

Greetings

by Terry Bisson

Most things may never happen: this one will

Philip Larkin, "Aubade"

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One

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It started out with a tangle, which should have been a sign. Tom's first concern, after his initial raw animal terror, was how to break the news to Ara; so he called Cliff and asked for help, telling him not to tell anyone, at least until he got there. But Cliff was already on the phone with Pam, who was meeting Arabella at the farmers market, and so by the time Tom got to Cliff's (walking across the golf course, even though it was prohibited) "the girls" had already dropped their bikes in the yard and were waiting in the kitchen.

They were all best friends, old friends ("At our age," Tom liked to joke, "all your friends are old."), and so Tom wasn't surprised or, after he thought about it, even annoyed to see them. It made it like an event, a ceremony of sorts, which seemed proper. And the terror had receded to a dull dread: a fear no less animal, but more domesticated, which he was to learn to live with over the next ten days, like a big, ugly, dun-colored dog.

"What's this, Cliff, an intervention?" he asked.

"Don't make this into a joke," Arabella warned. She was known for bursting into tears but only for the little things: a fender bender, a dropped dish, a goldfish floating on the top of the water. Her hand was damp as it found Tom's under Cliff and Pam's old-wood kitchen table.

"Start at the beginning," said Cliff, who was a lawyer, though he didn't practice anymore. "Guess he finally got it down," Tom liked to joke; though he didn't feel like joking this morning. It was 11:25, almost lunchtime. It was mid-October, and most of the leaves that were due to go that year were gone.

"It's pretty simple," Tom said, though *pretty* wasn't exactly the word. "I got it an hour ago, when I checked my mail. Certified. Here, I printed it out."

He laid it on the table, flattening it with the heel of his hand. Under the official US logo, it read:

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GREETINGS Thomas Aaron Clurman (401-25-5423)

YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN BY LOTTERY FOR INDUCTION INTO THE OREGON SUNSET BRIGADE. CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR SACRIFICE. YOU ARE TO REPORT TO CASCADE CENTER 1656, 18767 WEST HELLEN ST, AT 10 AM, OCTOBER 22, 20--. IF YOU WISH TO DISCUSS OTHER ARRANGEMENTS, AS PROVIDED BY LAW, PLEASE CALL 154 176 098 8245.

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"That's only ten days from now," Pam said. "The bastards."

"They don't want to give you time to think about it," said Cliff, who was serving coffee to everyone.

Arabella burst into tears.

"Come on, honey. What am I, a goldfish?"

"I don't get it," said Cliff, sitting down. The coffee was imported directly from the growers in Costa Rica. "I thought they weren't drafting anyone under seventy-five."

"Guess now they are." Tom folded the notice and put it into the pocket of his LL Bean chamois shirt. "The law says three score and ten, doesn't it?"

"The bastards," said Pam.

"That's the Bible, not the law," said Cliff. "Maybe it's the death rate in Africa. I read where some new vaccine has lowered the infant mortality rate by thirty-four percent."

"Whatever," said Tom, suddenly irritated by Cliff's interest in world events. "At any rate, last summer we talked about what we would do, remember? No way I'm marching off with the Sunset Brigade, so I'll need your help; Ara and I will need your help." He squeezed Arabella's hand.

Arabella was slow in squeezing back.

"Well, of course," said Pam. "But isn't there something we need to do first, some ...?"

"There's no appeal process," Cliff said. "There are options, of course. And we're with you a hundred percent, Tom. We all feel the same way you do."

Do you really? thought Tom. "Right. Anyway, maybe Arabella and I should talk first, and see you guys later."

"Yes, later," said Pam. "Tonight's card night anyway. Come early for dinner."

"Should we bring anything?" asked Arabella.

"Just yourselves," said Pam. "The bastards."

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Walking home, around the golf course, Tom and Arabella were silent. He walked her bike, which was, he thought, sort of like holding hands. Now, when there was everything to talk about, there was nothing to say. How come the world looks so bright? Tom wondered. *So various, so beautiful, so new ...*

"You and Cliff were stoned that night at Holystone Bay," said Arabella. "It isn't all that easy to, you know, do it yourself."

"Stoned but sincere," said Tom. "What do you want me to do, join the Brigade?"

"I don't want any of it. There must be something we can do. We should call the kids."

"Not yet," said Tom. "It's not their problem. Besides, Gwyneth was just here last week. Thomas is another matter altogether."

"Thomas always was."

.....

That night Pam cooked pasta. Cliff brought out a bottle of wine from his own vineyard.

"It must have been Africa," he said. He showed them the article in *The Economist*. A new vaccine had reduced the infant mortality rate and therefore, it was speculated, adjustments would have to be made in the death rates in the "developed" countries.

Tom had never had a problem with this before. Neither had Cliff. America had reaped the benefits of selective underdevelopment for hundreds of years. Now they were making up for it.

But tonight, drinking Cliff's Willamette Valley *pinot noir* and looking out over the golf course, Tom found it alarming that someone else's good fortune was his bad luck. Did this mean that life was a zero-sum game after all; and that the humanistic, liberal philosophy that had guided him and Cliff for most of their fifty-odd years as friends, was false; based on a false premise—that the greatest good for all and the greatest good for one were in some sort of deep, unwritten, unspoken but unbreakable harmony? Now the world, lopsided or not, was about to spin on without him.

It was, quite literally, unimaginable.

"I think they're after the opposition," Pam was saying. "The bastards."

"We're hardly the opposition," Cliff pointed out. "In fact, you might recall we're among those who supported the hemlock laws as a progressive move; a willingness to think and act in global terms."

"But not the Brigades," said Tom. "Not those smiling, marching fuckers with their little flags."

"What about the Resistance?" Pam asked.

"That's an urban legend," said Cliff.

"Wishful thinking," said Tom. "A token opposition at best. Look, there's no point in talking about how to beat this. We're not kids. I'll be seventy-one in August. I've had my three score and ten."

"So has Cliff," said Pam, who was sixty-six herself. "I still say there's something fishy about it. How many friends do we have who've gotten Greetings?"

"Guy Frakes, from the firm," said Cliff.

"Not exactly a friend. And he was almost eighty," said Pam.

"Seventy-seven," said Cliff.

"That's what he told you."

"You're not going to get that many anyway," said Cliff. "The Brigades are just a symbol, showing our willingness to adjust the death rate rationally. Most of the quota is made up by DNRs and end-term care reductions."

"And it's all guys," said Tom. "That was a great victory of the women's movement."

"Huh?" said Pam, showing her teeth.

"Look, it's a law of nature. All this does is put us into some sort of compliance," Tom said. He was amazed, listening to himself, at how self-assured he sounded. "Besides, we already decided what to do about this. Remember? We talked about it."

"You mean last summer, at the beach house," said Pam. "You guys were stoned."

"What does being stoned have to do with it?" Cliff protested. "It was after we watched that PBS special on the Brigades, before they had their weekly show."

"It was disgusting," said Tom. "Enlightening, really. All those geezers in their orange uniforms marching off into the sunset."

"Some were even volunteers," said Cliff.

"Cancer patients," said Tom. "They joined for the last cigarette."

"I don't see why you have to make a joke of it," said Arabella.

"It's no joke," said Tom. "It's my life, and I want to go out like I lived, with my friends, with dignity. With some dignity, anyway. At home. Listening to Coltrane, or Bob Dylan."

"And stoned," said Cliff. "Why not. I'll take care of that part."

"We'll all do our part," said Pam. She reached out for Arabella's hand. "You can count on us."

"Me, too," said Tom. "I'll check out. End of story. That'll be it."

It. They were all silent. Tom reached for the wine bottle, and saw that it was empty.

"It's just that we never really thought it would happen," said Arabella.

"No, but how many people live to be this old anyway? Better than dying of cancer." Although Tom wasn't as sure as he sounded. At least cancer didn't give you a date.

"It's even legal," said Cliff, "not that that matters. Oregon has a law making it legal to do it at home. Every state except Kentucky and Arkansas has them—it was a rider that defused some of the opposition to the Brigades."

"So what do we—do?" Arabella asked, pouring herself the last few drops of wine.

"We open another bottle," suggested Tom.

"I checked out the law at lunch," said Cliff. "All you have to do is show the Greetings, and you get the hemlock kit. It can all be done at the drugstore."

"How convenient," said Pam. "The bastards."

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Two

The next morning, Tom, Pam and Arabella went to Walgreens for the kit. They were sent to the pharmacy counter at the back of the store.

The pharmacist was a young man of about forty-five. He had a Sunset Brigade Certificate on the wall: a picture of his father, the former owner of the store, saluting a sunset. *Living Forever In Our Hearts*, it said.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Tom seemed to have lost his voice.

"We need one of those kits," Pam said, because Arabella wasn't speaking up either. It seemed that she had lost her voice, too.

"One of those what?"

Pam took the induction notice from Tom's hand; she unfolded it and spread it out on the counter. "They sent us back here to get it."

"Oh, the home kit." The pharmacist looked at Tom. "It's \$79.95."

"Jesus," said Pam. "Eighty bucks? What do you get?"

"You get an IV rack," the pharmacist said. "You get the three chems, the sharps, and the sterile solution; cotton swabs; death certificate, plastic bags ..."

Arabella looked sick. "I'm going to wait in the car," she said.

Tom started to follow her, but something held him back. *This is my show*. The pharmacist reached under the counter and set a beige box on the counter. "There's a DVD, too," he said. "Do you have a DVD player?"

"Everybody has a DVD player." Tom's voice was back.

"Well, there's a DVD that comes in the kit. And this 800 number here on the side is for the monitor. But you don't have to worry about that; he'll be calling you. As soon as I make this sale, your number goes into the database."

"Monitor?" Pam sounded suspicious.

"There has to be someone there from the government," the pharmacist said. "You're using lethal drugs."

"But they're supposed to be lethal," said Tom.

"Doesn't matter," the pharmacist said. "It's the law. It's not an extra cost. Although I hear some people tip him."

"Ring it up," said Tom.

Arabella was waiting by the car, in the parking lot. "Cliff just called," she said.

"And?"

"Better let him tell you." And she burst into tears, for the second time.

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Cliff had gotten his notice at the office. He went in two days a week. He wasn't practicing, but mentoring a younger attorney.

"This makes things simpler," he said, spreading it out on his kitchen table. It looked exactly like Tom's,

except that the date was three days later.

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GREETINGS William Clifford Brixton III (401-25-5423)

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"Simpler!?" said Pam.

"I mean, now it's unanimous, or something."

"Like, we don't count?" said Arabella.

"That's not what I said," said Cliff. "Not what I meant."

"Do you really want to count?" Tom asked. "I mean, this is one battle the women's liberation movement didn't want to win."

"Leave the women's liberation movement out of this," said Pam. "So what do we do now?"

"The same thing we were already doing," said Cliff. "Same time, same station. Another kit."

"Jesus! Isn't one enough?" Tom asked. "We've always shared everything before."

"And we're sharing this," said Cliff. "But it's the law. You have to have one for each—inductee."

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Three

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The next day, a Wednesday, Tom went with Cliff and Pam to pick up the second kit at the drugstore. This time they got another pharmacist; a more sympathetic, older man—African-American.

Was it just a convention of the movies, or were African-Americans always more sympathetic? Tom wondered. It was always either that or angrier, never both at once, as in real life.

Real life. It has a beginning. It has an end. It's almost over.

"There are several alternate exit program DVDs," the pharmacist was saying. "Made to coordinate with the official kit. You can get them at Tower Records or order them from Amazon. Or your church may provide one. It's more personal."

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"Two by two," said Cliff, laying the two kits side by side on the kitchen table. "Like Noah's ark."

"Not exactly," said Tom.

The woman were away, at the Aerobics for Seniors class that they shared. Life had to go on, after all.

It will go on, Tom thought. Without me. It was, quite literally, inconceivable.

"Let's smoke a joint," said Cliff. He pulled out the silver cigarette case he had received after twenty years at his law firm. In it were six neatly rolled joints, the finest *sinsemilla*, a week's supply.

That afternoon, as luck would have it, the Brigades had their weekly show. It was afternoon TV; not quite ready for prime time. The celebrity guest was introduced to do the invocation. It was almost always a woman.

This week it was Hillary Clinton.

The Sunset Brigade, in rose-colored coveralls, were lined up on a hill overlooking the sea. Their eyes were shining; their jaws were firm. The veterans got to wear their military braid. The theme was a frenchhorn/piano concerto especially written for the Brigades by Randy Newman.

Tom turned off the sound.

"You get an extra four days," he said, looking at Cliff's induction notice.

"Three," said Cliff. "I'm not going to take them, though. We'll go together. It'll be easier on the girls that way."

"You think so?"

"I know so." Cliff passed Tom the joint. Hillary got thin, scattered applause. The Brigade saluted the flag and started up the hill. Judging from the vegetation, this induction was taking place somewhere in the East. Massachusetts? New Jersey? The East, like the West, looked all alike.

There was nothing to distinguish the draftees from the volunteers, except for the few who were in wheelchairs with IVs on little masts. They marched (or rolled) off shoulder to shoulder in their rose uniforms and easy-off slippers, following the color guard off to the departure site, which was always over a hill and never seen. They carried little individualized flags their wives and grandchildren had made. The flags would be returned to the loved ones.

When the last of the men disappeared over the hill, Cliff turned the sound back on. The closing theme was by Elton John: another version of "Candle in the Wind."

Tom turned it off.

"Better to do it our own way," said Cliff.

"Anything is better than that clown show," said Tom.

"What are you guys watching?" Pam asked, bursting through the door like Kramer, as she always did.

Always, thought Tom. Always was almost over. For him, anyway. And for Cliff, too.

"Nothing," said Cliff, turning off the TV. "Some dumb reality show."

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Tom and Arabella had never had trouble making love, even though the frequency had dropped. Once they had gone for a whole year. But when he turned sixty-five, Tom had decided that they were going to set aside a day every two weeks for sex play, like it or not. It turned out that they liked it; liked being freed of the need to think about it and initiate it. At least he did.

But today something was wrong.

"Not a problem," said Arabella.

"Easy for you to say," said Tom.

Ara saw no point in arguing. She got out of bed and undressed, pulling on her regular panties, the ones he hated, that made her look like an old lady. "How about I make us some coffee?"

"Later," said Tom. "First I got to go see Ray."

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Ray was Tom's lawyer. His office was in a trendy new shopping center overlooking the Rose Garden. His desktop was of recycled barn wood. Odd, thought Tom, how many things in the new world get more valuable as they get older.

Everything but us.

"What can I do you for?" asked Ray.

They were old movement comrades, if not exactly friends. They had once been adversaries, since Ray was of the electoral persuasion, and Tom and Cliff were Direct Action.

But that was long ago.

Tom unfolded his induction notice and flattened it along Ray's desk, looking out for splinters.

"Jesus fucking Christ," said Ray. "Are you sure this isn't a mistake. I thought they weren't calling anyone under seventy."

"I'm seventy," said Tom, refolding the paper. For the first time he noticed its color and shape, like a tiny tombstone. "So are you."

"Well, you get certain advantages," said Ray. "There's the bonus. And there is no probate, which means you won't have to worry about Arabella. I mean, in terms of the house and stuff."

"We don't get the bonus," said Tom. "We're not doing it."

"Not doing it?" Ray looked uncomfortable.

"Not doing the Brigade thing. There's a provision in the law that allows you to do it yourself, at home. We're going to do it at our summer place, down at Holystone Bay."

Ray nodded. He had done the paperwork on the partnership twelve years before, when Tom and Ara had bought the house with Cliff and Pam. Ray had provided for every possible disagreement. There had been none. If anything, the two families were closer now than they had been then, when they had been cautiously, consciously, determinedly recovering from Cliff and Arabella's foolish, brief, unhappy affair.

"I want you to make sure Arabella is covered. And one other thing: I want you to have my Steve Earle records."

"Jesus, man. That's huge. But what about Cliff?"

"Cliff, too. Cliff's going with me."

"Jesus fucking Christ. Cliff, too! I've always hated these Brigades, even though I agree with the idea, I guess. But this stinks."

"I don't know why you say that," said Tom. "We've always felt that it wasn't right for the developed countries to use all the resources. Well, here it is: population control. It's not abortion or infanticide. It's

voluntary. Or sort of, anyway."

"Nobody fucking volunteers," said Ray. "Not for—this."

"Well. Let's not abandon all our principles just because our number came up."

Ray was silent. Tom realized he had been lecturing him. It was an old habit he had never managed to lose. "Sorry," he said. "I was on a high horse."

"It's okay," Ray said. "I've always rather liked your high horse. And now—"

He blushed and shuffled through a stack of papers.

"You need to sign a power of attorney for Arabella," he said. "I have one on boilerplate. It will avoid probate. Especially since you and Arabella aren't actually married."

"What about the domestic partner's law?"

"They still contest that occasionally," said Ray. "What if they wanted to get even?"

"For what?"

"For doing things your own way. Here. You sign it, and I'll get Arabella's signature after. I mean, later."

Tom signed the papers and got up to leave. Ray came around his desk and stopped him at the door.

"I don't know what to say, man."

"I'm sorry I lectured you. It's just, a shock, you know."

"It is to me, too. I don't know what to say, man."

"That's okay. Just so long, I guess."

"It's been great knowing you."

"Likewise," Tom said. And he meant it. It was his first good-bye. "So long."

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When Tom got home, Cliff and Pam were at the house. Cliff laid a ticket on the glass-topped table. It had a red-white-and-blue border.

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"Your airline pass," said Cliff. "I figured you might want to see your kids."

"What about your kids?"

"We just saw them last month," Pam said.

The pass was good for one round trip in the continental USA.

"I thought we didn't get them if we did it ourselves."

"I fooled them," said Cliff. "I turned my kit back in, told them I'd changed my mind."

"You didn't—"

"No, no. I'll go back and get it again. Change my mind again. I have ten days to decide, remember?"

"I could have done that," said Tom.

Cliff shook his head. "You're not a good liar," he said. "I'm a lawyer, remember? Or didn't you notice that big car parked outside?"

After Cliff left, Arabella asked: "Who are you going to see?"

"Thomas," he said.

"I thought so," she said.

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Four

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Tom and Arabella had two kids. Thomas, from Tom's first marriage, was a loan officer in Las Vegas. Thomas and his wife, Elaine, had two kids. If it had been possible, they would have had 1.646, thought Tom—the national average. The only child actually born of Tom and Arabella was Gwyneth, thirty, a kindergarten teacher in San Francisco.

She was Tom's favorite, but he had seen her just the week before. She knew he loved her.

Thomas was more of a problem.

On Monday, with four days left to go, Tom caught a flight for Las Vegas. It felt strange to be leaving Arabella, this close to the end of everything. Tom, who used to be terrified of landings, noticed as the plane descended that he wasn't nervous anymore. Everything in the world looked so temporary—what was a plane filled with people, more or less?

He was a little disappointed when the landing, like the twenty-three that had preceded it that day, or the two hundred twenty-three that had preceded it that week, went off without a hitch.

Thomas met him at the gate, looking worried. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Why should something be wrong?"

"You don't usually come and visit us here except on holidays," said Thomas. "In case you didn't notice. And Arabella usually comes with you."

"I just felt like seeing the grandchildren," said Tom. "And you and Elaine, of course."

Traffic in Las Vegas was even slower than Tom had remembered. The leather seats and quiet ride of the big Mercedes made it worse, not better.

Thomas and Elaine put him in the guest room, which had its own bath.

"Makes it feel like a motel," he said to Arabella, on his cell phone.

"It's their world," said Arabella. "People want to have their own bathroom. Sharing a bathroom seems old fashioned, and probably a little unsanitary, I guess."

"Makes it feel like a motel," Tom said again.

"Just be nice," she said, "and hurry home."

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The next afternoon, Tom took his grandchildren to the zoo.

Tara wanted to see the gorilla that had died the month before. She naively thought its body would still be on display. Eric wanted to talk about his day at school. Tom was impressed—how many kids want to talk about school? Until he heard what it was.

"We got a visit from the Sunset Brigade," Eric said. "Two men came by the school in their uniforms and told us to take good care of the planet because they were leaving it to us, to take good care of it. We got a signed certificate. It was cool."

"I'll bet," said Tom.

"Will you join the Brigade when you get old, Grandpa?"

"I'm already old," said Tom. "And I think the Brigades are horseshit."

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"Grandpa said the S word today," said Tara at the dinner table, right after Thomas had said grace. "Pass the mashed potatoes."

"Say please," said her mother, Elaine.

"I was overexcited," said Tom. "It must have been the gorilla."

"There wasn't any gorilla," said Eric.

That evening Tom gave the grandchildren a good-night kiss, and Thomas took him to the airport to catch the red-eye back to Portland. There is always a red-eye to everywhere from Vegas.

"Dad," said Thomas. "The kids aren't old enough to share your values. I mean about the Brigades and the government."

"They may never get that old," Tom said. "You didn't."

"You may recall, I was never given the chance," said Thomas.

Tom had abandoned his first family when he had gone underground with the Red Storm.

"That was my mistake," said Tom. "It doesn't mean I don't love you today."

"I know, Dad. And I know how you feel about the Brigades."

"You do?"

"Sure. It's how you feel about everything. Resistance. Rejection. Rebellion. Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Just that—I am proud of you, you know. You're a much better father than I ever was."

"Not such a stretch," said Thomas; then he laughed and clapped his father on the shoulder, a glancing blow. "I noticed you didn't say, 'better man.'"

"I meant that, too."

"I know, I know. Well, Dad, this is as far as I can go without a ticket."

They hugged and parted. Tom had taken great pains not to show his son his red-white-and-blue ticket. He waved good-bye and disappeared down the tunnel, through the gauntlet of bored security guards.

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Philip Larkin, "Aubade"

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It started out with a tangle, which should have been a sign. Tom's first concern, after his initial raw animal terror, was how to break the news to Ara; so he called Cliff and asked for help, telling him not to tell anyone, at least until he got there. But Cliff was already on the phone with Pam, who was meeting Arabella at the farmers market, and so by the time Tom got to Cliff's (walking across the golf course, even though it was prohibited) "the girls" had already dropped their bikes in the yard and were waiting in the kitchen.

They were all best friends, old friends ("At our age," Tom liked to joke, "all your friends are old."), and so Tom wasn't surprised or, after he thought about it, even annoyed to see them. It made it like an event, a ceremony of sorts, which seemed proper. And the terror had receded to a dull dread: a fear no less animal, but more domesticated, which he was to learn to live with over the next ten days, like a big, ugly, dun-colored dog.

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"Start at the beginning," said Cliff, who was a lawyer, though he didn't practice anymore. "Guess he finally got it down," Tom liked to joke; though he didn't feel like joking this morning. It was 11:25, almost lunchtime. It was mid-October, and most of the leaves that were due to go that year were gone.

"It's pretty simple," Tom said, though *pretty* wasn't exactly the word. "I got it an hour ago, when I checked my mail. Certified. Here, I printed it out."

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"Come on, honey. What am I, a goldfish?"

"I don't get it," said Cliff, sitting down. The coffee was imported directly from the growers in Costa Rica. "I thought they weren't drafting anyone under seventy-five."

"Guess now they are." Tom folded the notice and put it into the pocket of his LL Bean chamois shirt. "The law says three score and ten, doesn't it?"

"The bastards," said Pam.

"That's the Bible, not the law," said Cliff. "Maybe it's the death rate in Africa. I read where some new vaccine has lowered the infant mortality rate by thirty-four percent."

"Whatever," said Tom, suddenly irritated by Cliff's interest in world events. "At any rate, last summer we talked about what we would do, remember? No way I'm marching off with the Sunset Brigade, so I'll need your help; Ara and I will need your help." He squeezed Arabella's hand.

Arabella was slow in squeezing back.

"Well, of course," said Pam. "But isn't there something we need to do first, some ...?"

"There's no appeal process," Cliff said. "There are options, of course. And we're with you a hundred percent, Tom. We all feel the same way you do."

Do you really? thought Tom. "Right. Anyway, maybe Arabella and I should talk first, and see you guys later."

"Yes, later," said Pam. "Tonight's card night anyway. Come early for dinner."

"Should we bring anything?" asked Arabella.

"Just yourselves," said Pam. "The bastards."

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Walking home, around the golf course, Tom and Arabella were silent. He walked her bike, which was, he thought, sort of like holding hands. Now, when there was everything to talk about, there was nothing to say. How come the world looks so bright? Tom wondered. *So various, so beautiful, so new ...*

"You and Cliff were stoned that night at Holystone Bay," said Arabella. "It isn't all that easy to, you know, do it yourself."

"Stoned but sincere," said Tom. "What do you want me to do, join the Brigade?"

"I don't want any of it. There must be something we can do. We should call the kids."

"Not yet," said Tom. "It's not their problem. Besides, Gwyneth was just here last week. Thomas is another matter altogether."

"Thomas always was."

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"It must have been Africa," he said. He showed them the article in *The Economist*. A new vaccine had reduced the infant mortality rate and therefore, it was speculated, adjustments would have to be made in the death rates in the "developed" countries.

Tom had never had a problem with this before. Neither had Cliff. America had reaped the benefits of selective underdevelopment for hundreds of years. Now they were making up for it.

But tonight, drinking Cliff's Willamette Valley *pinot noir* and looking out over the golf course, Tom found it alarming that someone else's good fortune was his bad luck. Did this mean that life was a zero-sum game after all; and that the humanistic, liberal philosophy that had guided him and Cliff for most of their fifty-odd years as friends, was false; based on a false premise—that the greatest good for all and the greatest good for one were in some sort of deep, unwritten, unspoken but unbreakable harmony? Now the world, lopsided or not, was about to spin on without him.

It was, quite literally, unimaginable.

"I think they're after the opposition," Pam was saying. "The bastards."

"We're hardly the opposition," Cliff pointed out. "In fact, you might recall we're among those who supported the hemlock laws as a progressive move; a willingness to think and act in global terms."

"But not the Brigades," said Tom. "Not those smiling, marching fuckers with their little flags."

"What about the Resistance?" Pam asked.

"That's an urban legend," said Cliff.

"Wishful thinking," said Tom. "A token opposition at best. Look, there's no point in talking about how to beat this. We're not kids. I'll be seventy-one in August. I've had my three score and ten."

"So has Cliff," said Pam, who was sixty-six herself. "I still say there's something fishy about it. How many friends do we have who've gotten Greetings?"

"Guy Frakes, from the firm," said Cliff.

"Not exactly a friend. And he was almost eighty," said Pam.

"Seventy-seven," said Cliff.

"That's what he told you."

"You're not going to get that many anyway," said Cliff. "The Brigades are just a symbol, showing our willingness to adjust the death rate rationally. Most of the quota is made up by DNRs and end-term care reductions."

"And it's all guys," said Tom. "That was a great victory of the women's movement."

"Huh?" said Pam, showing her teeth.

"Look, it's a law of nature. All this does is put us into some sort of compliance," Tom said. He was amazed, listening to himself, at how self-assured he sounded. "Besides, we already decided what to do about this. Remember? We talked about it."

"You mean last summer, at the beach house," said Pam. "You guys were stoned."

"What does being stoned have to do with it?" Cliff protested. "It was after we watched that PBS special on the Brigades, before they had their weekly show."

"It was disgusting," said Tom. "Enlightening, really. All those geezers in their orange uniforms marching off into the sunset."

"Some were even volunteers," said Cliff.

"Cancer patients," said Tom. "They joined for the last cigarette."

"I don't see why you have to make a joke of it," said Arabella.

"It's no joke," said Tom. "It's my life, and I want to go out like I lived, with my friends, with dignity. With some dignity, anyway. At home. Listening to Coltrane, or Bob Dylan."

"And stoned," said Cliff. "Why not. I'll take care of that part."

"We'll all do our part," said Pam. She reached out for Arabella's hand. "You can count on us."

"Me, too," said Tom. "I'll check out. End of story. That'll be it."

It. They were all silent. Tom reached for the wine bottle, and saw that it was empty.

"It's just that we never really thought it would happen," said Arabella.

"No, but how many people live to be this old anyway? Better than dying of cancer." Although Tom wasn't as sure as he sounded. At least cancer didn't give you a date.

"It's even legal," said Cliff, "not that that matters. Oregon has a law making it legal to do it at home. Every state except Kentucky and Arkansas has them—it was a rider that defused some of the opposition to the Brigades."

"So what do we—do?" Arabella asked, pouring herself the last few drops of wine.

"We open another bottle," suggested Tom.

"I checked out the law at lunch," said Cliff. "All you have to do is show the Greetings, and you get the hemlock kit. It can all be done at the drugstore."

"How convenient," said Pam. "The bastards."

.....

Two

The next morning, Tom, Pam and Arabella went to Walgreens for the kit. They were sent to the pharmacy counter at the back of the store.

The pharmacist was a young man of about forty-five. He had a Sunset Brigade Certificate on the wall: a picture of his father, the former owner of the store, saluting a sunset. *Living Forever In Our Hearts*, it said.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Tom seemed to have lost his voice.

"We need one of those kits," Pam said, because Arabella wasn't speaking up either. It seemed that she had lost her voice, too.

"One of those what?"

Pam took the induction notice from Tom's hand; she unfolded it and spread it out on the counter. "They sent us back here to get it."

"Oh, the home kit." The pharmacist looked at Tom. "It's \$79.95."

"Jesus," said Pam. "Eighty bucks? What do you get?"

"You get an IV rack," the pharmacist said. "You get the three chems, the sharps, and the sterile solution; cotton swabs; death certificate, plastic bags ..."

Arabella looked sick. "I'm going to wait in the car," she said.

Tom started to follow her, but something held him back. *This is my show*. The pharmacist reached under the counter and set a beige box on the counter. "There's a DVD, too," he said. "Do you have a DVD player?"

"Everybody has a DVD player." Tom's voice was back.

"Well, there's a DVD that comes in the kit. And this 800 number here on the side is for the monitor. But you don't have to worry about that; he'll be calling you. As soon as I make this sale, your number goes into the database."

"Monitor?" Pam sounded suspicious.

"There has to be someone there from the government," the pharmacist said. "You're using lethal drugs."

"But they're supposed to be lethal," said Tom.

"Doesn't matter," the pharmacist said. "It's the law. It's not an extra cost. Although I hear some people tip him."

"Ring it up," said Tom.

Arabella was waiting by the car, in the parking lot. "Cliff just called," she said.

"And?"

"Better let him tell you." And she burst into tears, for the second time.

.....

Cliff had gotten his notice at the office. He went in two days a week. He wasn't practicing, but mentoring a younger attorney.

"This makes things simpler," he said, spreading it out on his kitchen table. It looked exactly like Tom's, except that the date was three days later.

.....

GREETINGS William Clifford Brixton III (401-25-5423)

YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN BY LOTTERY FOR INDUCTION INTO THE OREGON SUNSET BRIGADE. CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR SACRIFICE. YOU ARE TO REPORT TO

CASCADE CENTER 1656, 18767 WEST HELLEN ST, AT 10 AM OCTOBER 25, 20--. IF YOU WISH TO DISCUSS OTHER ARRANGEMENTS, AS PROVIDED BY LAW, PLEASE CALL 154 176 098 8245

.....

"Simpler!?" said Pam.

"I mean, now it's unanimous, or something."

"Like, we don't count?" said Arabella.

"That's not what I said," said Cliff. "Not what I meant."

"Do you really want to count?" Tom asked. "I mean, this is one battle the women's liberation movement didn't want to win."

"Leave the women's liberation movement out of this," said Pam. "So what do we do now?"

"The same thing we were already doing," said Cliff. "Same time, same station. Another kit."

"Jesus! Isn't one enough?" Tom asked. "We've always shared everything before."

"And we're sharing this," said Cliff. "But it's the law. You have to have one for each—inductee."

.....

Three

.....

The next day, a Wednesday, Tom went with Cliff and Pam to pick up the second kit at the drugstore. This time they got another pharmacist; a more sympathetic, older man—African-American.

Was it just a convention of the movies, or were African-Americans always more sympathetic? Tom wondered. It was always either that or angrier, never both at once, as in real life.

Real life. It has a beginning. It has an end. It's almost over.

"There are several alternate exit program DVDs," the pharmacist was saying. "Made to coordinate with the official kit. You can get them at Tower Records or order them from Amazon. Or your church may provide one. It's more personal."

.....

"Two by two," said Cliff, laying the two kits side by side on the kitchen table. "Like Noah's ark."

"Not exactly," said Tom.

The woman were away, at the Aerobics for Seniors class that they shared. Life had to go on, after all.

It will go on, Tom thought. Without me. It was, quite literally, inconceivable.

"Let's smoke a joint," said Cliff. He pulled out the silver cigarette case he had received after twenty years at his law firm. In it were six neatly rolled joints, the finest *sinsemilla*, a week's supply.

That afternoon, as luck would have it, the Brigades had their weekly show. It was afternoon TV; not quite ready for prime time. The celebrity guest was introduced to do the invocation. It was almost always a woman.

This week it was Hillary Clinton.

The Sunset Brigade, in rose-colored coveralls, were lined up on a hill overlooking the sea. Their eyes were shining; their jaws were firm. The veterans got to wear their military braid. The theme was a frenchhorn/piano concerto especially written for the Brigades by Randy Newman.

Tom turned off the sound.

"You get an extra four days," he said, looking at Cliff's induction notice.

"Three," said Cliff. "I'm not going to take them, though. We'll go together. It'll be easier on the girls that way."

"You think so?"

"I know so." Cliff passed Tom the joint. Hillary got thin, scattered applause. The Brigade saluted the flag and started up the hill. Judging from the vegetation, this induction was taking place somewhere in the East. Massachusetts? New Jersey? The East, like the West, looked all alike.

There was nothing to distinguish the draftees from the volunteers, except for the few who were in wheelchairs with IVs on little masts. They marched (or rolled) off shoulder to shoulder in their rose uniforms and easy-off slippers, following the color guard off to the departure site, which was always over a hill and never seen. They carried little individualized flags their wives and grandchildren had made. The

flags would be returned to the loved ones.

When the last of the men disappeared over the hill, Cliff turned the sound back on. The closing theme was by Elton John: another version of "Candle in the Wind."

Tom turned it off.

"Better to do it our own way," said Cliff.

"Anything is better than that clown show," said Tom.

"What are you guys watching?" Pam asked, bursting through the door like Kramer, as she always did.

Always, thought Tom. Always was almost over. For him, anyway. And for Cliff, too.

"Nothing," said Cliff, turning off the TV. "Some dumb reality show."

.....

Tom and Arabella had never had trouble making love, even though the frequency had dropped. Once they had gone for a whole year. But when he turned sixty-five, Tom had decided that they were going to set aside a day every two weeks for sex play, like it or not. It turned out that they liked it; liked being freed of the need to think about it and initiate it. At least he did.

But today something was wrong.

"Not a problem," said Arabella.

"Easy for you to say," said Tom.

Ara saw no point in arguing. She got out of bed and undressed, pulling on her regular panties, the ones he hated, that made her look like an old lady. "How about I make us some coffee?"

"Later," said Tom. "First I got to go see Ray."

.....

Ray was Tom's lawyer. His office was in a trendy new shopping center overlooking the Rose Garden. His desktop was of recycled barn wood. Odd, thought Tom, how many things in the new world get more valuable as they get older.

Everything but us.

"What can I do you for?" asked Ray.

They were old movement comrades, if not exactly friends. They had once been adversaries, since Ray was of the electoral persuasion, and Tom and Cliff were Direct Action.

But that was long ago.

Tom unfolded his induction notice and flattened it along Ray's desk, looking out for splinters.

"Jesus fucking Christ," said Ray. "Are you sure this isn't a mistake. I thought they weren't calling anyone under seventy."

"I'm seventy," said Tom, refolding the paper. For the first time he noticed its color and shape, like a tiny tombstone. "So are you."

"Well, you get certain advantages," said Ray. "There's the bonus. And there is no probate, which means you won't have to worry about Arabella. I mean, in terms of the house and stuff."

"We don't get the bonus," said Tom. "We're not doing it."

"Not doing it?" Ray looked uncomfortable.

"Not doing the Brigade thing. There's a provision in the law that allows you to do it yourself, at home. We're going to do it at our summer place, down at Holystone Bay."

Ray nodded. He had done the paperwork on the partnership twelve years before, when Tom and Ara had bought the house with Cliff and Pam. Ray had provided for every possible disagreement. There had been none. If anything, the two families were closer now than they had been then, when they had been cautiously, consciously, determinedly recovering from Cliff and Arabella's foolish, brief, unhappy affair.

"I want you to make sure Arabella is covered. And one other thing: I want you to have my Steve Earle records."

"Jesus, man. That's huge. But what about Cliff?"

"Cliff, too. Cliff's going with me."

"Jesus fucking Christ. Cliff, too! I've always hated these Brigades, even though I agree with the idea, I guess. But this stinks."

"I don't know why you say that," said Tom. "We've always felt that it wasn't right for the developed countries to use all the resources. Well, here it is: population control. It's not abortion or infanticide. It's voluntary. Or sort of, anyway."

"Nobody fucking volunteers," said Ray. "Not for—this."

"Well. Let's not abandon all our principles just because our number came up."

Ray was silent. Tom realized he had been lecturing him. It was an old habit he had never managed to lose. "Sorry," he said. "I was on a high horse."

"It's okay," Ray said. "I've always rather liked your high horse. And now—"

He blushed and shuffled through a stack of papers.

"You need to sign a power of attorney for Arabella," he said. "I have one on boilerplate. It will avoid probate. Especially since you and Arabella aren't actually married."

"What about the domestic partner's law?"

"They still contest that occasionally," said Ray. "What if they wanted to get even?"

"For what?"

"For doing things your own way. Here. You sign it, and I'll get Arabella's signature after. I mean, later."

Tom signed the papers and got up to leave. Ray came around his desk and stopped him at the door.

"I don't know what to say, man."

"I'm sorry I lectured you. It's just, a shock, you know."

"It is to me, too. I don't know what to say, man."

"That's okay. Just so long, I guess."

"It's been great knowing you."

"Likewise," Tom said. And he meant it. It was his first good-bye. "So long."

.....

When Tom got home, Cliff and Pam were at the house. Cliff laid a ticket on the glass-topped table. It had a red-white-and-blue border.

"What's that?" asked Tom.

"Your airline pass," said Cliff. "I figured you might want to see your kids."

"What about your kids?"

"We just saw them last month," Pam said.

The pass was good for one round trip in the continental USA.

"I thought we didn't get them if we did it ourselves."

"I fooled them," said Cliff. "I turned my kit back in, told them I'd changed my mind."

"You didn't—"

"No, no. I'll go back and get it again. Change my mind again. I have ten days to decide, remember?"

"I could have done that," said Tom.

Cliff shook his head. "You're not a good liar," he said. "I'm a lawyer, remember? Or didn't you notice that big car parked outside?"

After Cliff left, Arabella asked: "Who are you going to see?"

"Thomas," he said.

"I thought so," she said.

.....

Four

.....

Tom and Arabella had two kids. Thomas, from Tom's first marriage, was a loan officer in Las Vegas. Thomas and his wife, Elaine, had two kids. If it had been possible, they would have had 1.646, thought Tom—the national average. The only child actually born of Tom and Arabella was Gwyneth, thirty, a kindergarten teacher in San Francisco.

She was Tom's favorite, but he had seen her just the week before. She knew he loved her.

Thomas was more of a problem.

On Monday, with four days left to go, Tom caught a flight for Las Vegas. It felt strange to be leaving Arabella, this close to the end of everything. Tom, who used to be terrified of landings, noticed as the plane descended that he wasn't nervous anymore. Everything in the world looked so temporary—what was a plane filled with people, more or less?

He was a little disappointed when the landing, like the twenty-three that had preceded it that day, or the two hundred twenty-three that had preceded it that week, went off without a hitch.

Thomas met him at the gate, looking worried. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Why should something be wrong?"

"You don't usually come and visit us here except on holidays," said Thomas. "In case you didn't notice. And Arabella usually comes with you."

"I just felt like seeing the grandchildren," said Tom. "And you and Elaine, of course."

Traffic in Las Vegas was even slower than Tom had remembered. The leather seats and quiet ride of the big Mercedes made it worse, not better.

Thomas and Elaine put him in the guest room, which had its own bath.

"Makes it feel like a motel," he said to Arabella, on his cell phone.

"It's their world," said Arabella. "People want to have their own bathroom. Sharing a bathroom seems old fashioned, and probably a little unsanitary, I guess."

"Makes it feel like a motel," Tom said again.

"Just be nice," she said, "and hurry home."

.....

The next afternoon, Tom took his grandchildren to the zoo.

Tara wanted to see the gorilla that had died the month before. She naively thought its body would still be on display. Eric wanted to talk about his day at school. Tom was impressed—how many kids want to talk about school? Until he heard what it was.

"We got a visit from the Sunset Brigade," Eric said. "Two men came by the school in their uniforms and told us to take good care of the planet because they were leaving it to us, to take good care of it. We got a signed certificate. It was cool."

"I'll bet," said Tom.

"Will you join the Brigade when you get old, Grandpa?"

"I'm already old," said Tom. "And I think the Brigades are horseshit."

.....

"Grandpa said the S word today," said Tara at the dinner table, right after Thomas had said grace. "Pass the mashed potatoes."

"Say please," said her mother, Elaine.

"I was overexcited," said Tom. "It must have been the gorilla."

"There wasn't any gorilla," said Eric.

That evening Tom gave the grandchildren a good-night kiss, and Thomas took him to the airport to catch the red-eye back to Portland. There is always a red-eye to everywhere from Vegas.

"Dad," said Thomas. "The kids aren't old enough to share your values. I mean about the Brigades and the government."

"They may never get that old," Tom said. "You didn't."

"You may recall, I was never given the chance," said Thomas.

Tom had abandoned his first family when he had gone underground with the Red Storm.

"That was my mistake," said Tom. "It doesn't mean I don't love you today."

"I know, Dad. And I know how you feel about the Brigades."

"You do?"

"Sure. It's how you feel about everything. Resistance. Rejection. Rebellion. Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Just that—I am proud of you, you know. You're a much better father than I ever was."

"Not such a stretch," said Thomas; then he laughed and clapped his father on the shoulder, a glancing blow. "I noticed you didn't say, 'better man.'"

"I meant that, too."

"I know, I know. Well, Dad, this is as far as I can go without a ticket."

They hugged and parted. Tom had taken great pains not to show his son his red-white-and-blue ticket. He waved good-bye and disappeared down the tunnel, through the gauntlet of bored security guards.

.....

Eight

.....

Karin took off the slicker, which made her look a little less like Death, and dried her stringy blond hair with the towel Arabella provided. She was wearing a forest-green uniform: Youth Service Corps. It didn't do much for her figure. While Pam made sassafras tea for everyone, Karin set her attache case down on the coffee table, between the beige kit and the EZ-Exit DVD.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Your *hotelier* gave it to us," said Cliff. "It replaces the DVD in the kit."

"This is all new to me," said Karin. "You'll have to forgive me; all I know is the medical procedure."

"We'll forgive you," said Tom. *Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do.* "Want a cigarette? I have your brand."

"I can't smoke in uniform," said Karin.

"You can't smoke in the house anyway," said Pam. "Do you want some sassafras tea?"

Tom opened the beige kit. It contained a bottle of pills, a DVD in a plastic slipcase with an angel (not Jerry Garcia) waving an American flag, and a red-white-and-blue death certificate.

"This is all you get for \$79.95?" he said. "They could at least give you a little gun."

"No guns in the house," Pam reminded him.

"The kit is really just for the death certificate," said Karin. She didn't seem to mind saying the word anymore; in uniform, she was all business. "Where's the other one?"

"It's in the mail," Cliff lied smoothly. "They said you could write in both names on that one."

"I didn't know you could get them by mail," said Karin, unlocking her attache. "Anyway, I have everything I need here." She took out a little plastic device that looked like a toy pipe organ. It was three upright plastic tubes in ascending sizes, each one filled with a fluid: one pink, one amber, and one yellow. "The amber one is a tranquilizer. The yellow is a muscle relaxant, very powerful and smooth acting. The pink contains the actual ..."

"We don't need to know the details," said Pam.

"That's true," said Karin. "Sorry." Each tube was connected to a clear plastic IV line; the lines were tangled. Karin set the little device on the piano, which had come from Arabella's grandmother's house in Corvallis, and began the process of untangling the lines.

Meanwhile, Cliff put the EZ-Exit DVD into the player and started navigating through the menu. The first image that came up was clouds, and the Yanni soundtrack.

He skipped to Track Two: Jerry Garcia facing a huge crowd in a sunny meadow. "Was Jerry Garcia at Woodstock?"

"It was raining at Woodstock. See what the next one is," said Tom.

Arabella poured herself another bourbon. Pam was sipping sassafras tea.

Track Three was Coltrane: "My Favorite Things" over a picture of dunes and the sea.

"Let's do the dunes," said Tom.

"Done," said Cliff, hitting pause. "Now what?"

Karin arranged them on the couch, girl-boy-boy-girl. Tom and Cliff were sitting side by side, between their two wives. Cliff held the remote and laid it on his lap while he pulled a fat joint out of his silver case.

"I don't think that's allowed," said Karin.

"I think it is," said Cliff. "I'm a lawyer, or haven't you seen my car outside?" He lit the joint and passed it to Tom. "It comes under medicinal, and we're all terminal here, right?"

"Well, I don't know," said Karin, who was still trying to untangle the IV lines. She looked, to Tom, like Penelope undoing her weaving. Is that what death is like? he wondered. Instead of your life flashing before your eyes, a string of classical references.

"Don't we get a few minutes to say our good-byes?" Pam asked.

Karin shook her head. "We're already in overtime," she said. "This was supposed to happen at sunset."

She pulled two syringes from her attache case. She swabbed each man's arm with alcohol.

"Wouldn't want to get an infection," said Tom. He closed his eyes as Karin put the needle in his arm. Cliff left his open.

When both needles were inserted, she hooked the IV lines up to a coupler, which connected both men to all three lines. The lines were still tangled, but the loose ends were free, and each one found a connection.

Karin seemed satisfied. "Now, before I release the fluids, I have to note the exact time. Does anybody have a watch?"

"Aren't you supposed to have that?" asked Cliff. "Here, take my Rolex. But you can't keep it. Pam gets it in my estate."

"Rolex!" said Pam. "Don't let him make you nervous. He bought it on Canal Street in New York last year."

They were all nervous. Karin's hands shook as she slipped the watch onto her skinny wrist. Tom felt suddenly sorry for her. Arabella was leaning back on the couch with her eyes half closed. I'm glad we've said our good-byes, Tom thought. The whole point of all this is to make you eager to get it over with. "Let's get it over with," he said.

As soon as Karin had turned her back to write down the time, Tom felt Cliff tapping his hand.

He looked down and saw an orange tab of LSD in his palm. "Wainwright?" he whispered.

"No way, man. Clifford select. I've been saving this for a special occasion. I think this qualifies."

Cliff swallowed his.

Tom squeezed Cliff's hand but didn't take the acid. He pretended, and dropped it into his pocket. "I'm with you, man," he said.

"All I have to do is push this plunger down," Karin said. "It's better if I'm behind you and you aren't watching. The idea is ..."

RIING

Karin jumped and pulled a cell phone from her pocket.

"That's my phone!" said Tom. He had forgotten it. He reached for the phone, but Karin pulled it back.

"I don't think ..."

"Better answer it," said Cliff, grinning. "It might be the governor."

Karin reluctantly handed Tom his phone.

"Daddy?"

"Gwyn?"

"Daddy! What are you doing!"

"Gwyn, honey ..."

"I can't believe this. This is crazy. You can't do this!"

Tom got up from the couch. He looked at Arabella. "It's Gwyneth. I want to take this outside."

Even more reluctantly, Karin unhooked Tom's IV from the coupler, and he stepped outside the door. The wind had dropped. He lit a cigarette.

"Daddy!" Gwyneth's voice sounded far away. "This is crazy. You can't do this."

"How did you find out what I was doing?"

"Thomas called me after your visit. He thought you were acting strange. Daddy, you can't do this. There are other ways."

"You mean the Brigade?"

"No! There's an underground. A Resistance! I thought you of all people would know enough to know about that. I called them. They are on their way. They can help."

"Help with what? Honey, this is already happening." Tom looked down at the needle dangling from his arm. "We're already into the procedure."

"Fuck the procedure," Gwyneth said. "You can't just abandon us this way. We have a right to be there."

"Gwyn, honey, believe me, you don't want to be here. This isn't Little House on the Prairie."

"This is too cruel. Let me talk to mother."

"Your mother is okay. She's—busy," said Tom.

"She's drunk, right? I can't believe you let her start drinking again! I can't believe you two!"

Tom looked up. They were in the eye of the storm. A few stars showed overhead, and among them, a single blinking light—a plane far overhead, coming from Japan, bypassing Oregon, heading for Chicago or Toronto or New York or ...

"Put her on, maybe I can talk some sense to her," said Gwyneth. "This is just too ZZZXXXZZZ—"

"You're breaking up," said Tom. The stars overhead seemed cold and far away. They were lost in a sea of blackness. Floating in a sea of death.

It's all death out here. Come and join us.

He felt it pulling at him. But the tiny spark of life was still pulling harder. Wainwright was wrong. Death wasn't a mad dog; it was more like gravity—everywhere, but weak. Nothing escaped it in the long run, but everything, even a few cells, could resist it for a while.

For a while, but time is up. "I have to go back in," he said.

"You can't do this to me," Gwyneth said. "Are you saying I'll never talk to you again? You're my father! You can XXZZXXZZX—"

"You're breaking up," Tom said again. "I love you, honey. I'll always love you." *A lie. Always was all but over.* He clicked his phone shut and walked back into the house.

"Gwyneth," he said, putting the phone on the table.

"Let me talk to her," Arabella said woozily.

"She says she'll call you tomorrow," said Tom, sitting back down on the couch and holding up his arm for the connection. "Let's get on with this."

"Let's get it on . . .," Cliff sang; he was smiling. The acid, Tom thought. *Maybe I should have taken it, too.* While Karin reconnected the lines to his IV, he leaned over and gave Arabella a kiss. Her lips were cold. Her eyes were closed. She seemed as far away now as she would ever be.

"It's been a pleasure working with you all," said Karin. "Thanks for all your help."

"Think nothing of it," said Tom. "Should we start the DVD?"

"Go," said Karin.

Cliff was holding the remote. Tom leaned over and pressed PLAY. The TV showed a picture of the dunes, wavering, like from a rocking boat. The tall grass was dancing to the familiar sounds of "My Favorite Things."

The camera was a handheld, lurching through the dunes toward the bright blue sea. *Maybe I'm getting a rush,* Tom thought. It was almost as if he had taken the acid. There was Coltrane, then Bill Evans. No, it was the triads of McCoy Tyner.

These are a few of my favorite things ...

"You will feel sleepy," said Karin, from far away. "Whatever you do is okay now. Just relax, go to sleep if you want to."

Sleep? Is that what they call it?

The camera was a handheld, bobbing up and down through the low, no, high dunes. Ocean and sky met in a faraway blue/blue line. Ahead, there was something sticking up. It was bright orange. The trick, Tom thought, is to pretend to walk, to pretend to be there. He pretended to run toward the top of the dune, but the sand was soft and his feet were numb with cold, and clumsy. He slowed to a walk, and there it was, a small hang-glider with a seat hanging under it. It was already in the air, hovering. He sat down on the seat and scooted over to make room for Ara, and someone was beside him. Too heavy, though; it was Cliff. Tom pushed off with one foot and the glider soared upward, over the dunes. The clumsiness was gone, though his feet were still cold.

My favorite things.

"Hey, this is great," he said to Cliff, but it was Pam who answered. "Cliff is gone."

Where was Ara?

The little glider was sailing higher and higher and higher, caught in an updraft. "I can't turn this thing," said Tom. Leaning from side to side did nothing; it was as if he had no weight at all.

Higher and higher.

The dunes were gone, and it was all sea and sky.

Coltrane, soprano, blue blues blue. My favorite things.

Tom squeezed Arabella's hand, and she squeezed back. She had never understood his thing about music, about Coltrane, but she was getting it now, at last.

"Oh, honey," Tom said, but she was gone again, and he was alone on the wide under-glider seat, descending.

It was going down.

The water looked solid, like a sheet of blue light.

There was an island ahead, tiny but getting bigger. He tried to turn, but the glider was heading straight for it. They know what they are doing, Tom thought.

The island had a hole in it, like a little pond. Someone was standing beside it, waving him in.

Ara?

The glider tipped, and he hit the water, and the water was hard. Tom closed his eyes, and they opened instead. He was on the floor, looking up at the low, patched ceiling of the summer house he had bought twenty years ago with Arabella and Cliff and Pam. The IV stung in his arm, and his arm was bleeding. Karin was on the couch, kneeling between Pam and Cliff. She was pulling a plastic bag over Cliff's head. Arabella was slumped over sideways.

Tom gulped for air but nothing came. He clutched his face, and it was covered with clear plastic. He ripped off the plastic bag. The rush of air felt like water, waking him.

"Hey!" Karin was taping the plastic bag around Cliff's neck. Cliff's hand was raised, bobbing up and down, as if he were hoping to be called on.

Objection, Your Honor.

"Hey!" Pam sat up and started beating on Karin's back. "What the hell are you doing?"

"It's not working right," Karin cried. "I must have crossed the lines."

Tom stood up and pushed them both aside and ripped the bag off Cliff's head. "He can't breathe! You're trying to kill him!"

Cliff's mouth was lopsided, and he was drooling. His right hand was still bobbing up and down.

"Do something!" Pam was hitting Tom in the back now. "He's had a stroke. Do something!"

"I'm trying," said Tom. He pushed on Cliff's chest, but Cliff just sank deeper into the couch.

"We have to continue the procedure," said Karin. "We can't stop now."

"Somebody do something!" said Pam.

Tom stood back, confused. Where had the island gone? Ara was sleeping peacefully on the couch, her head to one side. She was the only one in the room who looked dead.

Karin traced the tubes into Cliff's arm. "Oh no!"

"What?" asked Tom and Pam together.

"I misrouted the tubes," said Karin, pulling two more plastic bags out of her case. "We have to use the bags. They're the backup."

"What do you mean, 'misrouted'?" Pam stopped her with a strong hand on her skinny little arm.

"He got two of the relaxants," Karin said, pointing at Cliff. "Double yellow. The whole thing has to start over."

"What?" Tom looked around the room. It was like waking up. He was in the beach house he had bought twenty years ago with Arabella and Cliff and Pam. He had survived Death. He wasn't dead at all.

He stood up, reaching down to the coffee table to steady himself. "Everybody slow down," he said calmly. "Let's all have a drink of sassafras tea—or whiskey."

"She can't drink on the fucking job!" said Pam. "All she can do legally is kill you."

"We've run out of time" said Karin, looking at Cliff's watch. "The deadline was nine o'clock!"

Deadline.

"Give me that," said Pam, grabbing at the watch. It slipped off Karin's wrist and hit the floor with a loud *crack*.

"The whole thing was supposed to be over twenty minutes ago," Karin said, starting to cry. "I messed it up entirely. Now I'll lose my certification for sure."

"Tough shit," said Pam. "I'm calling 911. We need an ambulance. Tom, where's your phone?"

"On the table," said Tom. He pulled the IV from Cliff's arm, then pulled Cliff down from the couch, onto the floor. He knelt over him and pushed down on his chest.

"Your IV is bleeding," said Karin. "There's not supposed to be any blood. That means it's out of the vein."

"It's out for sure now," said Tom, pulling his needle free.

"You can't do that!" said Karin. "You're not medical personnel."

"Personnel?" Tom had always hated the word. "Nobody's personnel here," he said, tossing the IV to the floor. "But Pam's right about one thing: this whole business is over. Now we have to get Cliff to a doctor."

"Nobody's going to any doctor," Karin said grimly. She was rummaging around in her attache case. For what? Tom wondered: Instructions? A noose? A gun?

He grabbed her arm. "Sit down!"

"You can't order me around!"

"I can't?" He pushed her down on the couch beside Arabella. "Because I'm dead? Well, I'm not dead anymore. In fact, I've lost all interest in being dead. Arabella!"

He slapped her face, gently at first, then harder. "Wake up, it's over."

"It's not over!" said Karin. It was in fact a gun. She pulled it out of the attache case"—a tiny 9 mm automatic, matte-black, as black as a little hole in the Universe.

"He's choking!" said Pam. She was kneeling over Cliff, banging on his chest with her fists.

"It's the muscle relaxant," said Karin. "Let it do its work. It relaxes the diaphragm." She pointed the gun at Pam, then at Tom. "I'm sorry, but I can't allow you to interfere."

"Give me that," said Tom. He reached for the gun, and she handed it to him, surprising them both. It fit into his hand just right. He pointed it at her. "Now do something for Cliff."

He clicked the safety off, then on again. Karin hadn't known that it was on.

"This is all wrong," said Karin, kneeling down over Cliff and pushing Pam aside. "It's his diaphragm, it's not his lungs. You have to press down, here, hard."

Cliff gasped, then took a single loud breath.

"It was supposed to be yellow to yellow," said Karin. "But the pink looked yellow in the tubes. The light was bad!"

She pressed down on Cliff again, and he took another breath. "Now we have to start over."

"No way," said Tom. "This show is over."

"What do you mean?"

"What I said. Over. We have to get Cliff to the doctor in Tillamook. No point calling an ambulance. That will take forever."

"I can't allow this," said Karin, standing up. "I have already signed the papers."

"Shut up," said Pam, pushing down on Cliff's diaphragm. "It's not working. He's not breathing again."

"You do it," said Tom.

"I can't," said Karin. "If we just let the muscle relaxant work, it will ..."

"It will kill him, I know," said Tom. "But we don't want to kill him anymore, do we? What you have to do is help him breathe."

"No."

Tom clicked the safety off, then on again. It made a wicked little noise, like a gun on TV. "Yes."

Karin knelt back down on the floor. She pressed down on Cliff's diaphragm, and he took another breath. "You're making a big mistake," she said. "I'm a federal employee on duty. This is terrorism."

"Terrorism is about innocent people. I don't see any of them here. Pam, see if you can wake Arabella up. She's passed out from the fucking whiskey. Then we have to get Cliff into the car. Do you have the card?"

"You do," said Pam, dragging Cliff by his armpits toward the door.

The storm was back. When Pam opened the door, a flood of rain and wind filled the room. Tom felt a moment's nostalgia for the peaceful sea he had been flying over. It had been replaced by a raging storm.

Arabella got to her feet on her own. "What's going on?" she asked. "Tom?"

"It's over," said Tom. "Get in the car. We have to get Cliff to the doctor."

"I can't allow this," said Karin. "It's terrorism."

"Get in the car!" said Tom. He pointed the gun toward the open door.

"No."

"Stay here, then." Each taking an arm, Pam and Tom dragged Cliff out the door, into the rain, across the gravel drive, to the yellow Cadillac.

"The card, the card," said Tom.

"You have it," said Pam.

They dragged Cliff into the back seat while Ara wobbled woozily around the car and into the right front seat. "Going for a ride in the car car . . .," she sang.

Jesus! thought Tom. The rain was pounding down, and he was soaked. Karin was standing on the doorstep in her yellow raincoat, hurriedly punching numbers into Tom's cell phone.

"She's calling the police," said Pam.

"You were about to call them a minute ago," Tom reminded her. "Get in the back with Cliff."

Tom got into the driver's seat and slipped the card through the slot on the dash. The Cadillac started with a smooth whine.

"Let's go, let's go! He's not breathing again!"

Dead again.

"I'm going," said Tom. "But first—"

He got out of the car and grabbed Karin by the arm. "You're going with us," he said, dragging her toward the car.

"No!" She pulled away, holding onto the doorknob of the little house they had bought twenty-five years ago. *It was raining then, too ...*

"Let her go!" said Pam. "Get back in the car. Cliff is barely breathing. Are you sure you can drive? Your arm is still bleeding."

"Only a little," said Tom. "But I'm woozy." When he closed his eyes he could still see the island perched on the edge of earth and sea, and the glider descending. "Hell, I was dead a little while ago."

"Let me drive," said Pam. She got out of the car and put Tom into the back with Cliff. Then she got into the driver's seat.

Tom leaned forward over the seat back. Rain was streaming down the windshield, out-running the wipers. "It's raining," Arabella said, opening her eyes.

"No shit," said Pam, slipping the Cadillac into gear. She started out the drive, then slammed on the brakes. Karin was standing in front of them, carrying her raincoat wadded up, like a yellow ball. "What's that crazy little bitch up to now?"

"Crazy little bitch," said Arabella, giggling.

"I'm going, too," said Karin, pulling the back door open.

"No way!" Tom pushed her away.

Karin threw her wadded-up slicker into his lap as she fell backward and sat down heavily in a puddle on the drive.

"Go!" Tom said.

"I'm going, I'm going." Pam floored the gas, and the Cadillac spun out onto the highway, spraying gravel and mud behind it, and roared up the hill toward the meager lights of the town.

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Nine

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Pam raced through the town's single street. "Where are we going?" she cried.

"Tillamook, Tillamook," Tom said. The word was like a mantra. It was the biggest town around; it would have a hospital with an emergency room.

"Uh oh!" A Ford Expedition sped past them with a blue light flashing. "Wainwright," said Pam.

"Where's he going?"

"After us," said Pam. "That little bitch called the cops, remember? Well, that includes him. He's got his Homeland Security light on."

Tom looked back. The Ford's taillights were bright. "He's stopping; he saw us."

"Of course he saw us!" said Pam. "How many yellow Caddies are there around here this time of year? Now what?"

"He thinks we're going to Tillamook. Step on it till we're out of sight, then turn right."

Pam understood perfectly. She topped the hill, then slowed, skidding on the wet asphalt, and turned into a narrow street leading up into the pines.

"Now stop and turn off the lights. Put her in PARK and take your foot off the brake."

"Why are cars always 'her'?"

"You should be flattered."

They watched out the rear window, through the streaming rain, holding their breaths as the Ford Expedition raced past on the highway, heading for Tillamook.

"Dumb shit," said Pam. "How's Cliff?"

Cliff was slumped against the door. "He's breathing. How's Ara? I've seen her drunk, but I've never seen her drunk like this."

"I gave her a tranq," said Pam. "She must have taken two. They interact with the whiskey, making me the designated driver. Now what?"

"I'm thinking." Tom shook an American Spirit out of the pack and fished through his pockets for a match.

"Wainwright will figure out we're not ahead of him," Pam said. "He'll turn around and come back. They've probably got the state troopers out, too, by now."

"I know, I know." Tom found matches in Karin's slicker, next to a lump that might have been a phone—or another gun.

"You can't smoke in the car," said Pam.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Tom shoved the slicker onto the floor. He rolled down his window and lit the cigarette, taking two drags before tossing it out into the rain.

Another car sped by on the highway. A state trooper, blue light flashing, heading down the hill toward the beach and the house.

"Damn that little bitch," said Pam. "She must have called every cop in the country. What do we do now?"

"We can't go to Tillamook. We have to stay off the highway. Go to the end of this street and turn left. We'll go to Azarov's."

"That quack?"

"He'll have to do. Cliff's breathing, but only about once or twice a minute."

"Damn that little bitch." Pam put the car into gear and roared off, spraying gravel—no lights. "This is Bonnie and Clyde time."

"Clyde?" asked Arabella, sitting up. "Who's Clyde?"

"Nobody, honey," said Tom. "Fasten your seat belt."

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Pam drove without headlights, from streetlight to streetlight through the dark town. She saw Azarov's driveway almost too late; she barely made the turn, and skidded to a stop in a circular gravel driveway behind a Boston Whaler on a trailer, white as a ghost in the steel gray rain.

A light came on, revealing a stubby unpainted porch.

The door opened, and a man stepped out, holding an umbrella.

"Doc, it's Cliff, he's ..."

"I know, I know," said Azarov, a middle-aged Iranian with a pepper and salt beard. A blond woman was standing in the doorway behind him, talking on a cell phone.

"I cannot treat him," said Azarov.

"He's having trouble breathing!"

"You do not understand," said Azarov. He walked out to the car, under his umbrella, and bent down to the open window. "I can not treat him. There is an all-points DNR out on him, and on you too, Tom."

"Nice to see your ass, too," Tom muttered.

"You must go now, before the authorities get here!"

"They don't know where we are."

"They will puzzle it out. I am the only doctor for miles."

"Chiropractor," said Pam.

Azarov ignored her. "It is on the TI-hotline, Tom. Assault, terrorism, kidnapping."

"Kidnapping?"

"But the main thing is the termination. Interfering with a termination is a federal offense."

"We didn't interfere; she fucked it up."

"Emily is on the phone with Homeland Security right now," Azarov said, pointing back over his shoulder. "They will be all over you like fleas in shit."

"It's flies *on* shit," said Tom. "At least take a look at Cliff."

The doctor shook his head. "If I even look at him, I will have to put a bag over his head. Yours too, Tom. Try Portland. Take the old highway. They may not be watching that."

"Damn!" said Pam.

"Just go!" Azarov pleaded.

"Let go of the car, then," said Pam.

"It must look like I am trying to stop you. Go!"

Pam hit the gas and turned sharply around the Boston Whaler. Azarov went flying, into the shrubbery by his porch.

Was that for real? Tom wondered. Or for show?

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The old highway was a concrete slab, cracked and repaired in so many places that it looked like an asphalt highway patched with concrete.

It was dark in the pines. Pam turned on the headlights. The rain slacked up, but there were wisps of fog tangled in the trees like ghostly Spanish moss. The road was slick with leaves and an occasional tiny, battered corpse.

Road kill. We are the Universe's road kill.

In the car, there was silence. Pam drove; Arabella slept; Tom watched the road grimly, with his gun in his hand; and Cliff breathed, once every mile or so.

They were almost at the top of the pass when they saw the roadblock. The road was filled with lighted flares and plastic cones.

"Shit."

Two figures stood beside a blue Ford Expedition, waving lights in the air. One of them wore a trooper hat over a ponytail.

"Wainwright!" said Pam, slowing. "And his Homies. How did they find us here?"

"Slow down," said Tom. "Stop. I'll talk to him."

"Are you kidding? They'll shoot."

"Not if we stop. Just do it." Tom pulled Karin's little gun out of his pocket as Pam rolled to a stop. He rolled down the window. The flares hissed. "Wainwright, is that you?"

"Tom, Cliff? Step out of the car, please." Wainwright started toward them, a stungun held across his chest. He looked stern.

Tom stuck the pistol out of the window and fired twice into the air.

BAM BAM

Wainwright hit the ground rolling, just as he'd been trained to do. Pam stepped on the gas without being told, scattering flares and cones.

"He'll be right behind us," she said, as she rounded the first curve, into the trees.

"Not him. He'll leave it to the state troopers now," said Tom. "Let's just try and get to the interstate before they block it."

"How's Cliff?"

"Still breathing."

The road corkscrewed down the mountain and followed a rocky little creek. Pam drove expertly; Tom could feel the rear end of the Cadillac sliding on the turns but always returning to true.

Cliff was slumped against the door. His eyes were open. He looked terrified.

"We're taking you to a doctor," Tom said.

"What?" asked Pam from the front.

"It's Cliff. His eyes are open."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"What?" demanded Pam.

"He's talking in his sleep," Tom said. "Just drive!"

Pam drove. The road left the creek bed and switchbacked up another long hill. They were almost at the top when they saw the SUV parked across the road—another Ford Expedition.

Pam slowed. A man got out of the SUV and stood on the highway in the rain, waving his arms. He wore a ponytail under a wide-brimmed hat.

"Wainwright," said Pam. "How the hell did he get ahead of us?"

"That's not Wainwright," said Tom. "That's a Tilly hat. And that's not the Shackleton model."

"Must be one of his Homies," said Pam.

"Just go around him."

"I hear you. Hang on! The shoulder looks soft."

It was indeed soft. As soon as the Caddy hit it, it crumbled.

"Uh oh." In the back seat, Tom could feel the rear of the car sliding sideways, off the edge. Pam overcorrected with the wheel, and the car nosed down, into a grove of trees so black they looked like they had erased the world. Tom closed his eyes and heard wood snapping, first small branches, then bigger and bigger; then nothing at all.

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Tom was surprised to find eyes behind his eyes. He opened them both. He was looking up out of a car window. It was like when he was a kid and lying in the back of his father's Oldsmobile watching the long riverbottoms pass under the wide Indiana sky. Except he wasn't a kid anymore.

He was seventy-one.

He sat up.

There was darkness and leather all around. He was between the seats; they were jammed together.

Cliff's door was open. He was out of the car; only his feet were up on the seat. One shoe was missing. Then both feet were gone, and Cliff had slipped away.

Passed away.

Arabella!

"Ara!" Tom tried to get up, but he was wedged tightly. He wriggled free, out Cliff's door, and tried to open Arabella's door.

It was jammed. He climbed back into the car and leaned over the back of the front seat.

Pam was slumped against the window, which was smeared with blood. Arabella was leaning forward with her head in her hands, as if in thought. Tom put his hand on the back of her head. Her hair was wet and cold. His hand was sticky. "Ara!"

"Tom," said a voice. Someone was pulling at his arm. "There's no time. Come on."

"No!" said Tom. *No time?* Someone had him by the arm, pulling him out of the car. He jerked his arm free and tried to stand and fell to his knees on cold, wet stones. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"A friend."

"Arabella," Tom said. There was blood on his hand; he wiped it on his shirt. *So much blood!*

He tried to get to his feet and fell again; then he felt something cold—a cold, soft, wet rag, like a dirty diaper—pulled across his mouth and nose.

"Ara," he said out loud, and the night went gray, then white: a brilliant cold bone white.

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The island was a hole of sand in a wall of water. Tom was circling down toward it, down, down, down. The island was bright, too bright; sunny, too sunny.

The lawn chair swung under the glider's wing, but the wing was too square, like a door or a window.

Tom opened his eyes. He was in a lawn chair, but inside, by a window. The window was bright, too bright.

"Arabella?"

She was gone. The car was gone, the night was gone, the rain was gone.

He looked at his hand. The blood was gone.

"Habeus corpus," said a familiar voice.

It was Cliff. He was sitting in a wheelchair, between two single beds. They were in a motel room. The wallpaper was a black-and-white pattern of interlocked birds flying in two directions at once; an Escher, wall to wall.

Cliff's right arm was lifting and dropping, lifting and dropping. His face looked weird; his mouth was slack. Tom panicked for a moment; then he looked into Cliff's eyes and saw that he was still there.

"Cliff, you're alive," he said, amazed. "We're both alive."

Shit, he thought meanwhile. He's had a stroke or something. And where are the girls?

Then he remembered.

He remembered it all, from the scene in the beach house, to the chase, to the crash.

"Where are the girls?" He got up, unsteadily. He was wearing pajamas. "Where are we?"

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"You're awake," said a woman's voice.

Tom stood and turned and saw her standing in the doorway, all in white, like an angel. It was not Arabella, though.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Tanya," she said. She was young and skinny, with limp blond hair, like Karin, the Angel of Death. "Don't worry, you're safe here. But I think you're not ready to be walking around yet."

She was right. Tom felt dizzy. "Where's my wife? Is she here?" He sat back down. The lawn chair creaked.

"The Super will explain it all," Tanya said. "In the meantime, you get some rest. You're not ready to be walking around yet."

"What day is it?"

But she was gone. Tom turned back to Cliff. "What happened? Where are the girls?"

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff. He lifted his arm and dropped it, twice.

"How long have we been here?"

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

Shit, man. Is that all you can say? Cliff looked bad, but that was to be expected. What about Pam? What about Arabella?

Tom got up, still dizzy, and opened the door. Looking out, he saw a long hallway past other doors, most of them closed. He could hear shouting at the far end of the hall. Steadying himself against the wall, he walked toward the sound.

A TV was blaring in a room filled with old people; it was a small room, and it only took six to fill it, four of them in wheelchairs, like Cliff.

The shouting was a talk show. A fat white girl in a halter top was shouting at a skinny black man with three gold teeth. He made the ancient, universal, hands-up gesture of helplessness, but it only made her shout louder.

Maybe we're dead after all. And here we are in Hell.

"Tom!" It was the woman in white, Tanya; she was feeding an old man with a long spoon. "You should wait in your room. I'll bring your lunch there."

Tom didn't have to be told twice. *In Hell you do what they tell you.*

He shuffled back to his room and sat down and closed his eyes. He didn't want to look at Cliff. His mouth was too slack and his eyes, though bright, were too wide. He looked like an old baby.

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"You can call me Tanya."

Huh? Tom opened his eyes. The woman in white was feeding Cliff with a long spoon; the same long spoon. It was a terrible spoon. "Are you hungry?"

Tom shook his head, too hard: it hurt.

"You probably still have the chemicals in your bloodstream. We thought there for a while last night we were going to lose you."

"Please," said Tom. "Start at the beginning. What happened? Where am I? Where's my wife, Arabella?"

"There was an auto accident," said Tanya. "The Super is checking our sources, trying to find out about your wife. I told her of your concern. In the meantime, just relax and let your body heal itself."

"What about Cliff? Is his body healing its fucking self?"

"He has apparently had some kind of stroke. The doctor will be here tomorrow to look at him. I can understand why you would be upset. Meanwhile, you are safe here with us."

"Who is us?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about that. But you know who we are. You know you do."

The Resistance? "This is all a mistake," said Tom.

"There." Tanya wiped Cliff's chin and stood up, smiling. "Meanwhile, don't worry about a thing. The Super will let you know as soon as she finds out something."

"The Super?"

"You can call her Dawn." Tanya left, closing the door behind her.

Dawn. Tom felt strangely relieved. Maybe it *was* all a mistake, *my* mistake, he thought. Maybe his memory of Arabella and her head all sticky with cold blood was a dream. He checked his hands again. They were clean.

Maybe I just dreamed I saw Arabella dead.

"Cliff, do you remember anything about the wreck?"

"Habeus corpus."

Shit. Poor fucking Cliff. Tom lay down on the bed closest to the door and closed his eyes, determined to search his memory ruthlessly and confront whatever he found. Instead, he went to sleep.

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When Tom woke up, it was dark. He turned on the light beside his bed and studied the wallpaper birds. Were they landing or taking off? He was still trying to decide when there was a knock at the door.

"Tom? Do you mind if I call you Tom? We like to call everyone by their first names. You can call me Tanya, remember?"

She was at the door, all in white, like an angel.

"I remember." Tom closed his eyes. The last thing he wanted to see was an angel.

"I'm afraid I have bad news. Your wife and her friend have passed away."

"Passed away? What?"

"There were fatalities in the accident. The Super asked me to tell you, since I'm a more familiar face. She will be here in the morning to speak with you directly, if you want to know the details."

"Arabella? Passed away." Tom couldn't bring himself to say the word. The word would make it real.

"I'm so sorry," Tanya said and closed the door again.

Tom swung his feet off the bed. He tried to stand up, but he was dizzy; he sat back down.

He could reach the door from the bed; the room was that small. He put his hand on the knob, but he didn't want to open it. Not now, not yet. Through that door, Arabella was dead.

Maybe this is the dream. He lay back down and closed his eyes and willed the world to go away, and before very much hateful time had passed, it did.

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Eleven

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When Tom woke up, light was streaming in the window. It was morning. He was alive.

Arabella was dead.

He stood up. Cliff was asleep on the other bed. *Just as well.* Tom wasn't dizzy any more. He looked for his clothes and found them in a paper bag at the foot of the bed. They smelled of smoke and rain. His hands were shaking, but he managed to put on his shirt and button it. One sleeve was stiff with dried blood.

Arabella's? *Better not to think.* He had to sit down to pull on his pants, first one leg and then the other. Arabella had always hated these pants. *Arabella—*

"Habeus corpus," said a calm, untroubled voice.

Cliff wasn't asleep after all; his eyes were wide open and his hand was plucking at the covers. In the morning light, he didn't look like an old baby anymore. He looked like an old man.

"Back in a minute," Tom said. "I'm going down the hall to figure out what's happening."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff in the same calm voice as before, but his big eyes were brimming with tears.

He knows.

"It'll be all right" Tom said. *What a stupid fucking remark!* "Be right back." He squeezed Cliff's hand and slipped out the door, into the dark hallway.

Tanya was in the dayroom, feeding one of the old folks through a tube. It was thicker than the IV tubes Karin had tangled. "Tom, good morning," she said. "Where are you going in those clothes?"

"The Super. Her office?"

"You really shouldn't wear those clothes around here, they're covered with blood and dirt."

Tom nodded. "Sure thing. Where's her office?"

The Super's office was another motel room off another hallway on the other side of the TV room. Instead of beds, it had two desks and two swivel chairs. A woman sat in one, at a computer screen. She looked up when she saw Tom in the doorway.

"You must be Tom." She also wore white.

Tom nodded.

"I'm sorry to say your wife has been in an accident."

"I know. I was in the same god-damned accident. And who the hell are you, anyway?"

"You can call me Dawn. I'm the Super of this site. Look, I'm on your side, okay? Why don't you sit down so we can talk."

Tom sat down in the other swivel chair. The wallpaper was the same Escher birds, either landing or taking off.

"I know this is all a shock. This whole operation has been difficult."

"You can say that again. Who are you people, anyway? Where am I?"

"You know who we are, Tom. We feel the same way you do about the Brigades, the kevorkians, the involuntary suicides. We have devoted our energies to doing something about it."

"This is all a mistake," Tom said. "None of this was supposed to happen."

"Of course not," Dawn said, shaking her head sympathetically. She had long hair tied back in a ponytail, like Wainwright's. She looked to be in her mid-forties. "We know that you didn't volunteer for the Brigade; that's why we intervened. We don't intervene when there is a terminal illness or a voluntary cessation."

"Nobody intervened in anything. You must have picked me up on the highway, after the accident. My wife—"

"I'm afraid your wife didn't survive the accident," said Dawn. "Nor did her friend, Cliff's wife."

"Pam," said Tom. "Pam and Arabella." Saying the names somehow made them more alive. Less—dead.

"I'm sorry for your loss," said Dawn.

"I need to call my daughter," Tom said. "This is a family emergency."

"I understand, certainly, but that's not possible right now," said Dawn. "You are still under the influence of the drugs, and we are in a crisis situation here. There's an all-points out on you and your friend."

"And he needs to see a doctor."

"That's going to happen. We're doing the best we can in the face of a Homeland Security Blue Alert. Usually they ignore us; this is a new development. But with any luck, the doctor will be here tonight. He's the one who rescued you, in fact. But delete that; I'm not sure you're supposed to know that."

"He's the doctor who treated Arabella? My wife?"

"I really can't say," said Dawn. "I'm sure we'll know more by tonight. Can you wait until then?"

Tom suddenly felt very tired. He was relieved to be relieved of the necessity of doing anything. "Sure," he said, getting up. "But Arabella—"

"There's nothing any of us can do for her now. And one other thing. Please don't wear those clothes here. They will freak out the others."

.....

On his way down the hallway toward his room, Tom passed a door that opened to the outside. He opened it and saw a yard of yellow clay with patches of grassy sod, like hairplugs. Beyond the yard was a dark forest of shaggy pine trees. They were moaning, as if in a wind, though their limbs were still. The sky overhead was filled with thin, high clouds. At the coast the clouds were low and thick; here they were wraiths, like ghosts.

He found the American Spirits in his shirt pocket. Matches, too, all crumpled and black with blood. He lit one; there was no one to tell him no.

Arabella is gone.

The taste was sweet. Almost like a friend. Or a betrayal.

He looked down at his hand. It was wrinkled and old. He could almost see right through it, to the ground. He was seventy-one. He was old.

"Tom? That door's alarmed." It was Tanya, all in white.

"Alarmed?"

"You can look out, but don't go through. It's not to keep people in; it's to keep intruders out."

"Okay."

"Plus, you can't smoke here, you know. The others."

"I understand," he said, taking a long drag. He flipped the cigarette out and hit a bare spot. An easy shot, since most of the lawn was bare.

.....

Cliff was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling and the birds.

Tom sat on the bed beside him and took his hand so that it stopped fluttering.

"It's bad, Cliff," he said. "We didn't think it could get any worse, but it did. Ara and Pam were killed. There was a wreck. Both killed. But you already knew, didn't you?"

"Habeus corpus."

"You remember everything that happened, don't you?" Tom was surprised at the anger in his voice. Was he mad at Cliff for understanding or for not understanding?

"Habeus corpus."

Tom had never felt so alone. He lay down on the other bed and closed his eyes.

It was afternoon when he awakened. He could tell by the shadows, even though he didn't know which way was east and which was west. There was something about the shadows, about the slow dropping of the birds ...

"That's it," he thought. I can tell time by them. In the morning they are taking off and in the afternoon they are dropping back down. It was easy. Everything was easy; too easy.

He fell back asleep. He dreamed of Arabella. He was walking in big circles on the sand, looking for her.

He awoke in a panic. Arabella was gone.

Cliff was gone.

He found Cliff down the hall in the TV room, lifting and dropping his arm. How did he get back and forth? Did someone push him?

"That's better," said Tanya.

Huh? Then Tom realized she was referring to his outfit. He was wearing pajamas. Someone had changed his clothes while he slept.

"Would you like to join us?"

No, he wouldn't. But he did. She brought him some tuna salad on a tray. He hadn't realized he was hungry before. It tasted good.

On the TV a judge was berating an overweight man for allowing his dog to ruin his girl friend's carpet. The judge and the defendant were black; the girl friend, also overweight, was white. The dog was white. Tom watched for a while, then went down the hall to the motel room/office where Dawn was pecking at a keyboard.

"The doctor?" he asked hopefully.

"He's on his way," she said. "I can't give you an arrival time because we're not in contact. Too dangerous. The phones are all monitored, and a call would lead them here. But don't worry; he will be here, and he will have news."

News? Tom went back to the TV room hoping to watch the news. But there was nothing on except judges and game shows.

"Is there anything to read?" he asked.

"Of course," said Tanya. Her smile and her tone made it clear that she approved of reading. She gave him a stack of magazines. One was about golf; another was about yachts for sale. He never got to the others. He must have fallen asleep, for when he opened his eyes he saw the lights of a car on the window; that's how he knew it was dark outside.

He heard a car door slam. That's how he knew the doctor had arrived.

"Where are you going?" Tanya asked. She was playing checkers with an old woman, moving for both of them.

"The office."

"It's right down the hall."

"I know where it is."

There was a man in the office in Dawn's chair. He had a ponytail like Wainwright's, and he wore a Tilly hat. Tom recognized it from the *New Yorker* ads.

"You must be Tom," the man said. "Come in and sit down."

"That was you," Tom said, as he sat down in Dawn's empty chair. "Flagging us down."

"Sorry I'm late," the man said. "I had to take a circuitous route to get here. They're on us like ticks on a hound. I'm afraid I don't have much to tell you yet. I'm trying to get through to certain people. Everybody's gone to ground. The Homies are swarming like bees."

"Are you the doctor?"

"One of them. You can call me Lucius. We don't use our real names here. And of course I can't tell you where you are. I'm not even supposed to know myself. As you have probably determined, you are safe here with the Resistance. I'm sorry about your wife."

"Where is she?"

"She didn't make it out of the wreck. There was nothing we could do for her, and we barely had time to pull you and Cliff free before the Homies got there."

"No, I mean where is she now?"

"That's what we're trying to find out."

"We thought you were the Homies. We tried to get around."

"The shoulder was soft, from the rain. The embankment gave way. You went all the way down into the ravine."

"You caused the wreck," Tom said, standing. "We were getting away."

"The rain caused the wreck," Dawn broke in. She was standing in the doorway. "The government and its inhuman policies caused the wreck."

"You only thought you were getting away," said Lucius. "They had roadblocks up all over the place. Still do. DNR and APB and whatever else they can think of. And you still had Karin's GPS sender in the car." He saw Tom's confusion. "Oh, yeah. It was in her raincoat; that's how I was tracking you, too."

"Karin? The monitor? She was in on this?"

"Not that she knew of."

Tom sat back down. "You are the boyfriend. She told Arabella you had broken up with her."

"It was she who broke up with me. She learned that I was using her to track the involuntary networks. I think she was pretty ambivalent about the whole business anyway."

"She was just doing her job. Not too fucking ambivalent, either. She tied a plastic bag over Cliff's head, which is why he's the way he is now. Are you going to do something for him?"

"I'm going to look at him while I'm here. But don't expect too much, Tom. The muscle relaxant knocks out the blood supply to the brain; stroke symptoms are fairly common among survivors."

"I have to find my wife. Is there a phone? I have to speak with my daughter."

"That can happen," said Lucius. "Your daughter knows about all this; she's the one who called and put us on the trail. Gwyneth? But it can't happen yet. You have to give it a few days."

"Days?"

"Come, I have something I have to show you, so you know the situation, the real deal."

The real deal. Tom followed Lucius and Dawn into the TV room. Lucius took a remote from a drawer under the TV (so that's where it was hidden!) and switched to CNN. If the old folks staring at the screen noticed the change, none of them showed any sign of it. Only Cliff seemed interested, with his bright eyes and his right hand fluttering up and down.

"It's been on all the networks," Lucius said. He sampled through memory, backing up through the evening news, until a familiar face filled the screen.

Tom's own. His mouth was open, as if he were about to speak. It was a picture Gwyneth had taken last summer on the deck. Wainwright must have picked up the picture in the house. Had they left it open? But of course, Wainwright had a key. The Homies had a key.

"Sought on terrorism charges, plus attempted murder and flight to evade prosecution," said the broadcaster. "Shoot-out in a sleepy seaside resort town of—" The words were unconnected but powerful.

There were pictures of rotating lights and a wrecked car being winched up a steep embankment, onto a rain-dark highway.

Then a Brigade, marching under an American flag. A sturdy, weathered face, looking resolutely into the sunset.

Then Tom's face again. He was surprised by how decrepit, how depraved, how old and wicked he looked. Could they have tampered with the photo? Did they need to?

"Aggravated terrorism and kidnapping—"

"Terrorism? Kidnapping?" Tom said. "All I did was pull an IV out of my arm!"

"And take a shot at a federal employee on duty, according to them. Which makes it a Homeland Blue Alert."

"Wainwright? I shot in the air, and the idiot hit the dirt. He's just a fucking handyman anyway."

"He's a Homey on alert," said Lucius. "Or maybe they meant Karin; who knows?"

"I never shot at her. She pulled a gun on me!"

Lucius shrugged. "Whatever. The kidnapping charge may refer to Cliff here. Apparently he's still under Brigade induction. You guys didn't even get your paperwork right."

"I've seen enough," said Tom. "I need to call my daughter and tell her where I am."

"We're taking care of that," said Dawn. "We're trying to get through to her. It has to be done in a secure way that doesn't endanger the others."

The others again.

"You have to understand," said Lucius. "It's not really you they are after. It's us." He tapped himself on the chest. "By putting out an APB-DNR on you, they are admitting that we exist."

"That there is alternative to involuntary suicide," said Dawn. "That there is an active, effective Resistance."

"I still need to contact my daughter. Are the cops looking for her, too?"

"I'm sure she's being watched," said Lucius, "in the hope that she will lead them to you—and to us. That's why the important thing now is to lay low and remain cool. Surely you of all people can understand that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we know about you and Cliff and your history in the movement. We know we can trust you to maintain security until this cools down."

"If it ever does," said Dawn. She raised her chin slightly, as if prepared to take a blow.

Lucius shot her a look. "Meanwhile, I need to take a look at Cliff, and you need to go back to your room and relax until morning. I promise to let you know as soon as we find out anything. Okay?"

"Okay," said Tom.

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Tom's clothes were still in his room, in the paper bag. He knew better than to put them on. He fished out the American Spirits. There were only four left in the pack; they were all bent. And there was something else in the bottom of the bag, something heavy.

It was Karin's little matte-black 9 mm automatic. He wrapped the shirt around it and put it back.

He straightened out one of the last American Spirits and took it down the hall to the outside door before lighting it.

The stars looked very cold and very small and very far away.

Tom wondered how he would ever get to sleep with Arabella gone, lost, closed up in a morgue drawer somewhere.

"Tom? Do you mind if I call you Tom?"

It was a girl in white, a black girl, not Tanya. She was pushing Cliff through the hall in his wheelchair. "You can call me Butterfly. You know, you can't smoke here."

"Sorry," said Tom. He threw away the cigarette and followed them to his room.

.....

The next morning, Dawn's office was closed. Breakfast was pancakes, with sausage. Some of the old folks in the TV room even smiled when they smelled the sausage.

Tanya's replacement had a sweet, wide smile and fluttering hands that almost matched Cliff's. "You can call me Butterfly," she said.

"I know," said Tom.

She was combing Cliff's hair over his bald spot, tenderly. Tom helped put the breakfast dishes away and checked the office again. Still closed.

He was watching a morning talk show when Lucius came in and pulled the remote from the drawer. "The Resistance is no longer a myth," he said, switching to CNN.

The TV showed two young people in chains, a man and a woman. They were both smiling and holding up their fists as they were led to a waiting Homeland Security van.

"This story has broken the silence," said Lucius. "Now the whole country knows there is a Resistance and it is active. The government has stopped trying to hide it. They are of course trying to paint us as murderers and criminals, but the people will know the difference. Most of them, anyway."

"How about Cliff?" Tom asked.

Lucius shook his head. "Not so good. I examined him last night. There's no change, and there's not likely to be change. We can take care of him, of course. That's why this place is here."

"He doesn't want to be here," Tom said. "Neither do I. We need to be with our families."

"I understand how you feel," said Lucius. "But you can't really speak for Cliff, can you? It would be suicide for you or him to leave here, and we can't allow that. Plus, it would endanger the others. Wait until you have thought it over and things have cooled down a little."

"What would your wife think?" It was Dawn, in the doorway. "I'm sure she wouldn't want you to throw away your life after all the efforts that have been taken to save it. Think of the thousands who are risking their own careers to put up a resistance to the involuntary suicide and judicial murder that is the Brigades and the kevorkian laws."

"This has all been a mistake," Tom said again. "We appreciate what you are doing, but ..."

"Not a mistake," said Lucius. "An inevitability. Sooner or later they would have to realize we existed. Now the fight has been joined. It's more important than ever that we keep you hidden and help you survive this assault."

"Let me call my daughter, at least."

Lucius put a hand on Tom's shoulder. "I understand, and we're on it. We have to patch in the call from the Netherlands, so they can't trace it. We've gone from symbolic resistance to real Resistance. We need your total cooperation."

"Doing what?"

"Laying low. Being cool. *Chilling*, I believe was once the word."

.....

Tom spent the morning "chilling" in the TV room with Cliff. The morning was filled with talk, then with games where people won money and then leaped about.

After a particularly big win, with much leaping about, Tom went back to his room to get an American Spirit out of the paper bag. There were three left, all crooked. The black gun was still safe, wrapped in the shirt in the bottom of the bag.

He unwrapped it and put on the shirt. The blood on the sleeve cracked off and fell to floor as dark powder.

He went back down the hall to the open door and lit the cigarette. The forbidden taste, the betrayal, was

sweet—but where was the betrayed? *Arabella, I didn't mean to leave you there alone. I didn't mean for any of this to happen.*

The long bare lawn, with a few patches of grass, ended abruptly at a row of shaggy pines; dark, thoughtless, still-living trees.

Tom tried to remember Arabella's face, her voice, but they both were dim. Like seeing through fog.

"Remember, Tom, you can't smoke here."

It was Butterfly, Tanya's replacement. Darker skin, brighter eyes, all in white like—

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," said Tom, flipping the cigarette out onto the lawn, hitting a bare spot. "What's that noise out there?"

"What noise? Out where?"

"Beyond the trees. I thought it was the wind, but there's no wind."

"A highway, I think," Butterfly said. "I don't know which one, of course. We come here blindfolded, for security. That way if we're arrested, like the ones this morning, we can't betray anything because we don't know anything."

"I thought it was the wind," Tom said. A highway was better.

.

When Tom got back to the room, Cliff was there, sitting in his wheelchair by the window. Tanya was feeding him lunch with a long spoon. "There's a sandwich for you on the bed," she said. "I'm sorry we're out of juice."

"I thought you had gone," Tom said.

"We're all stuck here until the alert is lifted," she said. "We can't all get arrested, can we?"

She made it sound like a privilege. As soon as she had wiped her spoon and left, Tom unwrapped his sandwich and ate it. Tuna fish.

"This is fucked," he said. "It's an old folks home. Assisted living. We go from assisted dying to assisted living. Fuck!"

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"It's a bunch of kids taking care of old people. But I'm talking to Gwyneth this afternoon. I'm going to figure out a way to get us out of here."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"I don't know where. Just somewhere. Anywhere."

Tom lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. He wanted to see the island again, but he couldn't find it, even in his imagination. Sleep wouldn't come; it was neither morning nor afternoon. He opened his eyes and watched the birds, caught in the wallpaper's beige universe, neither landing nor taking off.

Finally he got up and went down the hall to the TV room. The old folks were dozing, tomato soup dribbling down their chins. On the TV a judge was listening to the excuses of a black man whose dog had ripped down the wash from a neighbor's car. "He didn't know it was wash, Your Honor. Who hangs out wash anymore?"

The judge seemed unsympathetic. Just as she was about to announce her verdict, Tom felt a hand on his shoulder. He jumped, startled; he had been imagining he was the defendant.

It was Lucius, looking pleased. "Tom, your call. As promised."

Tom followed him to the office down the hall. "Make the best of it," Lucius said. "It took a lot of doing. We have people in Europe, too. We learned a lot from you and Cliff."

"From me and Cliff?"

"From your generation. From people with a personal history of resistance. From all those who would not go gently into that good night. There's the phone. Remember, it's international." He turned and left the room.

Tom was both eager and reluctant to pick up the phone. "Gwyn?"

"Dad!"

"It's me. Are you all right, honey?"

"Yes, they can't prove anything. Oh, it's so good to hear your voice."

"What do you mean, they can't prove anything? Have you been arrested?"

"Only detained for an hour or so yesterday. They're so stupid."

"What about your mother?"

"She's at Wainwright's."

Tom felt a moment's surge of hope. Then he realized what she meant. "Funeral home?"

"He won't release her body. They say it's evidence."

Her body. It used to mean something else.

"I'll take care of it, Dad. I promise. It's what mother would have wanted."

"What? That?"

"For you to be okay. Don't do something foolish like I know you're thinking about."

"Like what?"

"Everyone is looking for you. You and Cliff are heroes. You have to lay low."

"Heroes, hell. Gwyneth, this is no good. This is an old folks home."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but I'd rather have joined the fucking Brigade. Cliff is here, too. He's had some kind of stroke."

"Daddy, talk sense. It's not fair to Mom. It's not fair to me!"

"You're breaking up," Tom said. "I love you."

"I don't want to be an orphan!"

"I love you," said Tom, hanging up.

"She's right, you know," said Lucius. He was standing in the doorway.

"What the hell do you know! You were listening to my phone call?"

"Of course not." Lucius sat in the chair across from Tom and placed his two thick hands between his knees. "But I know what she was saying. I know this place looks bad. We have people here who were injured by the kevorkian chemicals. But you don't belong here. At the other centers, in California and back East, you will find people you will want to be with. Maybe even work with. You may even want to work with us. Now you have a choice. That's the whole point."

"What about Cliff?"

"He belongs here. He'll have to make his own choices. You can't make his choices for him."

And you can? "What about my wife? They won't release her to my daughter."

"And they sure as hell won't release her to you. Tom, you're a wanted man. You're part of the Resistance, whether you like it or not."

"Ara wasn't supposed to die."

"Tom, you have to give her up. She was ready to give you up. Can't you do the same for her?"

"I don't want to talk about it," said Tom, getting up.

"I understand," said Lucius. "You've been through a lot. Get some rest and think about it and we'll talk tomorrow."

.....

Thirteen

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Outside, the sun was going down. Tom found Cliff in the TV room. He pulled the remote out of the drawer and found CNN. The rest of the old folks either didn't notice or didn't mind; most of them were dozing.

"Arrested in Eugene and Northern Washington," said the announcer. The TV showed four young people in chains, being loaded into a red-white-and-blue ashcroft van. They were smiling and holding up their fists.

"More arrests," said Dawn. She was standing in the doorway again; she seemed to like doorways.

"How many of you are there?" Tom asked.

"I don't actually know," Dawn said. "And of course, I wouldn't say if I did. The Resistance is nationwide. Some are medical students, some are religious activists, some are volunteers like Tanya and Butterfly. We come from every sector of society, just like the opposition to the death penalty, or the right-to-life movement in your day."

"But those were two entirely different sets of people and politics," Tom said.

"Things change. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. We unite all those who are dedicated to fighting a society that discards old people when their usefulness is done. We fight for the dignity of old age and the rejection of suicide as a social policy. Surely you, with your history of political activism, can understand that."

"Not exactly. I supported the idea of voluntary termination at first," said Tom. "It seemed like a socially desirable thing, especially since the life span is so long in the developed world."

"Isn't that a little racist," said Dawn, with a tight smile. "Isn't suicide itself a little arrogant, with a hint of *noblesse oblige*? It's not just about you anyway. The Resistance is more than just a haven for those who are escaping the kevorkian laws. It's a mechanism for those who want to put their principles into action, like the Underground Railroad."

"But the Underground Railroad wasn't set up for the benefit of those who ran it," Tom protested.

Or was it? He looked up, and she was gone.

.....

Cliff was getting stronger. His arm was rising farther and falling more slowly. His eyes seemed brighter, more—understanding.

"Where are you taking him?" asked Butterfly.

"For a walk," said Tom. "Is that allowed?"

"Of course, but don't go outside. We don't know who might be watching through the fence."

"There's a fence?"

"It's not to keep people in," said Tanya, who was helping with the evening feeding. "It's to keep people out. Security."

Tom rolled Cliff down the empty hall. He stopped by their room and got the next-to-last American Spirit out of the bag. Then he smoked it, half in and half out of the open back door, while Cliff looked on in his now customary silence.

"It's all backward," said Tom. "More than backward. Twisted almost totally around."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"Young people dedicating their lives to keeping old people alive. Risking their lives, or at least their freedom, so ... what? So we can watch talk shows and eat tuna? Most of us don't even know what we are watching on TV. Or maybe we do. That's worse."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"They see this as their big shot. By repressing them, the government is finally taking them seriously. And in a weird way, they dig it! I can see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices. Remember all the people in the movement who didn't care about winning, who just wanted to fight the good fight?"

"Habeus corpus."

"You can't win, and therefore you never have to take responsibility for actually changing anything. You just get to feel good about making the fucking effort. Moralism in arms. They're not fighting the Brigades; they're fighting Death itself. Moralism's ideal strategy: pick a fight you know beforehand you can't possibly win. But what am I saying—it's not just them. All our lives, we are fighting Death. That's what life is, I guess: a slow holding action against entropy."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"Tom, you know you can't smoke here." It was Butterfly. "Think of the others."

"They can't smell it," Tom said. "They don't know what the hell's going on anyway. Tell me, Butterfly, why do you do this?"

"This?"

"All this. Taking care of all these old people. Of us."

"Old age deserves dignity," Butterfly said.

"No, it doesn't," Tom said, throwing out his cigarette and closing the door. "Take it from one who knows."

.....

Tom was alive, in a motel room. Arabella was dead, in a drawer.

It was backward. Worse than backward. But what could he do? He was a prisoner here, and Dawn was right: it was the fault of the government. The whole business was fucked.

He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. He had a gun, in the bag. He could end it for himself and Cliff. But what would that do to the kids here, who had saved them; or who thought they had saved them? It would be worse than betrayal.

He was trapped. He was in a drawer like Arabella.

Only worse: alive. With no one to talk to, except Cliff, who had forgotten how to talk back.

It was over, but it still went on. It was just as his grandfather had said, back in Indiana: "The problem is, life goes on after it's over."

He closed his eyes, hoping the world would go away again, like before. But it didn't. Tom was no longer tired, no longer dizzy. He tried counting sheep, and it was going okay, until suddenly someone pulled at his sleeve.

"There you are. I found you."

He opened his eyes. He was in the bed alone. But it was Arabella's voice. He started to cry, for the first time in years, and closed his eyes.

"I found you," she said again.

.....

Fourteen

.....

There was a quarter moon. The clouds continued their march eastward, into nothingness. They dissipated over the unseen desert, leaving not a trace: no rain, no shadow, and finally, no cloud.

Tom stood in the doorway smoking the last American Spirit, all the way down, until it would have burned his fingers if it were not for the filter. He tossed it away and went back inside and put on his clothes, stiff

shirt and all. There was the gun, in the bottom of the bag. The safety was off. Had it been off all along?

He switched it on and stuck the gun into his belt.

He felt like an outlaw. An American Spirit Outlaw. An old fucking outlaw.

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"You awake? We need to talk," said Tom. He sat down on the bed and took Cliff's hand. "I have to get out of here," he said. "I have to deal with Gwyneth and with Arabella, and Pam, too. Everything is fucked. They don't need me here. You don't need me here."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"Gwyneth will help me. I will come for you when all this is over. I'll try. I'll do what I can. But first I need to get far enough away so if I get caught they can't trace me back to these kids."

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

He knows I'm lying, Tom thought. Then he saw that Cliff was looking at the gun in his belt.

"It's the one I took from Karin," he said. "With an I. Don't worry, I'm not going to use it. If I can get to the highway, I can trade it for a ride to Portland."

"Habeus corpus."

"Seattle, then. Hell, Eugene. I know we're in Oregon, somewhere on the western side of the Cascades; I can tell by the clouds." He put his hand on the doorknob. "So long, buddy. So long again."

Cliff raised his arm and held it, almost steady. A salute? A plea? "Habeus corpus," he said.

Tom took his hand off the door. He couldn't go through. Not alone, anyway. "Okay, okay," he said.

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If the alarm went off, Tom didn't hear it. Perhaps the alarm had been a bluff, he thought, as he pushed the wheelchair through the door and onto the long, patched lawn. Then he turned it around: it was easier to pull than to push. Cliff was facing backward, saluting or waving steadily, as Tom pulled him into the woods.

Just inside the trees, there was a steep bank. At the bottom was a chainlink fence, taller than a man, with three strands of barbed wire at the top. Beyond the fence there was a dirt road. Tom could barely make it all out in the moonlight.

He heard a bell ringing behind him.

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"The alarm," said Tom. "I thought they were bluffing."

"Tom? I know you're there!" Lucius was speaking through a bullhorn. "I'm on your side. I want to bring you back safely, in a way that doesn't endanger you or us. Is Cliff with you?"

Tom didn't answer. That meant they couldn't see him, even in the moonlight. He heard a door open and shut; he heard muffled voices.

"We know he's with you. That's okay. Just don't go any farther. There's a fence. It's electric."

You're bluffing, Tom thought.

"It's not to keep you in. It's to keep them out. Come back before you bring the Homies down on us all."

Tom studied the fence. There was no way he was going to get through it with a wheelchair, even if it wasn't electric, which it probably wasn't. Plus, the bank was too steep here; there was no way down.

"Tom, it's me, Lucius. I'm coming to bring you back."

Tom pointed the gun straight up, toward the sky, and pulled the trigger. He had forgotten the safety was on. He clicked it off and pulled the trigger again.

BLAM!

"Whoa! What was that?"

He fired again: BLAM!

"Damn, Tom, I hope you're not shooting at me," Lucius shouted through the bullhorn. "Because I'm not going to shoot back, if that's what you want."

Tom decided it was best not to answer.

"Habeus corpus," Cliff whispered. Tom was surprised. Had he been able to whisper before, or was this a new power? Cliff was leaning forward in his wheel chair, his right hand plucking at the rim of the right wheel. Suddenly Tom realized what was happening.

Too late.

Before he could grab the chair, Cliff had rolled it over the edge of the bank. It pitched forward, spilling him out and rolling down on top of him. Cliff and the chair hit the fence at the same time.

There was a crackling sound, and a wad of dry grass burst into flame.

"Shit! It *is* electric!" Tom slid down the bank, holding the gun in one hand and slowing himself with the other.

The grass was still burning, but the fence was no longer crackling.

Cliff was half in and half out of the chair, wedged between the bottom of the bank and the fence. The wire was sparking where it crossed the spokes of the wheel. Cliff's arm was rising and falling rapidly.

Tom grabbed Cliff's hand, and it shocked him.

"Damn!" He tried it again; this time it was barely a tingle. He grabbed Cliff's wrist and pulled him out of the chair. But there was nowhere to go. They were both wedged in the tiny space between the steep bottom of the bank and the fence.

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"I know," said Tom. "It wasn't supposed to be like this, old buddy. We did our best, didn't we?"

"Habeus corpus."

Tom could hear doors slamming in the distance. Floodlights came on, lighting the tops of the trees, high above.

"Tom, don't do this! You're giving us no choice."

No choice? Tell me about it.

He could see silhouettes at the top of the bank. They were looking down. A light shone in his face.

He raised the gun and fired again.

BLAM!

The light went out.

"Go ahead, you old fool," said Lucius. "I can wait till morning. You're trapped there. We tried to work with you, but you're determined to put us all in danger. Well, we can wait you out."

Tom thought it best not to answer. At least the light was out. He tried to move the chair, but it was wedged against the fence. His hands tingled again when he touched it. It wasn't a shock, really; more of a warning.

Cliff was folded up in a fetal position on the ground. His left leg was moving in unison with his arm, back and forth.

Shit. Tom turned over and lay on his back and looked up.

The clouds swept across the moon like cotton swabs, big and incredibly beautiful, faster and faster—eastward, toward the still faraway dawn. They disappeared behind the trees.

"Habeus corpus," said Cliff.

"I know."

Tom put the gun against the side of Cliff's head. It wasn't supposed to be like this, but no one had to look. He could keep his eyes closed.

"So long again, old buddy."

BLAM!

"Tom! If you're firing at me, you're wasting your shots. I won't fire back."

Tom put the gun against his own temple. As he searched for the familiar little indentation, he saw the island again, finally. There was one tree on the center, just like in the cartoons. The hang glider was descending, too fast. There was Arabella, all in silhouette, all in black, but sweetly familiar.

"I found you."

Then there was nothing at all.

.....

This grave partakes the fleshly birth, which cover lightly, gentle earth.

—Ben Jonson

The End