

## The Shackles of Freedom

by Mike Resnick and Tobias S. Buckell

I came to New Pennsylvania because I was looking for a world with no government, no laws, nothing to hinder me from doing what I pleased. The colonists here hadn't liked the laws back on Earth, so they set up shop, free of all bureaucracy and all regulations.

What I never bargained for was having to live with the consequences of that freedom.

\* \* \*

Mark Suderman was dying on my operating table. His plain blue clothing, stained dark with blood, lay crumpled on the floor. I tried to avoid his brothers' frightened glances. There was nothing more I could tell them, except to pray.

They couldn't know it, but he was a dead man before I ever got a chance to examine him. I simply didn't have the tools to save his life.

I sighed deeply. So much for freedom. This was the twenty-third time I had the freedom to watch a man die that I could have saved.

Hooves clip-clopped in the distance and then echoed their way up the driveway. The rest of the Suderman family had arrived.

"Stay here," I told the brothers, then walked out through the dining room to my porch. A plank squeaked as I stopped next to the swing. Mr. Suderman, his hat in hand, stared straight up at me from the bottom of my tiny set of bleached stairs.

I looked down at him, sighed, and gestured to the door. He climbed the three steps and passed by me, but his rough, callused hand grabbed my shoulder for a brief instant before he went inside. His wife sat stoically in the buggy, her seat rocking on its suspension slightly as she shifted her weight from side to side. The wind tugged at the strings of her bonnet, and the light from our three moons cast shadows across her face.

I had a sudden impulse to walk over to the buggy—but what could I say? That I might have cured him on some world they couldn't even see, let alone pronounce?

I had come here because I knew they needed a doctor. So what if they were Amish? There was no constitution, there were no laws prohibiting me from practicing my trade. There were no restrictions at all.

Except for the Amish themselves.

\* \* \*

The sun set by the time the elders left with the Sudermans. I began cleaning the table to the flickering light of kerosene lamps. In the brown light it cast, the blood wasn't so noticeable, and not nearly as accusatory.

I could smell manure on the floor, tramped in by Mark's brothers. The men's sweat also filled the room, reminding me how unsterile the area was. Finally I left the house and walked down to the far edge of my small, neglected garden with the mop bucket.

The misshapen weeds seemed to erupt in fierce protest when I emptied the bucket. Tiny weasel-shaped

creatures with scaly skin chittered at me and scampered off.

My house lay close inside a cluster of farms and roads. Just beyond them lay an unfamiliar forest full of alien species creeping in and mixing with our own. I knew the weeds in my own garden. But behind the scraggly dandelions and patchy grass, spirals of unearthly flowers moved in and out of the shadows to the rhythm of the wind.

Instead of going back inside, I sat on the porch swing and shivered. The fourth moon—the largest of the quartet—edged over the hills and made silhouettes of the neighbor's barn.

I'd never lost so many lives in such a short time, and I was getting sick of funerals.

It didn't make any sense. I was free to try to convince them to let me save them. They were free to die unnecessarily. And there was no one, no higher authority I could appeal to. Except God.

And unlike me, they talked to Him every day, welcomed Him into their houses and the lives. They knew He was on their side.

I sighed and went back into the house.

Mark hadn't died doing anything glamorous like beating back the wild forest of a new planet. He'd been milling grain, and had fallen between the giant wheels. The hardwood cogs chewed him up, spit him out, and left him for me and God—and God washed His hands of the matter.

\* \* \*

At the Yoders' I pulled on Zeke's reins. He snorted and plodded to a nonchalant stop just short of the weathered post I usually tied him to. One of the little Yoders, Joshua, walked down to greet me.

"Guten morning," he said, mixing his German and English with a smile.

"Good morning, Joshua," I replied. I clambered out of my buggy, then reached back in to retrieve my black bag. Of all my visits, I looked forward to seeing the Yoders the most.

Joshua eyed Zeke with a critical eye.

"Your horse is getting old. How much longer will he be pulling you around? My dad could sell you a good one, with straight legs and a strong back and the look of eagles."

A fast talking six-year-old, this Joshua. Somehow I knew he wouldn't spend the rest of his life on New Pennsylvania.

Unless he contracted a serious disease. Or broke a leg. Or . . .

"No thank you," I said. "I think old Zeke will hold out just fine for me." In response Zeke broke wind and swished his tail.

Joshua giggled and ran back toward the house, his bare feet kicking up small puffs of dirt.

Joshua's mother came out to the porch. The hem of her black dress scraped the dirty wooden floor planks, and her white blouse had blue stains all over it. Several strands of honey-brown hair had escaped the edges of her bonnet. She brushed at them.

"Dr. Hostetler," she greeted me. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Mrs. Yoder." I walked onto their porch. Several giggling kids ran out the door past me. I looked around, but didn't see Rebecca anywhere.

"I'll tell Ben and Esther you're here," she said. "Please, come in."

I stepped in. The house smelled of food. Fresh-baked bread sat on the counter by the large iron range, and it appeared that Mrs. Yoder was taking advantage of the hot stove to put a cake in as well.

David Yoder, his full beard as dark as the unkempt hair crammed into his straw hat, shook my hand.

"You ministered to Suderman's son," he said. "God bless him, that was a fine boy. A tragedy."

The tragedy was that none of you would let me bring my skills to bear on him.

Mrs. Yoder took a stick and stirred the coal bin under the range. She opened the oven for a quick peek and waved her hand over it. "We'll have to pray for Betty," she said.

That brought back the image of Betty Suderman sitting in her buggy outside my house, waiting for the news of her son's death. I forced it back into my subconscious when I saw Ben and Esther coming down the stairs. Ben's beard had just started growing in, a sign that he was no longer a bachelor. Esther unconsciously held her arms protectively over her stomach.

I shook Ben's hand while Esther smiled nervously at me.

"Let's see what we have here," I said. I undid the clasp on my little black bag and opened it up. The look on Esther's face said that Pandora's box had nothing on my medical bag.

\* \* \*

There is nothing so amazing as hearing the heartbeat of a tiny human being inside of its mother's womb. But amazing as the experience was, I had another sobering thought: here was another little person who had better never come down with a disease, or undergo a crippling accident.

I took the stethoscope away from Esther's belly.

"Everything seems okay," I said. I smiled reassuringly. Although, without any scans, I couldn't be absolutely certain. A sonogram to look at the baby would have been nice; DNA tests to make sure to make sure everything was okay after the birth would have been even better. There was no law prohibiting it; just a belief that was a thousand times stronger than any law.

Esther coughed. She stood up with her proud husband, linking her arm through his. They walked back up the creaky steps.

"Asa and I'll be out in the field after lunch," David Yoder said to his son's back.

"I'll be there," replied Ben.

David winked at me. "There'll be a raising happening soon enough for the two of them. Will you join?"

It would be another chance to see Rebecca. I tried to hide my enthusiasm. "We'll see what my schedule is like," I said. "But, yes, I would like to join."

David looked around. "We're almost ready to bring in this year's wheat. Weather's been good. Real good. The strange seasons throw you off a bit, but I think I've got it figured this year. There'll be threshing soon, eh?"

He could have used any of a dozen instruments to predict the weather to a fraction of a degree, the rainfall to a tenth of a centimeter. No law against it. Just a moral repugnance to anything that would make his life easier. We'd argued it many times. I'd never come close to winning.

David kept trying to rope me into coming over to lend an able hand. And in truth I wanted to go. The women would cook blackberry and grape pies. There would be freshly churned butter and baked bread. Washing off a day's worth of hard sweat from forking wheat into the wheels of the thresher, joking with all the other men, eating that special food—it was an appealing picture. It was almost my only pleasure on this world, other than being in Rebecca's company.

Despite my privileged place in the community as a doctor, it was their nature to be wary of me. I had a very advanced education, which didn't sit too well with them, and technology was a very important part of my job (or at least it should have been)—but it was that very technology that was viewed as dangerous to the health of the community. No one ever told me I couldn't use it. I had the freedom to offer it to them; they had the freedom to refuse it. We were both batting a thousand: I always offered, they always refused.

Girls passed by us with white tablecloths, utensils, plates of bread, and half-moon pies. Someone brought out a tureen of bean soup. I pulled my watch out. "Brother Yoder," I said. "I'm falling behind already, I have to go."

David frowned. "You'll miss church tonight?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I don't know if that's good," he said.

"I have to see the Andersons' son and tend to him. They say he's had a cold for a few days, but it could be worse."

"There should always be time for God," David told me.

"A long time ago God spoke to me," I lied, trying to hide my irritation, "and charged me with curing the sick."

To which David could make no argument. He had been chosen by lot to be a preacher. His sermons were well thought out, I was told. I avoided Sundays, and sermons, and all that went with it. I could always easily be elsewhere. David and some of the other Elder preachers sensed that, but again, they usually made an allowance for me.

"I really must go," I said.

"Ja, well," David shook my hand and paid my fee. "Make sure you get some bread from my wife before you leave," he said.

"Thank you."

\* \* \*

When I walked out the door I looked around. Rebecca stood out on the porch, just beside the door. She smoothed down her spotless white apron and smiled.

"Hi," she said.

She had her mother's honey-brown hair and hazel eyes.

I smiled back. "Hello, Rebecca."

"It's good to see you again."

I could see David Yoder looking at me through the window. He was no fool. Someday soon I would have to tell him that I had nothing but honorable intentions toward his daughter. Which was true: marrying Rebecca was about the only thing that would make all the unnecessary dead men and women bearable.

"I heard you say you might make the raising?" said Rebecca.

"Will you be there?"

"Of course," Rebecca said with a shy smile. "I'll be helping Mutter with the cooking."

"Then I will do my best."

"I hope you do make it," Rebecca said. "There's singing and dancing afterwards."

Their notion of singing and dancing wasn't about to put the dance halls of Earth and some of the colony worlds out of business, but it was better than nothing. Maybe, just maybe, for a few hours that day, no one would get hurt. No one would come down with a disease that I wasn't permitted to cure. Maybe.

I checked my pocket watch. I would have to push Zeke faster than his usual meander to make it on time. But it was worth every delayed minute.

"I would really enjoy dancing," I told Rebecca. "I have to leave now. I'm very late."

She took my hand and shook it. Her skin was cool to the touch, and feathery.

"Gute nacht, Rebecca," I said.

\* \* \*

I drove Zeke at a quick clip through the forest, my mind thinking fuzzy, pleasant things about Rebecca. I didn't hear the distant rumble until Zeke began to perk his ears up.

It began low, but soon became a high pitch as I saw the triangular shape approach. Zeke slowed and sidestepped uneasily.

"Easy," I said.

The sound jumped to earsplitting. The ship buzzed just over the treetops, thundering past on a flyby, the pilot and his companions sightseeing no doubt. I craned my head back and caught just a flash of the number on the side: DY-99. The buggy bounced as Zeke began moving off the road.

"Whoa!" I yelled, pulling on his reins.

Zeke veered back toward the road, then stopped. He whinnied and looked back down at the bushes. A long creeper held his rear left leg. Hundreds of yellow barbs along the vine punctured his stifle, and blood began to trickle down toward his hoof.

I looked down at the gray floorboards of the buggy. The creepers might move up for me. Calm yourself, I thought; nothing is gained by panic.

"Come on, Zeke," I shouted, snapping the reins.

He strained against the creeper, pulling, his muscles quivering. Then he started kicking and bucking, until I heard a tearing sound, as he finally pulled free. Strips of torn flesh hung from his leg. He moved back away from the creeper, onto the road, but the buggy was still in the bush.

I snapped the reins again, and Zeke pulled at the buggy. We didn't move.

"Whoa."

I took my black bag and jumped out onto the road. Two long vines anchored the rear wheels. Zeke started straining at his harness again.

"Whoa!" It didn't seem to have any effect. Zeke still pulled, staring past me with determination and flared nostrils.

I started taking off his harness. My fingers slipped in under the buckle, and got caught as Zeke let up, then lunged forward again. Creepers began moving up the buggy toward Zeke. I waited for his next pause and lunge, then let go. I landed painfully, hitting my tailbone on a sharp rock.

I pulled a never-used scalpel out of my bag and tried to cut a vine away from Zeke's legs, but it was too small and the vine was too thick, and Zeke wouldn't hold still. He whinnied and kicked, but his efforts were becoming weaker, and finally he just stopped.

The vines wrapped around his legs and began to pull him down the side of the road. He pawed with his front legs at the road, dragging gravel and dirt in with him. Then he gave up with a snort.

The bushes rustled and sighed as they pulled Zeke in, and everything grew quiet.

Shaken, I stood up with my black bag.

The Andersons were a long walk away, but I could make it out of the forest road before dark. As long as I stayed in the middle of the road, I would be okay.

I limped off down the road, wondering what mad whim had made us come to this planet in the first place.

\* \* \*

The Andersons were kind enough to give me a lift back to my house, though it meant a long drive. It was dark, and Mr. Anderson kept to the very middle of the road. I looked away as we passed the spot where Zeke had lost his battle for life.

Once I was back in my house I struck matches and held them over my gaslights. They lit the room with a phoomph! of pale flickerings. I made dinner: pasta and a red sauce one of the ladies bottled for me, and some stale bread. Tonight would be a good night to just go to bed early, I thought, instead of poring over my library of books, hoping to find old-fashioned ways to mimic modern medicine.

But instead someone thumped at the door.

I opened it to find David Yoder standing on my porch.

"What is it?" I asked. "Is it Esther?" Probably she was going into labor too soon. I turned, thinking about forceps, wondering how I could convince the old man to let me use them in his house.

"No," David said. "It isn't Esther. Rebecca collapsed . . ."

I stood there, dazed, until my mind caught up with the rest of me. I grabbed my bag in a daze and followed David out to his buggy.

"Creepers," I explained.

David nodded. He'd lost a horse or two to them as well.

\* \* \*

Rebecca sat in her bed. Esther stood over her with a sponge. They thought she had a fever of some sort, but Rebecca looked like she had recovered already. She smiled when she saw me and apologized.

"I'm feeling much better now," she said. "I think it has passed."

"Well, let's make sure," I said. "Have you had any other dizzy spells?"

Rebecca chewed her lip.

She had.

"Are there any strange lumps on your body?"

The quizzical look in return sank me. I ran through the questions. And then under the watchful eye of her father I ran my hands over her pale white body, looking for the intrusions. She sucked in her breath slightly when I ran my fingers up the sides of her ribs.

"Your hands are cold," she said.

I didn't look at her face, but continued. It was bittersweet that the first time I touched her body was for medical reasons.

And that I found what I knew I had to find.

My lovely Rebecca had breast cancer. Maybe if she were more aware of her body, she would have been worried sooner. But even then, what could I have done on this world that permitted her the freedom to die in agony? It was advanced, metastasizing no doubt, spreading throughout her entire body.

When I stood up David Yoder caught my eye and nodded me out the door. We walked down through the kitchen to his porch.

"You know what's wrong," he said. It was not a question.

I nodded.

"Well?" he demanded.

"She has cancer."

I sat on the bench, leaned my head against the rough plank wall, and blinked. My eyes were a bit wet.

David didn't say anything after that. He stood near me on the porch for a while, then went into the house. Ben came out.

"Dad says to use one of our horses. I'll take you out to the barn."

I didn't reply. Ben sat next to me and clapped my shoulders.

"It'll be okay," he said. "God will protect her."

I looked the boy straight in the eye. Was he really that naive?

\* \* \*

I woke up numb. The alarm clock rang until I slapped the switch down, my motions every bit as mechanical as the clock's.

The bed creaked as I sat on its edge. Two days' worth of half-open books lay all around me, some of them buried in my covers.

Candle wax dripped over the edges of a plate on my bed stand, the translucent stalactites almost reaching to the floor. I picked the nearest book up. The margin had a scribble in it: DY-99. Underneath it I had written a single question mark.

"Brother Hostetler?" came the strong shout of David Yoder from my front door. "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

I stood up and pulled on my clothes, tying my rope belt off in a quick knot. A faceful of cold water dashed away my morning fuzziness. David's buggy waited outside, the horse looking as impatient as David was to get going.

Raisings were probably the most popular depiction of the culture among outsiders. Maybe it was just that it was a very attractive picture of community, and that was something they had in abundance. Many hands make light work, and there were many hands here at the edge of Yoder's property. Tables held food, lines of breads, preserves, and fruit juices. Soups simmered in iron pots. Women chatted and kids ran around, dodging around legs, tables, chairs, and whatever else served as a convenient obstacle course.

And the men gathered around the foundation of what would become Ben's home. We set to building his house together. It was more than just a community event, but a gift. When we were done Ben would have a home. A beginning.

We toiled together under the sun, hammering joints, then pulling walls up with ropes. Time passed quickly. The frame was up at lunch, and we broke to eat. Then we continued. At some point in mid-evening I stepped back, sweaty and out of breath, and looked up at a complete house.

They could have ordered a pre-fab, of course. It would have gone up faster and lasted longer. No law against it. But . . .

\* \* \*

At the meal, when all the men sat in rows at the tables and ate, I walked over to David Yoder's house. Rebecca sat on the back stairs, looking out over the fields at the gathering. She had her skirt tucked neatly under her legs.

I sat next to her. We could just see the picnic tables over the rows of wheat shifting with the changing directions of little wind gusts.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Much better," she said.



"Why aren't you out there, then?"

"Father told me to stay here, and rest myself."

I reached over and held her hand. She looked down at it.

"When you touched me . . ." she began. She caressed my hand. "I liked that." Suddenly she blushed and looked away.

We sat there silently for a long time, watching the stalks of wheat dance, running our fingers each over the other's.

"Are you frightened?" I asked at last.

"I was mad," Rebecca said. "Now I'm scared. I've done everything right. I go to church. I respect my parents. I do my best to be kind to all. Why is God punishing me?" She squeezed my hand, and pulled it to her cheek. "I don't want to die."

DY-99, I thought.

"You don't have to."

Rebecca looked up at me, curious, hope in her eyes.

"You know a cure?"

"There are many cures, though I have never been permitted to apply them here," I answered. "If we leave, we can go to the spaceport. You heard the Englishers' ship land. They haven't left yet. They will study the area for a bit, look around to make sure the spaceport is okay, and then leave again. They can take us to a hospital. We can easily cure you there."

Rebecca grabbed my forearm.

"But would they take us up with them?"

"Yes." One of the reasons they kept the spaceport cleared, and a regular schedule, was for reasons like this. A small percentage of the inhabitants changed their mind and took the subtle offer.

Rebecca leaned against me. "My parents will not approve."

"They can't stop you," I said. "This is your life we're talking about." I kissed her hair. It smelled of fresh bread and pumpkin pie. "Come with me."

She stood up, letting go of my hand. "The hospital," she said. "Can they . . . really . . . ?"

"Yes. Don't pack anything," I told her. "Just be ready."

"Tonight?"

I looked back down the road we would have to take to get to DY-99. "Later tonight."

Rebecca walked back into the house. I saw her falter for a second, and she held on to the edge of a table for support. I winced.

\* \* \*

I approached David. I felt wrong for deceiving him slightly as I asked him about a good deal for one of his horses.

He smiled and stroked his beard.

"We wondered how many more days it would take before you got tired of asking for rides," he said. He named a price and I agreed on the spot. I could have dickered a little, but I wanted to go home as soon as I could.

We walked to the stables, and David led my new horse out. He was a sturdy young fellow. I chose not to pay too much attention, though, as I would be leaving him behind soon enough.

"Herr Doctor," David said. "You still feel badly about young Suderman?"

"Yes," I said. "I could have saved him."

"All the good health in the world would be useless with an empty life, or in a community that had rotted away."

"If there is no one alive to appreciate the community," I said, "then it is all pointless."

"You believe this is all pointless, then."

"No." I leaned my head against the horse, smelling its musky sweat. It shifted. "No. But it is wasteful." I broke into the words of the Hippocratic oath: "Into whatsoever house I shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of my power . . . and then to also believe in the community and follow our practices."

"Did you anticipate being torn like this? Before you came to New Pennsylvania?"

"No," I said. "I was wrong. I thought on a world with total freedom that a doctor would be free to cure the sick."

"But you do tend to the sick."

"With methods and cures that haven't changed in five hundred years," I said bitterly. "Out there"—I waved my hand at the stars—"they replace hearts and lungs as easily as you replace a torn shirt. Yet here . . ."

"You should have looked deeper into your heart before making the decision to come here."

"Then who would have tried to save Mark Suderman?" I said. "I lose far too many patients, patients I could save anywhere else—but I do save some."

"He was saved the day he made the decision to join the church," David Yoder said with a certainty that I wished I possessed. About anything.

"It's getting near dark," I said. "I will be going now."

"Gute nacht."

I pushed the horse to a run after I was out of sight.

\* \* \*

I threw two suitcases of clothes together. In my desk I pulled out something I never thought I would need, but had kept anyway. It was a wallet, and inside were plastic cards that on any other world would link me to lines of credit and old friends. I hitched the new horse to my spare buggy and tossed the suitcases in the back.

A horse and buggy turned onto the gravel of my drive. I was sure it was David Yoder, but I was wrong. Two Elders, Zebediah Walshman and his brother, Paul, pulled aside the storm curtains.

"William Hostetler?"

I walked up to the buggy.

"Yes."

"We talked to Brother Yoder. He feels you are going through a crisis," Paul said.

Zebediah looked over at my buggy. "Are you leaving for a while, William?"

"Possibly," I said.

"You are going to the Englanders?"

I didn't reply.

"We can't deny you that choice," Paul said. "But you will not take Rebecca with you."

They turned the buggy back around and rattled off down the road. My heart pounded, my throat dried with nervousness. I walked back to my buggy and kicked at a wheel with my boot. The pain was briefly satisfying.

The air was chilly, and as I turned up the road toward the house I extinguished the buggy's road lamp. I stopped the horse a bit down from the usual post, tying him to a tree. I patted his neck and jumped the ditch onto David Yoder's farm.

It took me a few long minutes in the pitch black to find a ladder. The notion of it—a clandestine meeting with a ladder in the twenty-third century—struck me as ludicrous. But there was nothing ludicrous about the purpose of it. I walked it over to the point under Rebecca's window and leaned the ladder against the side of the house as gently as I could.

She was waiting. She opened the window, bunched up her skirts, and got onto the ladder. It creaked as she came down step by agonizing step.

I led her around the house toward the waiting buggy.

We didn't get far before David Yoder's gentle but firm voice came from the porch.

"Rebecca, come back inside the house," he said.

She froze.

"Come on," I said. "Keep walking. You're free to leave. He can't stop you."

"I can't stop you," David agreed. "But think about what you are leaving. Rebecca, you are already saved, no matter what you do here. But when you leave, you will no longer be able to come back. You will be healthy, but unable to ever see us or speak to us again. Do you think there will be a family out there, with

the Englishers, for you? What sort of lives do they lead? Good lives, or will they be confused, and spiritually cluttered, caught up with worldly goods." He paused. "Remember," he concluded, "if you leave, you can never come back. Your children can never come back."

Rebecca's tears trickled down her cheeks and collected along her jaw. "I can't do this!" she told me. "I can't!"

"Then you'll die," I said. "Probably within a couple of months. And in terrible pain that I am not permitted to alleviate on this world." I took off my hat, trying to do something useful with my hands.

"I know," she said. She brushed the side of my face with her hand and kissed me lightly on the lips. "I'm sorry, but I cannot be other than what I am. Better to die as what I am than to live as what I am not."

I watched her go back up into the house.

David and I stood there watching each other.

"She's free to go," I said.

"She was never free to go," said David. "There are certain laws that are unwritten, and these are the most powerful laws of all."

"You've signed her death warrant," I said bitterly.

"Do you think I want her to die?" he demanded, and the light of the four moons reflected off the tears running down his cheeks. "This is God's will, not mine. Never mine!"

And I suddenly realized that he was caught in the same web that had ensnared Rebecca and me. I had thought, just a moment ago, that I hated David Yoder. Now I knew that I could never hate him; I could only pity him, as I pitied us all.

"What will you do now, Dr. Hostetler?" he asked.

"I don't know."

I turned and began walking across his yard.

\* \* \*

I rode the horse hard. My hat blew away, and the cold wind played with my hair. The horse started to lather by the time I saw my house, and I slowed us down, struck by remorse. There was no reason to take my anger out on the poor beast.

I hadn't cried in a long time, but I cried that night.

And along with crying, I examined my life and my options. DY-99 was only a few miles away. It would be so easy to get on it, to go out into the galaxy where I could use all my skills.

And if I did, who would take care of Rebecca? Who would deliver Esther's child, and help make sure it grew into a healthy adult? Who would even try to save all the Mark Sudermans after I left?

I turned the buggy around. With a snap of the reins I sent us both trotting back toward the Yoders. In the coming days and weeks I was going to preside at two more miracles, the miracle of death and the miracle of birth. I was going to do it under adverse conditions, like a racehorse carrying extra weight, but Rebecca had not asked to die and Esther's child has not asked to be born, so in a way we were all

running handicapped.

In a moment of clarity, I realized that it just meant that we had to try harder. If we were already saved, then it was only right that God wanted a little extra effort in return, whether it was dying with grace or struggling to save people who placed so very many restrictions on their savior.

Somewhere along the drive back, I took the wallet from my pocket and threw it into the dark forest along the road.