

OKANOGGAN FALLS, by Carolyn Ives Gilman

The town of Okanoggan Falls lay in the folded hills of southwestern Wisconsin—dairy country, marbled with deciduous groves and pastureland that looked soft as a sable's fur. It was an old sawmill town, hidden down in the steep river valley, shaded by elderly trees. Downtown was a double row of brick and ironwork storefronts running parallel to the river. Somehow, the town had steered between the Scylla and Charybdis of the franchise and the boutique. If you wanted to buy a hamburger on Main Street, you had to go to Earl's Cafe, and for scented soap there was just Meyer's Drugstore. In the park where the Civil War soldier stood, in front of the old Town Hall infested with pigeons, Mr. Woodward still defiantly raised the United States flag, as if the world on cable news were illusion, and the nation were still reality.

American small towns had changed since the days when Sinclair Lewis savaged them as backwaters of conformist complacency. All of that had moved to the suburbs. The people left in the rural towns had a high kook component. There were more welders-turned-sculptors per capita than elsewhere, more self-employed dollmakers, more wildly painted cars, more people with pronounced opinions, and more tolerance for all the above.

Like most of the Midwest, Okanoggan Falls had been relatively unaffected by the conquest and occupation. Few there had even seen one of the invading Wattesoons, except on television. At first, there had been some stirrings of grassroots defiance, born of wounded national pride; but when the Wattesoons had actually lowered taxes and reduced regulation, the volume of complaint had gone down. People still didn't love the occupiers, but as long as the Wattesoons minded their own business and left the populace alone, they were tolerated.

All of that changed one Saturday morning when Margie Silengo, who lived in a mobile home on Highway 14, came racing into town with her shockless Chevy bouncing like a rocking horse, telling everyone she met that a Watteson army convoy had gone rolling past her house and turned into the old mill grounds north of town as if they meant to stay. Almost simultaneously, the mayor's home phone rang, and Tom Abernathy found himself standing barefoot in his kitchen, for the first time in his life talking to a Watteson captain, who in precise, formal English informed him that Okanoggan Falls was slated for demolition.

Tom's wife Susan, who hadn't quite gotten the hang of this "occupation" thing, stopped making peanut butter sandwiches for the boys to say, "They can't say that! Who do they think they are?"

Tom was a lanky, easygoing fellow, all knobby joints and bony jaw. Mayor wasn't his full-time job; he ran one of the more successful businesses in town, a wholesale construction-goods supplier. He had become mayor the way most otherwise sensible people end up in charge: out of self-defense. Fed up having to deal with the calcified fossil who had run the town since the 1980s, Tom had stood for office on the same impulse he occasionally swore—and woke to find himself elected in a landslide, 374 to 123.

Now he rubbed the back of his head, as he did whenever perplexed, and said, "I think the Wattesoons can do pretty much anything they want."

"Then we've got to make them stop wanting to mess with us," Susan said.

That, in a nutshell, was what made Tom and Susan's marriage work. In seventeen years, whenever he had said something couldn't be done, she had taken it as a challenge to do it.

But he had never expected her to take on alien invaders.

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Town Council meetings weren't formal, and usually a few people straggled in late. This day, everyone was assembled at Town Hall by five P.M., when the Watteson officer had said he would address them.

By now they knew it was not just Okanoggan Falls; all four towns along a fifty-mile stretch of Highway 14 had their own occupying forces camped outside town, and their own captains addressing them at precisely five o'clock. Like most Wattoon military actions, it had been flawlessly coordinated.

The captain arrived with little fanfare. Two sand-colored army transports sped down Main Street and pulled up in front of Town Hall. The two occupants of one got out, while three soldiers in the other stood guard to keep the curious at arms' length. Their weapons remained in their slings. They seemed to be trying to keep the mood low-key.

The two who entered Town Hall looked exactly like Wattoons on television—squat lumps of rubbly khaki-colored skin, like blobs of clay mixed with gravel. They wore the usual beige army uniforms that hermetically encased them, like shrink wrap, from neck to heel, but neither officer had on the face mask or gloves the invaders usually employed to deal with humans. An aroma like baking rocks entered the room with them—not unpleasant, just not a smell ordinarily associated with living creatures.

In studied, formal English the larger Wattoon introduced himself as Captain Groton, and his companion as Ensign Agush. No one offered to shake hands, knowing the famous Wattoon horror at touching slimy human flesh.

The council sat silent behind the row of desks they used for hearings, while the captain stood facing them where people normally gave testimony, but there was no question about where the power lay. The townspeople had expected gruff, peremptory orders, and so Captain Groton's reasonable tone came as a pleasant surprise; but there was nothing reassuring about his message.

The Wattoons wished to strip-mine a fifty-mile swath of the hilly, wooded Okanoggan Valley. "Our operations will render the land uninhabitable," Captain Groton said. "The army is here to assist in your removal. We will need you to coordinate the arrangements so this move can be achieved expeditiously and peacefully." There was the ever-so-slight hint of a threat in that last word.

When he finished there was a short silence, as the council absorbed the imminent destruction of everything they had lived for and loved. The image of Okanoggan Valley transformed into a mine pit hovered before every eye: no maple trees, no lilacs, no dogs, no streetlights. Rob Massey, the scrappy newspaper editor, was first to find his voice. "What do you want to mine?" he said sharply. "There are no minerals here."

"Silica," the captain answered promptly. "There is a particularly pure bed of it underneath your limestone."

He meant the white, friable sandstone—useless for building, occasionally used for glass. What they wanted it for was incomprehensible, like so much about them. "Will we be compensated for our property?" Paula Sanders asked, as if any compensation would suffice.

"No," the captain answered neutrally. "The land is ours."

Which was infuriating, but unarguable.

"But it's our home!" Tom blurted out. "We've lived here, some of us four, five generations. We've built this community. It's our life. You can't just walk in and level it."

The raw anguish in his voice made even Captain Groton, lump of rubble that he was, pause. "But we can," he answered without malice. "It is not within your power to stop it. All you can do is reconcile yourselves to the inevitable."

"How much time do we have?" Paula bit off her words as if they tasted bad.

"We realize you will need time to achieve acceptance, so we are prepared to give you two months."

The room practically exploded with protests and arguments.

At last the captain held up the blunt appendage that served him as a hand. "Very well," he said. "I am authorized to give you an extension. You may have three months."

Later, they learned that every captain up and down the valley had given the same extension. It had obviously been planned in advance.

The room smoldered with outrage as the captain turned to leave, his job done. But before he could exit, Susan Abernathy stepped into the doorway, along with the smell of brewing coffee from the hall outside.

"Captain Groton," she said, "would you like to join us for coffee? It's a tradition after meetings."

"Thank you, madam," he said, "but I must return to base."

"Susan," she introduced herself, and, contrary to all etiquette, held out her hand.

The Watteson recoiled visibly. But in the next second he seemed to seize control of himself and, by sheer force of will, extended his arm. Susan clasped it warmly, looking down into his pebbly eyes. "Since we are going to be neighbors, at least for the next few months, we might as well be civil," she said.

"That is very foresighted of you, madam," he answered.

"Call me Susan," she said. "Well, since you can't stay tonight, can I invite you to dinner tomorrow?"

The captain hesitated, and everyone expected another evasion, but at last he said, "That would be very acceptable. Susan."

"Great. I'll call you with the details." As the captain left, followed closely by his ensign, she turned to the council. "Can I bring you some coffee?"

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"Ish. What did it feel like?" said her son Nick.

Susan had become something of a celebrity in the eleven-year-old set for having touched an alien.

"Dry," she said, staring at the laptop on the dining room table. "A little lumpy. Kind of like a lizard."

In the next room, Tom was on the phone. "Warren, you're talking crazy," he said. "We still might be able to get some concessions. We're working on it. But if you start shooting at them, we're doomed. I don't want to hear any more about toad hunts, okay?"

"Have you washed your hand?" Nick wanted to know.

Susan let go of the mouse to reach out and wipe her hand on Nick's arm. "Eew, gross!" he said. "Now I've got toad germs."

"Don't call them that," she said sharply. "It's not polite. You're going to have to be very polite tonight."

"I don't have to touch him, do I?"

"No, I'm sure touching a grody little boy is the last thing he wants."

In the next room, Tom had dialed a different number. "Listen, Walt, I think I'm going to need a patrol car in front of my house tonight. If this toad gets shot coming up my walk, my house is going to be a smoking crater tomorrow."

"Is that true?" Nick asked, wide-eyed.

"No," Susan lied. "He's exaggerating."

"Can I go to Jake's tonight?"

"No, I need you here," Susan said, hiding the pang of anxiety it gave her.

"What are we having for dinner?"

"I'm trying to find out what they eat, if you'd just leave me alone."

"I'm not eating bugs."

"Neither am I," Susan said. "Now go away."

Tom came in and sank into a chair with a sigh. "The whole town is up in arms," he said. "Literally. Paula wanted to picket our house tonight. I told her to trust you, that you've got a plan. Of course, I don't know what it is."

"I think my plan is to feed him pizza," Susan said.

"Pizza?"

"Why not? I can't find that they have any dietary restrictions, and everyone loves pizza."

Tom laid his head back and stared glumly at the ceiling. "Sure. Why not? If it kills him, you'll be a hero. For about half an hour; then you'll be a martyr."

"Pizza never killed anyone," Susan said, and got up to start straightening up the house.

The Abernathys lived in a big old 1918 three-story with a wraparound porch and a witch's-hat tower, set in a big yard. The living room had sliding wood doors, stained-glass fanlights, and a wood-framed fireplace. It could have been fancy, but instead it had a frayed, lived-in look—heaps of books, puppy-chewed Oriental carpet, an upright piano piled with model airplanes. The comfy, well-dented furniture showed the marks of constant comings and goings, school projects, and meetings. There was rarely a night when the Abernathys didn't have guests, but dinner was never formal. Formality was alien to Susan's nature.

She had been an RN, but had quit, fed up with the bureaucracy rather than the patients. She had the sturdy physique of a German farm girl, and the competent independence to go with it. Light brown hair, cropped just above her shoulders, framed her round, cheerful face. Only rarely was she seen in anything more fancy than a jean skirt and a shirt with rolled-up sleeves. When they had elected Tom, everyone had known they weren't getting a mayor's wife who would challenge anybody's fashion sense.

That night, Captain Groton arrived precisely on time, in a car with tinted windows, driven by someone who stayed invisible, waiting. Tom met the guest on the doorstep, looking up and down the street a little nervously. When they came into the living room, Susan emerged from the kitchen with a bouquet of wine glasses in one hand and a bottle in the other.

"Wine, Captain?" she said.

He hesitated. "If that is customary. I regret I am not familiar with your dietary rituals. I only know they are complex."

"It's fermented fruit juice, mildly intoxicating," she said, pouring a little bit in his glass. "People drink it to relax."

He took the glass gingerly. Susan saw that he had stumpy nubbin fingers. As a nurse, she had had to train herself to feel compassion even for the least appealing patients, and now she was forced to call on that skill to disregard his appearance.

"Cheers," she said, lifting her glass.

There was a snap as the stem on Captain Groton's glass broke in two. The wine slopped onto his hand as he tried to catch the pieces. "Pardon me," he mumbled. "Your vessel is brittle."

"Never mind the glass," Susan said, taking it and handing the pieces to Tom. "Did you cut yourself?"

"No, of course—" he stopped in mid denial, staring at his hand. A thin line of blood bisected the palm.

"Here, I'll take care of that," she said. Taking him by the arm, she led him to the bathroom. It was not until she had dabbed the blood off with a tissue that she realized he was not recoiling at her touch as he had before. Inwardly, she smiled at small victories. But when she brought out a bottle of spray disinfectant, he did recoil, demanding suspiciously, "What is it?"

"Disinfectant," she said. "To prevent infection. It's alcohol-based."

"Oh," he said. "I thought it might be water."

She spritzed his hand lightly, then applied a bandage. He was looking curiously around. "What is this place?"

"It's a bathroom," she said. "We use it to—well, clean ourselves, and groom, and so forth. This is the toilet." She raised the lid, and he drew back, obviously repulsed. She had to laugh. "It's really very clean. I swear."

"It has water in it," he said with disgust.

"But the water's not dirty, not now."

"Water is always dirty," he said. "It teems with bacteria. It transmits a thousand diseases, yet you humans touch it without any caution. You allow your children to play in it. You drink it, even. I suppose you have gotten used to it, living on this world where it soils everything. It even falls from the sky. It is impossible to get away from it. You have no choice but to soak in it."

Struck by the startling image of water as filth, Susan said, "Occupying our world must be very unpleasant for you. What is your planet like?"

"It is very dry," he said. "Miles and miles of hot, clean sand, like your Sahara. But your population does not live in the habitable spots, so we cannot either."

"You must drink water sometimes. Your metabolisms are not that different from ours, or you would not be able to eat our food."

"The trace amounts in foods are enough for us. We do not excrete it like you do."

"So that's why you don't have bathrooms," she said.

He paused, clearly puzzled. Then it dawned on him what she had left out of her explanation. "You use this room for excretory functions?"

"Yes," she said. "It's supposed to be private."

"But you excrete fluids in public all the time," he said. "From your noses, your mouths, your skin. How can you keep it private?"

For a moment the vision of humans as oozing bags of bacteria left her unable to answer. Then she said, "That's why we come here, to clean it all off."

He looked around. "But there is no facility for cleaning."

"Sure there is." She turned on the shower. "See?"

He reacted with horror, so she quickly shut it off. She explained, "You see, we think of water as clean. We bathe in it. How do you bathe?"

"Sand," he said. "Tubs of dry, heated sand. It is heavenly."

"It must be." She could picture it: soft, white sand. Like what lay under the Okanoggan limestone. She looked at him in dawning realization. "Is that why you want—?"

"I cannot say anything about that," he said. "Please do not ask me."

Which was all the answer she needed.

When they came back out, Tom and the boys were in the kitchen, so that was where they went.

"Sorry, we got caught up in a really interesting conversation," Susan said breezily, with an I'll-tell-you-later look at Tom. "Captain Groton, these are our sons, Ben and Nick." The boys stood up and nodded awkwardly, obviously coached not to shake hands.

"They are both yours?" the Wattesoon asked.

"Yes," Tom said. "Do you have any kids, captain?"

"Yes. A daughter."

"How old is she?" Susan said, pouring some more wine for him in a mug.

Captain Groton paused so long she wondered if she had said something offensive, but finally he shook his head. "I cannot figure it out. The time dilation makes it too difficult. It would mean little to you anyway; our years are so different."

"So she's back home on your planet?"

"Yes."

"Your wife, too?"

"She is dead."

"I'm so sorry. It must have been hard for you to leave your daughter behind."

"It was necessary. I was posted here. I followed my duty." It had occurred to Susan that perhaps cow-excretion pie was not the thing to offer her guest, so she began rummaging in the cupboard, and soon assembled a buffet of dry foods: roast soybeans, crackers, apple chips, pine nuts, and a sweet potato for moisture. As Tom tried valiantly to engage the captain in a conversation about fishing, she started assembling the pizza for her family. The dog was barking at the back door, so she asked Ben to feed him. Nick started playing with his Gameboy. There was a pleasantly normal confusion all around.

"What sorts of food do you eat at home?" Susan asked her guest when she had a chance.

Groton shrugged. "We are less preoccupied with food than you are. Anything will do. We are omnivores."

Ben muttered, "Better watch out for our dogs."

"Ben!" Susan rebuked him.

Captain Groton turned marbly eyes on him. "We have no interest in your food animals."

The whole family stared in horror. "Our dogs aren't food!" Ben blurted.

"Then why do you keep them?" the captain asked reasonably.

Tom said, "For companionship."

Ben said, "For fun."

Susan said, "Because they remind us that we're human. Without other species around, we'd forget."

"Ah. I see," the Wattesoon said. "We feel the same."

In the awkward silence that followed, the humans all wondered who were the Wattesoons' pets.

They were saved by the timer. The pizza came out of the oven, and soon all was cheerful confusion again.

The internet had told Susan that Wattesoons were frugal eaters, but Captain Groton seemed ravenous. He ate some of everything she put on the table, including two slices of pizza.

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To spare their guest the troubling sight of counters, tabletop, and utensils being smeared with water, Susan asked him out to see the back yard so the others could clean up. The screen door banged shut behind them and the dog came trotting up, eager to smell the stranger, till Susan shooed him into the kitchen. She then led the Wattesoon out into the humid, crickety twilight.

It was a Midwestern evening. The yard backed up onto the river bluff, a weathered limestone cliff overgrown with sumac and grapevine. Susan strolled out past the scattered detritus of Frisbees and lawn darts toward the quiet of the lower yard, where nature had started to encroach. There was an old swing hung from a gnarled oak tree, and she sat down in it, making the ropes creak. In the shady quiet, she swung idly to and fro, thinking of other evenings.

She had never realized how desperately she loved this place until she was forced to think of losing it. Looking toward the dark bushes by the cliff, she saw the silent flare of fireflies. "Are you able to find this beautiful?" she said, not trying to hide the longing in her voice.

After a few moments of silence, she looked over to find the captain gazing into the dark, lost in thought.

"I am sorry," he said, recollecting himself. "What did you ask?"

Instead of answering, she said, "I think we each get imprinted on a certain kind of landscape when we're young. We can enjoy other spots, but only one seems like we're made from it, down to our bones. This is mine."

"Yes," he said.

"Can you understand how it is for us, then? We talk a lot about our investments and our livelihoods, but that's just to hide the pain. We love this place. We're bonded to it."

He didn't answer at once, so she stopped the swing to look at him.

"I understand," he said.

"Do you?" she said hopefully.

"It changes nothing. I am sorry."

Disappointed, she stared at his lumpy face. Now that she was a little more accustomed to him, he did not seem quite so rubbly and squat. He gave an impatient gesture. "Why are your people so fond of being discontent? You relish resisting, protesting, always pushing against the inevitable. It is an immature response, and makes your lives much harder."

"But, Captain, there are some things that *ought* to be protested."

"What things?"

"Folly. Malice. Injustice."

He cut her off in a pained tone. "These things are part of the nature of the world. There is nothing we can do to prevent them."

"You would not even try?" she said.

"Life is not just. Fairness is a fool's concept. To fight brings only disillusion."

"Well, we are different. We humans can put up with a thousand evils so long as we think they are fair. We are striving all the time to bring about justice, in ourselves and our society. Yours too, if you would just let us."

"So your truculence is all an effort to improve us?" the Watteson said.

Surprised, Susan laughed. "Why, Captain Groton, no one told me your people had a sense of irony."

He seemed taken aback by her reaction, as if he regretted having provoked it.

"I was not laughing at you," she explained hastily. "At least, not in any way you would not wish."

"You cannot know what I would wish," he said stiffly.

She said, "Oh, I don't know about that." For the time being, here out of all official contexts, he seemed just as difficult and contradictory as any human male. Speculatively, she said, "Your answer just now, about justice. You sounded bitter, as if you spoke from some experience. What was it?"

He stared at her with that unreadable, granitic face. For a few moments she thought he wasn't going to

answer. Then he said, "It is in the past. There is no point in talking about it. Today is today. I accept that."

They remained silent for a while, listening to the sounds of life all around. At last Susan said, "Well, the great injustice of *our* lives is still in the future."

The thought of it flooded into her. All of this gentle valley would be gone soon, turned into an open wound in the landscape. Tears came to her, half anger and half loss, and she got up to go back inside. When she reached the back porch, she paused to compose herself, wiping the tears from her face. Captain Groton, who had followed her, said in a startled voice, "You are secreting moisture."

"Yes," she said. "We do that from time to time, in moments of intense emotion."

"I wish—" he started, then stopped.

"Yes? What do you wish?"

"Never mind," he said, and looked away.

That night, lying in bed, she told Tom all she had learned.

"Sand," he said in disbelief. "The bastards are moving us out so they can have bathtub sand."

He was not feeling charitable toward the Wattsoons. After their dinner guest had left in his tinted limousine, Tom had gotten a call from the mayor of Walker, the closest Wal-Mart metropolis. The captain in charge of their evacuation was an unbending disciplinarian who had presented the residents with a set of non-negotiable deadlines. The news from Red Bluff was even less encouraging. The captain assigned there was a transparent racist who seemed to think evacuation was too good for the native population. Force seemed to be his preferred alternative.

"Larry wants us to mount a unified resistance," Tom said. "A kind of 'Hell no, we won't go' thing. Just stay put, refuse to prepare. It seems pretty risky to me."

Susan lay reflecting. At last she said, "They would think it was an immature response."

"What, like children disobeying?" he said, irritated.

"I didn't say I agreed. I said that was what they would think."

"So what *should* we do?"

"I don't know. Behave in a way they associate with adults. Somehow resist without seeming to resist."

Tom turned his head on the pillow to look at her. "How come you learn all these things? He won't give me anything but the official line."

"You're his counterpart, Tom. He has to be formal with you. I don't count."

"Or maybe you count more. Maybe he's sweet on you."

"Oh, please!"

"Who would have thought I'd lose my wife to a potato?" Tom mused.

She quelled the urge to hit him with a pillow. "You know, he's something of a philosopher."

"Socrates the spud," he said.

"More like Marcus Aurelius. I don't think he really wants to be here. There is something in his past, some tragedy he won't talk about. But it might make him sympathetic to us. We might win him over."

Tom rose on one elbow to look at her earnestly. "My god, he really did open up to you."

"I'm just putting two and two together. The problem is, I'm not sure what winning him over would get us. He's just following orders."

"Jeez, even one friend among the Watteson is progress. I say go for it."

"Is that an order, Mr. Mayor?"

"My Mata Hari," he said, with the goofy, lopsided grin she loved.

She rolled closer to put her head on his shoulder. All problems seemed more bearable when he was around.

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In the few weeks, no one saw much of Captain Groton. Information, instructions, and orders still emanated from his office, but the captain himself was unavailable—indisposed, the official line went. When she heard this, Susan called the Watteson headquarters, concerned that he had had a reaction to the odd menu she had fed him. To her surprise, the captain took her call.

"Do not concern yourself, Susan," he said. "There is nothing you can do."

"I don't believe you," she said. "You're so in love with stoical acceptance that you could have toxic shock before you'd admit there was anything wrong."

"There is nothing wrong."

"I'm a nurse, Captain Groton. If you are sick, you have become my job."

There was an enigmatic pause on the line. "It is nothing you would recognize," he said at last. "A Watteson complaint."

Concerned now that he had admitted it, she said, "Is it serious?"

"It is not mortal, if that is what you mean."

"Can I see you?"

"Your concern is gratifying, but I have no need of assistance."

And she had to be content with that.

In the end, Tom saw him before she did. It was at a meeting the captain couldn't avoid, a progress report on preparations for the evacuation. "It must be some sort of arthritis," Tom answered Susan's questions vaguely. "He's hobbling around with a cane. A bit testy, too."

Not trusting a man to observe what needed to be noticed, Susan called Alice Brody, who had also been at the meeting. She was more than willing to elaborate. "He does seem to be in discomfort," Alice said. "But that's not the strange part."

Aha, Susan thought.

"He's *taller*, Susan. By inches. And proportioned differently. Not quite so tubby, if you know what I mean. It looks like he's lost a lot of weight, but I think it's just redistributed. His skin is different, too—smoother, a more natural color."

"What do you think is going on?"

"Damned if I know."

That was when Susan got the idea to invite Captain Groton to the Fourth of July celebration. Observing the holiday at all had been controversial, under the circumstances—but the city council had reasoned that a day of frivolity would raise everyone's spirits. The Wattsoons regarded it as a quaint summer festival and completely missed the nationalist connotations, so their only objection was to the potential for disorder from the crowds. When the town agreed to ban alcohol, the occupiers relented.

Okanoggan Falls's Fourth of July always climaxed with the parade, a homegrown affair for which people prepared at least three hours in advance. There was always a chainsaw drill team, a convertible for the Butter Princess, a Dixieland jazz band on a flatbed truck, and decorated backhoes and front-end loaders in lieu of floats. Deprecating self-mockery was a finely honed sport in Wisconsin.

Tom was going to be obliged to ride in a Model T with a stovepipe hat on, so Susan phoned the Wattsoon commander and asked him to accompany her.

"It will be a real demonstration of old-time Americana," she said.

He hesitated. "I do not wish to be provocative. Your townsfolk might not welcome my presence."

"If you were riding in a float, maybe. But mingling with the crowds, enjoying a brat and a lemonade? Some people might even appreciate it. If they don't, I'll handle them."

At last he consented, and they arranged to meet. "Don't wear a uniform," was her last instruction.

She had no idea what a dilemma she had caused him till he showed up in front of Meyer's Drugstore in a ragbag assortment of ill-fitting clothes that looked salvaged from a thrift shop. However, the truly extraordinary thing was that he was able to wear them at all—for when she had last seen him, fitting into human clothes would have been out of the question. Now, when she greeted him, she realized they were the same height, and he actually had a chin.

"You look wonderful," she blurted out.

"You are exaggerating," he said in a slightly pained tone.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Better, thank you."

"But your clothes. Oh dear."

"Are they inappropriate?" he asked anxiously.

She looked around at all the American summer slobbery—men in baggy T-shirts and sandals, women bursting out of their tank tops. "No," she said. "You'll fit right in. It's just that, for a man in your position...." She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him into the drugstore, making for the magazine rack. She found an issue of *GQ* and thrust it into his hands. "Study that," she said. "It will show you what

the elite class of men wear.” Perusing several other magazines, she found some examples of a more khakified, Cape Cod look. “This is more informal, but still tasteful. Good for occasions like this, without losing face.”

He was studying the pictures with a grave and studious manner. “Thank you, Susan. This is helpful.” With a pang, she wished Tom would take any of her sartorial advice so to heart.

They were heading for the counter to buy the magazines when he stopped, riveted by the sight of the shelves. “What are these products for?”

“Grooming, personal care,” Susan said. “These are for cleaning teeth. We do it twice a day, to prevent our breath smelling bad and our teeth going yellow. These are for shaving off unwanted hair. Men shave their faces every day, or it grows in.”

“You mean all men have facial hair?” Captain Groton said, a little horrified.

“Yes. The ones who don't want beards just shave it off.”

“What about these?” he said, gesturing to the deodorants.

“We spread it under our arms every day, to prevent unpleasant odors.”

Faintly he said, “You live at war with your bodies.”

She laughed. “It does seem that way, doesn't it?” She looked down the aisle at the shampoos, mouthwashes, acne creams, corn removers, soaps, and other products attesting to the ways in which even humans found their own bodies objectionable.

Beth Meyer was manning the counter, so Susan introduced her to Captain Groton. Unable to hide her hostility, Beth nevertheless said, “I hope you learn something about us.”

“Your shop has already been very instructive, Mrs. Meyer,” the captain said courteously. “I never realized the ingenuity people devote to body care. I hope I may return some day.”

“As long as we're open we won't turn away a customer,” Beth said.

Outside, things were gearing up for the parade, and it was clear that people were spontaneously going to use it to express their frustration. Some of the spectators were carrying protest signs, and along the sidewalk one local entrepreneur had set up a Spike the Spud concession stand offering people a chance to do sadistic things to baked potatoes for a few dollars. The most popular activity seemed to be blowing up the potatoes with firecrackers, as attested by the exploded potato guts covering the back of the plywood booth. A reporter from an out-of-town TV station was interviewing the proprietor about his thriving business. The word “Watteson” never passed anyone's lips, but no one missed the point.

Including Captain Groton. Susan saw him studying the scene, so she said quietly, “It's tasteless, but better they should work it out this way than in earnest.”

“That is one interpretation,” he said a little tensely. She reminded herself that it wasn't *her* symbolic viscera plastering the booth walls.

His radio chose that moment to come to life. Susan hadn't even realized he was carrying it, hidden under his untucked shirt. He said, “Excuse me,” and spoke into it in his own language. Susan could not tell what was being said, but the captain's voice was calm and professional. When he finished, she said, “Do you have soldiers ready to move in?”

He studied her a moment, as if weighing whether to lie, then said, "It would have been foolish of us not to take precautions."

It occurred to her then that he was their advance reconnaissance man, taking advantage of her friendship to assess the need for force against her neighbors. At first she felt a prickle of outrage; it quickly morphed into relief that he had not sent someone more easily provoked.

"Hey, captain!" The man at the Spike the Spud stand had noticed them, and, emboldened by the TV camera, had decided to create a photogenic scene. "Care to launch a spud missile?" The people standing around laughed nervously, transfixed to see the Watteson's reaction. Susan was drawing breath to extricate him when he put a restraining hand on her arm.

"I fear you would think me homicidal," he said in an easygoing tone.

Everyone saw then that he understood the message of sublimated violence, but chose to take it as a joke and not a provocation.

"No homicide involved, just potatoes," said the boothkeeper. He was a tubby, unshaven man in a sloppy white T-shirt. His joking tone had a slightly aggressive edge. "Come on, I'll give you a shot for free."

Captain Groton hesitated as everyone watched intently to see what he would do. At last he gave in. "Very well," he said, stepping up to the booth, "but I insist on paying. No preferential treatment."

The boothkeeper, an amateur comedian, made a show of selecting a long, thin potato that looked remarkably like his customer. He then offered a choice of weapons: sledge hammer, ax, firecracker, or other instruments of torture. "Why, the firecracker of course," the captain said. "It is traditional today, is it not?"

"American as beer." One segment of the crowd resented that the Wattesons had interfered with their patriotic right to inebriation.

The boothkeeper handed him the potato and firecracker. "Here, shove it in. Right up its ass." When the captain complied, the man set the potato in the back of the booth and said, "Say when."

When the captain gave the word, the man lit the fuse. They waited breathlessly; then the potato exploded, splattering the boothkeeper in the face. The onlookers hooted with laughter. Captain Groton extracted himself with an amiable wave, as if he had planned the outcome all along.

"You were a remarkably good sport about that," Susan said to him as they walked away.

"I could have obliterated the tuber with my weapon," he said, "but I thought it would violate the spirit of the occasion."

"You're packing a weapon?" Susan stared. Watteson weapons were notoriously horrific. He could have blown away the booth and everyone around it.

He looked at her without a shade of humor. "I have to be able to defend myself."

The parade was about to commence, and Susan was feeling that she was escorting an appallingly dangerous person, so she said, "Let's find a place to stand, away from the crowd."

"Over here," Captain Groton said. He had already scoped out the terrain and located the best spot for surveillance: the raised stoop of an old apartment building, where he could stand with his back to the brick. He climbed the steps a bit stiffly, moving as if unused to knees that bent.

Okanoggan Falls had outdone itself. It was a particularly cheeky parade, full of double-entendre floats like the one carrying a group called the No Go Banjoes playing “Don't Fence Me In,” or the “I Don't Wanna Mooove” banner carried by the high school cheerleading squad in their black-and-white Holstein costumes. The captain's radio kept interrupting, and he spoke in a restrained, commanding voice to whoever was on the other end.

In the end, it all passed without intervention from any soldiers other than the one at Susan's side. When the crowd began to disperse, she found that she had been clenching her fists in tension, and was glad no one else was aware of the risk they had been running.

"What happens now?" Captain Groton said. He meant it militarily, she knew; all pretense of his purpose being social was gone.

"Everyone will break up now," she said. "Some will go to the school ballfield for the fund-raiser picnic, but most won't gather again till the fireworks tonight. That will be about nine-thirty or ten o'clock."

He nodded. "I will go back to base, then."

She was battling mixed feelings, but at last said, "Captain—thank you, I think."

He studied her seriously. "I am just doing my duty."

That night on the television news, the celebration in Okanoggan Falls was contrasted with the one in Red Bluff, where a lockdown curfew was in place, fireworks were banned, and Wattesoon tanks patrolled the empty streets.

* * * *

A week later, when Susan phoned Captain Groton, Ensign Agush took the call. "He cannot speak to you," he said indifferently. "He is dying."

"What?" Susan said, thinking she had heard wrong.

"He has contracted one of your human diseases."

"Has anyone called a doctor?"

"No. He will be dead soon. There is no point."

Half an hour later, Susan was at the Wattesoon headquarters with her nurse's kit in hand. When the ensign realized he was facing a woman with the determination of a stormtrooper, he did not put up a fight, but showed her to the captain's quarters. He still seemed unconcerned about his commanding officer's imminent demise.

Captain Groton slumped in a chair in his spartan but private sitting room. The transformation in his appearance was even more remarkable; he was now tall and slender, even for a human, and his facial features had a distinctly human cast. He might have passed for an ordinary man in dim light.

An exceedingly miserable ordinary man. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face unshaved (she noted the facial hair with surprise), and his voice was a hoarse croak when he said, "Susan! I was just thinking I should thank you for your kindness before...." He was interrupted by a sneeze.

Still preoccupied with his appearance, she said, "You are turning human, aren't you?"

"Your microbes evidently think so." He coughed phlegm. "I have contracted an exceedingly repulsive

disease."

She drew up a chair next to him. "What are your symptoms?"

He shook his head, obviously thinking the subject was not a fit one. "Don't be concerned. I am resigned to die."

"I'm asking as a professional."

Reluctantly, he said, "This body appears to be dissolving. It is leaking fluids from every orifice. There, I told you it was repulsive."

"Your throat is sore? Your nose is congested? Coughing and sneezing?"

"Yes, yes."

"My dear captain, what you have is called a cold."

"No!" he protested. "I am quite warm."

"That's probably because you have a fever." She felt his forehead. "Yes. Well, fortunately, I've brought something for that." She brought out a bottle of aspirin, some antihistamine, decongestant, and cough suppressant. She added a bottle of Vitamin C for good measure.

"You are not alarmed?" he asked hesitantly.

"Not very. In us, the disease normally cures itself in a week or so. Since your immune system has never encountered it before, I'm not sure about you. You have to level with me, captain. Have you become human in ways besides appearance?"

Vaguely, he said, "How long has it been?"

"How long has what been?"

"Since I first saw you."

She thought back. "About six weeks."

"The transformation is far advanced, then. In three weeks I will be indistinguishable from one of you."

"Internally as well?"

"You would need a laboratory to tell the difference."

"Then it should be safe to treat you as if you were human. I'll be careful, though." She looked around the room for a glass of water. "Where's your ba—" It was a Watteson apartment; of course there was no bathroom. By now, she knew they excreted only hard, odorless pellets. "Where can I get a glass of water?"

"What for?" He looked mildly repulsed.

"For you to drink with these pills."

"Drink?"

"You mean to tell me you've had no fluids?"

"We don't require them...."

"Oh, dear Lord. You're probably dehydrated as well. You're going to have to change some habits, captain. Sit right there. I need to run to the grocery store."

At the grocery she stocked up on fruit juices, bottled water, tissues, and, after a moment's hesitation, toilet paper—though not relishing having to explain that one to him. She also bought soap, a washcloth, mouthwash, shaving gel, a packet of plastic razors, a pail, and a washbasin. Like it or not, he was going to have to learn.

She had dealt with patients in every state of mental derangement, but never had she had to teach one how to be human. When she had gotten him to down the pills and a bottle of orange juice, she explained the purpose of her purchases to him in plain, practical language. She showed him how to blow his nose, and explained how a human bladder and bowel worked, and the necessity of washing with soap and water. When she finished he looked, if anything, more despairing than before.

"It is not common knowledge to us that you are hiding these bodily deficiencies," he said. "I fear I made a grave error in judgment."

"You're a soldier," she said. "Stop dramatizing, and cope with it."

For a moment he stared, astonished at her commanding tone. Then she could see him marshaling his courage as if to face dismemberment and death. "You are justified to rebuke me," he said. "I chose this. I must not complain."

Soon the antihistamine was making him drowsy, so she coaxed him to return to bed. "You're best off if you just sleep," she told him. "Take more of the pills every four hours, and drink another bottle every time you wake. If you feel pressure and need to eliminate liquid, use the pail. Don't hold it in, it's very bad for you. Call me in the morning."

"You're leaving?" he said anxiously.

She had intended to, but at his disconsolate expression she relented. It made her realize that she could actually read expressions on his face now. She drew up a chair and sat. "I must say, your comrades here don't seem very sympathetic."

He was silent a few moments, staring bleakly at the ceiling. At last he said, "They are ashamed."

"Of what? You?"

"Of what I am becoming."

"A human? They're bigots, then."

"Yes. You have to understand, Susan, the army doesn't always attract the highest caliber of men."

She realized then that the drug, or the reprieve from death, had broken down his usual reticence. It put her in an odd position, to have the occupying commander relying on her in his current unguarded condition. Extracting military or political secrets would clearly violate medical ethics. But was personal and cultural information allowed? She made a snap decision: nothing that would hurt him. Cautiously, she said, "I didn't know that you Wattsoons had this ... talent ... ability ... to change your appearance."

"It only works with a closely related species," he said drowsily. "We weren't sure you were similar enough. It appears you are."

"How do you do it?"

He paused a long time, then said, "I will tell you some day. The trait has been useful to us, in adapting to other planets. Planets more unlike our own than this one is."

"Is that why you changed? To be better adapted?"

"No. I felt it was the best way to carry out my orders."

She waited for him to explain that; when he didn't, she said, "What orders?"

"To oversee the evacuation on time and with minimal disturbance. I thought that looking like a human would be an advantage in winning the cooperation of the local populace. I wanted you to think of me as human. I did not know of the drawbacks then."

"Well, I don't think you would have fooled us anyway," Susan said a little skeptically. "Can you change your mind now?"

"No. The chameleon process is part of our reproductive biology. We cannot change our minds about that, either."

The mention of reproduction brought up something she had often wondered about. "Why are there no Wattesoon women here?" she asked.

The subject seemed to evoke some sort of intense emotion for him. In a tight voice, he said, "Our women almost invariably die giving birth. The only ones who survive, as a rule, are childless, and they are rare. If it were not for the frequency of multiple births, we would have difficulty maintaining our population. We see the ease with which you human women give birth, and envy it."

"It wasn't always this way," Susan said. "We used to die much more frequently, as well. But that wasn't acceptable to us. We improved our medicine until we solved the problem."

Softly, he said, "It is not acceptable to us, either."

A realization struck her. "Is that what happened to your wife?"

"Yes."

She studied his face. "I think you must have loved her."

"I did. Too much."

"You can't blame yourself for her death."

"Who should I blame?"

"The doctors. The researchers who don't find a cure. The society that doesn't put a high enough priority on finding a solution."

He gave a little laugh. "That is a very human response."

"Well, *we* have solved our problem."

He considered that answer so long she thought he had fallen asleep. But just as she was rising to check, he said, "I think it is better to go through life as a passerby, detached from both the good and the bad."

Especially from the good, because it always goes away."

Gently, Susan said, "Not always."

He looked at her with clouded eyes. "Always."

And then he really did fall asleep.

That evening, after the boys had gone up to their rooms, Susan told Tom everything over wine. Some of her medical details made him wince.

"Ouch. The poor bastard. Sounds worse than puberty, all crammed into nine weeks."

"Tom, you could really help him out," Susan said. "There are things you could tell him, man to man, that I can't—"

"Oh no, I couldn't," Tom said. "No way."

She protested, "But there are things about male anatomy—you expect *me* to warn him about all that?"

"Better you than me," Tom said.

"Coward," she said.

"Damn right. Listen, men just don't talk about these things. How am I supposed to bring it up? More to the point, why? He got himself into this. It was a military strategy. He even admitted it to you: he wanted to manipulate us to cooperate in our own conquest. I don't know why you're acting as if you're responsible for him."

Tom was right. She studied the wine in her glass, wondering at her own reaction. She had been empathizing as if Captain Groton were her patient, not her enemy. He had deliberately manipulated her feelings, and it had worked.

Well, she thought, two could play at that game.

It was not to be a summer of days at the beach, or fishing trips, or baseball camp. Everyone was busy packing, sorting, and getting ready to move. Susan marshaled Nick and Ben into the attic and basement to do the easy part, the packing and stacking, but the hardest part of moving was all hers: making the decisions. What to take, what to leave. It was all a referendum on her life, sorting the parts worth saving from the rest. No object was just itself: it was all memories, encapsulated in grimy old toys, birthday cards, garden bulbs, and comforters. All the tiny, pointillist moments that together formed the picture of her life. Somehow, she had to separate her self from the place that had created her, to become a rootless thing.

The summer was punctuated with sad ceremonies like the one when they started disinterring the bodies from the town cemetery, the day when the crane removed the Civil War soldier from the park, and the last church service before they took out the stained glass windows. After the dead had left, the town paradoxically seemed even more full of ghosts.

The protests did not die down. Red Bluff was in a state of open rebellion; a hidden sniper had picked off three Wattsoons soldiers, and the army was starting house-to-house searches to disarm the populace. In Walker, angry meetings were televised, in which residents shouted and wept.

In Okanogan Falls, they negotiated. The Wattsoons were now paying to move three of the most

significant historic buildings, and the school district would be kept intact after relocation. Captain Groton had even agreed to move the deadline two weeks into September so the farmers could harvest the crops—a concession the captains in Red Bluff and Walker were eventually forced to match, grudgingly.

The captain became a familiar face around town—no longer in a limousine, but driving a rented SUV to supervise contractors, meet with civic groups, or simply to stop for lunch at Earl's Cafe and chat with the waitress. Outwardly, there was no longer a hint of anything Wattersoon about him, unless it was his awkwardness when asked to tie a knot or catch a baseball. He had turned into a tall, distinguished older man with silver hair, whose manners were as impeccable as his dress. In social settings he was reserved, but occasionally something would catch his whimsy, and then he had a light, tolerant laugh. At the same time, a steely authority lay just under the surface.

The women of Okanoggan began to notice. They began to approach and engage him in conversation—urgently, awkwardly warm on their side, full of self-conscious laughter; and on his side, studiously attentive but maddeningly noncommittal. People began to talk about the fact that he went every week to dine at the Abernathy home, whether Tom was there or not. They noticed when Susan took him to the barber shop, and when they drove together to La Crosse to visit the mall. Her good humor began to irritate the other women in ways it never had before, and their eyes followed her when she passed by.

"She must of kissed that frog good, 'cause he sure turned into a prince," said Jewell Hogan at the beauty salon, and the remark was considered so witty it was repeated all over town.

For herself, Susan had found one more reason to love her life in Okanoggan Falls just before losing it. She was playing a game that gave her life an exotic twist, excitement it had lacked. It was her patriotic duty to lie awake each morning, thinking of ways to get closer to a thrillingly attractive, powerful man who clearly enjoyed her company and relied on her in some unusually intimate ways. In the last month before it all fell apart, her life had become nearly perfect.

Between arranging to move his business and the mayoral duties, Tom was often gone on the nights when Captain Groton came over for dinner. Susan was aware of the gossip—a blushing Nick had told her the boys were taunting him about his mother—but she was not about to let small-mindedness stop her. "Just wait till they see how it pays off," she said to Nick.

It made her think she needed to start making it pay off.

By now, Captain Groton was perforce conversant with the ceremonial foods of the Midwest—string bean casserole, jello salad, brats and beans—and the communal rituals at which they were consumed. So Susan had been entertaining herself by introducing him to more adventurous cuisine. His tastes were far less conservative than Tom's, and he almost invariably praised her efforts. On one night when Tom was returning late, she ordered a pizza for the boys and prepared shrimp with wild rice, cilantro, artichokes, and sour cream, with just a hint of cayenne pepper and lemon. They ate in the dining room with more wine than usual.

The captain was telling her how the amateur scholar who ran the landfill, in one of the endless efforts to deter the Wattersoons from their plans, had tried to convince him that there was an important archaeological site with buried treasure underneath the town. He had even produced proof in the form of an old French map and a photo of a metallic object with a mysterious engraved design.

Susan laughed, a little giddy from the wine. "You didn't fall for it, did you?"

Captain Groton looked at her quizzically. "No, I didn't fall down."

His English was so good she almost never encountered a phrase he didn't know. "It's an expression, to

fall for something. It means he was pulling your leg."

"Pulling my leg. And so I was supposed to fall down?"

"No, no," she said. "It's just an idiom. To fall for something is to be deceived. On the other hand, to fall for *someone* means to become fond of them, to fall in love."

He considered this thoughtfully. "You use the same expression for being deceived and falling in love?"

It had never struck her before. "I guess we do. Maybe it means that you have to have illusions to fall in love. There *is* a lot of self-deception involved. But a lot of truth as well."

She suddenly became aware how seriously he was watching her, as if the topic had been much on his mind. When their eyes met, she felt a moment of spontaneous chemical reaction; then he looked away. "And when you say 'Okanoggan Falls,' which do you mean, deception or love?" he asked.

"Oh, love, no question."

"But if it meant deception, you would not tell me," he said with a slight smile.

"I am not deceiving you, captain," she said softly. And, a little to her own surprise, she was telling the truth.

There was a moment of silence. Then Susan rose from the table, throwing her napkin down. "Let's go to the back yard," she said.

He followed her out into the hot summer night. It was late August; the surrounding yards were quiet except for the cicadas buzzing in the trees and the meditative sigh of air conditioners. When they reached the deeper grass under the trees, the captain came to a halt, breathing in the fragrant air.

"The thing I was not expecting about being human is the skin," he said. "It is so sensitive, so awake."

"So you like it now, being human?" she asked.

"There are compensations," he said, watching her steadily.

Her intellect told her she ought to be changing the subject, pressing him on the topic of public concern, but her private concerns were flooding her mind, making it impossible to think. She was slightly drunk, or she never would have said it aloud. "Damn! It's so unfair. Why does such a perfect man have to be an alien?"

A human man would have taken it as an invitation. Captain Groton hesitated, then with great restraint took her hands chastely in his. "Susan," he said, "There is something I need to explain, or I would be deceiving you." He drew a breath to steady himself as she watched, puzzled at his self-consciousness. He went on, "It is not an accident, this shape I have assumed. On my planet, when a woman chooses a man, he becomes what she most wishes him to be. It is the function of the chameleon trait. We would have died out long ago without it." He gave a slight smile. "I suppose nature realized that men can never be what women really want until they are created by women."

Susan was struggling to take it in. "Created by...? But who created you?"

"You did," he said.

"You mean—"

"That first day we met, when you touched me. It is why we avoid human contact. A touch by the right woman is enough to set off the reaction. After that, physiology takes over. Every time you touched me after that, it was biochemical feedback to perfect the process."

All the misery and shock of an interspecies transformation, and she had done it to him? "Oh my God, you must hate me," she said.

"No. Not at all."

Of course not. Her perfect man would never hate her. It would defeat the purpose.

At that thought, she felt like a bird that had flown into a window pane. "You mean you are everything I want in a man?" she said.

"Evidently."

"I thought Tom was what I wanted," she said faintly.

"You already have him," Captain Groton said. "You don't need another."

She studied his face, custom-made for her, like a revelation of her own psyche. It was not a perfect face, not at all movie-star handsome, but worn with the traces of experience and sadness.

"What about your personality?" she asked. "Did I create that, too?"

He shook his head. "That is all mine."

"But that's the best part," she said.

She couldn't see his face in the dim light, but his voice sounded deeply touched. "Thank you."

They were acting like teenagers. They *were* like teenagers, in the power of an unfamiliar hormonal rush, an evolutionary imperative. The instant she realized it, it shocked her. She had never intended to cheat on Tom, not for a nanosecond. And yet, it was as if she already had, in her heart. She had fantasized a lover into being without even realizing it. He was the living proof of her infidelity of mind.

Trying to be adult, she said, "This is very awkward, captain. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "Perhaps—"

Just then, the back porch light came on, and they jumped apart guiltily, as if caught doing what they were both trying to avoid thinking about.

Tom was standing on the back porch, looking out at them. "You're back!" Susan called brightly, hoping her voice didn't sound as strained as she felt. She started up the lawn toward the house, leaving Captain Groton to follow. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes," Tom said. "I stopped at the Burger King in Walker."

"Oh, poor dear. I was just about to make coffee. Want some?"

"I am afraid I must be getting back to base," Captain Groton said.

"Won't you even stay for coffee?" Susan said.

"No, it is later than I realized." With a rueful laugh he added, "Now I understand why humans are always

late."

She went with him to the front door, leaving Tom in the kitchen. The captain hesitated on the steps. "Thank you, Susan," he said, and she knew it wasn't for dinner.

Softly, she said, "Your women are lucky, captain."

Seriously, he said, "No, they're not."

"Their lives may be brief, but I'll bet they're happy."

"I hope you are right." He left, hurrying as if to escape his memories.

When Susan went back into the kitchen, Tom said with studied casualness, "Did you make any headway with him?"

"No," she said. "He's very dutiful." She busied herself pouring coffee. When she handed him his cup, for the first time in their marriage she saw a trace of worry in his eyes. She set the cup down and put her arms around him. "Tom," she said fiercely, "I love you so much."

He said nothing, but held her desperately tight.

And yet, that night as she lay awake listening to Tom's familiar breathing, questions crowded her mind.

There was a hole in her life she had not even known was there. Now that she knew it, she could not ignore the ache. She had settled into a life of compromises, a life of good-enough. And it was no longer good enough.

Yet there was no way for her to have more without hurting Tom. She didn't love him any less for the revelation that he wasn't perfect for her; he was human, after all. None of this was his fault.

She looked at the lump of covers that was her husband, and thought of all she owed him for years of loyalty and trust. Somehow, she needed to turn from possibility and desire, and pass on by. She had to reconcile herself to what she had. It was simply her duty.

* * * *

The day of the move was planned down to the last detail, the way the Wattsoons did everything. Fleets of moving vans, hired from all over the region, would descend on Okanoggan Falls starting at six thirty A.M. After stopping at the Wattsoon base, they would roll into town at eight sharp and fan out to assigned locations. The schedule of times when each household would be moved had been published in the paper, posted in the stores, and hand-delivered to each doorstep. There was a website where everyone could find their own move time.

The protesters were organized as well. The word had gone out that everyone was to gather at seven A.M. in the park opposite Town Hall. From there, they would march down Main Street to the spot where the highway ran between the bluff and the river, and block the route the trucks would have to take into town.

When Susan and Tom pulled into the mayor's reserved parking spot behind Town Hall at six forty-five, it was clear the rally had drawn a crowd. The local police were directing traffic and enforcing parking rules, but not otherwise interfering. Lines of people carrying homemade signs, thermos bottles, and lawn chairs snaked toward the park, as if it were a holiday. Some activists Susan didn't recognize were trying to get a handheld PA system going.

When Tom and Susan reached the front steps of Town Hall, Walt Nodaway, the Police Chief, saw them and came up. "We've got some professionals from out of town," he said. "Probably drove in from Madison."

"You have enough guys?" Tom asked.

"As long as everyone stays peaceable."

"The officers know not to interfere?"

"Oh, yeah." They had talked it over at length the night before.

A reporter came up, someone from out of town. "Mayor Abernathy, are you here to support the protesters?" she asked.

Tom said, "Everyone has a right to express their opinions. I support their right whether I agree with them or not."

"But do you agree with the people resisting the relocation?"

Susan had coached him not to say "No comment," but she could tell he wanted to right now. "It's hard on people. They want to defend their homes. I know how they feel." Susan squeezed his hand to encourage him.

The city council members had begun to arrive, and they gathered on the steps around Tom, exchanging low-toned conversations and watching the crowd mill around. The protest was predictably late getting started; it was seven thirty before the loudspeaker shrieked to life and someone started to lead a chorus of "We Shall Not Be Moved." People were starting to line up for the two-block march down to the highway when, from the opposite direction, a familiar black SUV came speeding around the police barricades and pulled up in front of Town Hall. A van that had been following it stopped on the edge of the park.

Captain Groton got out, followed by three Watteson guards who looked even more lumpish than usual beside their lean commander. All were in sand-colored uniforms. The captain cast an eye over the park, where people had just started to realize that the opposition had arrived, and then he turned to mount the steps. When he came up to Tom he said in a low, commanding voice, "A word with you, Mayor Abernathy. Inside." He turned to the city council members. "You too." Then he continued up the steps to the door. The others followed.

A few spectators were able to crowd inside before the Watteson guards closed the doors; Susan was one of them. She stood with the other onlookers at the back of the room as Captain Groton turned to the city officials.

They had never seen him really angry before, and it was an unsettling sight. There was a cold intensity about him, a control pulled tight and singing. "I am obliged to hold all of you responsible for the behavior of those people outside," he said. "They must return to their homes immediately and not interfere with the operation in progress." He turned to Tom. "I would prefer that the order come from you, Mayor."

"I can't give them that order," Tom said. "For one, I don't agree with it. For two, they're not going to obey it, regardless of what I say. I'm not their commander, just their mayor. They elected me, they can unelect me."

"You have a police force at your disposal."

"Just Walt and three officers. They can't act against the whole town. There must be four hundred people out there."

"Well then, consider this," Captain Groton said. "I *do* have a force at my disposal. Two hundred armed soldiers. Ten minutes ago, they started to surround the park outside. They are only waiting for my order to move in and start arresting noncompliers. We have a secure facility ready to receive prisoners. It is your decision, Mayor."

Somehow, they had not expected such heavy-handed tactics. "There are children out there, and old people," Tom protested. "You can't have soldiers rough them up. They're just expressing their views."

"They have had three months to express their views. The time for that is over."

"The time for that is never over," Tom said.

Their eyes met for a moment, clashing; then Captain Groton changed his tone. "I am at my wit's end," he said. "You have known from the beginning what we were here for. I have never lied to you, or concealed anything. I have done everything in my power to make you content. I have compromised till my superiors are questioning my judgment. And still you defy me."

"It's not you, Captain," Tom said in a more conciliatory tone. "You've been very fair, and we're grateful. But this is about something bigger. It's about justice."

"Justice!" Captain Groton gave a helpless gesture. "It is about fantasy, then. Something that never was, and never will be. Tell me this: Do you call the earthquake unjust, or march against the storm?"

"Earthquakes and storms aren't responsible for their actions. They don't have hearts, or consciences."

"Well, if it would help reconcile you, assume that we don't, either."

With a level gaze, Tom said, "I know that's not true."

For a moment Captain Groton paused, as if Tom had scored a hit. But then his face hardened. "I have misled you, then," he said. "We are implacable as a force of nature. Neutral and inevitable. Neither your wishes, nor mine, nor all those people's out there can have the slightest influence on the outcome."

Outside, the crowd had gathered around the steps, and now they were chanting, "The people, united, will never be defeated." For a moment the sound of their voices was the only thing in the room.

In a low tone, Captain Groton said, "Show some leadership, Tom. Warn them to get out of here and save themselves. I can give you ten minutes to persuade them, then I have to give the order. I'm sorry, but it is my duty."

Tom stared at him, angry at the betrayal, furious to be made into a collaborator. Captain Groton met his gaze levelly, unyielding. Then, for an instant, Tom glanced at Susan. It was very quick, almost involuntary, but everyone in the room saw it. And they knew this was about more than principle.

Tom drew himself up to his full height, his spine visibly stiffening. Ordinarily, he would have consulted with the council; but this time he just turned and walked to the door. As he passed by, Susan fell in at his side. The onlookers made way. Not a soul knew what Tom was going to do.

Outside, the Watteson guards keeping the crowd away from the door fell back when Tom came out onto the steps. He held up his hands and the chanting faltered to a stop. "Listen up, everyone," he started, but his voice didn't carry. He gestured at the woman with the portable loudspeaker, and she

hurried up the steps to give him the microphone.

"Listen up, everyone," he said again. The crowd had fallen utterly silent, for they saw how grim his face looked. "The Watteson soldiers have surrounded us, and in ten minutes they're going to move in and start arresting people."

There was a stir of protest and alarm through the crowd. "They're bluffing," someone called out.

"No, they're not," Tom said. "I know this captain pretty well by now. He's dead serious. Now, if you want to get arrested, roughed up, and put in a Watteson jail, fine. But everyone else, please go home. Take your kids and get out of here. I don't want you to get hurt. You know they can do it."

On the edges, some people were already starting to leave; but most of the crowd still stood, watching Tom in disappointment, as if they had expected something different from him. "Look, we did our best," he said. "We talked them into a lot of things I never thought they'd give us. We pushed it as far as we could. But now we've reached the point where they're not going to give any more. It's our turn to give in now. There's nothing more we can do. Please, just go home. That's what I'm going to do."

He handed the mike back to its owner and started down the steps. Susan took his hand and walked with him. There was a kind of exhalation of purpose, a deflation, around them as the crowd started breaking up. Though one of the protesters from Madison tried to get things going again, the momentum was gone. People didn't talk much, or even look at each other, as they started to scatter.

Halfway across the park, Susan whispered to Tom, "The car's the other way."

"I know," Tom said. "I'll come back and get it later." She figured out his thinking then: the symbolic sight of them walking away toward home was the important thing right now.

Don't look back, she told herself. It would make her look hesitant, regretful. And yet, she wanted to. When they reached the edge of the park, she couldn't help it, and glanced over her shoulder. The green space was almost empty, except for a little knot of diehards marching toward the highway to block the trucks. On the steps of Town Hall, Captain Groton was standing alone. But he wasn't surveying the scene or the remaining protesters. He was looking after her. At the sight, Susan's thoughts fled before a breathtaking rush of regret, and she nearly stumbled.

"What is it?" Tom said.

"Nothing," she answered. "It's okay."

* * * *

By evening of the second day, it was all over in Okanoggan Falls.

In Red Bluff, there had been an insurrection; the Watteson army was still fighting a pitched house-to-house battle with resisters. In Walker, the soldiers had herded unruly inhabitants into overcrowded pens, and there had finally been a riot; the casualty reports were still growing. Only in Okanoggan Falls had things gone smoothly and peacefully.

The moving van had just pulled away from the Abernathy home with Tom and Nick following in the pickup, and Susan was making one last trip through the house to spot left-behind items, when her cell phone rang. Assuming it was Tom, she didn't look at the number before answering.

"Susan."

She had not expected to hear his voice again. All the decisions had been made, the story was over. The

Wattsoons had won. Okanoggan had fallen to its enemies.

"Can you spare five minutes to meet me?" he said.

She started to say no, but the tug of disappointment made her realize there was still a bond between them. "Not here," she said.

"Where?"

"On Main Street."

Ben was in the back yard, taking an emotional leave of the only home he had known. Susan leaned out the back door and called, "I have to run into town for a second. I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

Downtown, the streetlights had come on automatically as evening approached, giving a melancholy air to the empty street. The storefronts were empty, with signs saying things like "Closed For Good (or Bad)" tacked up in the windows. As Susan parked the car, the only other living things on Main Street were a crow scavenging for garbage, and Captain Groton, now sole commander of a ghost town.

At first they did not speak. Side by side, they walked down the familiar street. Inside Meyer's Drugstore, the rack where Susan had bought him a magazine was empty. They came to the spot where they had watched the Fourth of July parade, and Captain Groton reached out to touch the warm brick.

"I will never forget the people," he said. "Perhaps I was deceiving myself, but in the end I began to feel at ease among them. As if, given enough time, I might be happy here."

"It didn't stop you from destroying it," Susan said.

"No. I am used to destroying things I love."

If there had been self-pity in his voice she would have gotten angry; but it was simply a statement.

"Where will you go next?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I need to clear up some disputes related to this assignment."

Behind them a car door slammed, and Captain Groton cast a tense look over his shoulder. Following his gaze, Susan saw that a Wattsoon in a black uniform had emerged from a parked military vehicle and stood beside it, arms crossed, staring at them.

"Your chauffeur is impatient."

"He is not my chauffeur. He is my guard. I have been placed under arrest."

Susan was thunderstruck. "What for?"

He gave a dismissive gesture. "My superiors were dissatisfied with my strategy for completing my assignment."

Somehow, she guessed it was not the use of force he meant. "You mean..." "She gestured at his human body.

"Yes. They felt they needed to take a stand, and refer the matter to a court-martial."

Susan realized that this was what he had wanted to tell her. "But you succeeded!" she said.

He gave an ironic smile. "You might argue that. But a larger principle is at stake. They feel we cannot risk becoming those we conquer. It has happened over and over in our history."

"It happens to us, too, in our way," Susan said. "I think your officers are fighting a universal law of conquest."

"Nevertheless, they look ahead and imagine Watteson children playing in the schoolyards of towns like this, indistinguishable from the humans."

Susan could picture it, too. "And would that be bad?"

"Not to me," he said.

"Or to me."

The guard had finally lost his patience and started toward them. Susan took the captain's hand tight in hers. "I'm so sorry you will be punished for violating this taboo."

"I knew I was risking it all along," he said, gripping her hand hard. "But still...." "His voice held a remarkable mix of Watteson resolution and human indignation. "It is unjust."

It was then she knew that, despite appearances, she had won.