

ON THE BUBBLE
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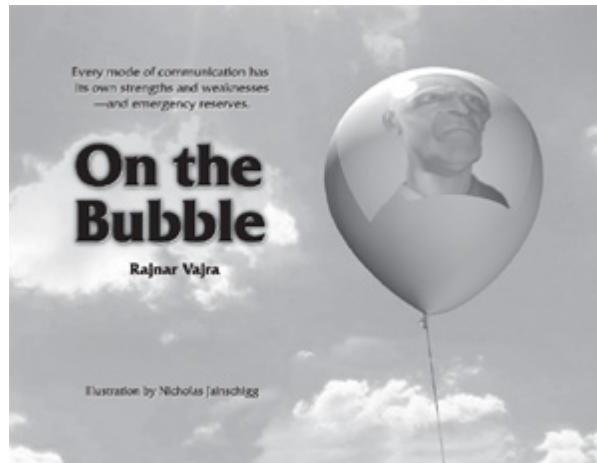


Illustration by Nicholas Jainschigg

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Every mode of communication has its own strengths and weaknesses—and emergency reserves.

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August 16, 2028

Eve Horton, my youngest granddaughter, reeled in the string tied to her wrist to pull my face down to her eye level. She peered at me, then held my imaged mouth near her left ear. Evidently, my smile wasn't enough and she wanted to *hear* me claim I was having fun. A helium-filled balloon, even one sprayed with x-change paint, makes a poor loudspeaker, so I gave her the white lie in as much of a bellow as my dying lungs and senile vocal cords could manage. Satisfied, she let me, or rather my point of view, float back up above crowd level.

Despite the clear afternoon sun, lightbulbs were glowing; thousands beaded tightly on high lines connecting each fairground structure to its neighbors. To most people in the cotton-candy sticky, Tilt-a-Whirl dizzy horde, this might've seemed wasteful—assuming they noticed. And cared. But my engineer's eye was still sharp enough to spot omni-voltaic foam sheathing rooftops and tents. Ergo, this redundant illumination wouldn't add a penny to anyone's electric bill and probably helped prevent overcharging whatever batteries lurked in the park's power shed. Still, according to Horton's Third Law, or maybe the Fourth, since I've never finalized my list, every thrifty act has some hidden cost. In this case, checking bulbs and replacing dead ones couldn't come cheap. And unlike me, not one of the countless lights was burned out.

A boy, not yet a teenager but surely a good five years older than my Evie, passed us towing a balloon displaying a fellow sufferer's face: grandmotherly, age spotted, and friendly. Her eyes were as pain lined as mine, but she winked at me just before two bulky men with "Manny's Maintenance" emblems on their gray coveralls

stepped between us. I *think* she winked; could've been a transmission glitch. With so many people around, some other x-change tourist might be operating on a microwave frequency close enough to cause interference....

I shifted attention to the translucent clock in my peripheral display. Twenty miles from the fairground, in the hospice wing of Saint Teresa Hospital, in the room I shared with the always astonishing Juan Diego Lopez, I pressed the “attention” button on my x-change remote to make the balloon flash rainbow colors. Eve was too busy tugging both me and her mom toward a food stand emblazoned with those appetizing words “Fried Dough” to look up, but her mother, my daughter-in-law Amanda, was more alert.

“What is it, Fred?” she asked before remembering she wouldn't be able to hear the answer. “Wait a second, sweetheart,” she told Eve, “Grandpa's trying to tell us something.”

Frowning, Evie pulled me down again and turned the balloon so both of them could admire my wrinkles.

“Kids,” I shouted, triggering a juicy cough. I gulped some water and continued. “Those custodians who passed a moment ago reminded me. Got an appointment coming up with a technician here at the hospice. Be offline for maybe twenty minutes.” Cough, sip. “I'll flash hello when I return.”

Evie's frown deepened. “But Grandpa! You promised!”

“I couldn't promise to be with you every single second today, honey. Honest, I'll be back before you know it.”

“Well, I suppose.”

“Listen to your mother, okay? And Amanda, *please* be careful.”

“You know I will, Fred.” Poorly disguised annoyance edged her voice. “Besides, my job here today isn't to catch 'em, just spot 'em.”

“Right. Sorry.” I turned off the feed, pushed the featherweight x-change “glasses” onto my forehead, and shoved the video lens staring at me to one side. I kept my expression neutral, but with Lopez nearby I might as well have been wearing a placard.

“You are troubled, *amigo*?” My roommate was standing, practicing one of his Qigong exercises. Perhaps calming himself before his scheduled afternoon surgery, although he never seemed concerned about being sliced open.

“Troubled, yeah. Silly of me, I'm sure. It's just that Amanda's using my granddaughter again as—as what we used to call a ‘beard’ back in the day.” Come to think of it, “back in the day” had long since gone belly-up.

Lopez smiled, spiraling one hand above his head, palm upward, while the other twirled at his waist. I'd never met anyone before who'd converse while doing Tai Chi, Qigong, Yoga, or the like, but Lopez was one of a kind. Still, he didn't respond until completing a slow inhalation. "I understand you. But you've told to me Amanda is on duty most weekends, so how else could she enjoy these hours with her daughter?"

"I know, I know. Just can't abide the idea of mixing police work with daycare. Not with *my* granddaughter." County ordinances require an official police presence wherever enough people are gathered, but Amanda's team was mainly on the prowl for drug trafficking. The park's hired security guards could handle most pickpockets, flashers, molesters, and idiots with overly short fuses.

"Honestly, Juan, I've never been quite sure about Amanda. Don't say it! Knowing you, you're probably about to tell me I should be grateful for the chance to get to know her better. Oh hell, I am grateful. And I'm for sure grateful to be with Evie."

"This is good. Gratitude is my favorite of emotions."

"Really?" He was trying to distract me and I appreciated it. "Would've thought you'd favor ... love or compassion considering the way you go on about those two."

He began the leisurely arm swings of the form he called "Dragón de la Natación." "Love and compassion, Fred, are wonderful and holy feelings, but may not of themselves drive *el cachorrodeleón* from his castle."

"The lion cub?" Before rooming with Lopez, my Spanish had nearly rusted away.

His smile widened. "My affectionate way of saying 'ego.' What emotion other than gratitude makes the heart glow, yet pushes the self aside without pain?"

Smoothly, as if he'd completed his long Swimming Dragon routine rather than just begun it, he slipped into his bed and pulled the thin covers up.

"What's wrong?" I asked, surprised.

"I did not believe she was due for some time." He chuckled. "My hope was to be in surgery by then."

"Jesus!" I muttered, turning to stare into my bedside water glass, half expecting the surface to display *JurassicPark*-style compression ripples. But Mary Reed, our thrice-a-week in-room physical therapist only had the personality of a T-Rex, not quite the mass. Still, her tread was heavy enough to feel through my mattress now that Lopez had alerted me. A moment later, the woman herself opened the door and tromped in, three hours ahead of schedule.

“Afternoon, boys! Bill Meyer over at Cedars, bless his sweet soul, passed away last night so’s I’m free this morning and I thought we’d get to you boys, hey, *temprano*. That means ‘early.’ Don’t it, Juan?”

“Most certainly,” Lopez said in his smoothest caramel voice.

Mary wasn’t one ounce overweight, but was a neutron star of a woman: small and improbably dense with linebacker muscles compressed onto a five-foot-five frame. Her race was anyone’s guess; her mop of hair was dyed white-blond with a scarlet streak in front; her hands were short but thick as mittens. She clearly viewed me as a particularly willful toddler but Lopez as a saint on his deathbed. In fact, cancer notwithstanding, he only acted infirm when she was around, his graceful way of avoiding certain exercises he considered “bad for the chi.” Considering he’d already lived three years past his doctors’ most optimistic prognoses, he seemed to be on to something.

“Everyone ready?” Mary asked rhetorically.

“Perhaps some other time,” I offered. Given a shred of hope she’d go easy on me, I would’ve confessed how far I’d cut down on my pain meds this morning to keep a clear head for my granddaughter’s sake. But I knew Mary better than that.

Ignoring my comment, she deposited her case of torture implements on my mattress and threw it open with her usual violence. “You been out of that bed at *all* today, Freddy Horton?”

“Sure.” Twice, and only because I can’t bear to use a bedpan, and each twenty-yard trip to the john took fifteen minutes. Each way. When I’m low on meds, it hurts just to stand.

She eyed me dubiously. “Let’s change up the order today. After our warm-ups, hey, we’ll move on to stretching, then the ankle weights, wrist weights, and you better believe we’ll end with more stretches. Okay?” She plucked the x-change glasses off my head, tossing them onto my bedside table, snatched my blankets away, and ordered me to start wiggling limbs. Of course, she respectfully asked Lopez’s permission before removing his covers.

Not being fond of either agony or embarrassment, I didn’t enjoy flailing my arms and legs. But it was fun and dignified compared to what was coming up. Mary was a big fan of “resistance stretching,” a somewhat counterintuitive technique developed by one Bob Cooley, God knows how many decades ago. The idea was to stretch muscles that were simultaneously contracting and fighting the stretch. The technique supposedly reduced the pain of stretching and reduced the chance of injuries, and I freely admit it didn’t hurt nearly as much as the Yoga stretches inflicted on me by my previous therapist. But it was absurdly hard work and uncomfortable even on days I was pumped to the gills with analgesics.

Naturally, Davis Preston, the hospice’s handyman, arrived to install the new

TV screen while I was performing the most humiliating stretch of the lot: a kind of leg press against a padded board, which Mary pushed toward me with no apparent effort.

“If’n you don’t shove harder than that, Freddy Horton, you’ll be bound to suffer decalcification.” I’m sure she deliberately mispronounced the word, just to add aggravation to insult.

Dave, pretending not to hear my grunts, or see the way my leg trembled, or notice my involuntary bursts of high-decibel flatulence, peeled the old forty-five-inch screen off the wall with a thin-bladed scraper. Flakes of paint behind the screen came off as well, but not enough to create a problematic texture. He measured and taped off the perimeter of a much larger rectangle, gave the area a light sanding, and sprayed on a new screen in several light coats, perfuming the room with the plastic sweetness of some water based solvent—improving the usual reek. He squirted a blobette of gel at one edge, stuck one end of a power cord into it, and the cord’s far end into a ceiling socket.

“This baby should be much easier to see, Fred,” he said between my latest gasps. “Seventy-five inches! And not only bigger, it’s an updated model. Just let it set for a good half hour before you turn it on and everything should be fine. I’ll come back to pull off the tape around supertime. You remember how to do the adjustments? This one’ll be way too bright just out of the can.”

“I—damn it, Mary, stop that for just one damn moment!—of course I remember. Thanks, Dave.”

“No problem.”

When and why did people replace “you’re welcome” with “no problem”?

“How you doin’ with those ankle weights, Juan?” Mary asked, placing the padded board on my upper thighs and gesturing for me to lift my legs.

“They get heavier every week, Maria.”

“Well, maybe it’s time I get you some lighter ones. Hey, c’mon Freddy, *lift*. You want total decalcification?”

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After the blessed moment of Mary’s departure, I gave my new and improved TV screen a nice glower before retrieving the x-change specs. So often in our glorious world of competing businesses and mutual lawsuits, everyone wins. Except for the public. The x-change system, once invented, should’ve put ordinary TV screens on the endangered technologies list. The glasses, streaming visual data directly into human optic nerves, provide better clarity and control than even scientific-grade Light Emitting Plastic because they surpass limitations inherent in even the best human eye. But the entertainment networks were already in bed with

TV and microprocessor manufacturers and wouldn't grant X-change Incorporated the relevant licenses....

I propped myself up on my pillows and pulled the video lens and microphone toward my face. "Headed back to the granddaughter, Juan."

From the corner of my eye, I saw him get out of bed and resume his exercises. "Have fun, *amigo*."

"Thanks."

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I winced as the system came online, leaving me floating above and to the right of Eve's head, facing directly into the sun. The automatic filters reacted fast, but left me in a detail-obscuring sepia murk. So I had to override the filters. Eyes tearing, lids at quarter mast, I pressed the attention button and this time not even Amanda noticed. The sun had to be washing out the balloon's flashes. I fumbled around for the camera control and rotated the brightness dial to full.

That did it. Both my loved ones gawked up at me and joined me in squinting.

"Grandpa!" Evie shouted.

Amanda blinked and shook her head. "You might want to turn that down a shade, Fred. You're blazing like an archangel on a mission. You'll scare someone."

I adjusted the setting without bothering to reply; floating as high as I was, she couldn't have heard me over the crowd noise.

"Much better. You missed fried dough and the petting zoo." She grabbed my string and pulled me within easy hailing range. "And some c-u-t-e things somebody said." Amanda glanced at her daughter, who was paying too much attention. "Tell you later." Her words sounded cheerful enough, but I thought her tone was a bit distracted.

"I would've loved to see her at the petting zoo," I yelled. She pulled me even closer. "But it turned out lucky I had that appointment." All that anti-decalcification had left my muscles shaky, but my voice, if nothing else, was stronger. "My PT showed up hours ahead of time. So the good news is that all my afternoon business is out of the way. Where are we going? Out of the sun, I hope?"

"Glassblowing demonstration dead ahead. We're going to watch someone making paperweights or vases, but I've been instructed to ask if a unicorn might be in the offing."

"Oh? Well, speaking as a balloon, let's not get too intimate with any open furnace."

"Don't worry, we won't let you pop, Pop. But if you do, I brought along

whatever's left in the can. We can always buy a new balloon.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that easy, Amanda, with us this far away. The system has to set up phase-lock-loops that—Amanda, are you listening?”

“Sure, Fred. Phase-lock-loops. You’re forgetting something. The equipment you’ve got at Saint Teresa’s and the paint I’m carrying aren’t the kind you can buy at Sears. This is police issue, military-grade equipment, with all sorts of bells and whistles. Believe me, if we have to spray some more on, it’ll hook up just fine.”

She hadn’t fooled me; I could tell her attention was elsewhere. I was accustomed to her eyes constantly roaming while she was on duty, and they were roaming now, but kept returning to a spot somewhere behind me. Since she’d only sprayed one side of the balloon with the paint, I couldn’t dial around to see what she kept peering at. Then a lucky gust of wind turned me just far enough. And I still couldn’t pick out anything unusual....

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Talk to me, Amanda.”

“Really, it’s nothing.” She turned me around to face her. “I just keep noticing the fairground crew.”

“Manny’s Maintenance? What about them?”

She shrugged. “Never seen so many around. And I don’t recognize most of them. But they have to be legit, because the ones I do recognize have no problems with the others.”

“I suppose. Still ... they don’t work directly for the city, do they, but for a private company. Whichever put in the low bid. Just like the security guards.”

“C’mon, Fred! You’re not suggesting the entire company could be up to something shady? Feeling a bit paranoid, are we? That’s an occupational hazard of *mine*, and I try to keep it under control. Anyway, right from here you can see a reason why there might be some extra maintenance personnel around. Let me turn you again. See all that activity near the power shed? They’re probably fixing or upgrading something.”

“Amanda, I think you and Evie should go home. Now.”

She frowned and glanced down at her daughter who seemed to be ignoring the adult conversation. “Why?”

“Those men leaving the shed aren’t carrying any tools.”

“So? They probably left them inside and plan to come back and finish

whatever job they're doing. You're overreacting. I'm sorry I brought up the whole thing."

I tried to keep my voice calm and my expletives deleted. "You're a good cop, Amanda, and I'll bet you've grown some good instincts. Here's a secret: I've got some decent instincts myself from parts of my life I've never told you about."

Her expression turned thoughtful. "Donny mentioned a few things. The army paid your way through college, didn't it?"

"My son talks. A lot. Did he mention they had me on a bomb squad in the Mideast? And right now, on the back of my neck, I feel something I haven't felt since a *real* close call in Syria: a cold spot smaller than a fingernail. Get *out* of here. Call in sick if you have to."

"I can't do that. Look, if it makes you feel better, we'll stroll past the shed and we'll see if my, um, cop-sense tingles."

"Don't do that! If you won't leave, for God's sake, at least send one of the uniforms to ask questions. Or ordinary park security."

She shook her head and her long dark curls, so like her daughter's, followed her head movement like an afterthought. "And let the doers know they've attracted official interest? I mean, just on the very farfetched chance something illegal *is* happening?"

I knew it was time to shut up and I did. But I had plenty of time to worry because we weren't going anywhere at record speed. Evie was fascinated by everything from the art-glass demo, to a hideous squeakfest surrounding a perpetrator of balloon animals outside the glassblowing tent, to an unfortunate individual boiling to death in a Big Bird costume, et very much cetera.

So we were still twenty or thirty yards from the power shed when I felt a tug on my arm.

"I deeply regret bothering you, *amigo*," Lopez said from either two feet or twenty miles away, depending on viewpoint. "But my surgery awaits, and the nurse will be here pronto. No, you needn't leave your loved ones."

I disabled the x-change system and pulled off the glasses anyway to see my friend.

He was beaming at me. "Since anesthesia general," he continued, "has risks we both know well, I wished to say good-bye and give you my blessings and love beforehand."

"Juan, you're going to be fine. You have to be, for both our sakes. Honestly, you're the only thing that's made this place bearable this last year."

“My life is not entirely in my hands, Fred, but I will survive if offered a choice. You have been a great joy to me as well. So I have one more foolish maxim to offer you if you will permit. You needn’t make a face so sour! Your Horton’s Laws were the inspiration for my maxims.”

“Ha. The difference is that *my* rules are practical.”

“The difference is my maxims are true.” He smiled to take the sting out of it, but I was a bit stung anyway.

“Name one that’s false.”

“Your first Law, *por ejemplo*. Conservation of Misery you call it, no?”

“Right. Misery never actually vanishes; if one part of your life improves, some other part—”

“I understand your concept, *amigo*, but it does not fit my experience.”

“All right. Every rule has its exceptions and I admit you’re exceptional. So what new truth were you going to lay on me?”

“One to explain why you will do beautifully even without me. Perhaps you remember that I once earned my pay as a *carpintero*?” Despite minimal formal education, he’d uplifted his career from subsistence fishing to rough framing to being one of LA’s most popular private contractors. “So it is natural for me to see the human spirit as a building, a *special* house that becomes *más*—more strong through the years, even as the body weakens.”

“Nice image, Juan, but what’s your point?”

“A wise person comes to know which walls are load bearing and which can be torn away without harm. At our age, *amigo*, we need very few walls.”

After Lopez had been wheeled away by Nurse Bob, heading toward the surgical end of the hospital, which most of us inmates call the “wrecking yard,” it dawned on me I hadn’t warned Evie or Amanda about my latest departure. So I hurriedly pushed the glasses back in place and returned to my family. Apparently no one had missed me, which might’ve been a trifle ego-denting, except we were back in the sunlight, which made my face or its absence easy to overlook. Besides, I was too concerned about Lopez to brood about anything petty. This was the third time he’d gone under the knife in the last five months, both for adhesions and to drain some fluid build-up, but he’d never supplied such a formal farewell. I’d learned to respect the man’s intuition, maybe a little too much, and had the miserable feeling I’d never see him again.

So between heartsickness and checking on my granddaughter, it took me a few moments to realize we were only a few yards from the chainlink fence surrounding the big shed.

“What do you *suppose* is going on in there, sweetheart?” Amanda prompted Evie. “You could ask those two guys if you want to.”

“I will, Mommy.”

Two heavysset men in gray coveralls were smoking cigarettes in front of the fence’s closed gate, its massive padlock open and dangling from the highest link. As we moved past the first DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE sign, I could see how hard these boys were puffing, perhaps trying to suck tar past the anti-cancer filters. They eyed us warily, and I could almost smell the nervous sweat.

My daughter-in-law was no fool. “We’ll ask them later, sweetheart,” she said, taking a sharp left turn and dragging along her little girl who was too surprised to protest. “First, let’s go back to the petting zoo! I think you missed one of the lambs.”

X-change paint uses any surface it’s sprayed on as both a loudspeaker and a piezoelectric audio pickup. It makes a much better pickup than a speaker, but the stereo imaging is limited. So I was only sure the husky, polite male voice was coming from behind us because I couldn’t see who was talking.

“Officer Horton, I have a hidden gun with a quite remarkable silencer pointed at your child’s head. Don’t turn around.” The phrasing almost sounded British but without the accent. Instinctively, at the first few words, I’d punched the display button on my remote, erasing my face from the balloon but maintaining my sensory contact with the fairground. One of the maintenance men pulled the gate open.

“Walk through,” said the un-Brit, “then fast through the shack’s door if you want her to live.”

Someone opened the door ahead of us, just barely wide enough to accommodate my balloon, and I got the briefest glimpse of a curtain ahead made of layers of hanging black plastic strips and the trailing arm of a person just disappearing through it. Then the door slammed behind us, and I couldn’t see a thing. “Now push through the screen and I’ll tell you when to stop walking,” the voice commanded with an unpleasant gentleness.

A moment later, “That’s far enough.”

The shed’s interior was cave-dark and for one long moment of pure stupidity, I waited for my eyes to adjust. I heard several voices talking at once, rustling noises, and the unmistakable sizzle of ripping duct tape—also a continual ambient sound, part hum and part buzz. Finally I got smart enough to push the auto-contrast control on my remote, triggering the photomultiplier function. Suddenly, the plywood sheets blocking off the shed’s two windows were oozing light like thin porcelain, and I could see. Three men wearing compact night-vision goggles were with us, not counting whoever had forced us in here.

A huge goon with obscenely long arms was holding the silver brooch Amanda had been wearing all day. Another goon had stolen her purse and had pulled her .38 from its concealed compartment. He casually placed weapon and purse on a nearby shelf as the third forced Amanda's wrists behind her back and wrapped them in layers of tape. Her ankles were already bound. Evie's eyes were huge, and she remained unnaturally silent, even when the tape man bound her wrists in front of her.

When they'd finished making my family helpless, the trio of creeps strolled over to a folding table near one wall, sat down in folding chairs, clapped on headset phones, hoisted small control boxes of some sort, and started up low-voiced conversations, presumably not with each other. I boosted my audio feed momentarily, but the only thing I learned was that the three weren't telemarketing. Their talk was incomprehensible, filled with grid this and grid that, and familiar street names in downtown L.A. and Beverly Hills.

From inside, the shed was roomier than I'd expected, despite holding so much equipment. The fairground evidently had dual power systems. A low voltage setup involved chargers, voltage-regulators, and an extended bank of deep-cycle batteries hung in two tiers—probably for the miles of strung lights outside. Hundreds of thin color-coded insulated cables running in neat lines were stapled to the wall, and dozens of small metal boxes were spliced into this highway of wires. The boxes seemed as appropriate to the system as leeches on a human leg, and the many bright splashes of solder hinted they'd been added recently and in haste. On the high-voltage end, a massive bus fed two major-league Toshiba transformers isolated behind steel meshwork, output cables vanishing beneath the concrete floor but surely leading to the amusement park area with its Ferris wheel and rides. For backup, a heavy-duty gas-powered generator squatted near the rear wall, escorted by a gang of truck batteries. Lawsuit avoidance, I guessed. Wouldn't do to have a ride freeze up should city power brown out or fail completely.

Here and there, little pieces of black electrical tape were stuck to surfaces. Covering the ready lights? The goons wanted the place *dark*, and the possible implications chilled me to the core. Had they been planning all along to kidnap Amanda and were making sure she couldn't see their faces? But if so, wouldn't masks or disguises have been far easier and cheaper?

A laptop resting on the shelf with Amanda's possessions had a widescreen displaying a large green outline, rectangular except for its pointed top, and a host of scattered red dots with a few blue ones; the display must've been dimmed to the limit, it was a bit bleary even to my augmented vision, and the dots flickered as though about to gutter out. A box with a large hole in one side sat between laptop and purse, probably how our host had kept his weapon inconspicuous. A cheap condenser microphone was half hidden behind the laptop.

All this attention to detail wasn't just an old engineer's habit. It was my only way to keep panic at arm's length. Even so, my heart was racing fit to burst, and my hands were colder than ice.

“Mommy, I’m scared.”

Eve’s little chin was trembling, and the sight broke through all my defenses. Without removing my glasses, I fumbled around until I’d grabbed my bedside phone. My fingers were twitching to press 911, but something between fear and intuition made me hesitate.

“Mommy’s here.” From reserves I couldn’t imagine, Amanda managed to keep her voice soft and soothing. “Don’t worry, Evie, everything will be all right.”

“If you behave yourself, Officer, everything *will* be all right,” said the husky voice. “But I must warn you. We lack time to search you properly, although my ... employee Jimmy always enjoys such opportunities.” From the table, Gorilla Arms turned and grinned beneath his goggles, and I was glad Amanda couldn’t see it. “Hence, you may have a concealed means of communication aside from that too-obvious broach, one that might not require the use of hands. If so, I would *strongly* suggest you not use it. Be advised: we are all wearing state-of-the-art nocturnal vision devices, which use x-change-type nerve induction to provide ideal clarity. Even if we fail to catch you in the act, we are monitoring these grounds intensely and have, ah, an associate or two at your police department. I see you shaking your head, but I assure you it’s true. How would I have known your name and occupation otherwise? You will come in handy to aid in negotiations when we reach that point, but are hardly indispensable. The moment I receive word *any* authorities have prematurely become aware of your situation, you and your daughter will die.”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“You may call me Mr. Blunt. Please sit down and make yourselves as comfortable as possible. We shall be here for some hours yet. I’ve a few things to do at the moment, but I promise we’ll have a little chat soon.” He moved forward and I could finally see him. Tall and very thin with a narrow but protuberant nose. On him, the coveralls somehow appeared almost elegant. His eyes were hidden behind another pair of goggles.

He turned away, then turned back as if struck by an afterthought. “I should also mention how well this building is soundproofed to kill noise should the generator kick in. Still, I would appreciate silence on both of your parts and I suggest you take every least whim of mine most seriously.” He whirled and stepped up to the laptop; a moment later I heard the faint swishing of someone using a touchpad.

“I can’t see, Mommy!”

“I know, sweetheart. Sit down with mommy and cuddle up close. It’s very important for both of us to be very, very quiet.”

As they lowered themselves, Amanda swung around so that her back was

touching her daughter's side. I didn't understand what she was up to until her hands, bound at the wrist but still able to grab, worked their way down Evie's arm far enough to snag the string. She turned to face forward and pulled my balloon close to her head in one smooth movement.

I was asking myself a key question: did Blunt know about me? Was it coincidence he'd used the word "x-change"? Was his threat aimed only at Amanda or was he also making sure I didn't dare act? He'd obviously been following us, but x-change faces are hard to see at any distance, particularly in bright light. And I'd had the system disabled while my loved ones were walking to the shed. *And* I'd flipped the picture off the instant Blunt started his abduction routine. The gate goons hadn't even glanced at the balloon. The purse-snatcher hadn't, thank God, seemed to notice the small spraycan. Maybe they didn't know.

But in either case, I might be able to do something. The question was *what*. Contact the FBI? No, couldn't be sure *they* wouldn't call the cops.

I noticed a murmuring just at the edge of audibility and boosted my audio. Amanda was repeating, "Fred, can you hear me?" I could, but it wasn't easy. Her words were slurred because she was barely moving her lips and the amplification was boosting every other sound in the room.

Speaking so quietly I was confident the ambient hum-buzz and the trio of phone conversations would keep anyone farther than a foot away from eavesdropping, I said, "Okay. I hear you." She didn't react so I said it again just a tad louder. That did the trick.

"Fred, thank God. Can you *see* anything?"

"Everything, dear. I've got the—"

"Anyone watching me right now?"

"No. Blunt's fiddling with a computer and the others are on phones."

"How many others?"

"Three. The one called Jimmy has to be the missing link and there's ... Thing One and Thing Two."

"Where's my purse?"

"On a shelf about ten feet in front of us, and your gun's right next to it. Thing One seemed to know exactly where it was."

"Oh sh—" she cut herself off, probably remembering Evie. "Anything behind me I can use to free my arms?"

"I don't—actually, yes! If you can scooch over about two feet to your left and back up just a bit."

“Nothing I’ll bump into on the way?”

“No. You’re clear.”

Amanda leaned over and whispered into Evie’s ear. A moment later, the two of them slowly wriggled to the side, stopping often so the balloon would float back to where I could supply new instructions. Within two minutes, they’d reached the right spot.

“What now?” Amanda asked.

“Immediately behind you, a battery is hanging from a metal strap that’s edge-on to you and about the right height. I doubt it’s very sharp, but the strap’s thin so the edge should eventually cut the tape if you can force it between your hands and wiggle your arms up and down.”

“I’ll try. First let’s see if I can work this string under my butt; I don’t want us to lose contact.” Her hushed voice remained steady.

“Amanda, I’ve got to say. I knew my son had done well, but I hadn’t dreamed he’d done *this* well. I’m proud of you. And Evie too. You’ve got real courage.”

“I wish. But your being with us makes all the difference.” She rocked forward and managed to pin the string under her rear end on the first try. Then she extended her arms backward until they touched the strap, a little lower than I’d hoped but high enough to get decent friction if she was flexible enough. Before she could try my idea, Blunt left his laptop and headed our way.

“Amanda!” I cried. “Freeze!” Nothing wrong with her reaction time. “Blunt’s coming back.”

He stopped a few feet away and squatted down. “Now, Officer, I will explain your role in today’s operation.” His voice was painfully loud in my ears until I turned down the audio.

“What are you, Blunt? Some kind of terrorist?”

He chuckled. “Hardly. I consider myself a ... creative entrepreneur. One very near retirement thanks to the proceeds you will help us earn.”

“Why do you keep it so *dark* in here?” my granddaughter blurted. “I don’t like it.”

Blunt frowned. “You’re the youngest daughter, aren’t you? Eve, as I recall.”

“I’d like to know about the darkness, too,” Amanda said quickly when Evie didn’t respond. “Why go through so much trouble?”

“I doubt the girl is old enough to understand such things, but in the spirit of

cooperation, I'll tell you both. The answer is *efficiency*. Efficiency is my personal god. More thought, effort, and time has gone into this than you might believe and I've polished my plan to the finest grit."

"So you're the one running the show."

"I see no harm in admitting it. Returning to the girl's question: since we've needed to work between county inspections, we've had to do considerable work in this shack over the last few nights and couldn't risk any light showing should anyone ... unauthorized pass by."

"Even with your blackout screen?"

"We only put that up this morning and largely for your benefit. Wouldn't do to have had someone nosy and clever glimpse something so odd when we've needed to open the door. You must admit, the darkness keeps you conveniently harmless and ignorant, doesn't it?"

"You weren't worried about the night security guards hearing you?"

"Ah. You're a bit clever yourself, aren't you? I must bear that in mind. Of course, you're right. I own both Manny's Maintenance and the Confidence Security Agency. No harm in your knowing that since both organizations will evaporate shortly. I think that will be enough questions on your end."

"Can I make one comment?"

He stood up for a moment, rubbed his knees, and returned to his squatting position. "Just one and only due to my single vice: curiosity."

"If you're expecting to retire on what you'll get by holding us hostage, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. The LAPD has a policy—"

"No, no. Now I'm disappointed in *you*. I intend to hold every single soul in this park hostage, and we'll see how well your *policy* holds up. Almost all is in place, but we're waiting for the peak hour, when the grounds are sure to be busiest."

"How can you expect to hold that many people at gunpoint?"

"Gunpoint? We'll be relying very little on guns."

In an unpleasant flash, I understood the outline on the laptop screen. It represented the fairground's perimeter. The dots had to be bombs. And something else began nagging at me, which I couldn't pin down.

"Sometime within the next several hours," Blunt continued, "I will push a button on my phone and then hold the phone to your ear. You will find yourself talking to an operator at your police department. At that time, you will say nothing on your own but will simply repeat whatever I tell you to say. Word for word. The smallest deviation, particularly when it comes to the numbers of certain overseas

accounts, will result in—let’s say considerable grief for you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Do not speak again until I tell you to.”

* * * *

I’ve never experienced time passing so slowly. Amanda worked on cutting her wrists free, and I worked like hell trying to figure a way out of this mess. Something about the image I’d seen so briefly on the screen was still bothering me, and I still had no idea what. And the minutes barely crawled. Blunt kept tinkering with something beyond my view on the shelf behind the laptop, and the three stooges blabbed constantly into their mouthpieces. At the hospice, a nurse came into my room and went away when I told her things were just dandy and I was busy.

“Boss!” Thing One called out, startling me and making Evie emit one forlorn cry. “We got a problem.”

“I see that. Why, if I may ask, is grid ten suddenly filled with blue lights?”

“You know that excavator behind the carousel? Some punk just moved it to grid nine. With the backhoe down. Took out most of our remote—”

“Unbelievable. It’s the bloody *weekend!* Canapka Construction doesn’t work weekends. They barely work at all!”

“Easy, boss. Wasn’t Canapka. Some smart-ass kid hot-wired it and took it for a joyride. With our security team tied up getting ready for crowd control, we don’t got enough—”

“How many technicians can we put on this?”

“Um. I don’t know.” Despite an obvious attempt to sound tough, his voice quavered.

“Then would it be too much trouble to find out?”

Thing One hastily punched buttons and had a quick discussion over his headset. “Only four, boss, unless you want to pull anyone off the fence crew or have fewer watchers.”

“No. But four isn’t enough. It seems we’re going to have to pitch in and get our own hands dirty. We’ll leave Jimmy alone to hold the fort.”

“But boss—”

“Is that all *right* with you, J.C.?”

“Of course, sir.” Textbook sullen.

“And what about you, Zack? Can you bear to leave your station?”

“Sure.”

“Officer Horton, you sit tight and keep your girl quiet. Jimmy, what you do on your own time is your business, but right now you keep your mind on *my* business or I’ll shoot you myself. Got it?”

“Yeah. No problem.”

Blunt and his Things stepped through the plastic curtain as if it was an airlock, and I heard the door open and slam shut.

Then we were alone with the Missing Link.

* * * *

For a while, the Link ignored Amanda and became embroiled in a phone argument with someone called Eric who apparently wasn’t pushing his team hard enough to get whatever work they were doing completed on time. Eric, I gathered, couldn’t figure out how he was supposed to increase his pushing while Jimmy was keeping him tied up. I began to think Jimmy wasn’t going to be trouble after all. Big mistake.

I used one of those bells, or perhaps whistles, of my police-issue x-change receiver to photograph the laptop’s screen, wishing the system had a zoom function. Checking the recorded image, I was relieved to find the dots clear enough to provide a detailed map of where every bomb was placed. For backup, I sent the image to Amanda’s e-mail account and my own before switching back to a live feed and, for the first time, really studying the screen. The issue nagging my back brain practically jumped out at me.

A profusion of red dots glimmered *outside* the fairground, spread in a wide crescent near the front gate. I wondered uneasily why they’d mined that particular area and closed my eyes to think it through.

An impressively high and strong-looking chainlink fence enclosed the entire park. Even if the main gate were closed and locked, it would be still be the weakest part of the fence, the logical place for a SWAT unit to mount an assault. Once Amanda relayed Blunt’s instructions, the entrance area would surely be swarming with cops—Lord! Probably *every* available cop in the county, an FBI contingent, various assault vehicles along with the usual police cruisers, maybe even National Guard soldiers. If his bombs packed enough wallop, Blunt could wipe out most of L.A.’s law enforcement structure in an instant! Something told me the man had bigger plans than just holding the local crowd for ransom....

I opened my eyes and found Jimmy staring at my daughter-in-law. He remained on the phone, badgering someone new, but his gaze kept shifting between the plastic-strip curtain and Amanda’s chest. He shifted his chair in tiny increments,

seemingly tugged by magnetic surges until he was facing her directly. Amanda's breasts were bouncing as her arms worked at abrading the tape, but apparently the Missing Link didn't realize what she was doing, or didn't care.

When the Link got to his feet, his chair creaked and Amanda froze. "What's happening, Fred?" she asked.

"Jimmy's walking toward you. No, keep working. I'm afraid you're going to need your hands."

At close range, the man appeared positively subhuman. The headset seemed as out-of-place as it would've on a gorilla. He sat down in front of Amanda, close, and stretched out a long finger to gently tap the top button of her blouse. She shrank back, but had no place to go.

For the first time in a long time, Eve spoke. "Something smells real bad, Mommy."

Jimmy turned slightly, tugged off his headset, and tossed it behind him. Without warning, he moved faster than I'd ever seen anyone move, lashing out with one of those ape arms to backhand Evie across her forehead. The blow cannoned her skull into the concrete wall behind her, and my little girl slumped over sideways as if her bones had liquefied.

"What have you *done*?" Amanda cried. "Evie?"

"Don't you worry 'bout her, pretty lady, she's breathing okay. But if you're not *real* sweet to me and keep your mouth shut tight afterwards, I'll stomp her neck flat. Maybe I should do that first...."

"*No!* I'll do whatever you want. Just don't hurt her."

"You and me gonna have some fun."

Something more solid than rage moved through me, pushing through my horror and shock. I wanted to hurt this monster, and I suddenly knew how to go about it. I reached for the flash dial on my remote. Just in time, it occurred to me the sudden brightness would hurt Amanda too. Then I started shaking. I'd come *thisclose* to blowing a real chance to rescue my loved ones. I refused to think it might be too late to rescue Evie.

My knowledge of night-vision goggles was decades—hell, over a half century—out of date. But if Jimmy's goggles had the kind of automatic filtering built into my x-change system, he might've had no more than a moment of discomfort. And then he would've known about me for sure. Even the best auto-filters take several dozen milliseconds to work. If I wanted to put Jimmy out of commission for long enough for Amanda to get the upper hand, which I wanted with all my heart, I had to produce a light so damn bright it would blind him for at least a few minutes in that one instant.

And I had a way to do it! But I had to warn Amanda first. And I wasn't at all sure my body was strong enough for the job.

The Link was panting now as he unbuttoned Amanda blouse. She was wearing a soft-looking bra underneath, and he tugged on one cup until one breast was free. He started poking at her nipple like someone trying to spear a fish, no longer bothering to even glance toward the doorway.

I tilted my x-change glasses to uncover my left eye, put the TV remote on my pillow, and forced myself upright onto the floor. The glasses slipped back into place with the motion so I bent the frames to keep it from happening again. One eye in the shed and one twenty miles away in my room, I took a deep breath and got to work.

My plan required getting the x-change camera as close as possible to the wall with the TV, but the camera was attached to my bedframe and the damn hospital bed seemed to be glued in place. You idiot, I told myself after a few futile pushes, the wheels must be locked.

Sweat pouring off me in sheets, I had to stomp repeatedly on each of the four wheel levers before the bed was ready to roll. And then I *still* couldn't get the damn thing to budge!

Jimmy had one hand pawing between Amanda's legs now while the other was fumbling with her belt. I heard myself swearing, even over the Link's heavy panting and little chuckles.

If only Lopez were here! I didn't dare call for help from anyone else. One thing you don't get at Saint Teresa's when you're old and sick is respect. Any nurse that came in would have to be convinced I knew what I was doing—which would take too much time at best. At worst, they'd insist on calling the police.

I shoved with all my energy, and the bed moved maybe an inch.

And then it was all over. With the first rattle at the door, Jimmy was moving with insane speed. He managed to get Amanda's blouse partly buttoned and was back in his position at the table as Blunt and Thing One pushed through the plastic strips. Jimmy wasn't just brutal, he was stupid.

Blunt pulled on his goggles and took one quick glance around the room. His gaze froze when he came to Evie's unconscious form.

"Jimmy, lad," he said very softly, "I'll be dealing with you later. Right now, I'm advancing the schedule to avoid anything else going wrong. J.C., kindly hand me Zack's headset and put yours back on. Our guest will be using my phone. The minute Zack tells me he's finished, I'll have you order the fence crew to close the gates. Jimmy, at that point you'll notify our associates downtown. The rest of the operation, I'll handle myself." After donning the headset, he moved the microphone in front of his laptop and mumbled for a time. Probably rehearsing his threats for the

fun-loving crowd outside.

I couldn't bear it. Was one old man's weakness going to kill dozens, maybe *hundreds* of people? But every day for months now I'd proved how feeble I'd become, hardly able to drag myself to the toilet. Two years ago, I could've *carried* the damn bed. Stupid old man tears kept merging with the sweat on my cheeks....

I can't explain what happened next, but I swear it happened. Clear as though he was standing right next to me, I heard Lopez repeating one of his little platitudes.

"The past is a sea anchor, *amigo*. In a storm terrible, it can hold your ship steady and preserve your life. At other times it is only a drag."

For the first time, I understood what he was getting at. It wasn't just the bed resisting me, but the accumulated weight of everything I'd learned about my cancer and chemo-induced physical limitations. It didn't matter how weak I'd been last week or yesterday, or even a second ago. What counted was right now, and right now I had to move the bed. No matter what. Which meant I had to *believe* I could do it.

After the thing really started rolling, it was easier to keep it moving. Then it banged against the TV with a loud crash, and I was terrified something had broken. But when I grabbed the TV remote and pressed the button, the unit came on instantly, the menu appearing much too bright but UHD-sharp. I flipped to the test channel and boosted the brightness all the way, forcing me to squint to find my x-change lens, which I turned to face the blazing screen.

I preset the luminance control on my x-change remote to the max, pulled the mic near my mouth, and spoke quietly.

"Amanda, how you coming with the tape?"

"It's cut, but I don't know what good it will do me now that Blunt's back. How is Evie?"

"Still sleeping and still breathing. Listen carefully. When I say 'now' I want you to close your eyes as tight as you can and cover 'em. I'm going to make one hell of a flash. If it bursts the balloon, and it probably will, get that tape off your ankles, then stand up facing exactly the way you are now. Take maybe thirteen or fourteen short steps straight forward keeping your arms just a bit ahead of you, but very low. With me so far?"

"Yes."

"Good. When you get near the shelf, you'll feel a rubber pad under your feet. At that point move to your right about three feet, which should put you safely past the laptop. We don't want you touching that laptop! Reach straight ahead slowly and feel around, about your shoulder level, until you find the shelf. Then slowly work your way to the left until you locate your purse. Pull out the paint can and just

spray it anywhere on the shelf. That way I can make a light for you. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Evie's going to be fine and so are you. I love you. NOW."

I disengaged my auto-contrast function and barely remembered to shut my own eyes as I punched the display button. Even then, the light in the shed stabbed like a dagger, turning the inside of my right eyelid sun-bright yellow until my filters kicked in. My left eyelid merely turned a blazing scarlet. Stupid of me not to have taken my glasses completely off. I'm sure I made some kind of noise, but it was drowned out by three truly horrific screams. With the x-change projection multiplying the TV's brightness, God knows how many times, I can't imagine how much candlepower hit that room. But somehow it didn't burst my bubble.

I turned the TV off, dialed the x-change luminance way down but still bright enough to illuminate the room, and repositioned the lens toward my face. Blunt and company were flat on the floor. Jimmy was groaning and thrashing as if his clothes were on fire, but the other two were lying still as death. Then, mercifully, Jimmy went limp and silent.

Amanda rubbed her eyes and gave her former captors one long cold stare. "What knocked them out, Fred? Sheer pain?"

"Could be." Their night-sight gear wasn't anywhere near them, sign of how desperately they'd clawed the devices off. Maybe their "state-of-the-art" gear hadn't had auto-filters after all....

I spotted one pair of goggles in a corner and I knew. "More than pain, I think. Blunt bragged about how his equipment uses direct nerve stimulation, right? Look just left of the generator. See the goggles and that smoke coming off the battery module? Even with a low-voltage power supply, the overload must've given these boys one hell of a shock."

My wonderful daughter-in-law shook her head, unwrapped her ankles, and leaped to the shelf, dragging me along. She grabbed her gun and pulled her cell phone from her purse, then hurried back to Evie, laying the weapon down within easy reach. Since she was directly beneath me I couldn't see Amanda's face, but after too long a moment, I heard her sigh. She pulled me down and close.

"Her heartbeat's strong, Fred. And her color, far as I can tell by your light, doesn't look so bad. But we've got to get her to a hospital." She flipped her phone open.

"Wait, Amanda! I want Evie checked out as much as you do, but we've still got a situation."

"I know it. If all private security and maintenance here is on Blunt's payroll—"

“There’s worse. See that laptop? What you can’t see with naked eyes is what’s on the screen. While my vision was boosted, it displayed a diagram of the park and an army of red dots.”

She frowned. “Dots representing perps?”

“They never moved, so I doubt it. Remember what Blunt said about not controlling the crowd with guns? I’m afraid each dot means some kind of explosive. Amanda, I counted more than twenty *outside* the front gates.”

“That’s ... oh. Oh my God...”

“Exactly. I figure Blunt was using this fairground stunt as a—a stepping stone. He would’ve had you make that ransom demand and then waited until every cop within a fifty-mile radius was on the way. Then he’d get the gates shut, patch that crappy microphone into the local PA system, and warn all paying customers to keep still or else. Maybe set off a bomb or two to underline his point.”

She glanced at the unconscious men and I wouldn’t have cared to be on the receiving end of that look. “I’m not sure you got the order straight, Fred, but I’m buying your list of events. And when the cavalry showed up, Blunt would’ve blasted them to shreds. And you heard him mention some ... associates downtown? Enough ‘associates’ and they would’ve had an easy shot at the banks and jewelry stores and—but you don’t think the bombs are *still* a problem?”

“They might be. I’d assume the laptop is set up as a remote detonator. But I can’t believe anyone who planned something this elaborate would put all his eggs in a—a wireless basket. So I’m thinking there’s a hardwired backup, and I’m just praying it’s in *here*. Another thing: a man like Blunt would’ve wanted individual control over each explosive, which rules out radio-triggered detonation from one central transmitter—too many bombs involved.”

“Don’t you—”

“Now I’m just speculating, but see all those little boxes juryrigged to wires on the wall behind you?”

She turned briefly. “So?”

“My hunch is that each wire goes to a specific string of lights and can be used to carry specific signals. Also, I read an article last month about these new induction triggers. Maybe some of the lights themselves have built-in—”

“Fred! Theorize later. What should we *do* about this?”

“Sorry. You’re right. Hey, could we barricade the door somehow, maybe jam a chair under the knob?”

She gave the folding chairs a speculative look, then sighed. “Might work,

might not. We'd better not take the time to experiment."

"Then get me close to that laptop, but not close enough to bump it by accident. And do *not* touch it yourself, not until I say when and how. Particularly avoid the keyboard."

"We are going to shut it off?"

"Better to go an extra step and disable it completely. Which I suppose could mean losing some evidence, but at least I already took a picture of everything on the screen. So we'll know exactly where to dig up the bombs."

"That's good to hear."

"All right. After I get a good look at that machine and see what kind of peripherals or memory cards are plugged in, we'll turn this place upside-down if we have to—I mean you will—until we find another controller or we're positive it's not here. Meanwhile, maybe you could dream up a plan for handling Blunt's people outside? They must be getting antsy by now."

"No dreaming needed ... Dad." She'd never called me that before, although I'd often asked her to. "There's only one sensible way to deal with this kind of situation. Isn't it obvious?"

Not to me it wasn't.

* * * *

If it hadn't been such a relief, finding the backup controller would've been almost anticlimactic. An old-fashioned breadboard festooned with a jungle of wires and hundreds of micro-switches was right there on the shelf, lying flat behind the laptop, not even hidden when you were close enough to that wall. Amanda also spotted a small toolbox containing the usual soldering equipment, including wire-cutters. I studied the homebaked circuit, cramming for the most important test of my life before having Amanda shut down the laptop and pull out its battery. Then I issued step-by-step instructions for gelding the breadboard. Amanda's hands were steady and precise as she cut the primary hot leads. But that wasn't the only reason I was even prouder of her by the time we finished. From my own feelings, I could guess how urgently she wanted to get her daughter medical attention, but she'd only glanced at Evie twice while we were working.

And she didn't give the curtain of strips even a single look, although she was probably as scared as me about one of Blunt's men coming in to check on the sudden lack of communications. But with possible dirty cops infesting the LAPD—or moles or whatever you're supposed to call such vermin—we didn't dare cry for help without first defusing the explosives. No saying what kind of help would've showed up.

But the instant I told Amanda the bombs had been neutralized, she began

making calls to her fellow officers on fairground duty, contacting cops she trusted the most first. Apparently she didn't care to risk any general announcement over official frequencies, so she punched in cellphone numbers, briefly described the situation, and commanded the surprised individual on the other end of the line to reach the power shed ASAP to stand guard. After six such conversations, she called for two ambulances and only then contacted her watch commander.

* * * *

August 18, 2028

Got a heap of news to report so I'll put it in three columns: good news, news I'm not sure how to feel about, and the bad.

For me, the best part was when Evie woke up in the ambulance, outraged we weren't headed toward the petting zoo. She seems to have forgotten everything that happened in the shed—maybe for the best. The doctors kept her overnight for observation, and Don, my middle son, joined Amanda and me at the USC medical center, keeping Evie company all night in her hospital room. Well, to be honest, Grandpa was napping half the time, but I never took off my x-change glasses. In the morning, the doctors released Eve but cautioned us to keep alert for any odd behaviors, slurred speech, and the like. Of course, I'd already planned to keep a remote, although close, eye on her. The human brain is about as tough as a ripe avocado and the long-term effects of concussion are unpredictable.

More good news: Amanda's plan for handling the fairground crisis worked perfectly. No one was hurt or taken hostage or even bothered. Her basic idea, based on SOP in similar situations, was to do nothing but observe. And, I imagine, do some fancy tracking by satellite. The police had cordoned off the power shed but hadn't immediately arrested anyone outside the shed. I wasn't around to see it, but apparently after an ambulance had taken Eve, Amanda, and me away, and a more military kind of ambulance had removed Blunt and the two Things, every member of Manny's Maintenance and Confidence Security, one by one, drifted casually through the front gate and drove off. I understand about thirty of the conspirators have already been captured and are awaiting trial. And there's a former police dispatcher in the same jail.

In column two, Blunt and his buddies are blind. Permanently. I'm sure Lopez would feel great regret if he'd been the one who'd ruined three pairs of eyes, but while I'm trying to be more like Lopez, I'm not there yet. Not saying I'm overjoyed at this result, but I sure as hell would do the same thing again in the same circumstances.

Also in the gray column: I've been deluged with a storm of publicity, and I hear more and heavier is coming my way. Newswebs, newspapers, and TV news programs are already full of inflated descriptions of our little ordeal. Apparently, I'm something called a "hero," a word that evidently means a person with no right to any privacy. Supposedly, offers are about to flood in for everything from exclusive

interviews to movie rights. I'll probably milk it for all it's worth—my children could use the money. And rumor has it the governor is coming all the way from Sacramento to shake my arthritic hand. I can't wait.

Then there's the bad news. No, not Lopez. I forgot to put him in the good column. He's good; in fact his doctor's are scratching their balding heads about his condition. The surgery showed that while he hadn't exactly gone into remission, his cancer's rate of growth has slowed to a crawl. Figures. I'm going to ask him to teach me some of that Qigong.

The bad news is that we're not leaving this hospice alive, Lopez or me. Maybe we'll hang around for longer than anyone expects, as Juan already has, but we're still dying, however slow the process. But then, aren't we all?

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