana and sat around the table.

Harry had a strange smirk on his face. He said. "Sorry. Ah. We have four. Who has the cards?"

No one laughed or even smiled. Jerry sighed deeply. "You are never going to grow up. Can we get serious? Here is our task. Jack needs out. He is considering a suicide mission for his personal freedom. Can't we get this done without loss of life?"

My intuition alarms were on maximum danger. These three people were as close to me as my mother which in part explains my willingness to forgive them murdering her and framing me. Why would I want to be with them and what the hell were they thinking they doing here? As I thought, the questions multiplied.

In the background I could hear Sophy's seductions as she explained some situation or other. Her whispered kisses and her promises of flesh floated by my ears. I did not take them seriously.

I thanked them for the good food and drink. I shook the hands of each one. Smiled into their faces and walked first to the cabana and then, in my swim gear and backpack, I walked back past them and into the dark sea under a rising full moon.

As I let the tide draw me towards the opening in the reef, I reviewed my simple plan. By my reckoning I had about a half hour to leave and return before the surf would return and make my return journey difficult.

The moon had risen so that its image was reflected in every wavelet that disturbed the smoothness of the cove. Beautiful, I thought it was a good sign. My plan was simple I would swim through the shore current to the channel's current. I would use my experience to gauge how fast the shore current was and how fast the channel current. At first. I would be going south and then as I entered the channel current, I would be going north at what I hoped would be a faster rate. Once I had returned, a little math would tell me how long it will take to make the journey to Taiwan.

"Jack," It was Harry who was swimming alongside me. "Your plan sucks."

"You do not know what it is." I rolled over onto my chest and stroked through the opening into the East China Sea. He must have turned back because about fifteen minutes later the plane buzzed me as it returned them to wherever they came from. I hoped it was our last meeting. I was three minutes from the cove opening when a small sailboat coming from the north joined me. It was Alpha. He pulled me aboard.

He did not turn into the cove, instead we continued south. As we sailed, he pulled a piece of a map from his coat. It was of the East China Sea. A few lines were added showing the currents and a path from the cove to Taiwan. His Chinese was brutally fast, but, as before, his gestures taught me what I needed to know. When he understood I understood he offered his hand as if to ask if that was what I wanted. I took it. With luck we both would escape from mainland China.

Alpha proved to be a good sailor and a better co-conspirator. As we moved inshore to the south we may have been out of radar and as we move north in the channel current, we ducked in with a line of tankers headed to Taipei. We were never confronted. We made a landing at a small village fifty miles shy of Taipei.

"What's the name of this town." I asked.

Alpha answered, “Nanliao.”

“Where will you go next?”

“Back to the prison.”

“I see.” He had never spoken to me in English before. He had an accent I couldn’t place. Rather than make a point of it, I decided I knew what the answer was. He worked for Harry or Jerry. Alpha saved me from the ‘death’ they had predicted.

After my experience at the US-Mexico border I had planned ahead for a paperless existence. When I walked into the only bank in the village, I gave them the password to a cloud account that had my virtual ID and I had access to funds, virtual passport, etc.

I hired a cab to the Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport. I stared at the board of departures for five minutes until I found what I wanted: a flight to Hawaii.

I fasted for the 12 hours it took to get to Oahu. Airport and airline food are too difficult to digest. A cab ride and I was in a bed for a long nap to awaken at 4 AM with a massive hunger. I rose and fled back to the airport and a flight to Seattle, Washington. I knew they would not be there. I supposed they would try to arrange a snatch in broad daylight. I prepared for that.

When one flees as if they are being followed, chased even, every moment is exciting. In Seattle I found a Vietnamese restaurant near my hotel with outdoor seating. The food was to die for, and the view was almost a 360 degree. My table was close to the intersection of three roads. I was a sitting duck and in the range of at least four cameras I could identify. I ate in peace knowing that if they tried, I might have some footage to identify them as the kidnappers.

This was when I began to carry a lightweight system to record and broadcast my audio and video reality to an account of my own that was encrypted. Evidence, I thought, that might rid me of them.

I bought a biker's hat.

When I felt safe, I booked flights to Europe with Amsterdam in mind. As I boarded the aircraft waiting behind others doing the shuffle down the aisle I felt as if I was at long last alone.

Chapter 36: The End

I lived in peace. There were no threats that I could detect. Soon enough I felt safe and much of my alert system was relaxed. Face it. No matter where I am, the ones I seek to avoid, are still moving out there while I am still. They could access me in a matter of hours, and I would only know they were coming when I saw them. My intuition was telling me Jerry was protecting me from Harry's obsession of watching me run from him. I stopped and maybe he grew bored with his game.

Two years passed and I was ready to begin my life anew. I travelled to Connecticut by plane and cab. After checking into my hotel, I took a cab to my old neighborhood. I noted that Yankees was still in business. I stood outside the door of what had been my home. I pressed the doorbell and stepped back to see what would happen. By habit I looked around for cameras. There had been none but in seconds of eyeballing I found two. Someone was watching. My spine tingled. Nothing happened so I went away on foot.

I walked past Yankees and soon stood where Sophy once lived. I saw no one around. I rang the bell at the door and a young woman I did not know answered.

"Oops, sorry. Looking for an old friend. Sorry to bother." I turned and as I did she spoke.

"You are Jack. Right?" She smiled. "Sophy warned me about you, in a kind way. Said you were a long-lost friend and that I could tell you she is in Virginia now hard at work as always. That's all I know."

I thanked her and left. As I walked across the University campus I wondered if it wasn't all just over. No more running. No one chasing me. I could hope.

I rented a car and wandered around the Northeast looking for good

restaurants and comfortable hotels. I went back to my old haunts in Old Quebec City. I hung out at L'Oncle Antoine writing at a table inside. The people were perfect for characters. I studied the wait staff and bartenders looking for clues. Close to my loft, I felt safe in this 300 year-old stone cavern.

This neighborhood is one of the most romantic places on earth. I have fallen in 'love' a dozen times. The tourists walked by in droves; many holding hands. The shopkeepers were generous with their smiles. I sat in the solitude of my new home and wrote everything you have read so far.

One afternoon I was preparing for a special neighborhood costume party when much to my dismay Sophy stopped by. She rang me on the house phone by code from the front entrance name list and I answered. "Ca va?"

She said. "It's me. Sophy. Let me in. I need your help."

"I'll come down and fetch you." I could have given her my room number and buzzed her through the security door but then she would be roaming around the building and finding her could be very difficult.

She saw me as I exited the elevator and was enthusiastically waving as if I were her favorite sister.

She was her most beautiful and most vulnerable self ever. She hugged me hello. I commented on her fur lined coat. She apologized for wearing it. It was almost 27 C. She commented on my outfit too. Like old times. As we navigated the elevator and the halls, I decided to keep our discussion somewhat public. Rather than at my place, I sat her on the balcony near my loft. It overlooked a public square. It was comfortable, the weather agreeable.

"Jack, they are coming for me."

“Who?”

“The network. They rebuilt.”

“Why you?”

“They are after you.”

“You brought them here?”

“Probably.”

“They sent you. You could not find me by yourself, and Harry and Jerry would have come before you. You are part of the network.”

“Jack.”

“I am not involved in your drama. I am a lonely writer, not an assassin. Not a member of anything.” She got nervous and I became wary. There was no way a casual listener could decipher our talk. No one was within three floors of us.

“You are my last chance.” By then I realized no matter what I wanted to do I was in for another round of catch me if you can.

“Sophy. Tell me the story.”

“Love triangles don’t work.”

“Jerry got angry?”

“Harry felt left out.”

“Oh. That’s funny. So, Harry turned the network onto you in revenge? Tacky.”

“Fraid so.” We stared out into the square below.

“Who is out there? Who did you bring?” My voice was hitting a high whine or maybe a growl.

“Don’t be mad at me.” Sophy flashed her puckered lips as if she was about to say please. I held my poker face as steady as I could.

“Why not? You are messing with my solitude. I should care. I should have hung up on you.”

“You should realize that you got two years of happiness while we or should I just say I ran from my own shadow.”

“Been there.”

“That’s what I mean. I was there with you for some part of it, but you were surviving while I was ...”

“Conniving.”

She was looking at me with more interest than I remembered was her habit. Sophy was a true romantic.

“Jack, you are the man I told you I wished you were, back in Amsterdam. You look sexy.”

“Ah, the ice cream blob is gone. Left it in the jungle or the desert or maybe China. That was a great time in my life. I was as alone as I ever remember being. Food was scarce. I saw ice cream a few times in La Paz, but it was too regressive to attract me.” I was suddenly missing the way Sophy, and I were during the days in Barcelona.

“Do you ever think about me?” Her eyes were blinking. She was asking for help. She would seduce me to get it. I wanted calmness and she did not offer that.

I had from time to time thought about her. As I approached a departure gate for instance. I considered the recollection a repeated warning sent to my temporal brain from the depths of wherever survival instincts live.

“Not really. I still have sexual energy running through me. I try to let it go in favor of other things like finishing my book. I am near the end and things are very tense. Maybe finish inside a week. Exciting.”

“That’s great honey, I can hardly wait to read it.”

Her hand did that thing it did again as it suddenly appeared on top of my thigh. The reason we were sitting on a balcony two stories shy of my floor was for the vantage point the view offered. One reason I was in this particular building other than its proximity to Uncle Tony’s was the opportunities for escape. As I had learned escape routes are attack routes as well. The network would send people who could climb walls. The balconies were easy to climb floor to floor. I waited for them as she talked.

“Sophy, how can I help you?”

“How did you escape? Teach me.”

“I figure we have less than ten minutes left until it will be my pleasure indeed my necessity to escape again. We could travel together. Or we could wait for Bernard and Ralph or whoever. My idea is to wait. I doubt Harry has told them I can kill with my bare hands. Don’t think he knows. My Saseong taught me how to attack a gunman from 20 feet away and win every time. Indiana Jones should be jealous.”

“Let’s escape.” She sounded ready to go.

“Not as easy as it sounds unless you have a way to escape.” She appeared lost. “Look, there is a trick that Harry taught me. As long as they are not there waiting for you, then you are winning.”

“So far I am ahead then.”

“Harry thought that the best way to travel is light, without weapons. Saying that, I wonder what is under your coat.”

“A small caliber machine pistol with a 30-round magazine. A few hand grenades. What have you got?”

“A seventh-degree black belt. I earned that while I was in high school.” She looked quizzically for a few seconds. “Sophy lose the coat. Leave it here. They will only climb to the first balcony and enter there. They love stairs so take the elevator. Oops getting ahead. You were followed by GPS so throw everything you are wearing off the balcony. Keep your undies. Take the elevator. Get off in the lobby. Go through the doors turn right go one and a half blocks. There is a bar. Go in say Jack sent me and they will hide you in a storage closet. I will find you.”

She did everything I asked.

I waited for who was pursuing her. It wasn't Bernard or Ralph.

I wasn't Jack Martel either. My beard and long hair, my excessive brownness made me invisible to the pair of climbers who burst out of the stairwell on my floor. I was standing there. I was wearing clothes from India and a turban from Iran. These are expensive clothes. The jewelry must have blinded them.

They were well dressed for their tasks as well. They were in green jumpsuits worn by tactical squads with all the pockets for all the gear including two sets of handcuffs each. I had debated whether or not to take them to my

room first or not and decided they might become smelly. I acted. When the fight was over, I pulled their inert bodies hands and legs cuffed into the elevator and left them there for another to find. As I pulled them in, I lectured them.

“Always pay attention to your surroundings. Never underestimate an unlikely foe.”

I recycled all their toys in the proper dumpster and went for a beer. I had taken no time to change before I was standing at the bar asking Patrik if he had seen a friend of mine.

“And who are you? If I may ask.” Patrik grinned.

“Jack. I don’t look that different.” He just listened and shook his head side to side.

“What was your favorite ice cream parlor?” He’d heard my story. I probably had told him twice by now. Sophy would definitely know. Patrik loved games and this fit into his sporting self. He showed his tongue as he mimed licking a cone.

“Yankees.” I said. He grimaced as if he had lost a bet.

“You win. Follow me.”

She was in the storage room under a small blanket, sitting on a short wall of bottled beer. She was definitely cute in her very too cute undies. She needed something to wear. I took off my turban which could double as a summertime wrap to cover a bikini. It was flaked with gold and the fine embroidery was of red cranes bathing in a sparkling pool.

I pulled my jewelry and coat off. Patrik had lent them to me anyway. He was glad to get them back. The long sleeve shirt underneath was enough for me.

As we walked to the Saint Lawrence and the ferry, the moments slowed to a dream pace.

We boarded and soon were looking at the opposite shore as we approached Lévis. As far as I could tell she had exactly no possessions. Her coat was her everything. She could not carry much in her lingerie.

I thought about abandoning her, but I didn't want to return to Vieux Quebec with the network on my tail. Only thing I needed was my laptop and access to my book on the cloud. A new computer was available to me in the next city south of our position.

For the next two hours we rode in silence in a cab headed down highway 73 to Sandy Bay and the beautiful State of Maine, USA. Which offered us little comfort.

We crossed the border separately. We both pled a poverty of documentation but we each had a global virtual passport. We passed out of Canada into the USA. No big deal. A cab took us the 3-hour drive to Bangor International Airport.

We found seats on a regional flight that gave us time to re-clothe ourselves to prepare for the big city. She ended up with a sports t-shirt, a NY Yankee baseball cap and a pair of very baggy shorts with BANGOR across her butt in large letters.

We were booked to Portland. I waited at the gate while she went to the toilet. After ten minutes boarding began. I needed a laptop and Portland had the best deals. I boarded. A standby passenger took her place at the window. I was not surprised she had parted company with me. Five hours of silence and no touching had been enough for her. I had noticed a plane back to Quebec City would depart twenty minutes before our booked flight to Portland. She could depart to Europe from there. I wished her good luck, silently.

While the plane waited in Portland for another plane to back away from our gate, it dawned on me that she had flushed me from Canada to the US where I was more visible. I began to suspect Harry would be behind every bush until he 'caught' me.

I was not going to run this time. I was prepared to stay above the fray. I wished myself good luck.

He wasn't at the airport. I took a cab to Best Buy. He wasn't there either. Me and my new computer found lodging in a chain hotel. I had studied escaping from various designs. Exteriors that are accessible by climbers I opted out of. I found a design like my Quebec condo that offered a narrow corridor that made the odds of hand to hand in my favor. The lack of space meant a team could only bring one to the fight at a time. I trained for hallway battles. In any case I came to prefer one design above the others. I went there. Trade secret. I felt safe.

The phone rang after I had been there for two hours. It wasn't management asking after my happiness.

"Hello."

"Jack. Jerry."

"Ah, my darling wife. How can I help you?"

"Looking for Sophy."

"Lost her this morning. I have grown too boring to bear."

"No time to joke. Where is she?"

"My guess. Happily running ahead of you. I failed because I am not running

anymore.”

“What are you doing?”

“An odd thing called a private life. And you.”

“You know damn well.”

“You’re in love.”

“Where is she?”

“If I wanted to know, I would call the network and ask about her there.”

“You aren’t curious?”

“Nope. Just waiting for the right moment to go home and avoid getting caught up in the aftermath.”

“Of what? Is she OK?”

“OK? Ah. I have no opinions other than she reminds me of me when Harry was first making me run and maybe later in Asia somewhere. Dog ragged.”

“You are not helping.”

“Never meant to. What do I win?” She hung up.

Chapter 36: Back Home

I wrote a poem about Sophy. It was supposed to be a little tidbit to start this chapter. I removed it from this edition. She sent me a last text message from a cellphone. Might not have been hers by the look of it. She was no longer her old self.

“Jack, I have caught your dis-ease. It is a very big world. Happy trails. S.”

My poem was a teary lament for a pained soul. Now she sounded free. Why remember the old.

My loft was not entered in my absence. I had installed a camera under my sofa. It pans the room and a sound level meter that analyzes the sounds matching for footsteps and recording those events. If a human had been in there I would know.

I remember the day as a day I could not tell how much to wear to be comfortable. I checked the weather forecast and still could not tell. So, I opened the window. I did this many times daily when I took a toke of the Wowie. Take a puff. Open the window and blow it out.

I stuck my head out. I looked down. Five floors below someone was looking up and waving. I didn't want to know. I closed the window. I pulled my phone cord free to kill the door buzzer.

My computer called. I forgot it was set to be the alt for the phone.

“Damn.” I said.

I plugged the phone back in and answered.

“This better be good.”

“Or else?”

“Yes.” I had recognized her voice. Jerry. “502. Here is the buzzer.”

I opened the door and sat at my desk. She noted the open door and walked in as she closed the door.

“Don’t you feel at home.” I said.

She had thrown her coat on the chair and sat down. “Any Champagne?”

“Not my habit.” I picked up the phone and called Bou de Bio and in ten minutes it was in her hand. Did she thank me?

She was mumbling about her crazy life when Anthony arrived with the wine. Ever gracious he opened a bottle, found a glass and handed it full to her. She emptied it and signaled for more. He served her, then left us with a wave.

I wasn’t listening closely to her. I sat at my computer, typing like a madman trying not to become part of her current life in any manner of speaking.

“Hey, you listening?” I turned. “Look, I owe you an apology.” She said before she filled the glass again. I stood and waited for it wondering why this amazing event was due. Fearlessly she remained focused on her wine. There was some humor in it.

I went back to my typing. She never finished her thought. After an appropriate amount of time, I broke the silence.

“Do you have a car?”

“No. I took a cab from the YQB. Thanks for the bubbly. I am an addict.”

“No shit. But on another note, are you here to cross the river?” She looked

at me and I could see her eyes were roaming around the room. Alcohol had that effect on her. When I was first attracted to her, I fell for her brain. She is a pleasant person to look at, especially if one is attracted to women. Her eyes always seemed harsh to me. I assumed her mind was working as her eyes rolled. I might have been correct.

“Is it my turn?”

“Yes, if you have to ask then that is why you are here. I can say that it may not be your last journey. I have not read that part of the book. Won’t until I can see it myself.”

“What?”

“The path forward from the Tower.” I was enjoying this dialogue that fit into the theme of my book. I walked to the window opened it, took a toke, blew it out, closed the window, turned back and saw that she was shaking the empty bottle.

“More, please.”

“It’s in the fridge. Help yourself.” My brain was burning with my new reality. I needed time to myself to write and to have a beer. I thought of just abandoning her in my condo to her soon to be passed out prelude to a hangover. Then it struck me. I had a plastic half liter cup. The wine fit and I used it as a lure to move her to the door.

“Jerry, get your stuff if we walk starting now, we can see the other side before the fog comes in.”

She staggered down Cote de la Montagne to the shore. The sight of the river might have reminded her of some scene from her youth. She began spinning very slowly as if she was trying to capture all of the view for her memory. No, she was searching for cameras and signs of Harry. That was what I was

doing.

The ride across was as usual. The fog came up as we were in passage. It was beautiful in its way. The dock approached as I was counselling her as to her next steps including the word 'cab,' the number '73' and a 'Happy Trails' to boot.

She left carrying my plastic cup with a wave but no "Good-bye." That would have been too much to hope for.

I went back home.

As the ferry re-crossed the river to Quebec, I wondered if there would ever be an end to it. I looked back across the river, but the fog had now become high enough above the river to hide Lévis from view. When I sat in front of my computer again: I googled Levis. That was the name of an apostle before his name changed to Matthew.

I wrote a poem about Jerry and her trip across for her transition. It was too private, so I put it with the one about Sophy now that both of them had moved on.

My next move was to call the market and order enough food for a week and another bottle of Champagne. Once it was delivered, I locked my door and waited for Harry.

It was his turn.

Chapter 38: Home

Harry knew I would prepare. So, I prepared. Harry knew I would gather data and plot my escape from any trap. I did that, too.

One of my urban survival practices is to make friends with the shopkeepers on my block. I was drawn to restaurants and to bars which I had found were the perfect environments for a writer. I would take my laptop with me and eat and drink while I worked. That's how I met Patrik and Anthony. And that's how I met Nikki.

Since I began this book, I knew it would read like a travelogue. On the road is where one finds the most interesting people. When I met Nikki, I was on the road or only recently settled. I was curious about who my new neighbors were and there she was living across the street from me.

She owned an art shop across from L'Oncle Antoinnes. She asked me why I was there, and I told her my cover story.

"I am a writer."

"What do you write?"

"Romantic murder stories. My next one is called The Last Kiss." I described a book about an old man or woman, and as death came near people who visited would see the mistletoe over the bed and give the dying a last kiss. Each kiss set off a different memory in the dying person of a first kiss they experienced while still vital. I said I was collecting stories, and would she tell me hers.

"What do you want to know?"

"You have been in love. Do you remember the first kiss?"

“The love of my life? I remember the first kiss and everything else. He stood in front of me, and I knew if I kissed him, he would change my life. I kissed him. And I was right.” I watched her lips and her eyes as she spoke, I could see her story on her face. I might have fallen for her then.

I only started visiting her shop once we were introduced at the bar. She likes wine. She likes wine while she works in her store. We hit it off right away. I made many more friends on Rue Sainte Pierre, all shopkeepers. If I get separated from this place Nikki is the one I would struggle back to see if for no other reason than her sparkling eyes when she laughs.

Time passed. And as if I needed to repeat errors my awareness waned until I was not ready for much.

The last chapters of the Hesse’s book were in my memory, but not from having read them. My memory was of my own imaginings of what might have been the ending. Would Siddhartha survive? Was he Buddha? What did the Boatman and the river signify?

Harry had chosen to appear as one personality after another except for the Boatman. I surmised that he would soon captain the ferry itself and so I took timed walks around the ferry landing to see if I could see him. After several days I gave up and resumed writing the ending to my book. That’s what I did for the snow season.

Then it was a day in spring, and the spring rains often flood a street or two and always Cote de la Montagne which nearly surrounded my view can become a small river. It was late and if I wanted to have a beer at home, I needed to walk three blocks to the gas station. I had been mumbling about my perceived need for a half hour before I dressed to go. As I left my building I turned left and there he was. He held up a six pack in one hand and a bottle of Champagne in the other.

It’s hard to admit it but I was glad to see him. My waiting ended. We would

go to my place. He would open his bottle and relax on the couch. I sat at my computer where my book was done, not quite done, but brought up to the moment at least.

“How did you know to bring beer?” I asked him.

“You talk while you work. You were saying you wanted a bottle of beer. No one has that around here at this hour except the gas station. Here I am.”

“Ah, Jerry set me up. I hoped I was wrong to suspect her but what the hell. Here you are. Like clockwork.”

Harry always brought a chemical or two to add to my blood stream. Of course, I began to feel fatigued. I hoped it was a Wowie overload and had a glass of water. I had not considered how at ease Harry acted. There was something I had not prepared for.

“Actually no. You are wrong. The two brave agents who became victims of your flying fists and feet gave me your room number. Word to the wise, this place is a sieve. I laughed at your lock. Your camera was clever. It took me all of a day to make it forget I was here. Almost beat me. I brought the beer because this place is fully mic’ed. I have been listening for days. You lead a boring life.”

“I expected nothing less from you. What’s the point?”

“Just doing the cleanup.”

“As in your act or as in bloody mess cleanup.”

When his meaning became unclear, he had finished a glass of wine. I wondered if that change could be the result of so little so fast and so soon. I took it as a ploy to balance his poor fighting position. A stuffed couch is hard to get out of. Behind me on the wall was my Geom. This sword is too sharp

for bone to stop. He had no weapon visible.

I was thinking back to Indiana Jones. I watched several on a flight to Paris as I recall. A gigantic warrior wielding two such swords and blocking Indiana's path was dispatched with a piece of metal one 8th the length of one sword. And from a distance. It was a shocking moment in cinematograph. I was shocked the first time I saw that scene. That was a quality lesson for me.

My view of the movie series was that Jones with his many talents and weapons was inserted into a more primitive society to beat them all because he was from a superior culture. A form of proof of the 'truth' of racism and a win in the culture war. In a way I am an Indiana Jones character but instead of beating them I want to join them – the ones who don't buy the raft of shit I just described. It is hard for a whitey to admit it's all a raft. Don't worry just get over it.

All that explains why I did not grab the Geom to delimb him and instead reached out a hand to pull him from the couch. He accepted and I think I saw a smile but if not, who cares?

"We going somewhere?"

"We are. We are going out for a drink and maybe food. This loft is too small for more than me. I get nervous and my feet get a little jumpy. I'll introduce you to Patrik. He will love you. Believe me." It was 16 C outside. A light sweater, maybe a hat. No gloves.

Once you leave my building and stand in the street if you have a single romantic bone in your body, you feel it. The love flowing around this place is everywhere in the spring. Even in the snow it hit me as we landed on the sidewalk. We had a moment of camaraderie of brothers hugging and patting each other. He was happy and started commenting on the flower boxes that had suddenly appeared once the snow was gone.

The light frisk went unnoticed. He was packing so a plan to assist his disarming was in order. By the time we reached Uncle Tony's we were fast friends. I even got a dig in about his losing Jerry to Sophy. He laughed and made some drunken joke about never trusting anybody with one's life and especially a married woman.

I have majored in dive bars. Uncle Tony's has a streak of dive but is saved by the amazing architecture. Two tubes built from roughly quarried stone. In one end of one is the bar itself. The rest is seating. The music is loud and rock. The food is bar food in the Quebecoise manner. The staff were perfect for my needs.

"Now remember Patrik is my friend so don't get rough with him and he'll keep you high all day. Sort of like heaven."

We entered. I watched Harry's eyes as he began to understand what I saw in Uncle Tony's. We found seats. Patrik was behind the bar and my favorite woman of the moment was waitressing.

"Jack." He screeched. "You're back." Patrik was a product of the Culture de la Taverne that provided an atmosphere of party to the neighborhood. The jobs at the bars and taverns were filled by young energetic and often eccentric people of all persuasions. Patrik was decidedly gay and proud of it. He also loved intrigue and had somehow caught that that was my bent as well.

L'Oncle Antoine is an unusual place. It takes some looking at to feel you know where you are. It is my favorite place in the world. I have cousins working there. Patrik came around the bar to greet us.

"I want you to meet my friend. Harry. Patrik."

"Enchanté." Said Patrik with his usual large smile.

“Pleasure.” Replied Harry with an air of grimness that surprised me.

“He wants Champagne. I want a lager.” Patrik fled to jump into action.

“I need a bathroom.” Harry was pointed in the direction. I followed close enough to see him descend into the area. Then I returned to Patrik’s realm. The drinks were on the table.

“Need your help, Bro. Up for it?”

“Yeah. De quoi avez-vous besoin?”

“He needs to be lying down soon in the storage locker.”

“Date rape?”

“No don’t do that. He is a killer.”

“I meant the drug. Looks OK in Champagne. Next glass.”

“Good for me. Big time reward for this one.”

“Ne me ment pas.”

“Jamais.”

When Harry returned from below, he seemed more himself than I would have thought knowing how much he had of the wine. He sat. Next, I knew his glass of wine had been upset and a small catastrophe was upon him. I figured he did that to avoid being poisoned by his friends. Smart move. Patrik rushed over to try to make it all right. There was a flurry of activity and then a new glass of Champagne was brought. He quickly coifed his wine and asked for another. He seemed happier.

“I like this place. It is so odd with the frontier interpretation of European architecture. A stone city like this one is a frightening reminder of crueler times.”

I said I agreed and launched into a description of the network’s block-walled jail that housed me for an as yet undetermined amount of time. As I talked his eyes closed as if he were resting them. His head slowly lowered until he was asleep on the tabletop. I finished my beer.

A dim memory of Sophy’s erudition on Siddhartha held a view of the river and the fog, the boatman and the passenger. She left me with the impression that it was always dark near the river. The Boatman had a lantern. That the passenger had to approach the Boatman and request to be taken across. There was one more requirement that had to be met and that was the passenger had to have escaped death. I am not sure of this. The passenger is referred to as the undead, but they still walk and talk so I don’t know.

Harry had escaped death. Probably many times. At least one involving me. So, he was ready if he would only ask. There were not many customers in the bar. Harry’s inert form looked almost normal. He had slumped down with a little help into a form that more resembled a nap as opposed to having passed out.

At closing time, we moved him into the storage in the basement. We left a light on. Patrik assured me he would be out until about 11 in the morning. We decided to meet at the bar at 10 AM and I would take custody of his hopefully still inert body.

At home I slept and dreamt about the river. When I woke, he was downstairs making coffee. I was not surprised. I slowly descended to see his back as he is talking to me about how difficult it is to beat him.

“You know, Jack, if you wanted to take my gear from me OK do it but we could have talked about it. I was fond of that gun. It fit my hand. You know what I mean?”

He went on about drugging friends and I wanted to remind him we were now even on that score two and two, but he had a head of steam and interrupting was something only a fool would do.

We listened together in enforced silence as he ground the beans. The kettle whistled and we were set to wait. He set a timer. He found cups. We waited for the tone. He pressed the coffee down through the water and we had steaming cups of java in front of us.

I found some frozen pastry in the freezer and thawed them in the oven. They proved to be cheese Danish. He said they were his favorite. I said he didn't deserve it, but it was his fate. He said you are sounding very mid-twentieth century. I admitted to being drawn to it by Sophy.

He laughed and said, “She's just fucking with your head. Hope you didn't take any of that seriously.”

“Harry, life is too short for that kind of thinking besides we never know what we teach when we deceive.”

“Oooh!” He said. “Sounds so Princeton. Go Tigers?” Then he grrr'ed from the depth of his throat. We both laughed.

“Remember when I would come home, and you'd be there? Or the time in Ankara when I crawled out of the underground only to see you standing there as if you knew I would be there. How about the time you appeared from under a pile of rags? What did you say that time? ‘Don't fuck with Buddha.’ Yeah. I learned that from you.” I laughed.

He sat in his chair at the kitchen bar looking somewhat defeated. Never

underestimate an unlikely foe. Can't say I did not like the man. Doesn't mean I must take shit from him.

Later as I reread the above and thought about the last three or four years, I was reminded of a treatise on Godzilla films from the 50's. The monster enters the city, and nothing can stop it. No World War II arms are good enough to beat him. Godzilla smashed an entire military assault with tanks and planes. Then when the movie is more than three quarters over Godzilla lost his overpowering talents and is destroyed with all the screaming of a defeated monster. Harry was showing signs of such a defeat.

We didn't say anything else while our coffee was drinkable. We stared out at the tourists walking in the street. A cruise ship had landed and off loaded its passengers who dispersed throughout the city on the hunt for experiences to photograph and later impress their friends with or to take to their graves as a just reward for a life well lived.

Harry busied the counter, found the dishwasher and put our two cups and plates away to wash. He washed his hands and dried them on the kitchen towel. He took one last look around and, I imagined, decide it was as he found it.

"I am ready."

"For what?"

"To cross the River Lawrence."

"Too early. It must be dark. Only a few hours. Can you wait?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I can help you across the River Lawrence or you can take yourself. It's a ferry. More of a symbol of your final transition. The real river requires for

you to be dead and to pay the ferryman.”

“It’s complicated.”

“There are many stories. The version I prefer is about the Arcana. The 16th card called the Tower. Know it?”

“Sure. It’s about transitions.”

“The notion is about physical destruction and the need to cast off delusional thinking in order to survive.”

“Oh. Not today. I have a room two blocks away. I need sleep. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Thanks for the beer.”

He left. Of course, I wished him well and I wished him gone.

Chapter 39: The end of time

Harry had been gone for ten days when a cabbie buzzed me. I made the trek down to the street to meet him. Abdul is his name. When I needed a ride to the airport, I would call him. We weren't great friends just a commercial relationship that we both respected. He called. I went to see what he needed.

"Sir." He always called me that. I didn't have the heart to correct his error in judgment. "No bags?"

"Abdul, where am I going?"

"To Amsterdam, sir. You left a detailed message. You must leave now, or you will miss your flight."

"I need a coat and my passport. Wait for five minutes for me?"

"I will be here, sir."

Abdul was from Dubai. He drove cab in Quebec City in the summer and in the spring in Dubai. He showed me a full nude body shot of his GF in Dubai. He was trying to help me understand why he would leave 'this beautiful city' even for the money he would make. She didn't seem intellectual enough to draw my attention. Abdul said he loved her. I believed him.

When I got back down and in the cab. I said, "Tell me what I told you. Please."

"Your address. The time to pick you up and that you were booked into Delta to Amsterdam. I looked it up. It's a direct to Heathrow and then Amsterdam. There is a two-hour layover."

"I thought that's what I said." At least I had the ten days without the crazies

coming for me. It felt too short for a lifetime. I had no spare anything. I had not even grabbed a razor. That's what the layover at Heathrow would be about. I had my journal and my laptop. I watched Indiana Jones again.

When I arrived at my European home in the brambles, I pulled on my running shoes and hit the road in time for last call for Bones' kitchen. The Texas style ribs were great. I walked home. Better for digestion.

I walked through the gate. I opened the door. A bird had found its way in and was fluttering from window to window. It was a hummingbird. I figured out a technique for catching them. Think about the St. Francis statues you have seen. Hold your hands cupped under the bird who is most likely tenuously attached to a window. The bird will fall as it tries to escape and fall into your hands.

The bird had not been in the house when I left. I hadn't stayed long after my arrival, just a few minutes. I was sure no one was in the house now after my late dinner. I looked around for a way the hummer could have gotten in. All doors and windows were closed.

I found a beer in the fridge, a cold beer glass in the freezer. I sat at the kitchen table admiring how shiny the chrome on the wood fired cook stove was. It was cleaner than I remembered. Maybe someone is living here. I went into the bedroom and pulled open the wardrobe and there she was trying to hide behind her clothes. Sophy said nothing. Only stared back at me. I might have looked startled. She looked relieved.

"Now I know where people go when they cross the river." I was seriously considering calling the cops. The explanations of her clothes in my closet and her feeling, if not at home at least, it was OK to be there, would have been too funny for an accusation of a crime to be believable.

"Jack, so glad you came. I was hiding because I was afraid it was Harry and his network friends. They are cleaning up. Have you heard?"

“Harry mentioned something about cleaning, but he was tricky and vague. Did you polish the kitchen stove?”

“I don’t do housework.”

The oddities were piling up and I wasn’t sure I wanted to be part of it. I pulled out my phone and speed dialed Uber and set up a ride by text. I had come with next to nothing, so packing was nothing. I was out the door while she was rehangng her clothes. I ran to Bones, found my uber and cabbed to the airport.

As I was riding in the cab, I considered what I would find at the airport. I checked my ID. Searched my pockets for anything. All I had was a thumb drive with the latest version of my book. The journal and laptop are disposable and replaceable.

On my way to the Delta desk to ticket myself to somewhere I saw them watching me from the gallery above. I detoured to the help counter and asked how to get up to the gallery. Was it on the other side of the security check? The answer was yes. Where is the exit on this floor? I was pointed to a locked door. The door was located in a corridor hidden from the prying eyes. I decided to wait. I leaned against the wall across from the door.

Jerry came out first. She saw me.

“Carrying?” She asked. I grinned. Then he came out. He saw me, looked at her then he took her arm at the elbow and much to her chagrin ushered her down the hall and away from me.

I followed and watched them until they found a cab and the cab had left my eyesight. I went back to Delta for a ride to YQB. It was another long trip without any way to entertain myself.

My building seemed secure enough to keep most intruders out of the lobby and the hallways. With Harry around there was one intruder who could not be stopped. The locks on my condo had been upgraded to an electronic entrance with a new code established upon each entry and recorded automatically on the card that opened the door. I would automatically know if someone had entered because my key wouldn't open the door. My key is the master key and can reset the latest code and still gain entrance, but the forewarning was useful.

Of course, they or he had been there since I left. My card did not open the door. One can imagine why he entered but why bother. I had come to realize that they needed me to play along. I would take them across the river if they asked.

I spent most of an evening fingertip searching for bugs and cameras uncovering his original audio bug on top of kitchen cabinets. Nothing else was found but I was after that particular one so I could stand down.

The next day I went to see Nikki. There were not many shoppers in town since the Summer had yet to begin. She helped me find a painting to match what she knew of my Siddhartha obsession. It was a print.



The painter was not familiar to me. It's by Andrew Palyanov and is named 'The Imaginary Dead.' The title was so true of my situation I had to have it. I keep it leaning across the fireplace when there is no fire present.

I had a sense that Jerry and Harry were living near me. Every once in a while, my key would not work on my door, so I knew he had been in my home. They may have changed considerably and be unrecognizable. That would be like Harry to beat me at disguises. I looked into every face to find him until it didn't matter anymore.

Sophy was living in my house in Amsterdam. We never have tried to contact one another since she came out of the closet.

I settled into my habits. By some mercy of a greater god, I have been free for all these years.

Most of the next year I read Siddhartha before sleep one paragraph at a time. All the questions I had were answered. The end went thus,

Not knowing any more whether time existed, whether the vision had lasted a second or a hundred years, not knowing any more whether there existed a Siddhartha, a Gotama, a me and a you, feeling in his innermost self as if he had been wounded by a divine arrow, the injury of which tasted sweet, being enchanted and dissolved in his innermost self, Govinda still stood for a little while bent over Siddhartha's quiet face, which he had just kissed, which had just been the scene of all manifestations, all transformations, all existence. The face was unchanged, after under its surface the depth of the thousandfoldness had closed up again, he smiled silently, smiled quietly and softly, perhaps very benevolently, perhaps very mockingly, precisely as he used to smile, the exalted one.

Deeply, Govinda bowed; tears he knew nothing of, ran down his old face; like a fire burnt the feeling of the most intimate love, the

humblest veneration in his heart. Deeply, he bowed, touching the ground, before him who was sitting motionlessly, whose smile reminded him of everything he had ever loved in his life, what had ever been valuable and holy to him in his life.

There may be more to this story. Nikki is sitting with me. She visits to help me finish a book on Intuition and Mathematics. She tells me she has seen a look on my face of seeing visions. I tell her to hold my hand, a signal that I feared death was near. She refuses. She tells me that we have a duty to live until our last day. I cannot cross the river until I have left this life behind.