

NANO COMES TO CLIFFORD FALLS by NANCY KRESS

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I was weeding the garden when nanotech came to my town. The city got it a month earlier, but I haven't been to the city since last year. Some of my neighbors went--Angie Myers and Emma Karlson and that widow, Mrs. Blanston, from church. They brought back souvenirs, things made in the nanomachine, and the scarf Angie showed me was really cute. But with three little kids, I don't get out much.

That day was hot, with the July sun hanging overhead like it wasn't ever going to move. Bob McPhee from next door stuck his head over the fence. His Rottweiler snarled through the chain links. I don't like that dog, and Kimee, my middle one, is afraid of it.

"Hey, Carol, don't you know you don't have to do that no more?" Bob said. "The nanomachinery will make you all the tomatoes and peas you want."

"Hey, Bob," I said. I went on weeding, swiping at the sweat on my forehead with the back of my hand. Jackie watched me from the shade of the garage. I'd laid him on a blanket dressed in just his diaper and he was having a fine time kicking away and then stopping to eat his toes.

"They're giving Clifford Falls four of 'em," Bob said. Since he retired from the fire department, he don't have enough to do all day. "I saw it on TV. The mayor's getting 'em installed in the town hall."

"That's good," I said, to say something. I could hear Will and Kimee inside the kitchen, fighting over some toy.

"Mayor'll run the machinery. One for food, one for clothing, the other two he's taking requests. I already put in mine, for a sports car."

That got my attention. "A car? A whole car?"

"Sure, why not? Nano can make anything. The town is starting with one request from each person, first come first served. Then after that ... I dunno. I guess Mayor Johnson'll work it out. Hey, gorgeous, stop that weeding and come have a beer with me. Pretty gal like you shouldn't be getting all hot and sweaty at *weeding*."

He leered at me, but he don't mean anything by it. At least, I don't think he does. Bob's over fifty but still looks pretty good, and he knows it, but he also knows I'm not that kind. Jack might've took off two months ago, but I don't need anyone like Bob, a married man, for temporary fun and games.

"I like the taste of home-grown tomatoes," I tell him. "Ones at the Safeway taste like wallpaper."

"But nano won't make tomatoes that taste *processed*," he says in that way that men like to correct women. "That machinery will make the best tomatoes this town ever tasted."

"Well, I hope you're right." Then Will and Kimee spilled their fight out through the screen door into the back yard, and Jackie started whimpering on his blanket, and I didn't have no time for any nanomachinery.

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Still, I was curious, so in the late afternoon, when it wasn't quite so hot, I packed up the stroller and the kids and I went downtown.

Clifford Falls isn't much of a town. We're so far out on the plains that all we got is a single square ringed with dusty pick-ups and the teenagers' scooters. There's about two dozen stores, the little brick town hall with traffic court and Barry Anderson's police room and such, the elementary school, Baptist and Methodist churches, Kate's Lunchroom, and the Crow Bar. Down by the tracks is the grain elevator and warehouses. That's about it. Once a movie was filmed here because the movie people wanted some place that looked like it might be fifty or sixty years ago.

Soon as I turned the corner I could see where the nanomachinery must be. People milled around the patch of faded grass in front of the town hall, people who probably should have still been to work on a Wednesday afternoon. A big awning stretched across the front of the building with a huge metal box under it, nearly big as my bedroom. To one side the mayor, who retired two years ago from the factory in Minneonta, stood on a crate right there in the broiling sun without so much as a hat on his bald head, making a speech.

"--greatest innovation since supercheap energy to raise our way of life to--"

"What's getting made in that box?" I asked Emma Karlson. She had her twins in a fancy new stroller. Just after Jack left me, her Ted got taken on at the factory.

"A dais," she said.

"A what?"

"A thing for the mayor to stand on instead of that apple crate. It's supposed to be done in a few minutes."

What a dumb thing to make--Mr. Johnson could just as well have gotten a good stepladder from Bickel's Hardware. But I suppose the dais was by way of demonstration.

And I have to admit it was impressive when it come out of the box. Four men had to move it, a big fancy platform with a top like a gazebo and steps carved on their sides in fancy shapes. After the men set it down, there was this moment of electric silence, like a downed power line run through the crowd, and then everybody started shouting.

"Make me a rocking chair!"

"Tell it to grow a table!"

"I need a new rug for the dining room!"

"Make a good bottle of booze!"

Emma turned to me. Her eyes were big and shining. "Some people are so ignorant. That big nanomachine don't make anything to eat or drink--the ones inside do that. Three little ones, for food and clothes and small quick stuff. Mayor Johnson already explained all that, but some people just can't listen."

The crowd was pressing closer to the new dais, and a few men started to climb the fancy steps. Kimee was getting restless, pulling on my hand, but Will said suddenly, "Mommy, tell the machine to make me a dog!"

Emma laughed. "It can't do that, Will. Nobody but God can make a living thing."

I said, "Then how can it make a tomato? A tomato's living."

Emma said, "No, it's not. It's dead after you pick it."

"But it *was* living."

Emma got that look in her eyes that I seen there ever since the third grade: *Don't argue with me because you'll regret it*. Will jumped up and down screaming, "A dog! A dog! I want a dog!" The people around the dais were pushed back by Barry Anderson and his deputy, but they didn't stop shouting at Mayor Johnson. I grabbed Will, smiled hard at Emma, and started home.

Nanotech wasn't going to put Kimee down for a nap or breast-feed Jackie. And it sure as hell wasn't going to get my bastard husband back to help me do those things.

Not that I wanted him.

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I waited for nano to make Clifford Falls look like the places in the TV shows. What surprised me was that it did.

I didn't see anything for a few weeks because both Kimee and Will came down with some sort of bug. Diarrhea and cramps. The doctor I got on the computer told me which chemicals to squirt over samples of their shit and when I told him what colors the shit turned, he said it wasn't serious but I should keep the kids in, make them drink a lot of water, and keep them away from the baby. In a two-bedroom rented house, that alone took a lot of my time. But we managed. Emma bought the medicine I needed at Merkelson's and left it on the doorstep. She left three casseroles, too, and some chocolate-chip cookies.

Ten days later, when they were better, I baked Emma a sponge cake to thank her. After the kids were dressed and the stroller packed up, we went outside and I had to blink hard.

"Wow!" Will said. "Mommy, look at that!"

Parked in Bob McPhee's driveway was the reddest car I ever seen, low and smooth and shiny. It looked *fast*. Will ran over to it and I called, "Don't touch, Will!"

"Oh, he can't hurt it," Bob said with a sort of fake casualness. He was bursting with pride. "And if he did hurt it, I'll just wait until my turn comes up on the Big Gray and order me another one."

The Big Gray--that must be what they were calling the largest nanomachine. Stupid name. It sounded like a sway-backed horse.

Bob leered at me. "Wanna go for a ride, baby?"

"Why don't you take your wife?" I said, but I smiled when I said it because I'm a wuss who likes to stay on good terms with my neighbors.

"Oh, I did," Bob said, waving his hand airily, "but there's always room for one more, if you know what I mean."

"A ride! A ride!" Will shouted.

"Not today, Will, we're gong to see Jon and Don." That distracted him; Emma's twins are his best friends.

Emma met me at the door dressed in a gorgeous yellow sundress with a low neck and full skirt. Emma was always pretty, even when we were thirteen, but I'd never seen her look like this. She'd done things to live up to the dress, fixed her hair and put on make-up and even had on rhinestone earrings.

"God, you look amazing!" I said, in my old jeans with baby puke on my T-shirt. Emma touched her earrings.

"Real diamonds, Carol! Ted used his second pick at the nanomachine to choose these!"

I gaped at her. The nanomachine could make real diamonds? Will barreled past me toward Don and Jon and I saw that all three of them jumped onto a new blue sofa covered with the nicest material I'd ever seen.

All I could think of to say was, "I brought you a sponge cake. A thank-you for all you done when the kids were sick."

"Well, aren't you the sweetest thing. Thank you. I'd offer you a piece now but, well, Kitty'll be here in a few minutes to take the twins."

Kitty Svenson was the teenager who babysat for everybody. She was saving up for secretarial school. Ted came out from the bedroom dressed in a bathrobe.

"Oh, God, Ted, have you got this diarrhea-thing, too? I'm sorry, it's a bitch. Come on, Will, let's go. Em, I can take the twins while Ted's sick."

"I'm not sick, Carol," Ted said. Emma blushed. I was really confused. This was a Tuesday morning.

"I quit the factory," Ted said. "No need to kill myself working now."

"But ... the mortgage...."

"The nano's making us a house," Emma said proudly.

"A house? A whole house?"

"One part of a room at a time," Ted said. "Em and I are both using all our picks for it. We'll put it on that piece of land my daddy left me by the lake, and the whole house'll finish just before the bank forecloses on this one. I got it all figured out."

"But..." My brain wasn't working right. I just couldn't take it in, somehow.

"The food nano is making all our meals now," Emma said. "Just churning 'em out like sausages. Here, Carol, taste this." She darted into the kitchen, earrings swinging, and came back with a bowl of small round things like smooth nuts.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But it tastes good. The food nano can't make like, you know, real meats or anything, but it does pretty good delivering things that look and taste like fruits and veggies and bread, and this stuff is the protein."

I picked up one of the round things and nibbled. It did taste good, sort of like cold spicy chicken. But something in me recoiled anyway. Maybe it was the texture, sort of bland and mushy. I palmed the rest of the ball. "Mmmmmmmmmmm."

"Told you so," Emma said triumphantly, like the round balls were things she'd baked herself. "Oh, here's Kitty."

Kitty Svenson hauled herself up the steps. Fat and acne-covered and dirt poor, she was the sweetest girl

in town, and every time I saw her my heart ached. She liked Tom DeCarno, who lived down the street from me and was the starting quarterback on the football team at the consolidated high school in Remington. He'd notice Kitty on the day that Hell got a hockey franchise.

It was obvious what Emma in her sexy new dress and Tom in his bathrobe were going to be doing, so I dragged the protesting Will and we went home. I saw things I hadn't noticed on the way to Em's: a new playhouse in the backyard of the big house on the corner. Fresh chain-link fence around the Alghren place. The Connors' pick-up in their driveway, which meant that Eddie hadn't gone to work at the factory, either. Across the street, a woman I thought I didn't know, dressed up like a city girl in a ruffled suit and high heels, until I realized it was Sue Merkelson, the pharmacist's wife.

At home I took the kids into the backyard and weeded the tomatoes, which were nearly strangled with ten days' worth of weeds. Jack used to do at least some of the weeding. But that was before, and this was now, and I kept at it until the job was done.

* * * *

By late August the factory in Minneonta had closed. Most of the men in town who didn't farm were out of work, but nobody seemed to mind much. The Crow Bar was full all the time, groups playing cards and laughing at TV. I saw them spilling out onto the street the one time I went to the supermarket to buy Pampers and milk.

Emma told me on the phone that Mayor Johnson, Barry Anderson, and Anderson's deputy had the nanomachines on a regular schedule. Every morning people lined up to pick up whatever their food order'd been from the previous day, enough food for all that day's meals plus a little over to store. Another machine made whatever clothes you picked out of a catalogue, in whatever size matched after you gave in your measurements. It made blankets and curtains and tablecloths, too, anything out of cloth. The last two machines, including the big one, turned out everything else, picked from a different catalogue, turn by turn.

The county's corn, ready to harvest, sat in the fields. Nobody wanted to buy it, and except for the farm owners, nobody hired on to harvest it.

Nearly every family in town drove a new car, from six different models that our nanos were programmed to make. There was a lot of red and gold vehicles in our streets.

"I want a playhouse, Mommy," Will whined. "Caddie Alghren got a new playhouse! I want one, too!"

I looked at him, standing there in his rumpled little pajamas with trains on them, looking like his best friend just died. His hair fell over his forehead just like Jack's used to do.

"How do you know Caddie's got a new playhouse?"

"I saw it! From my window!"

"You can't see into Caddie's yard from your window. Did you climb out up onto the roof again, Will?"

He hung his head and twisted the sleeves of his pajamas into crumpled balls.

"I told you that going up on that roof is dangerous! You could fall and break your neck!"

"I'm sorry," he said, raising his little face up to me, and I melted even though I knew he wasn't sorry at all and would do it again. "I'm sorry, Mommy. Can't we get a playhouse? We been inside all summer, feels like!"

He was right. I'd only taken the kids outside our yard a few times. I'd hardly been out myself. I told myself that it was because I didn't want to see everybody's pitying looks. ("*Jack run off with that sexy girl from the hardware store, Chrissie Somebody, just left Carol and those kids without so much as a backward glance.*") But it wasn't just that.

The big freezer downstairs was almost empty. I'd used up everything I could. I run out of Tide last Thursday and the laundry was piling up. Worse, the Pampers were nearly gone. I had to keep the checking account, the half of it that Jack left, to pay the rent and the phone as long as I could. After that ... I didn't know yet. Not yet.

So I guessed it was time. I didn't understand why I didn't want to go before, didn't understand why I didn't want to go now. But it was time.

"Okay, honey, we'll get you a playhouse," I said. "Find your sneakers."

When I had Jackie changed and fed, Will and Kimee dressed, the stroller packed with diapers and water, we set off outside. Will was good, holding onto the side of the stroller and not running ahead. Kimee stood on the back bar and whimpered a little; she gets prickly heat in the summer. But when we turned the corner toward the town square, she stopped fussing and stared, just like me and Will. The whole place was full of garbage cans. Clean, blue, plastic garbage cans, hundreds of them, stacked and thrown and lying on their sides, not a single one of them holding any garbage. People milled around, talking angrily. I saw my neighbor.

"Bob, what on Earth--"

He was too angry even to leer at me. "That Beasor kid! The one that won the state technology contest a few years ago--that kid's too smart-ass for his own good, I said so then! He hacked into the Big Gray somehow and now all it'll make is garbage cans, no matter what you tell it!"

I craned my neck to see the big metal box under its awning. Sure enough, another garbage can popped out. A bubble of something started in my belly and started to rise up in me. "Is ... is..."

"The kid left town! Anderson's got an APB out on him. You haven't seen Danny Beasor, have you, Carol?"

"I haven't seen anybody," I said. The bubble rose higher and now I knew what it was: laughter. I turned my face away from Bob.

"If that kid knows what's good for him, he'll keep on running," Bob said. He was really upset. "Now the mayor's shut down the other nanomachines, except the food one, until the repair guys get out here from the city. You get your food today, Carol?"

"No, but I'll come back later," I managed to say, without laughing in Bob's face. "K-Kimee's not feeling well."

"Okay," he said, not really interested. "Hey, Earl! Wait!" He pushed through the garbage cans toward Earl Bickel across the square.

Will somehow understood that there would be no playhouse today. He screwed up his face, but before he could start to howl, I said, "Will! Look at all these great cans! We can make the best playhouse ever out of them!"

His face cleared. "Cool!"

So we nested and dragged home four garbage cans, with a little help from the teenage Parker boys, who are nice kids and who seemed glad to have something to do. They found some boards in the basement, plus a hammer and nails, and spent all afternoon making a playhouse with four garbage-can rooms. Will was in seventh heaven. I couldn't pay them, but I unfroze and toasted the last of my home-made banana bread, and they gobbled it down happily. Will and Kimee, her itching forgotten, played in the garbage cans until dark.

The next day all the nanomachines were working again, and I put in a daily food order. But I left the kids at home with Kitty Svenson when I picked up my order, and I started canning all the squash, beans, peppers, corn, and melons in the garden.

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School opened. Will was in first grade. I walked him there the first day and he seemed to like his teacher.

By the third week of school, she'd quit.

By the fifth week, so had the teacher who replaced her, along with a few other faculty.

"They just don't want to work when they don't have to, and why should they?" Emma said. She sat in my kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee and wearing a strange hat that sloped down to cover half her face. I suppose she picked it out of the nano-catalogues--it must be what they were wearing in the city. The color was pretty, though, a warm peach. It was practically the first morning she'd made time for me in weeks. "With nano, nobody has to work if they don't want to."

"Did the twins' teacher quit, too?"

"No. It's old Mrs. Cameron. She's been teaching so long she probably can't even imagine doing anything else after she gets up in the morning. Carol, look at this place. How come you let it get so shabby?"

I said mildly, "There isn't too much money since Jack left. Just enough for the rent."

"That asshole ... but that's not what I meant and you know it. Why haven't you replaced those old curtains and sofa with nano ones? And that TV! You could get a real big one, with an unbelievable picture."

I put my elbows on the table and leaned toward her. "I'll tell you the truth, Em: I don't know. I get nano food and diapers, and I got some school clothes for Will, but anything else ... I don't know."

"You're just being an idiot!" she said. She almost shouted it--way too angry for just my saggy sofa. I reached out and pulled off the sloping hat. Emma's eye was swollen nearly shut, and every color of squash in my garden.

All at once she started sobbing. "Ted ... he never done anything like that before ... it's terrible on men, being laid off ! They get so bored and mad--"

"He wasn't laid off, he quit," I said, but gently.

"Same thing! He just scowls himself around the house, yells at the kids--they're glad to be back in school, let me tell you!--and criticizes everything I do, or he orders Scotch from the nano--did order it until Mayor Johnson outlawed any nano liquor and--"

"He did? The mayor did?" I said, startled.

"Yeah. And so last Thursday, Ted and I had this big fight, and ... and..." Suddenly she changed tone.

"You don't know anything, Carol! You sit here safe and alone, thinking you're so superior to nano, just like you always acted so superior to poor Jack--oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that!"

"Probably you did," I said evenly, "but it's all right. Really it is, Em."

All at once she got defiant. "You're thinking I'm just dumping on you because Ted hit me. Well, I'm not. It was only that once, most of the time he's a good husband. Our new house by the lake will be done in a few more weeks and then everything'll be better!"

I didn't see how, but all I said was, "I'll bet the house is pretty."

"It's gorgeous! It's got a blue-brick fireplace in the living room--*blue* bricks! And it's equipped with just everything, all those robo-appliances like you see on TV--I won't have to do hardly anything!"

"I can't wait to see it," I said.

"You'll love it," she said, put her hat back on so it covered her eye, and stared at me with triumph and fear.

* * * *

I pulled Will out of school to home-school him. He didn't mind once I got the Bellingham grandkids to school at my place, and then Caddie Alghren. The Bellinghams were farmers going bust. Mr. Bellingham was still doing dairy, though, even while his crops rotted in the fields. Mrs. Bellingham's always been sickly and she never struck me as real smart. But Hal Bellingham is smart, and he looked at me real sharp when I said I would home-school his grandkids because the teachers were all quitting.

"Not all, Carol."

"No, not yet. And some won't quit. But the government's not getting much tax money because nobody's earning and the TV says that the government is taking itself apart bit by bit." I didn't understand that, but Mr. Bellingham looked like he might. "How many teachers'll stay when they can't get paid at all?"

"That time's a ways off."

"Maybe."

"What makes you think you can teach my grandkids? Begging your pardon, but you don't look or sound like a college graduate."

"I'm not. But I did good in high school, and I guess I can teach first- and second-graders. At any rate, in my living room they'll be safe from the kinds of vandalism you see all around town now."

"What'll you use for books?"

"We have some kids' books, I'll get more out of the library as long as it lasts, and we'll make books, the kids and me. It's fun to write your own stories, and they can read each other's."

"You aren't going to get books from the nanomachinery?"

"No." I said it flat out, and we looked at each other, sitting there in the Bellinghams' big farm kitchen with its old-fashioned microwave.

He said, "Who's going to watch your two little ones while you teach?"

"Kitty Svenson."

"What's she get out of it?"

"That's between me and her."

"And what do you want in return?"

"Milk, and a share of the spring calves you might have sent to market, slaughtered and with the meat dressed. You aren't going to be able to get in enough hay to feed them anyway."

He got up, walked in his farm boots around his kitchen, and looked at me again. "Do you watch the news, Carol?"

"Not much. Little kids take a lot out of you."

"You should watch. Vandalism isn't limited to what we got in Clifford Falls."

I didn't say anything.

"All right, the kids will be home-schooled by you. But here, not at your place. I'll clear out the big back bedroom for you, and Kitty can use the kitchen. Mattie'll like the company. But before you agree, there's somebody I want you to meet."

"Who?"

"Suspicious little thing, aren't you? Come with me."

We went out to the barn. The cows were in the pasture, and the hayloft half empty. In an old tack room that the Bellinghams had turned into an apartment for a long-ago cattle manager, a pretty young woman sat in front of a metal table. I blinked.

The whole room was full of strange equipment, along with freezers and other stuff I recognized. The woman wore a white lab coat, like doctors on TV. She stood and smiled at us.

"This is Amelia Parsons," Bellingham said. "She used to work for Camry Biotech, which just went out of business. She's a crop geneticist."

"Hello," she said, holding out her hand. Women like her make me nervous. Too polished, too educated. They all had it too easy. But I shook her hand; I'm not rude.

"Amelia's working on creating an apomictic corn plant. That's corn that doesn't need pollination, that can produce its own seeds asexually, like non-hybrid varieties once did, and like blackberries and mangos and some roses do now. Apomictic corn would keep all the good traits of hybrid corn, maybe even with added benefits, but farmers wouldn't have to buy seed every year."

"I couldn't work on this very much at Camry," Amelia said to me. Her pretty face glowed. Her red hair was cut in one of those complicated city cuts. "Even though apomixis was my doctoral thesis. The biotech company wanted us to work on things that were more immediately profitable. But now that I don't need to earn a salary, that oversight agencies are pretty much dismantling, and that I can get the equipment I need from nano ... well, nano makes it possible for me to do some real work!"

I smiled at her again, because I didn't have anything to say. There was a baby-food stain on my jeans and I moved my hand to cover it.

"Thanks, Amelia," Hal Bellingham said. "See you later."

On the way back to the house, he said quietly, "I just wanted you to see the other side, Carol."

I didn't answer.

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My little school started on Monday. Caddie Alghren, whose mother had been killed by a drunk driver last spring, clung to me at first, but Will and she were friends and as long as she could sit next to him, she was all right. The three Bellingham kids were well-behaved and smart. Kitty watched Kimee and Jackie in the kitchen and helped Mattie Bellingham. At night Kitty went home with me, because her stepfather had started to come into her room at night. Nothing real bad had happened yet, but she hated him and was glad to babysit for her keep.

After the kids finally got to sleep each night, Kitty and I watched the TV, like Hal said, and saw what was happening in the cities. A lot of people won't work if they don't have to. But a lot of people not working means a lot of broken things don't get fixed. Nano can make water pipes and schoolbooks and buses and toilets. It can't install them or tech them or drive them. The cities were getting to be pretty scary places.

Clifford Falls wasn't that bad. But it wasn't all that far out from the city, either. Kitty and I were watching TV one night, the kids in bed, when the door burst open and two men rushed in.

"Look at this--not just the one, *two* of them," one man said, while I was already reaching for the phone. He got there first and knocked it out of my hand. "Not that it would help you, lady. Not a lot of police left. Kenny, I'll take this one and you take the fat girl."

Kitty had shrunk back against the sofa. I tried to think fast. The kids--if I could just keep any noise from waking the kids, the men might not even know they were there. Then no matter what happened to us, the kids would be safe. But if Will saw either of their faces, if he could identify them ... and Kitty, Kitty was only fifteen....

I said quickly, "Leave her alone. She doesn't know how to do anything, she won't be any fun for you. If you leave her alone, I'll let you both do me. I won't even fight. I'd be a lot more fun for you." My gorge rose and I tasted vomit.

The two men looked at each other. Finally "Kenny" shrugged and said, "The fat one's ugly, anyway."

The other one nodded and his piggy eyes gleamed. Noise--the important thing was no noise. I got down on the floor and unzipped my jeans. Oh, God--but no noise, no noise to wake the kids, and I had to protect Kitty, God, *fifteen*....

My head exploded.

No, not my head, the head leering above me. Blood and brains splattered over me. Then there was a second shot and the other man went down. I staggered up, puked, and heard Will and Kimee screaming. When I could see again, the kids stood in the doorway, clinging together, and Kitty still sat on the sofa, the gun in her hand.

She was the calmest one there, at least on the outside. "I stole it to use on my stepfather if I had to, just before you said I could live here. Carol--" Then she started shaking.

"It's okay," I said stupidly and, my own hand trembling, picked up the phone to call the cops.

I got a *recording* at 911. "I'm sorry, but due to reduced manpower, your call may have to wait. Please stay on the line until--" I hung up and called Barry Anderson's cell.

It was turned off. When he finally got there, three hours later, he said it was the only sleep he'd had in two days. His deputy quit last week and left for Florida. By that time I'd gotten the kids back to sleep, the room and myself cleaned up, and Kitty to stop shaking.

The next day, Hal Bellingham moved us all out to the farm.

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By spring, there were fifty-four of us on the farm, plus ten kids. And in the spring, Jack came back.

I was coming out of the lamb barn with Will, who saw Jack first. He cried, "Daddy!" and my heart froze. Then Will was running across the muddy yard and throwing himself into Jack's arms. I trailed slowly behind.

"How'd you get past the guards?" I said.

"Bellingham let me in. What kind of set-up you got going here, anyway?"

I didn't answer, just stared at him. He looked good. Well-fed, well-dressed, maybe a little heavier but still the handsomest man ever to come out of Clifford Falls. This was how Will, beaming in his daddy's arms, would look in twenty years.

Jack reddened slightly. "Why are you living here, Carol? Don't tell me you and old Bellingham..."

"That *would* be what you'd think. The answer is no."

Did he look relieved? "Then why--"

"Mommy's my teacher!" Will shouted. "And I can write whole sentences!"

"Good for you," Jack said. To me he suddenly blurted, "Carol, I don't know how to say this, but I'm so sorry, I--"

"Where's Chrissie? You get tired of her the way you did of me?"

"No, she ... who the hell is *that*?"

His eyes almost bugged out of his head, and well they might. Denny Bonohan strolled out of the house, dressed in one of his costumes. Denny's gay, which was hard enough for me to take, but he's also an actor, which is even worse because he strolls out to do his share of guard duty dressed in outlandish things he and the other two actors brought with them. Now he wore tights with a bright tunic almost as long as a dress, all in shades of gold. Hal is amused by him but I think Denny's loony and I won't let the kids be alone with him. My right, Hal says in his quiet way, and what Hal says goes.

I said, "That's my new boyfriend." I said it to make Jack mad but instead he threw back his head and laughed, his white teeth gleaming in the sunshine.

"Not you, Carol. Never. I know you that much, anyways."

"What are you doing here, Jack?"

"I want to see my kids. And I want ... I want you, Carol. I miss you. I was wrong, as wrong as a man can be. Please take me back."

Jack apologizing was always hard to resist, although it's not like he ever did all that much of it. Will clung hard to his father's neck. Also, an old sweet feeling was slipping into me, along with the anger. I wanted

to hit him, I wanted to hug him. I wanted to curl up inside him again.

"It's up to the Council if you can stay here."

"Here?"

"We aren't leaving, the kids and me."

He took a deep breath. "What's the Council? What do I have to do?"

"You have to start by talking to Hal. If Denny's on guard duty, Hal's probably coming off."

"Guard duty?" Jack said, bewildered.

"Yeah, Jack. You're back in the army now. Only this time, we all enlisted."

"I don't..."

"Come on," I said roughly. "It's up to a vote of the Council. For my part, I don't give a damn what you do."

"You're lying," he said softly, in that special voice we used between us, and I damned him all over again because it was true.

* * * *

July again, and we are eighty-seven people now. Word spreads. About half are people who fled nano, like me. The other half embraced it because it lets them do whatever they'd wanted to do before. Some of those ones have their own nanomachines, little ones, made of course by other nanomachines. Hal allows them to use nano to produce things for their jobs, but not to make food or clothing or shelter or anything else we all need to survive, except for some medicines, and we're working on that.

The two kinds of people here don't always get along very well. We have five actors, Amelia the geneticist, and two other scientists, one of them studying something about the stars. We have a man writing fiction, an inventor, and, finally, a real teacher. Also two organic farmers, a sculptor, a man who carves and puts together furniture all without nails, and, of all things, the United States chess champion, who can't find anyone good enough to play with and so plays against our old computer.

He also farms and does guard duty and lays pipe and cleans and cans and cooks, of course. Like all the rest of us. The things that the chess player didn't know how to do, which was everything, we taught him. Just like Hal, who was a Marine once, taught us all to shoot.

It's pretty bad out there now, although the TV says it's getting better as "society adjusts to this most cataclysmic of social changes." I don't know if that's true or not. I guess it varies. There was a lot of rioting and disease and fires. Some places have some government left, some places don't, some are like us now, mostly our own government, although Hal and two educated women keep our taxes filed and all that. One of the women told me that we don't have to actually pay taxes because the farm shows a consistent loss. She was a lawyer, but a religious lawyer. She says nano is Satan's work.

Amelia Parsons says nano is a gift from God.

Me, I think something different. I think nano is a sorter. The old sorting used to put the people with money and education and nice things in one pile and the rest of us in another. But nano sorts out two different piles: the ones who like to work because work is what you do, and the ones who don't.

It was kind of like everybody won the lottery all at once. I saw a TV show about lottery winners once, a show that followed them around for a year or two after they won real big money. By that time, most of them were worse off than before they won that money: miserable and broke again and with all their relatives mad at them. But some used the money to make nicer lives. And some just gave nearly all of it away to charity and went back to taking care of themselves.

Jack lasted two months on the farm. Then he was gone again.

I get email from him every once in a while. Mostly he asks after the kids. He never says where he is or what he's doing instead of working. He never says who he's with, or if he's happy. I guess he is, or he'd come back here. People usually end up doing what makes them happiest, if they can.

A month ago I went with Hal and some others down to the lake to catch fish. A house stood there, burned to the ground, weeds already growing over the blue brick fireplace. In the ashes I found one diamond earring. Which I left there.

Now Kimee is in the garden, waiting for me to pick peas. I'm going to show her how to shell them, too, and how to separate the good pods from the bad ones. She's only five, but it's never too early to learn.

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